
Exploring the Root Causes of Youth Unemployment in the Gurage Zone, Central Ethiopia

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Abstract:

Purpose: Unemployment presents a major macroeconomic challenge, with youth particularly vulnerable compared to adults. This study explores the root causes of youth unemployment in the Gurage Zone, Ethiopia, using a mixed-methods approach that integrates descriptive and explanatory designs with qualitative and quantitative analyses.

Design/methodology/approach: Data were collected through a multi-stage sampling technique from 417 selected youths, yielding 400 complete questionnaires. Descriptive and inferential statistical methods, including cross-tabulation analysis, revealed key factors influencing youth unemployment: sex, age, migration status, educational attainment, maternal education level, access to credit, and training received. Broader structural causes include inflation, declining investment, political instability, skill mismatches, inadequate education curricula, a neglected agricultural sector, and limited financial resources.

Findings: The study recommends enhancing education, increasing government investment in agriculture, improving political stability, expanding access to credit, and promoting self-employment initiatives. Priority sectors identified for youth employment include poultry, cattle, and sheep farming, cobblestone production, modern farming techniques, dairy and meat production, and irrigation development.

Practical implications: Given the Gurage Zone's limited industrial activity, targeted support from governmental and non-governmental organizations in these sectors could substantially reduce youth unemployment and drive sustainable regional development.

Originality value: Establishing modern marketplaces and improving access to necessary inputs are also crucial.

Keywords: Causes, demographics, employment, socio-economic factors, unemployment, youth.

JEL Codes: J64, J21, J13, O15, R23.

Paper type: Research article.

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1. Introduction

Unemployment, job quality, and working poverty are pressing global challenges, especially in the context of evolving technological advancements and shifting labor market dynamics. These changes create both opportunities and uncertainties, particularly for young workers entering the labor force (ILO, 2017). Youth unemployment, defined as the lack of employment among individuals aged 15 to 29 actively seeking work, remains a critical socio-economic issue with profound implications for national development (MYPE, 2004). Economic fluctuations exacerbate youth unemployment, disproportionately affecting young people compared to older age groups and highlighting the need for targeted interventions to improve employment prospects (ILO, 2018).

Youth are vital to economic, social, and political development, particularly in countries where they form a significant portion of the population and labor force. Effectively integrating youth into the labor market is crucial for harnessing their potential and fostering national progress (Ayhan, 2016). However, youth unemployment remains a persistent challenge globally, particularly in developing countries, where poverty forces many young people to seek employment out of necessity (Kassa, 2012; ILO, 2011).

Globally, youth unemployment is often worsened by poor macroeconomic conditions, with young workers experiencing "super-cyclical" unemployment due to economic fluctuations (Ryan, 2001). Factors like high real wage rigidities, insufficient aggregate demand, and high real interest rates further exacerbate the issue. In the Eurozone, youth unemployment exceeds 14%, with countries like Spain and Greece facing rates above 30% due to economic downturns and austerity measures (ILO, 2020).

In Sub-Saharan Africa, erratic economic growth and high unemployment rates pose significant barriers to development, with youth unemployment being especially severe. Ethiopia exemplifies these challenges, grappling with macroeconomic instability caused by political turmoil, which affects inflation, investment, and productivity. Periods of low economic growth correlate with rising youth unemployment rates (Broussara and Tekleselassie, 2012; Awogbenle and Iwuamadi, 2010). Between 2013/14 and 2019/20, Ethiopia faced increasing inflation, declining savings, reduced investment, and rising external debt, all of which exacerbated youth unemployment (NBE, 2020).

Inflation surged from 8.1% to 21.5%, significantly eroding the purchasing power of youth (CSA, 2021). These economic constraints often force youth into precarious employment or financial dependence, further limiting their job prospects. Declining investment has particularly impacted sectors that traditionally employ young people, while rising external debt raises concerns about austerity measures and reduced public expenditure, potentially hindering job creation (Alemayehu, 2021).

Addressing youth unemployment in Ethiopia requires targeted government investment, especially in agriculture, which employs the majority of the population but faces significant structural challenges. The transition from an agrarian economy to industrial development, combined with political instability, has exacerbated unemployment. With over 60% of Ethiopia's population under 30, the country faces both a challenge and an opportunity for economic growth (CSA, LFS, 2021).

However, fiscal and monetary constraints limit the government's ability to implement effective job creation programs, particularly in regions like the Gurage Zone, where economic expansion has not resulted in sufficient employment opportunities.

In Ethiopia, youth unemployment is influenced by a variety of economic, demographic, and structural factors. The high population growth, with the labor force expanding at an annual rate of 3.2%, outpaces job creation, contributing to high unemployment rates among youth (Denu *et al.*, 2007). Additionally, there is a significant skill mismatch, where many young people find that their qualifications do not align with labor market needs, especially those with higher education, exacerbating unemployment (Denu *et al.*, 2005).

Weak economic performance hampers job creation, as a sluggish economy reduces labor demand, deepening youth unemployment (Brunero, 2008). The lack of a supportive entrepreneurial environment also limits sustainable job creation, as many youths are forced into entrepreneurship out of necessity rather than opportunity, negatively impacting business stability and growth (UN-Habitat, 2011).

Moreover, rural-to-urban migration, coupled with internal urban migration, has intensified youth unemployment. Migrants face challenges such as inadequate infrastructure and limited services, which further increase unemployment rates (Kuralbayeva, 2018).

Power supply instability is another contributing factor, as frequent power shortages affect business operations, thereby reducing employment opportunities for young people (IFC and World Bank, 2014). The neglect of agriculture, which provides livelihoods for many rural youth, limits job opportunities in the sector and drives migration to urban areas, intensifying urban unemployment (World Bank, 2018).

Lastly, political and security instability discourages investment, disrupts economic activities, and increases youth unemployment. Instability also drives internal migration, raising competition for jobs in more stable regions (Dercon and Hill, 2014; Gebreyesus and Söderbom, 2019).

