
BARRIERS TO YOUTH ENTREPRENEURSHIP IN RURAL AREAS: A SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW

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Abstract:

Rural youth entrepreneurship supports economic development and limits migration, but significant barriers remain. To identify and analyze these barriers, we performed a Systematic Literature Review of peer-reviewed articles from the Web of Science Core Collection database, published between 2014 and 2025 (final sample - 57 articles). The bibliometric analysis using VOSviewer, including co-occurrence, co-authorship, citation analysis, was complemented by a qualitative content analysis to synthesize the identified barriers. The study reveals that research on this topic is geographically concentrated, with a notable focus on African contexts. The bibliometric analysis reveals a fragmented research network with limited worldwide collaboration. We identified six main rural youth entrepreneurship barriers: financial (lack of start-up capital, low income), infrastructural (inadequate roads, limited digital connectivity), educational (skills mismatch, limited entrepreneurship education), social/cultural (traditional gender roles, risk aversion), institutional (lack of government support, bureaucratic hurdles, corruption), and market-related (limited access, marketing challenges). The study points out that the barriers are extremely interdependent and therefore require a multi-dimensional, holistic intervention approach and not isolated solutions. The review also highlights key research gaps, particularly the need for more comparative, region-specific studies and a more integrated approach to gender.

Key words: *youth entrepreneurship; systematic literature review; rural youth; VOSviewer*

1. Introduction

Entrepreneurs serve as fundamental catalysts for economic development across global markets, driving innovation and growth through their central role in economic systems. The substantial contributions of successful entrepreneurial ventures to national and international economies have been extensively documented in the literature (Acs, 2006; Guerrero, et al., 2021; Neumann, 2020; Pato & Teixeira, 2016; De Guzman et al., 2020). Entrepreneurship functions as a major mechanism for economic expansion by generating employment opportunities, addressing poverty reduction initiatives, providing essential resilience during periods of economic instability (Alvarez & Barney, 2014;

Morozova et al., 2019; Si, et al., 2019; Sutter et al., 2019; Humberg & Braun, 2014), promoting sustainable rural development (Bawa et al., 2007).

Entrepreneurial activity plays a particularly significant role in developing economies, where micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises account for more than fifty percent of total employment and exceed ninety percent of value-added business activities across all firm categories (OECD, 2023). Furthermore, entrepreneurship represents a strategic pathway for maximizing the economic potential of youth populations, offering sustainable employment alternatives and promoting economic self-sufficiency and independence (Awogbenle & Iwuamadi, 2010; Baskaran & Mehta, 2016; Igwe et al., 2020). Youth entrepreneurship is increasingly recognized as a key driver of economic diversification, innovation and employment in rural areas (De Guzman et al., 2020; Chakravarty et al., 2021; Ningrum, 2018), contributing to livelihood security and sustainable development (Deng et al., 2020).

However, despite these well-established benefits, young entrepreneurs across numerous global regions continue to face significant structural and systemic barriers that restrain their entrepreneurial endeavors (Baskaran & Mehta, 2016). These include limited access to entrepreneurial education and training, which reduces the readiness of youth to start ventures or effectively navigate business challenges (Nurbekovna et al., 2025; Mathhake & Kalitanyi, 2025), and cultural constraints that influence entrepreneurial motivation differently in rural contexts compared to urban ones (Escandón-Barbosa et al., 2019). Beyond the lack of technical skills, cultural attitudes and insufficient encouragement from families and educational institutions can also discourage young people from entrepreneurial pursuits (Davids et al., 2021).

Rural entrepreneurship, in particular, contributes to building a more inclusive and sustainable future (Mishra et al., 2020) and has proven especially important for improving rural livelihoods, including those of women in less developed economies (Akinbami et al., 2019). Yet rural regions are experiencing increasing pressure to revitalize their local economies as they confront demographic decline, limited job opportunities and persistent outmigration (De Guzman, et al., 2020). Within these settings, young entrepreneurs represent a major resource, not only as job creators but also as agents of change capable of introducing new business models and revitalizing traditional sectors. Their engagement in entrepreneurial activity holds the potential to address structural imbalances, foster community resilience and stimulate inclusive rural development.

However, despite growing policy attention to rural entrepreneurship, empirical evidence consistently highlights the fact that young people face a distinct set of challenges when attempting to start and grow businesses in rural environments (De Guzman, et al., 2020; Li et al., 2019; Paniagua, 2013). These challenges are often exacerbated by sparse institutional presence and underdeveloped infrastructure (Yeung et al., 2015; Baumgartner et al., 2013), as well as by lack of resources and poverty in rural areas (Tabares et al., 2022). Barriers include inadequate access to finance and infrastructure (Bouichou et al., 2021; Robb, 2021; Yeung et al., 2015), mismatches between academic training and market needs (Bullock et al., 2025; Ferreira et al., 2021), institutional voids (Audretsch et al., 2022), the digital divide and insufficient ICT infrastructure (Warren, 2007; Galloway & Mochrie, 2005), restricted access to markets and business networks (Ashby et al., 2009;

Shu et al., 2018), gender-specific barriers particularly affecting women entrepreneurs (Kitole & Genda, 2024; Semkunde et al., 2022; Naegels et al., 2018; Samandar & Wardak, 2025; Bannor et al., 2020; Aggarwal & Johal, 2021), and limited access to quality education and entrepreneurial training programs (Baskaran & Mehta, 2016).

Yet, much of the literature on entrepreneurship either treats youth as a homogeneous group or focuses predominantly on urban entrepreneurial dynamics, thereby overlooking the multiple barriers present at the intersection of youth and rurality.

Existing literature often treats the barriers faced by rural youth entrepreneurs as separate and isolated constraints. Studies typically focus on specific obstacles such as limited access to finance, infrastructural deficiencies, or socio-cultural norms, without fully examining how these barriers interact or reinforce one another over time. Entrepreneurship research has applied institutional theory, including Scott's (2014) regulative, normative, and cognitive pillars in various contexts (Álvarez et al., 2025; Lopez et al., 2025), however most studies continue to analyze these dimensions independently. This fragmented approach limits understanding of why barriers persist and often results in policy responses that address individual symptoms rather than underlying institutional constraints.