The COVID-19 pandemic and internal conflicts have worsened these challenges, increased rural-to-urban migration and deepened urban poverty (UNDP, 2022). High

inflation, which reached 37.2% in May 2022, has strained sectors like agriculture and manufacturing (Quarterly Economic Profile, 2022).

Existing literature on youth unemployment in Ethiopia reveals critical gaps. Many studies focus narrowly on urban areas, neglecting semi-urban areas. The youth population is often treated as homogeneous, without differentiation by age, gender, or education level. Many studies also rely on small, non-representative samples and basic descriptive statistics, lacking advanced econometric methods and integrated mixed methods approaches.

There is limited evaluation of policy impacts at the zonal level and minimal attention to the informal sector and institutional and cultural barriers. Addressing these gaps is crucial for developing effective interventions and gaining a comprehensive understanding of youth unemployment in Ethiopia.

This study seeks to address these gaps by analysing the root causes of youth unemployment in the Gurage Zone, Ethiopia. By integrating demographic and socio-economic factors, it aims to provide a holistic understanding of youth causes unemployment, offering valuable insights for policymakers and stakeholders.

The main objective of this study is to explore and identify the root causes of youth unemployment in the Gurage Zone, Ethiopia

The central research question for this study is:

What are the root causes of youth unemployment in the Gurage Zone, Ethiopia?

1.1 Definition of Key Terms

In this section, important concepts and terms related to the study are defined to ensure a clear understanding for readers. We followed the same classification of terms as in our previous study titled “Determinants of Youth Unemployment in the Gurage Zone, Ethiopia: A Socio-Economic Analysis”.

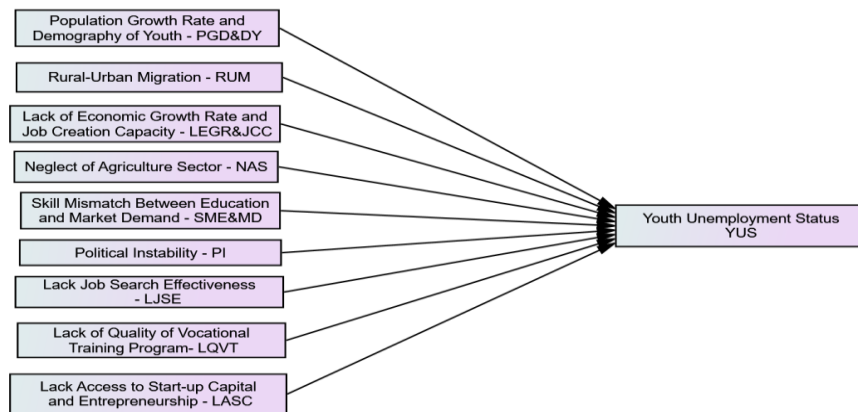
- Youth: A person aged between 15 and 29 years, as defined by Ethiopia's Ministry of Youth, Sports, and Culture (MOYSC, 2004). This category includes individuals between the ages of 15 and 29 in this study.
- Youth Unemployment: Refers to the percentage of young people (aged 15-29) who are unemployed as part of the total labor force, where the labor force includes both the unemployed and the employed.
- Economically Active Youths: Individuals aged 15 to 29 years who are either employed or actively seeking employment.
- Unemployment: Defined as individuals aged 15 to 29 who, during the reference period, were "without work," but are "currently available for

work" and actively "seeking work." These individuals have taken specific steps to seek paid employment or self-employment (CSA, 2018).

Youth unemployment is a complex issue influenced by various socio-economic and political factors. In the context of the Gurage Zone and similar regions, several key causes contribute to the rising rates of youth unemployment. These include population growth, rural-urban migration, economic downturns, and neglect of the agricultural sector, skill mismatches, and political instability.

Figure 1 visually represents these factors as direct causes of Youth Unemployment Status (YUS), emphasizing how each plays a significant role in limiting employment opportunities for young people. The interaction of these variables suggests the need for multifaceted policy interventions to address both structural and immediate challenges in the labor market.

Figure 1. Causes of Youth Unemployment in the Gurage Zone.



Source: Own study.

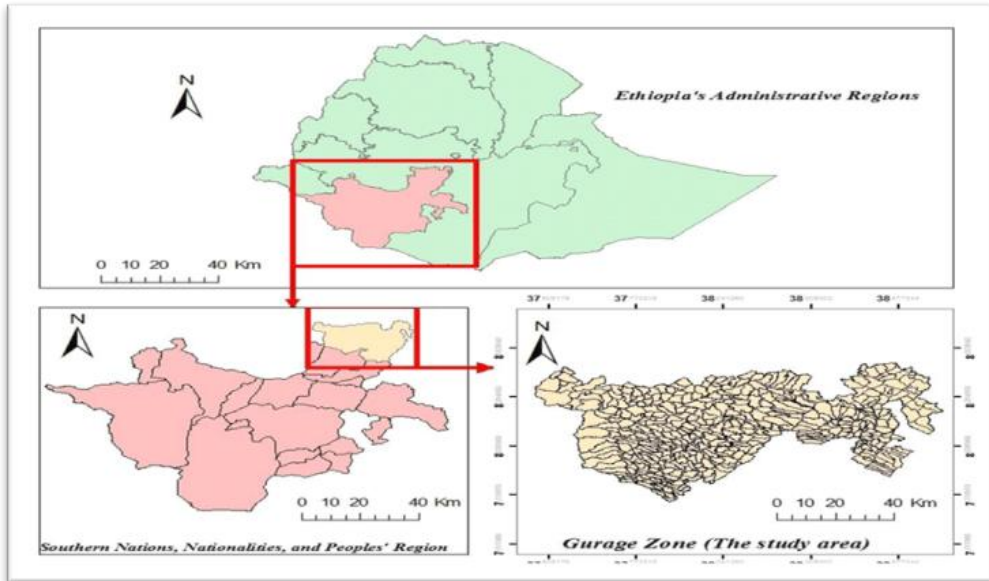
2. Research Method and Data

This study was conducted in Gurage Zone, located in central Ethiopia, the same zone as in our previous research titled “Determinants of Youth Unemployment in the Gurage Zone, Ethiopia: A Socio-Economic Analysis”.

As it is written in our previous study the population of Gurage Zone is around 1.5 million, with 400,000 youth (ages 15-29), and approximately 85% of the population lives in rural areas (Gurage Zone Youth and Sports Office, 2024). This study explores the demographic and socio-economic factors influencing youth

unemployment in the region, aiming to offer recommendations for improving youth employment prospects (Gurage Zone Youth and Sports Office, 2024) (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Study Area – Gurage Zone, Ethiopia and Its Administrative Boundaries within Central Ethiopia



Source: Google map.

This study adopts the same research philosophy as in the previous study, a pragmatic philosophy, which integrates both positivist and interpretivist approaches.

A mixed-methods approach with a concurrent triangulation design is employed in this study, where both quantitative and qualitative data are collected simultaneously to facilitate cross-validation.

The study follows the same structure as in the previous study with an explanatory research design based on cross-sectional method for the period between 01/10/2024 and 15/08/2025.

The same town was selected from each Woreda for the study as in our previous study: Buee (from Sodo), Butajira (from Meskan), Wolkite (from Kebena), and Gubre (from Sebat Bet). The total youth population in these towns is 28,355, all of whom are economically active. Both employed and unemployed youth were considered as respondents for the study, and the sample size was determined using proportional allocation based on the youth populations in each town.

This study used a multistage sampling technique to efficiently collect data from a large and diverse population. Rather than sampling the entire population, which

would be resource-intensive, a representative sample was drawn. Multistage sampling allows the researcher to select units in multiple phases, starting with larger units like towns or Woredas and narrowing down to smaller units such as kebeles.

As it is mentioned in our previous study this research approach ensures that the sample remains representative of the population while being cost-effective and manageable. Hence, representative samples were drawn from the entire population. In light of this, Leary (2004) emphasized that researchers must carefully choose samples that best support their findings (Table 1).

Table 1. Sampling Technique Use

Stage of Sampling Technique	Sample Selected	Sampling Technique Used	Reason
Stage I	Gurage Zone	Purposive	Due to their research gap
Stage II	Four Woredas	Purposive	Due to their high youth population
Stage III	One Town from each Woreda	Simple Random Sampling	It reduces bias and gives every member of the population an equal chance to participate in the study
Stage IV	Respondents	Simple Random Sampling	It reduces bias and provides each individual in the population a fair opportunity to take part in the study

Source: Self-developed (2025).

2.7 Sample Size Determination

The sample size for this study was determined using Kothari's (2004) formula for finite populations, with a 95% confidence level and a 5% margin of error. Given a target population of 28,355 economically active youth in the Gurage Zone, this approach ensured statistical reliability and allowed for accurate generalizations, enabling valid inferences about youth unemployment. Using the same formula we have calculated the sample size as follows:

$$\text{The formula is: } n = \frac{Z^2}{e^2} \frac{p \cdot q \cdot N}{(N-1) + Z^2 \cdot p \cdot q}$$

Where:

- n = required sample size
- Z = z-value (1.96 for 95% confidence)
- p = estimated proportion (0.5)
- q = 1 - p (0.5)
- e = margin of error (0.05)
- N = population size (28,355)

$$\text{Plugging in the values: } n = \frac{1.96^2}{0.5^2} \frac{0.5 \cdot 0.5 \cdot 28355}{(28355-1) + 1.96^2 \cdot 0.5 \cdot 0.5}$$

$$n = \frac{27,232.1426}{71.8454}$$

$n \approx 379$

The initial sample size of 379 was adjusted for a 10% non-response rate, raising the target to 417 respondents. However, due to practical constraints, the final sample size was set at 400, slightly below the target but still statistically acceptable. This ensures the reliability, statistical power, and generalizability of the findings.

This figure outlines the towns selected for the study in the Gurage Zone, along with the sampling procedure and the methodology used to determine the sample proportion for each town.

The Gurage Zone consists of several towns, each contributing to the study based on specific criteria. The sampling procedure ensures that each town's population is adequately represented in the sample, based on their size and other relevant factors.

2.8 Source of Data, Data Collection Methods, and Procedures

This study utilized both primary and secondary data to provide a comprehensive analysis of youth unemployment in the Gurage Zone. The combination of data sources strengthens the study by offering both statistical and contextual depth.