This limitation is especially evident in research on rural youth entrepreneurship. Although institutional theory has been commonly applied to entrepreneurship generally, its use in examining rural youth remains limited, particularly when integrating all three pillars of Scott's framework. Studies that do apply institutional perspectives tend to focus on village-owned enterprises (Way, 2025), cooperatives (Hidayat et al., 2024), or urban settings rather than on rural youth entrepreneurship. This represents an important gap because rural contexts present distinct institutional configurations. They are influenced by particular combinations of formal and informal institutions that differ from urban environments, while young entrepreneurs face additional age-specific constraints including limited experience, restricted networks, and perceptions that question their entrepreneurial capability.

To address this gap systematically, our study adopts institutional theory as an analytical framework, building on North's (1990) foundational work and Scott's (2014) multidimensional approach. We view entrepreneurial behavior as the outcome of interactions between regulative rules, normative expectations, and the cognitive perceptions that guide individual decision-making. This framework is especially suited to rural youth entrepreneurship, as young people in rural areas face institutional disadvantages across all three dimensions. These include formal exclusion from credit markets and support programs, normative pressures toward migration and traditional employment, and cognitive perceptions that devalue youth capabilities and rural entrepreneurial opportunities. Consequently, this study is guided by the following research question: *What barriers do young entrepreneurs face in rural contexts and how can these be understood institutionally?*

To answer this question, the paper conducts a systematic literature review (SLR) combining bibliometric analysis with qualitative content synthesis to identify, categorize, and interpret barriers faced by young entrepreneurs in rural areas over the last decade.

2. Methodology

Research design. This study employs a systematic literature review methodology to identify, analyze and synthesize existing research on barriers to youth entrepreneurship in rural areas. SLRs are recognized as an effective method for rigorously analyzing and evaluating a specific body of research (Tranfield, et al., 2003). Following established systematic review protocols, we have combined bibliometric analysis with qualitative content analysis. This approach will provide both quantitative insights into research patterns and a qualitative understanding of identified barriers.

Search strategy and database selection. The literature search was conducted using the Web of Science (WoS) Core Collection. The WoS Core Collection was selected to ensure metadata homogeneity, an important requirement for bibliometric analysis. Integrating records from multiple databases can introduce inconsistencies in citation counts, keyword standardization, and document classification, potentially affecting the accuracy of network visualizations produced in VOSviewer. In addition, the stringent selection criteria of the WoS Core Collection provide a consistent quality threshold, in line with common practices in bibliometric research. Although this choice limits overall coverage, it allows for a more consistent and methodologically reliable bibliometric analysis.

We used a systematic combination of keywords targeting three core conceptual domains: youth entrepreneurship, rural contexts and barriers or challenges. This comprehensive search strategy was designed to capture the entrepreneurship barriers while maintaining focus on experiences specific for youth in rural contexts. The keywords were connected using Boolean operators ("OR", "AND") to refine and expand the search results. The example of the search strategy and search query that was applied to titles and abstracts is provided in (Figure 1).

Inclusion and exclusion criteria. The following inclusion criteria were established to ensure the relevance and quality of selected studies:

- Period: Publications from 2014-2025 to capture contemporary barriers and recent developments in rural youth entrepreneurship.
- Geographic scope: Global perspective with no regional restrictions to ensure comprehensive understanding of barriers across different contexts.
- Document types: Peer-reviewed articles and review articles to maintain academic rigor.
- Research areas: Studies within Business Economics, Development Studies, Geography, Social Sciences, Social Issues and Agriculture disciplines.
- Content focus: Studies addressing youth entrepreneurship in rural contexts with specific attention to barriers, challenges, constraints.

Studies were excluded based on the following reason:

- General young business: Research on "young social businesses" without specific focus on individual youth entrepreneurs.
- Migration studies: Research primarily examining youth mobility or migration for employment opportunities rather than local entrepreneurship development.

- Insufficient rural focus: Studies mentioning rural areas without addressing unique rural entrepreneurship challenges.
- Peripheral mention: Research where youth entrepreneurship appears as tangential rather than central to the analysis.
- Non-entrepreneurial focus: Studies primarily addressing other phenomena (e.g., environmental adaptation) where entrepreneurship barriers are not systematically examined.

Selection process. The systematic selection process followed PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) guidelines to ensure transparency and reproducibility in the documentation of study selection procedures. A PRISMA-style flow diagram was created to illustrate the screening and selection process (Moher, et al., 2009).

The initial search yielded 96 potentially relevant publications. Following systematic abstract screening, 39 studies were excluded for failing to meet inclusion criteria. The remaining 57 studies formed the final corpus for our study.

Analytical approach. Data analysis and visualization were conducted using VOSviewer software, a specialized bibliometric tool designed for mapping and analyzing scientific literature networks (Van Eck and Waltman, 2010). Three analytical techniques were applied: co-occurrence analysis to identify frequently associated keywords and thematic patterns; co-authorship analysis to examine collaboration structures; and citation analysis to assess patterns of research influence within the field.

For the bibliometric mapping, a minimum threshold of two keyword occurrences and two documents per author was applied. We have selected this relatively low threshold due to the limited dataset size ($N = 57$), as higher thresholds risk excluding emerging themes and smaller collaborative links relevant to rural youth entrepreneurship. At the same time, we acknowledge the sensitivity of cluster structures to parameter selection, with different thresholds yielding varying levels of network consolidation and detail.

Also a qualitative content analysis was employed to systematically examine the findings of included studies. This process involved barrier categorization where entrepreneurship barriers reported across studies were identified.