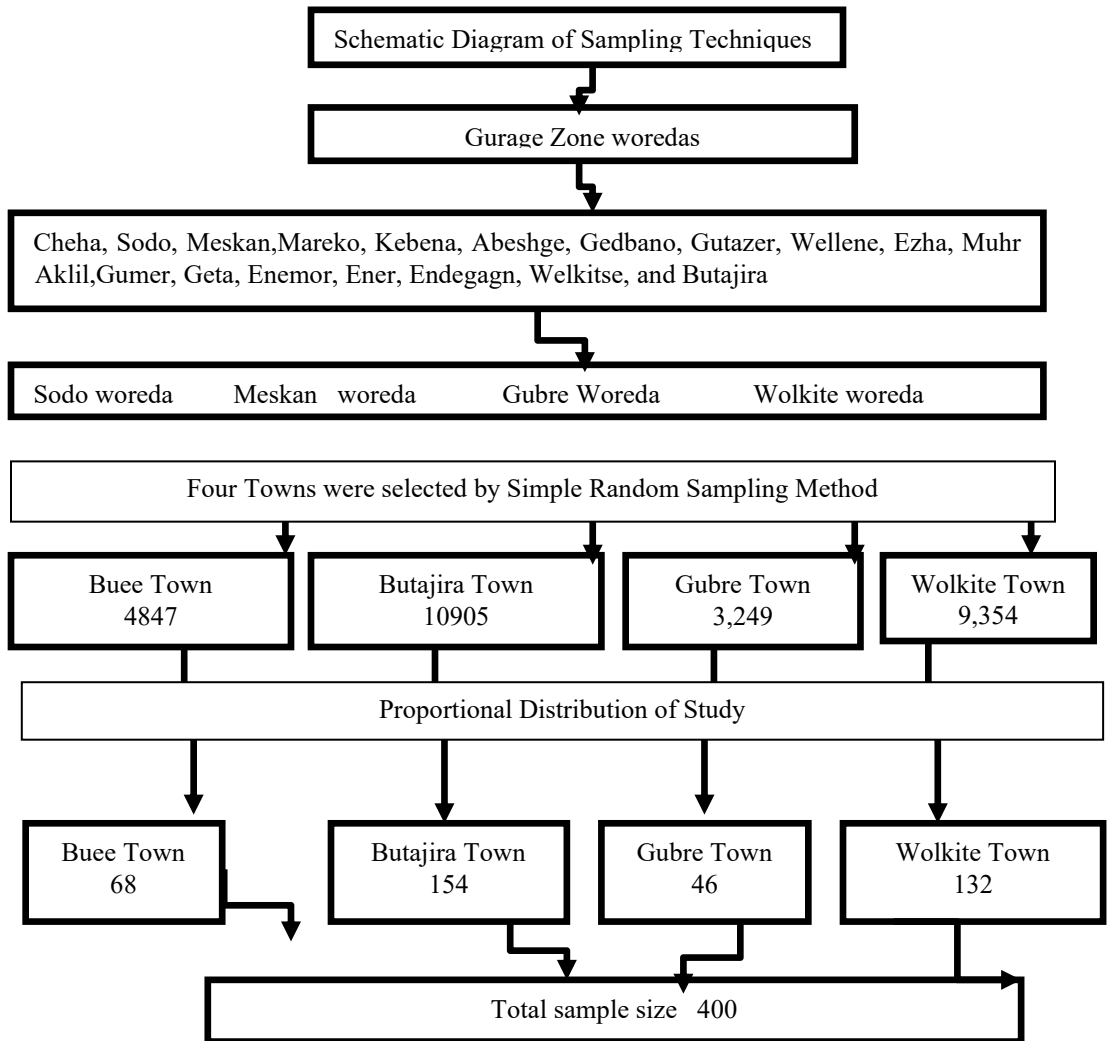
The study integrated primary data obtained through questionnaires, interviews, and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), as in the first article, with secondary data gathered from government reports, published studies, and academic journals. This integration enhances both the statistical rigor and contextual insights of the study.

A structured questionnaire was developed and administered to 400 respondents. The questionnaire primarily consisted of closed-ended and open-ended questions, focusing on demographic and socio-economic factors influencing youth unemployment. The standardized format allowed for robust statistical analysis and identification of key trends related to the issue.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with purposively selected key informants, including graduates, kebele leaders, parents, civil servants, town experts, microfinance representatives, and small-scale entrepreneurs.

These interviews aimed to capture diverse perspectives on youth unemployment, providing qualitative insights that complemented the quantitative survey findings (Table 2).

Figure 3. List of Gurage Zone Towns, Sampling Procedure, and Determining Sample Proportion



Source: Authors' design (2025).

Table 2. Key Informants and Sampling Technique for Qualitative Data Collection

Name of the Areas	Key Information	Sample Technique
Buee	4 students, 1 Kebele leader, 2 parents, 1 civil servant, 2 town experts, 1 microfinance, 1 entrepreneur	Purposively selected for in-depth information on youth unemployment
Gubra	4 students, 1 Kebele leader, 2 parents, 1 civil servant, 2 town experts, 1 microfinance, 1 entrepreneur	Purposively selected

Butajira	4 students, 1 Kebele leader, 2 parents, 1 civil servant, 2 town experts, 1 microfinance, 1 entrepreneur	Purposively selected
Wolkite	4 students, 1 Kebele leader, 2 parents, 1 civil servant, 2 town experts, 1 microfinance, 1 entrepreneur	Purposively selected
Total	16 students, 4 Kebele leaders, 8 parents, 4 civil servants, 8 town experts, 4 microfinance reps, 4 entrepreneurs	

Source: Own study.

Four FGDs, as in the previous research, each lasting between 45 minutes to one hour, were conducted with a total of 24 purposively selected participants. The participants were chosen based on factors such as age, gender, education, and socio-economic status. The FGDs provided qualitative data on community perceptions, social dynamics, and deeper insights into the causes and consequences of youth unemployment in the region.

The research was conducted at the personal level from the sampling frame, which included economically active youth in the specified kebeles of the Gurage Zone. Primary data was gathered through semi-structured interviews and questionnaires. Secondary data was obtained from the Woreda Labour and Social Affairs Office, Woreda Youth and Sports Office, and Kebele Administration heads. This data included details on the number, gender, educational status, and unemployment rates among youth in the region.

The survey questions were pre-tested to enhance clarity and reduce potential bias prior to full-scale data collection. A small sample of respondents was selected to complete the questionnaire, allowing the researcher to identify ambiguities and biases in the wording.

Feedback from this process was analysed to make necessary revisions, ensuring that the questions were clearing, unbiased, and effectively captured the intended data on the causes of youth unemployment in the Gurage Zone. This pre-testing phase was essential in refining the instrument to improve its validity and reliability.

3. Method of Data Analysis

3.1 Quantitative Data Analysis

Quantitative data analysis in this study relied on both descriptive and inferential statistical methods to provide a comprehensive understanding of youth unemployment in the Gurage Zone. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations, were used to summarize key socio-economic variables, offering an overview of the study population's characteristics and the scope of youth unemployment.