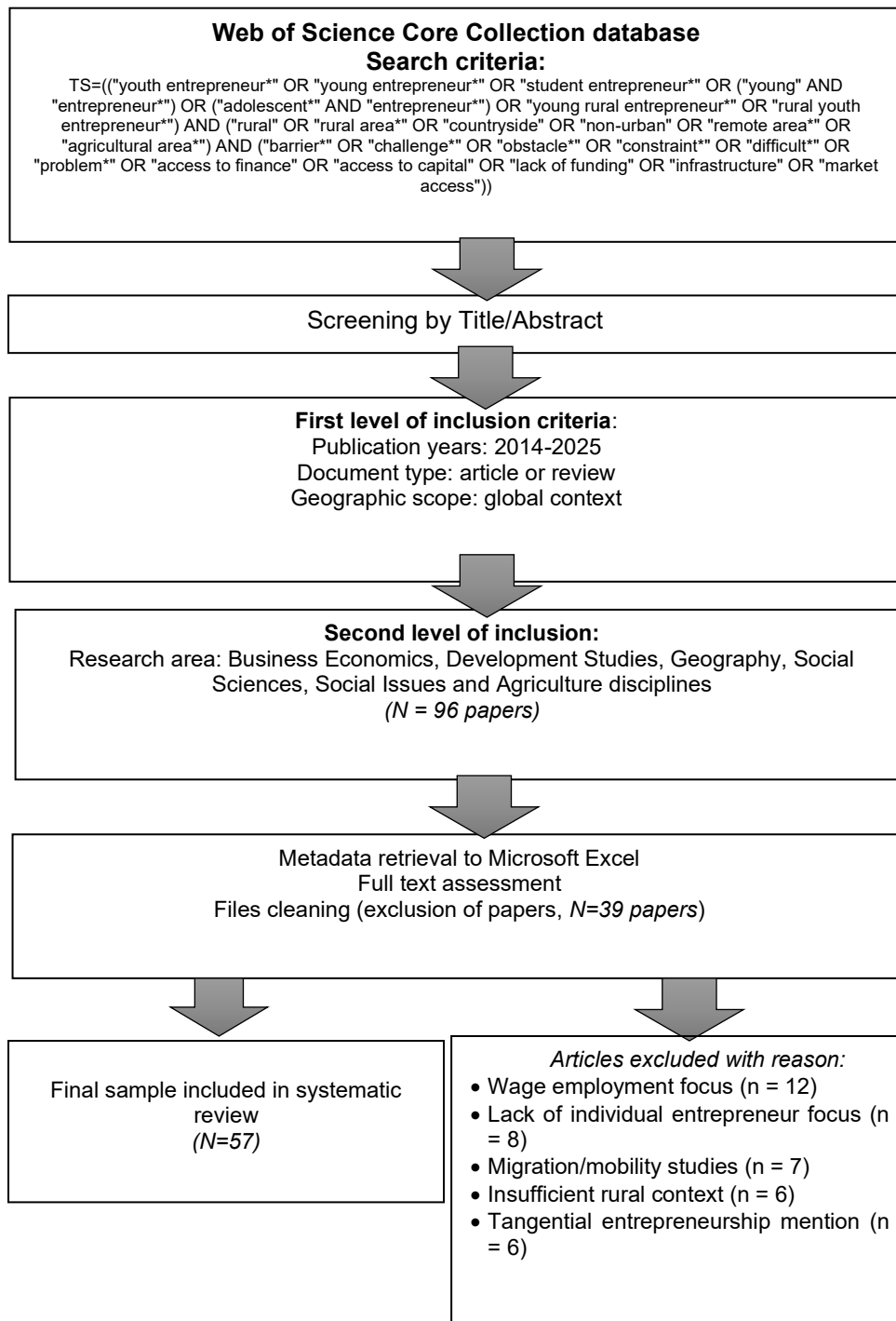


Figure 1: Flow diagram of the systematic literature review protocol

3. Results/findings

Publication year analysis. The systematic literature review covers publications from 2014 to 2025. The distribution of publications by year is shown in Figure 2:

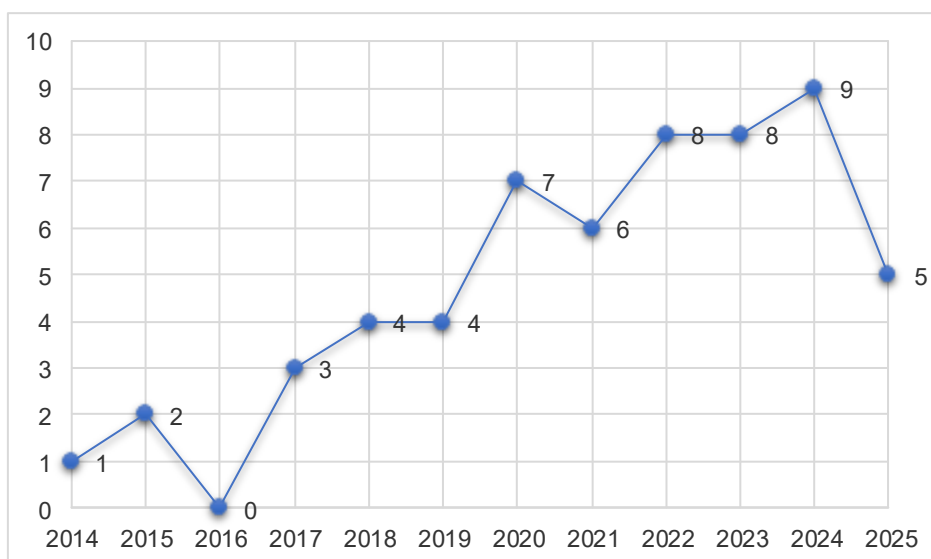


Figure 2: Annual distribution of publications (2014–2025)

The trend suggests an important increase in research output on barriers to youth entrepreneurship in rural areas, with the highest number of publications observed in 2024 (9 publications), followed closely by 2022 and 2023 (8 publications each). This upward trajectory highlights the escalating relevance and focus on this topic within academic discourse.

Country analysis. The geographical distribution of the studies reveals a diverse global engagement (Table 1).

Table 1: Publications by country

Country/Region	Number of publication	% of Total
USA	9	15,8
England	6	10,5
China	5	8,8
Nigeria	5	8,8
Spain	5	8,8
Ghana	4	7,0
India	3	5,3
Benin	3	5,3
Kenya	3	5,3
Cameroon	3	5,3
Australia	2	3,5
Croatia	2	3,5
Mexico	2	3,5
Malaysia	2	3,5
Romania	2	3,5
Morocco	2	3,5
Canada	2	3,5
Madagascar	2	3,5
Czech Republic	2	3,5
Scotland	1	1,8
Netherlands	2	3,5
Greece	2	3,5

Other countries like Poland, Brazil, Portugal, Russia, Cape Verde, Latvia, Sweden, Jordan, Democratic Republic of Congo, South Africa, Mali, Bosnia & Herzegovina, Tanzania, Pakistan, Uganda, Germany, Laos, Turkey, Ethiopia, Bangladesh, Serbia, Indonesia, Cyprus, and France have also contributed to the literature. The wide range of countries studied points to a significant worldwide interest in the challenges youth entrepreneurs face in rural settings.

Type of publication. Key journals and their respective publication counts include: Sustainability, Journal of Rural Studies, African Development Review-Revue Africaine De Developpement. Other notable journals contributing single publications include: Journal of Extension, Journal of Entrepreneurship in Emerging Economies, International Journal of Entrepreneurial Behavior & Research, Journal of Global Entrepreneurship Research and Small Business Economics, among others. The prevalence of publications in journals focused on sustainability, rural studies and entrepreneurship highlights the interdisciplinary nature of the research topic.

Table 2: Leading journals by publication volume

Source	# article	% of total	Countries
Sustainability	8	14,0	Australia; Laos; Brazil; Portugal; Cameroon; Nigeria; Dem Rep Congo; China; Greece; Cyprus; Morocco; Mali; South Africa; Sweden
Journal of Rural Studies	4	7,0	China; USA; England; Ghana
African Development Review-Revue Africaine de Developpement	2	3,5	Benin; Tanzania; Kenya
Agricultural and Resource Economics-International Scientific E-Journal	2	3,5	Czech Republic; Russia; Bangladesh
Journal of Enterprising Communities-People and Places in the Global Economy	2	3,5	Nigeria; Cameroon
Land	2	3,5	Netherlands; USA; Ghana; Serbia; Spain; Croatia
Other journals (each 1 article)	37	64,9	Mexico, Uganda, Benin, Nigeria, Romania, Spain, France, Morocco, etc.
Total	57	100	

Citation analysis. The citation analysis of selected papers shows distinct patterns in the scholarly development of research on youth entrepreneurs barriers in rural areas. Several papers have emerged as highly influential contributors to the field. De Guzman et al. (2020) achieved 38 citations for their exploration of rural communities as entrepreneurial contexts, focusing specifically on youth perceptions and business owner experiences in the United States. This work has been influential in establishing the conceptual framework for understanding how rural contexts themselves create unique barriers and benefits for young entrepreneurs.

The African context has produced particularly impactful study, with Mwaura's (2017) work of educated youth in Kenya accumulating 37 citations. This research showcased the complex relationship between educational attainment and agricultural

livelihoods under neoliberal economic structures, highlighting how educational-employment misalignment creates significant barriers for rural youth entrepreneurship. Similarly, Ripoll et al. (2017) advanced the discourse on youth and agrifood systems with a widely cited study (36 citations). In his study, he analysed how structural rural transformation shapes young people's economic agency in cereal-based economies across Africa. The authors proposed an analytical framework to assess youth engagement in agricultural value chains, emphasizing context-specific constraints and opportunities within rural African areas.

Afreh et al. (2019) advanced research on informal entrepreneurship through their study of migrant youth in rural Ghana, which has been cited 34 times. The study is particularly significant for showing how migration and informal economies create both opportunities and barriers for young entrepreneurs in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Emerging themes and recent developments. The analysed papers show a clear evolution toward more sophisticated analytical approaches and specialized focus areas. Financial access barriers have gained prominence through Senou and Manda's (2022) study of rural youth entrepreneurship in Benin, which has already accumulated 23 citations despite its relative recency. Their research employed advanced econometric techniques including propensity score matching to examine gender gaps in financial access, highlighting that a significant gender gap in rural entrepreneurship among youths exists. The authors showed that age, education, poverty status, experience, working in the agricultural sector and the existence of a bank branch are important determinants of rural youths' access to finance.

The Chinese context has emerged as a particularly rich area for recent high-impact research. Chen and Barcus's (2024) study on women returning home to start businesses, already cited 22 times, highlights gender-specific barriers and empowerment mechanisms in rural entrepreneurship.

Co-occurrence analysis. Figure 3 shows the thematic structure through a keyword co-occurrence network. In this map, the size of the nodes is proportional to the frequency of keyword occurrence. The connecting lines signify that specific terms co-occur within the analyzed studies. Spatial proximity reflects how often keywords appear together across publications, with shorter distances indicating more frequent associations. Color-coding represents thematic clusters generated by the VOSviewer clustering algorithm. Given the exploratory nature of keyword co-occurrence analysis and the size of the dataset, the resulting clusters are interpreted as descriptive patterns of thematic emphasis and association, not definitive representations of the conceptual structure of the field.

The VOSviewer co-occurrence analysis highlights a comprehensive range of research themes in youth entrepreneurship within rural contexts. From a total of 380 keywords, 68 met the minimum threshold of two occurrences and were grouped into eight clusters. The network shows a strong centrality of frequently used terms such as "youth," "entrepreneurship," and "Africa," which appear across multiple clusters.