Inferential statistics, particularly p-values, were applied to test the significance of relationships between variables, such as employment status and socio-economic factors. This combination of methods allowed for the identification of significant patterns and a deeper understanding of the determinants of youth unemployment.

3.2 Qualitative Data Analysis

The qualitative data analysis method was essential for exploring the contextual and experiential aspects of youth unemployment that quantitative methods alone could not capture. Thematic analysis of interviews and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) helped identify recurring themes, enhancing the understanding of the socio-economic, political, and personal causes of youth unemployment.

This systematic coding process ensured rigorous organization and analysis of the data, providing rich insights into the challenges faced by unemployed youth in the Gurage Zone. These qualitative findings were key to complementing the quantitative results and offering a more comprehensive view of the social and psychological impacts of unemployment.

3.3 Research Ethics

The study adhered to strict ethical standards throughout the research process. Permissions and consent were obtained from relevant authorities and all participants prior to data collection. Confidentiality was maintained by securely storing the data and limiting access to authorized personnel only. The research followed key ethical principles of respect, beneficence, justice, and integrity. Approval was granted by an ethics committee, and the findings will be responsibly disseminated while ensuring the privacy and anonymity of participants (Table 3).

Table 3. Independent Variables and Expected Sign

Independent Variables	Categories	Type	Measurement	Expected Sign
AGE	15-19 years, 20-24 years, 24-29 years	Categorical	Age group	-
MST	Never Married, Currently Married, Divorced, Widowed, Separated	Categorical	Marital status	+/-
REL	Orthodox, Muslim, Protestants, Catholic, Other	Categorical	Religion	+/-
MGST	Migrant, Non-Migrant	Categorical	Migration status	+/-
HSIZE	Less than 4, 4 to 7, Greater than 8	Categorical	Household size	+
EDU	Can't read and write, Can read but not write, Primary (1-8), Secondary (9-12), TVET,	Categorical	Education level of youth	-

	First Degree and above			
MOEDU	Can't read and write, Can read but not write, Primary (1-8), Secondary (9-12), TVET, First Degree and above	Categorical	Mother's education level	-
FAEDU	Can't read and write, Can read but not write, Primary (1-8), Secondary (9-12), TVET, First Degree and above	Categorical	Father's education level	-
ACREDIT	Has access to credit, No access to credit	Categorical	Access to credit	+
RT	Not received, Received once	Categorical	Training received	-
FI	Less than 500, 501-1000, 1001-1500, Above 1500	Categorical	Family income	-

Source: Self-developed (2024).

Table 3 above provides an overview of the independent variables used in this study, including their categories, types, and expected relationships with youth unemployment in the Gurage Zone. Each variable is categorized as categorical, with distinct groups or ranges. The expected sign indicates the anticipated relationship between the variable and youth unemployment, where negative signs (−) suggest a reduction in the likelihood of unemployment, while positive signs (+) suggest an increase.

4. Result and Discussion

4.1 General Remarks

Following the structure of the previous study this section presents the research findings, organized into three parts. The first part details the demographic and socio-economic characteristics of the respondents. The second discusses the bivariate analysis, exploring the relationship between various factors and unemployment status. The third focuses on the multivariate analysis, identifying key determinants of youth unemployment.

Data were collected through 69 questionnaires across four Woredas and towns in the Gurage Zone. A binary logistic regression and multiple regression models were employed to identify the main determinants of youth unemployment, while Pearson Chi-square statistics were used to assess the relationship between independent and dependent variables at a 95% confidence level.

The study examined variables such as gender, age, marital status, religion, migration status, household size, education level, parental education levels, access to credit, received training, and family income. The findings highlight the significant factors influencing youth unemployment in the region.

4.2 Demographic and Socio-Economic Characteristics of Respondents

The data in Table 4 provides a detailed comparison of employed and unemployed youth in the Gurage Zone with 240 unemployed youth compared to 160 employed, highlighting a high unemployment rate and its consequences, such as poverty, reduced productivity, and social instability.

The gender distribution showed that both male (46.3%) and female (53.8%) youth are equally affected by the crisis, despite the higher proportion of females in the study. Age-wise, youth aged 24–29 years (44.8%) are most likely to face unemployment, potentially due to limited educational and job opportunities, while younger youth (15–19 years) and those in their early twenties (20–24 years) experience different challenges in entering the job market.

In terms of marital status, 73.3% of youth were never married, suggesting that many are at an early stage of entering the workforce, though married youth may face additional pressures that could affect their employment prospects. Religious affiliation was another factor, with Orthodox youth making up the majority (67.8%), followed by Protestants (13.3%) and Muslims (13.3%), which may influence access to employment through social networks.

Migration status also plays a role, with 56.8% of youth being migrants, potentially facing challenges like fewer local connections, lower skills, and discrimination.

Household size was significant as well, with larger households potentially imposing greater economic pressures on youth, limiting resources available for education and job-seeking efforts. Education levels were strongly linked to employment prospects, as 47.0% of youth had a First Degree or higher, while 6.0% were illiterate, with those lacking formal education being particularly vulnerable to unemployment.

Parental education levels also had an impact, as 46.3% of mothers and 26.5% of fathers were illiterate, suggesting intergenerational effects that further limit youth employment opportunities.

Access to credit was another key factor, with 42.5% of youth reporting access, which is important for starting businesses or pursuing further education, but many youth face barriers due to a lack of financial resources.

Additionally, 70.5% of youth had not received formal training, highlighting the need for increased vocational and technical education to improve employability. Finally, family income distribution showed that 48.8% of youth came from families earning below 500, which limits their access to education, networks, and entrepreneurial opportunities, making them more vulnerable to unemployment. These findings underscore the need for targeted interventions to address the socio-economic

challenges contributing to youth unemployment in the Gurage Zone, as in the previous study.