Cluster 1 (red) - Youth entrepreneurship in rural and agricultural settings. Frequently co-occurring terms such as "youth," "rural youth," "young farmers," and "agriculture" indicate that a substantial share of the literature focuses on farming-related entrepreneurial activities. Keywords related to education, skills, competencies, and

entrepreneurial intention suggest an emphasis on human capital development, while the presence of finance-related terms points to recurring attention to capital access. References to sustainability, self-employment, generational renewal, and succession reflect concerns about the long-term viability of rural economies, particularly in agricultural sectors.

Cluster 2 (green) - Gender and contextual constraints. This cluster brings together keywords related to gender, constraints, risk, empowerment, and developing-country contexts, including specific geographical references such as Benin and China. The co-occurrence of "constraints" and "risk" alongside "gender" and "rural women" suggests that gender-specific barriers are frequently examined in relation to rural youth entrepreneurship, particularly in low- and middle-income settings.

Cluster 3 (blue) - Youth entrepreneurship mechanisms and policy context. Cluster 3 groups keywords related to entrepreneurship intentions, information, land access, policy, and rural development. The co-occurrence of these terms indicates that the literature often examines how access to resources, information, and institutional frameworks may influence entrepreneurial engagement among young people in rural areas.

Cluster 4 (yellow) - Ecosystem perspectives and social capital. This cluster reflects a systemic orientation in the literature, linking concepts such as networks, embeddedness, knowledge, resources, and innovation. The presence of "ecosystem" and "social structure" suggests growing interest in understanding rural youth entrepreneurship within broader relational and institutional contexts. The mention of „tourism" points to opportunities for diversification beyond agriculture.

Cluster 5 (purple) - Agribusiness performance and entrepreneurial behavior. This cluster centers on agribusiness and agripreneurship, emphasizing behavior, perceptions, challenges, and performance. The inclusion of program-related terms indicates attention to policy interventions and support mechanisms targeting young entrepreneurs in the agricultural sector.

Cluster 6 (light blue) - African-focused youth entrepreneurship research. This geographically concentrated cluster highlights the prominence of African contexts, with keywords such as Africa, Sub-Saharan Africa, Ghana, employment, and entrepreneurship education. The association between informal farm entrepreneurs and education-related terms suggests a research focus on formalization processes.

Cluster 7 (orange) - Women's participation. This smaller cluster focuses specifically on women's participation in rural entrepreneurship. Unlike the broader gender perspectives in Cluster 2, it treats women's entrepreneurial participation as a distinct theme. The cluster emphasizes the unique challenges women face and their specific contributions, especially in areas like gender equality and rural entrepreneurship. These issues are illustrated in studies on „rural women entrepreneurs" (Chen & Barcus, 2024).

Key research themes and institutional implications. The co-occurrence analysis highlights several structural characteristics of the literature that carry potential institutional implications. The high total link strength of core terms like "youth" (52), "entrepreneurship" (45), and "Africa" (36) indicates these are central organizing concepts in the field.

The prominence of agriculture-related clusters (Clusters 1, 5, and 6) points to a strong alignment between rural entrepreneurship research and agriculture. While this partly reflects the empirical reality that agriculture dominates many rural economies, this concentration may limit scholarly attention to non-agricultural entrepreneurial opportunities in rural areas.

The separation of gender research into distinct clusters (2 and 7), instead of being integrated across thematic areas, is particularly notable. This pattern suggests that gender barriers are treated as a specialized subfield, not as a cross-cutting dimension affecting rural youth entrepreneurship more broadly. Such fragmentation may limit understanding of how gender norms interact with other institutional barriers to create compounded disadvantages for young women entrepreneurs.

The strong concentration of studies in African contexts reflects important empirical realities but also raises questions about the institutional transferability of existing findings. Barriers shaped by specific regulative environments (land tenure arrangements, access to credit), as well as by normative factors (e.g., gender roles, youth status) may operate differently in other rural regions. The limited number of comparative or cross-regional studies therefore constrains our ability to distinguish between institutional barriers that are context-specific and those that may be more largely applicable across rural contexts.

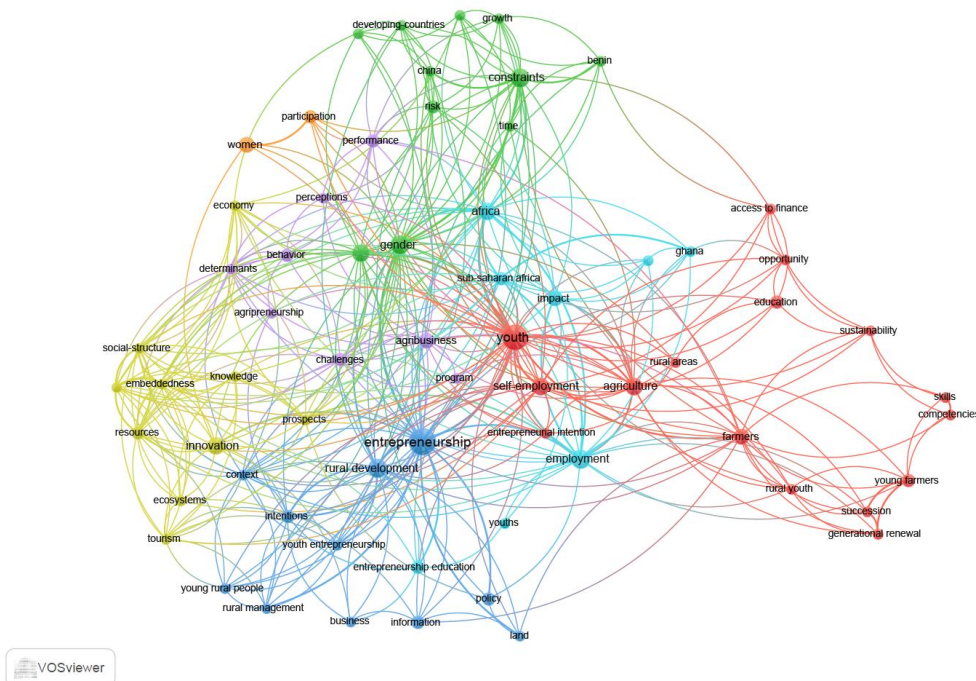


Figure 3: Network visualization of keyword co-occurrence

Note: The colors show which cluster each item belongs to, while the lines between nodes represent co-occurrence. Shorter distances between nodes indicate stronger relationships between the keywords.

We then examined the most frequently occurring terms within the titles and abstracts of the 57 articles in our database using a word cloud visualization. This method

graphically highlights the prominence of individual words based on their frequency of appearance, whereby the font size of each term is directly proportional to its relative frequency in the literature. The resulting visualization, presented in Figure 4, serves as a thematic snapshot of the field; it reveals that the dominant terms are “youth” (as expected, due to its inclusion in the search parameters), followed by “entrepreneurship”, “rural”, “agriculture”, and “farmers”.



Figure 4: Word cloud of prominent research themes (obtained with word clouds generator)

Co-authorship network analysis. International collaboration patterns are shown in the co-authorship network (Figure 5). Here, nodes represent countries, and the links between them signify joint research publications. The total link strength is an indicator of the degree of international connectivity; the clusters (represented by colors) reveal regional research partnerships and geographical concentrations in the production of knowledge.

The co-authorship analysis reveals a moderately fragmented global research landscape in barriers to rural youth entrepreneurship, with 19 countries meeting the minimum threshold of 2 publications from a total of 46 countries represented in the dataset. This relatively low threshold achievement (41% of countries) suggests that research in this field remains geographically concentrated, with limited international collaboration networks. The analysis identifies three distinct collaborative clusters, indicating regional research partnerships and thematic specializations.

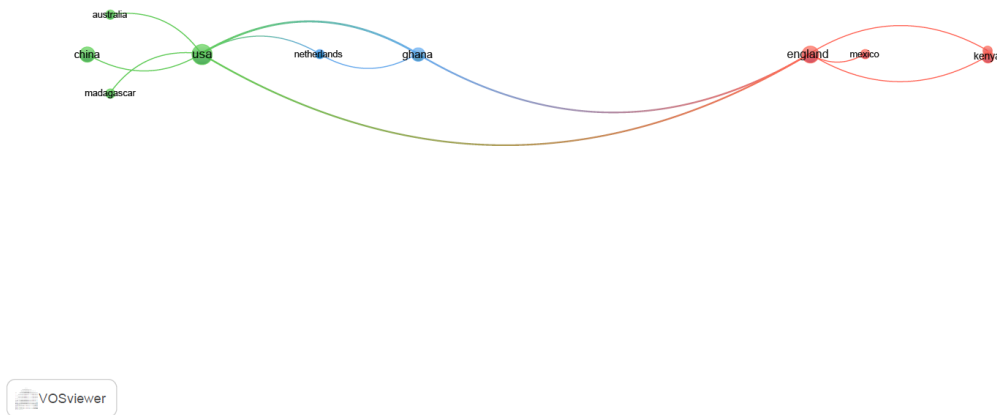


Figure 5: Global co-authorship network visualization

Cluster 1 (green) (Australia, China, Madagascar, USA). It combines developed and developing economies, hinting at research collaborations across different contexts. The USA leads with 9 documents and 78 citations, showing strong research impact. China follows with 5 documents and 70 citations, while Madagascar's 2 documents and 1 citation reflect inclusion of least developed country perspectives. Australia with 2 papers and 6 citations suggest regional engagement and expertise in rural development. Overall, this cluster points to comparative studies and the transfer of knowledge between diverse economic contexts.

Cluster 2 (red) (England, Kenya, Malaysia, Mexico). The cluster combines established research institutions from England with emerging economies, reflecting traditional North-South research partnerships. England leads with 6 documents and 98 citations, likely serving as a methodological and theoretical guide. Kenya's inclusion (3 documents, 52 citations) represents a significant African research contribution. Malaysia (2 documents, 3 citations) and Mexico (2 documents, 43 citations) bring Asian and Latin American perspectives.

Cluster 3 (blue) (Ghana, Netherlands). The blue cluster represents a focused collaboration between European academic institutions and West African research contexts. Ghana's prominence (4 documents, 34 citations) indicates a significant local research capacity and international recognition of its contributions to understanding youth rural entrepreneurship barriers in sub-Saharan contexts.

Table 3: Research productivity, impact, and collaboration metrics by country

Country	Documents	Citations	Total link strength
England	6	98	7
USA	9	78	9
China	5	70	1
Kenya	3	52	2
Mexico	2	43	1
Ghana	4	34	7
Morocco	2	31	0
Nigeria	5	30	3

Spain	5	22	0
Romania	2	20	0
Cameroon	3	18	2
Australia	2	6	1
Netherlands	2	5	2
Benin	2	4	2
Malaysia	2	3	2
Canada	2	3	1
Greece	2	3	0
India	3	2	0
Madagascar	2	1	1

Note: The minimum threshold was set to 2 publications from a total of 46 countries represented in the literature.

Geographic distribution and research intensity. The network analysis reveals several important patterns in global research distribution (Table 3):

There is a dominance of African countries. The researched topic is represented significantly in the literature by Ghana, Nigeria, Kenya, Benin, Cameroon, Madagascar and Morocco. This concentration may reflect the challenges the African continent encounters regarding youth unemployment and the policy relevance of rural entrepreneurship. Also, this concentration means empirical evidence is densely context-specific, potentially limiting the applicability of findings to rural settings in other regions.

Asian countries are underrepresented. Although Asia has a large rural population, only China and Malaysia appear in the collaboration network, and China's collaboration links are limited (link strength: 1). This may point to potential gaps in regional coverage and limited cross-regional knowledge exchange.

Research isolation and knowledge silos. Several countries (Greece, India, Morocco, Romania, Spain) exhibit zero total link strength, suggesting that some research has been conducted largely without international collaboration. This fragmentation creates knowledge silos in the field, where researchers may be working on similar issues without relying on each other's findings. Such research isolation can limit opportunities for comparative analysis, slow cumulative theory development, and reduce the transferability of relevant policy lessons across different rural contexts.