Table 4. Demographic and Socio-Economic Characteristics of the Respondents

Variable	Categories	Frequency (%)
Sex (Sex)	Male	185 (46.3)
	Female	215 (53.8)
Age Group (Age)	15-19 years	81 (20.3)
	20-24 years	140 (35.0)
	24-29 years	179 (44.8)
Marital Status (MST)	Never Married	293 (73.3)
	Currently Married	75 (18.8)
	Divorced	12 (3.0)
	Widowed	9 (2.3)
	Separated	11 (2.8)
Religion (REL)	Orthodox	271 (67.8)
	Muslim	53 (13.3)
	Protestants	53 (13.3)
	Catholic	13 (3.3)
	Other	10 (2.5)
Migration Status (MGS)	Migrant	227 (56.8)
	Non-Migrant	173 (43.3)
Household Size (HHS)	Less than 4	125 (31.3)
	4 to 7	174 (43.5)
	Greater than 8	101 (25.3)
Education Level (EDU)	Can't read and write	24 (6.0)
	Can read but not write	10 (2.5)
	Primary (1-8)	34 (8.5)
	Secondary (9-12)	105 (26.3)
	TVET	39 (9.8)
	First Degree and above	188 (47.0)
Medical Literacy (MOEDU)	Can't read and write	185 (46.3)
	Can read but not write	55 (13.8)
	Primary (1-8)	112 (28.0)
	Secondary (9-12)	16 (4.0)
	TVET	19 (4.8)
	First Degree and above	13 (3.3)
Father's Education Level (FAEDU)	Can't read and write	106 (26.5)
	Can read but not write	69 (17.3)
	Primary (1-8)	181 (45.3)
	Secondary (9-12)	24 (6.0)
	TVET	4 (1.0)
	First Degree and above	16 (4.0)
Access to Credit (AC)	Has access to credit	170 (42.5)
	No access to credit	230 (57.5)
Received Training (RT)	Not received	282 (70.5)
	Received once	118 (29.5)
Family Income (FI)	Less than 500	195 (48.8)
	501-1000	119 (29.8)
	1001-1500	39 (9.8)
	Above 1500	47 (11.8)

Source: Survey Data, 2024.

4.3 Demographic and Socio-Economic Characteristics, Bivariate Analysis, and Their Association with Youth Unemployment

The same analysis holds as in the previous research. Table 5 presents the bivariate analysis of various socio-demographic factors and their association with unemployment status among youth in the Gurage Zone. The analysis, based on chi-square tests, highlights several key demographic and socio-economic factors that significantly influence employment status.

Gender was found to be a significant predictor of employment status (Chi-Square = 7.082, $p = 0.008$), with females exhibiting a higher unemployment rate compared to males. This finding reflects ongoing gender-based barriers in the labor market, as indicated by previous studies (Tadesse and Gebre, 2016; UN Women, 2020).

Interviews with female youth participants revealed that despite having similar qualifications to their male counterparts, women often face discrimination and are overlooked for job opportunities (Mekonnen and Melaku, 2015). *One female participant shared, "Even with the same qualifications as men, we are often passed over for job opportunities. It's frustrating."* These results emphasize the structural and cultural challenges that impact youth employment in the region (Klasen and Lamanna, 2009).

Age was also identified as a significant factor influencing employment status (Chi-Square = 12.264, $p = 0.002$), with younger youth, particularly those aged 15–19, experiencing higher unemployment rates compared to older youth (25–29 years).

This underscores the difficulties younger individuals face in securing employment, particularly due to limited work experience and fewer job opportunities. *Qualitative interviews supported this finding, with younger participants citing the challenge of gaining experience when employers typically demand prior work history. One participant shared, "No one wants to hire someone without experience, but how can I gain experience if no one hires me?"* This reflects the well-documented barriers to entry that young people face when entering the labor market (ILO, 2019; Tadesse and Gebre, 2016).

Marital Status, however, did not show a significant relationship with employment status (Chi-Square = 1.904, $p = 0.753$). This suggests that whether youth are married or unmarried does not significantly affect their likelihood of being employed in the Gurage Zone.

This finding aligns with studies indicating that marital status often has a minimal impact on employment outcomes, especially in regions where education, skills, and socio-economic factors are more influential (Kraus et al., 2017; ILO, 2019). *Interviews with youth in the Gurage Zone further supported this, with many noting that skills, education, and social networks played a more critical role than marital*

status. One participant explained, "Whether you're married or single, what matters most is if you have the skills and who you know to get a job."

Religion was similarly found to have no significant impact on employment status (Chi-Square = 0.483, $p = 0.975$). This suggests that religious affiliation does not play a major role in shaping employment opportunities for youth in the region. *Qualitative data from youth participants indicated that religion was not a significant factor in their employment prospects. One respondent noted, "Religion doesn't matter in finding a job; what matters is what you know and who you know."*

In contrast, *Migration Status* exhibited a significant association with employment status (Chi-Square = 13.447, $p = 0.000$), with migrants facing higher unemployment rates compared to non-migrants.

This suggests that migration may present additional barriers to employment, such as a lack of local networks, skill mismatches, or difficulties in having qualifications recognized. *Interviews with migrant youth participants in the Gurage Zone highlighted these challenges, with one participant explaining, "When you move to a new area, you don't know anyone, and it's hard to find a job without connections or local experience."* This reinforces the view that migration can complicate access to employment (Oucho, 2007; ILO, 2019).

Household Size was another significant factor influencing employment outcomes (Chi-Square = 15.750, $p = 0.000$). Youth from larger households, particularly those with more than five members, were more likely to experience unemployment.

This suggests that larger households may experience resource constraints, limiting individual access to education, job training, and employment opportunities. *One participant shared, "In a big family, you're competing for everything—food, money, even the chance to get a good education or job."* This reflects the challenges youth from larger households face in securing employment (Wright, 2006; ILO, 2019).