4. Discussions

Analysis of main barriers to youth entrepreneurship in rural areas. The systematic literature review reveals several significant and persistent barriers to youth entrepreneurship within rural contexts. We have categorized these impediments into financial, infrastructure, educational/skills, social/cultural, institutional/policy, and market-related challenges.

These barriers are not isolated obstacles but reflect deeper institutional deficits across regulative, normative, and cognitive dimensions (Scott, 2014). Young people in rural areas face disadvantages across all three dimensions. Formal systems hinder their access to credit and support programs, social norms pressure them toward migration and traditional employment, and prevailing assumptions devalue both youth capabilities and rural entrepreneurial opportunities. Rather than addressing these

challenges separately, we examine how they function as components of a broader institutional environment that systematically marginalizes rural youth entrepreneurs.

Financial barriers as regulative exclusion. Access to finance emerges as the most frequently cited barrier. Young rural entrepreneurs face more than capital scarcity - they are systematically excluded from formal financial systems. Formal financial institutions use eligibility criteria that disadvantage young people. Requirements for collateral, credit history, and stable income create an inherent disadvantage for young people who have not yet accumulated assets or formal employment records (Arthur-Holmes & Yeboah, 2025; Iwara, 2025; Pervez et al., 2024). This issue is intensified by “inadequate startup capital” and a “shortage of credit access” (Leul et al., 2023), “low savings rates” among young people (Pervez et al., 2024), and “low income” levels that prevent entrepreneurial initiation (Dragin et al., 2024).

In the agricultural sectors, “limited access to land” remains a critical regulative barrier, as existing funding programs inadequately support youth land acquisition and capital needs (Makris et al., 2025). Funding limitations further constrain agricultural service providers' sustainability (Kadzamira et al., 2024), while the informal and seasonal nature of rural markets creates “inconsistent income” streams (Ratompoarison et al., 2023). These conditions reflect structural biases rather than simple market failures; regulative frameworks favor established, asset-holding entrepreneurs and thereby constrain the entry of younger participants.

Infrastructure deficits as regulative underinvestment. Infrastructure inadequacy reflects systematic regulative underinvestment in rural areas. “Inadequate roads” and the deficiency of transportation systems impede market access for perishable products (Leul et al., 2023; Pervez, et al., 2024; Ratompoarison et al., 2023), while the lack of storage and processing facilities prevents year-round product availability (Ratompoarison et al., 2023). “Limited utilities” including power and water, absence of paved roads and electricity (Leul et al., 2023; Ratompoarison et al., 2023), and critically, “limited digital infrastructure” (Zhang et al., 2024) represent not mere development gaps but regulative priorities that systematically disadvantage rural economies. Infrastructure deficits and financial exclusion create a reinforcing cycle. Without basic infrastructure, such as roads, utilities, and storage, youth-led ventures often cannot meet the requirements for formal credit, limiting their ability to grow. So far, regulatory efforts have been insufficient to address this persistent barrier.

Institutional/policy barriers as governance deficiency. Direct governance deficiencies further exacerbate these structural problems. General “lack of government support” manifests through “poor political governance and corruption”, “institutional weakness in employment planning” (Iwara, 2025), and failure “to generate formal job opportunities” (Arthur-Holmes & Yeboah, 2025). Limited information access due to “ineffective labor market information systems” further disadvantages young entrepreneurs (Iwara, 2025). Formal institutions often exhibit “inefficient property rights protection”, “slow judicial systems”, “excessive bureaucratic requirements”, and “high transfer taxes” that impede land mobility for young farmers (Makris et al., 2025). “Complex licensing systems” and criminalization of certain informal activities increase suspicion and make formalization more difficult (Arthur-Holmes & Yeboah, 2025), while “political instability” creates

environmental fragility (Iwara, 2025). These challenges are compounded by the relative ineffectiveness of current government interventions in mitigating youth underemployment (Tadzong Mouafo et al., 2024). In this context, regulative institutions often act as barriers, as poorly aligned policies and weak enforcement undermine entrepreneurial initiative.

Social and cultural norms as entrepreneurial deterrents. Beyond formal regulations, normative institutions play a decisive role in legitimizing or devaluing specific entrepreneurial paths. The "socialization of Good Jobs" establishes a rigid cognitive hierarchy. Within this framework, formal salaried positions are viewed as the only "respectable" occupations, a perception that actively discourages educated youth from pursuing entrepreneurship, particularly in the informal sector (Arthur-Holmes & Yeboah, 2025). This deficit of social recognition drives youth migration; when local ventures are devalued, urban centers offer a dual promise of both economic opportunity and higher social status. Such trends contribute to a rural "brain drain" that systematically depletes potential entrepreneurial talent (Dragin et al., 2024; Iwara, 2025; Pervez et al., 2024).

These pressures are further reinforced within the domestic sphere. "Family attitudes/tradition" often dictate labor divisions and entrepreneurial roles, including gendered expectations around domestic work (Ratompoarison et al., 2023). Furthermore, a prevalent culture of risk aversion, deeply rooted in values that favor security over independence further discourages entrepreneurial endeavor (Pervez et al., 2024; Ratompoarison et al., 2023). From an institutional perspective, these barriers reinforce one another. Migration reduces the presence of local role models, which strengthens the view of rural entrepreneurship as a "fallback" option instead of a viable career. Over time, this perception sustains outward migration and deepens the resulting talent gap.

Gender as a complex normative barrier. In addition to general youth-related constraints, gender functions as a distinct and often insufficiently examined institutional dimension. This is reflected in our bibliometric analysis, where gender research is concentrated in separate clusters instead of being integrated across broader entrepreneurial themes. Gender norms create additional normative barriers for young women entrepreneurs, who experience both youth-based and gender-based institutional exclusion. Traditional gender roles limit young women's participation in certain sectors, while family and community expectations constrain their entrepreneurial autonomy. This dual marginalization suggests that institutional barriers are multiplicative, not merely additive, resulting in a higher level of exclusion for young women compared to young men or older women entrepreneurs

Educational systems as a source of cognitive institutional deficiency. A persistent mismatch between education and labor market demands (Arthur-Holmes & Yeboah, 2025; Iwara, 2025) indicates a cognitive institutional misalignment. Many educational systems remain "chiefly theory-oriented rather than aligned with a knowledge economy," producing "irrelevant qualifications" that are often decoupled from market needs (Iwara, 2025). This disconnect generates "inadequate graduate developmental skills", "mismatched skills", and a "lack of practical experience" (Arthur-Holmes & Yeboah, 2025; Iwara, 2025). The scarcity of business and management skills, "poor startup expertise" (Iwara, 2025; Pervez et al., 2024), and "lack of tailored support programs" and mentorship opportunities (Dragin et al., 2024; Iwara, 2025) may suggest that cognitive institutions have

not yet recognized entrepreneurship as a legitimate educational outcome. Inadequate technical training in areas like postharvest processing (Arthur-Holmes & Yeboah, 2025; Ratompoarison et al., 2023), absence of comprehensive knowledge regarding agricultural business practices, and “insufficient extension services” (Leul et al., 2023) highlight specific knowledge gaps. Furthermore, in a digital economy, deficiencies in digital literacy and resource mobilization (Iwara, 2025; Zhang et al., 2024) create additional cognitive barriers. These gaps do not merely represent a lack of tools; they restrict an individual’s capacity to recognize and exploit diverse digital entrepreneurial opportunities.

Institutionally, this misalignment reproduces itself over time. Educational systems that prioritize formal employment as the primary “legitimate” outcome continue to emphasize traditional career preparation. This emphasis reinforces social perceptions that devalue entrepreneurship, allowing these cognitive biases to persist.

Market access as structural institutional weakness. Market-related barriers illustrate how institutional deficits across all dimensions converge to isolate rural youth from economic opportunities. The “limited market access” for rural enterprise products (Iwara, 2025; Leul et al., 2023; Ratompoarison et al., 2023) stems not only from geographic distance, but also from weak institutional infrastructure. Specifically, the absence of standardized quality controls, “organized marketing channels” and value chain coordination prevents rural producers from reaching markets beyond the local level (Ratompoarison et al., 2023). This structural isolation is further intensified by persistent employment pressures. As shrinking economies push youth toward alternative informal livelihoods (Arthur-Holmes & Yeboah, 2025), and rural depopulation renders many local businesses unsustainable (Dragin et al., 2024), the consumer base for new ventures becomes increasingly precarious. These supply chain disruptions and “marketing challenges” (Ratompoarison et al., 2023) reflect institutional voids. In the absence of coordinated support structures, whether formal or informal, youth-led ventures struggle to secure stable market access necessary for long-term viability.

Institutional interdependencies and systemic exclusion. These barriers do not operate independently but reinforce one another. Regulatory exclusion from finance prevents youth from overcoming infrastructure deficits; normative devaluation of entrepreneurship reduces demand for entrepreneurship education; cognitive deficiencies within educational systems leave graduates unprepared for available opportunities; and market barriers make entrepreneurship appear unviable, reinforcing normative pressures toward migration. This creates an institutional poverty trap where each barrier strengthens others, systematically limiting rural youth's access to entrepreneurial pathways.

5. Conclusions

This systematic literature review explores a central question: what barriers do young entrepreneurs encounter in rural environments? Our synthesis of 57 studies published over the past decade reveals that these barriers relate mostly to financial access, infrastructure deficits, educational misalignment, social and cultural norms, governance deficit, and market constraints. These barriers are not separate issues; they interact and reinforce each other.

The bibliometric analysis reveals several structural imbalances in the field. Most notably, research is densely concentrated in Africa. This focus is understandable given the region's urgent policy challenges, but it leaves us with a thin evidence base for Asia, Latin America, and Eastern Europe. Such geographic narrowness makes it difficult to know if current findings apply globally. Furthermore, research networks show significant fragmentation, with several countries conducting isolated studies without international collaboration. These "knowledge silos" make comparative learning difficult. Without more collaboration, it remains unclear which barriers are unique to specific locations and which are universal across the rural settings.

Implications for policy and practice. Our findings show that tackling barriers one by one is rarely effective. A financial assistance program, for instance, is unlikely to succeed if it ignores the crumbling infrastructure around it. Similarly, training initiatives often fall short if they fail to address the social norms that discourage youth from starting businesses in the first place. Effective policy, therefore, needs to move away from "one-size-fits-all" solutions. Instead, it should prioritize integrated, place-based strategies that account for how different obstacles mutually reinforce each other within a specific rural context.

For practitioners and development organizations, support should intersect with the lived realities of rural youth. Mentorship and training work best when they move away from "top-down", standardized models. To be truly effective, these programs need to address the specific cultural expectations, gender roles, and community structures that define what "success" looks like in a particular village or region.

Limitations. As with all systematic reviews, this study faces certain methodological constraints. The reliance on the Web of Science Core Collection and the exclusion of grey literature might have narrowed the practical perspective. Also, our ten-year timeframe, though justified by the need for contemporary relevance, means we have not fully engaged with earlier foundational works that continue to shape theoretical debates. The dominance of studies from certain geographic regions also restricts the generalizability of the findings. Gender appears frequently in the literature, but it is often treated as a peripheral theme instead of being integrated across analyses, which limits understanding of how it interacts with other barriers.

Directions for future research. Future studies would benefit from broader geographic coverage, particularly studies that allow comparison across different rural contexts. Such work could help clarify which barriers are common across settings and which are influenced by specific institutional and economic environments. There is also scope for more integrated analytical approaches that examine how barriers interact and reinforce one another, rather than considering them in isolation. Finally, longitudinal research could add much-needed depth by tracing how young entrepreneurs adapt and persist over time, revealing the dynamics of resilience within rural entrepreneurial ecosystems.

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