Education Level emerged as one of the strongest determinants of employment status (Chi-Square = 28.402, $p = 0.000$), with youth holding higher educational qualifications, particularly those with tertiary education, being significantly more likely to be employed.

This underscores the importance of education in enhancing employability. *Many youth participants reinforced this point, with one stating, "I got this job because I have a degree. Without it, I wouldn't have been considered."* These findings are consistent with studies that highlight the positive relationship between education and employment outcomes (Psacharopoulos and Patrinos, 2018; ILO, 2019).

The *Education Level of the Mother* was also found to significantly influence youth employment status (Chi-Square = 13.121, $p = 0.022$). Youth with more educated

mothers were more likely to be employed, suggesting that maternal education may indirectly impact employment prospects by improving access to resources and social networks.

This finding aligns with previous research that highlights the influence of parental education, especially maternal education, on youth employment outcomes (Schultz, 2004; ILO, 2019).

In terms of *Access to Credit*, a significant association was found with employment status (Chi-Square = 8.355, $p = 0.004$). Youth who had access to credit were more likely to be employed, indicating that financial resources play a crucial role in facilitating employment opportunities. *Access to credit allows youth to invest in skill development or start their own businesses, thereby improving their employability.*

One respondent explained, "If I had the money to pay for extra courses or a job search program, I think I'd have a better chance of getting a job, but it's hard without any support." These findings support other studies that highlight the importance of financial resources in youth employment (Field, 2017; ILO, 2019).

Training was another key factor influencing employment outcomes (Chi-Square = 10.971, $p = 0.001$). Youth who received vocational or job-related training were more likely to secure employment, emphasizing the value of skill development in the job market.

One participant noted, *"I didn't know how to use a computer before the training, but now I can work in an office, and it has made a huge difference."* This is consistent with research indicating that vocational training significantly enhances youth employability (Almeida and Bassi, 2015).

Finally, *Family Income* was found to be a strong determinant of employment status (Chi-Square = 13.839, $p = 0.003$). Youth from higher-income families were more likely to be employed, reflecting the role of socio-economic background in shaping employment opportunities.

Youth from wealthier families tend to have better access to education, networks, and job opportunities. One participant explained, *"If I had the money to pay for extra courses or a job search program, I think I'd have a better chance of getting a job, but it's hard without any support."*

Table 5. *Bivariate Analysis of the Determinants of Unemployment Status among Youth in the Gurage Zone*

Variable	Categories Levels	Unemployed (%)	Employed (%)	Chi-Squ	Df	P-Value
Sex	Male	124 (51.7%)	61 (38.1%)	7.082	1	0.008
	Female	116 (48.3%)	99 (61.9%)			
Age	15-19 years	58 (24.2%)	23 (14.4%)	12.264	2	0.002

Group	20-24 years	91 (37.9%)	49 (30.6%)			
	24-29 years	91 (37.9%)	88 (55.0%)			
Marital Status	Never Married	178 (74.2%)	115 (71.9%)	1.904	4	0.753
	Currently Married	42 (17.5%)	33 (20.6%)			
	Divorced	7 (2.9%)	5 (3.1%)			
	Widowed	7 (2.9%)	2 (1.3%)			
	Separated	6 (2.5%)	5 (3.1%)			
Religion	Orthodox	161 (67.1%)	110 (68.8%)	0.483	4	0.975
	Muslim	34 (14.2%)	19 (11.9%)			
	Protestants	31 (12.9%)	22 (13.8%)			
	Catholic	8 (3.3%)	5 (3.1%)			
	Other	6 (2.5%)	4 (2.5%)			
Migration Status	Migrant	154 (64.2%)	73 (45.6%)	13.447	1	<0.001
	Non-Migrant	86 (35.8%)	87 (54.4%)			
Household Size	Less than 4	57 (23.8%)	68 (42.5%)	15.750	2	<0.001
	4 to 7	115 (47.9%)	59 (36.9%)			
	Greater than 8	68 (28.3%)	33 (20.6%)			
Education Level	Can't read and write	13 (5.4%)	11 (6.9%)	28.402	5	<0.001
	Can read but not write	9 (3.8%)	1 (0.6%)			
	Primary (1-8)	25 (10.4%)	9 (5.6%)			
	Secondary (9-12)	79 (32.9%)	26 (16.3%)			
	TVET	24 (10.0%)	15 (9.4%)			
	First Degree and above	90 (37.5%)	98 (61.3%)			
Father's Education Level	Can't read and write	63 (26.2%)	43 (26.9%)	8.325	5	0.139
	Can read but not write	41 (17.1%)	28 (17.5%)			
	Primary (1-8)	117 (48.8%)	64 (40.0%)			
	Secondary (9-12)	12 (5.0%)	12 (7.5%)			
	TVET	2 (0.8%)	2 (1.3%)			
	First Degree and above	5 (2.1%)	11 (6.9%)			
Access to Credit	Has access to credit	116 (48.3%)	54 (33.8%)	8.355	1	0.004
	No access to credit	124 (51.7%)	106 (66.3%)			
Training Received	Not received	184 (76.7%)	98 (61.3%)	10.971	1	0.001
	Received once	56 (23.3%)	62 (38.8%)			
Family Income	Less than 500	107 (44.6%)	88 (55.0%)	13.839	3	0.003
	501-1000	81 (33.8%)	38 (23.8%)			
	1001-1500	17 (7.1%)	22 (13.8%)			
	Above 1500	35 (14.6%)	12 (7.5%)			

Note: The Chi-Square test significance levels are as follows:

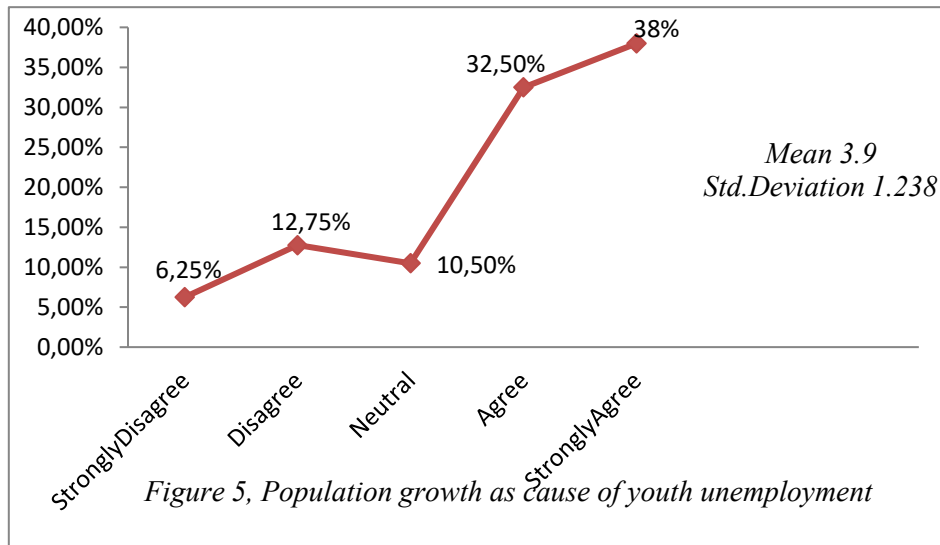
p-value < 0.001: Highly significant, *p*-value < 0.01: Moderately significant; *p*-value < 0.05: Statistically significant.

Source: Survey Data, 2024.

4.4 Major Causes of Youth Unemployment

In the Gurage Zone, respondents were asked to rate their agreement with various statements regarding the primary factors contributing to youth unemployment. The findings reveal that rapid population growth is perceived as a major contributor to the high levels of unemployment among the youth.

Figure 4. Perceptions of Rapid Population Growth as a Factor in Youth Unemployment



Source: Survey data 2024.

Figure 4 presents participants' perceptions regarding the relationship between rapid population growth and youth unemployment. The results show a significant consensus among respondents, with 32.5% agreeing and 38.0% strongly agreeing that rapid population growth increases job competition and contributes to higher youth unemployment. This suggests that most respondents believe that population growth is a major factor influencing youth unemployment.

However, there is some disagreement, as 12.8% disagreed, 6.3% strongly disagreed, and 10.5% were neutral, indicating that not all respondents share the same perspective.

The mean score of 3.9 indicates that, on average, participants tend to agree with the statement, suggesting a consensus that population growth has a negative impact on youth employment. The standard deviation of 1.23 reflects moderate variability in responses, meaning there is some divergence in opinions, but the overall trend leans towards agreement.

These findings align with previous studies, such as those by Mekonnen (2021) and Kumar (2021), which link population growth to challenges in employment.

The widespread agreement in this study supports the argument that demographic changes, such as rapid population growth, play a significant role in exacerbating youth unemployment.

The Malthusian theory, which suggests that unchecked population growth can lead to severe socio-economic issues such as high unemployment, underpins these perceptions (Malthus, 1798). Empirical studies support this view, highlighting the effects of population dynamics on unemployment rates (Lee and Mason, 2011; Bloom *et al.*, 2013).

However, it is also important to consider alternative perspectives that argue population growth can stimulate economic development and job creation (Sachs, 2005; Bloom and Canning, 2008). Thus, the relationship between population growth and unemployment is complex and context-specific, requiring a nuanced analysis to understand fully the implications for youth employment.

A qualitative study in the Gurage Zone identified several key factors contributing to youth unemployment: corruption, infrastructural decay, and neglect of the agricultural sector were noted as major barriers to job creation. Additional factors include unfavourable government policies, the impact of globalization, poor job recruitment practices, and a deficient educational system. Insecurity and negative attitudes towards employment, along with poor leadership and governance, further complicate the issue. These findings highlight the need for comprehensive strategies to address the multifaceted challenges of youth unemployment in the region.

Figure 5 shows that 67.5% of respondents believe rural-urban migration contributes to higher youth unemployment, with 35.5% agreeing and 32.0% strongly agreeing. A smaller portion, 17.6% disagreed, and 15.0% remained neutral, indicating some differing views.

The mean score of 3.76 suggests that most participants agree that migration impacts youth unemployment, though with some variability as indicated by the standard deviation of 1.17.

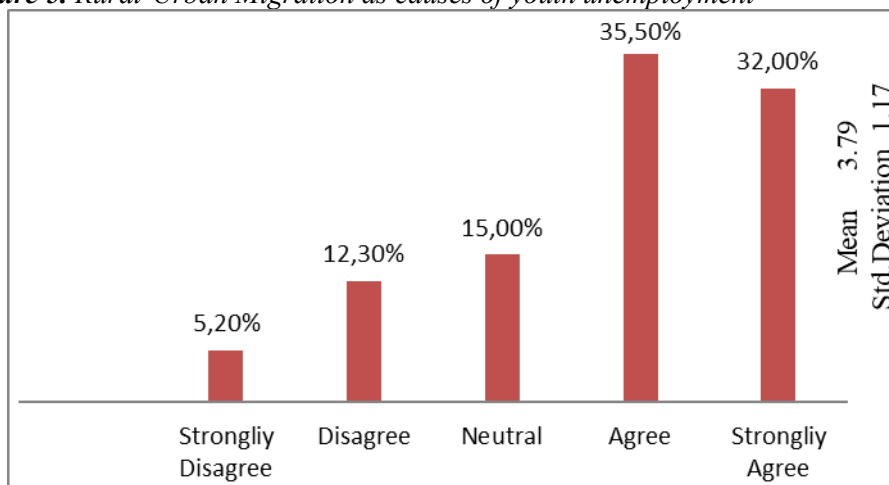
These results align with previous studies (Imuetinyan, 2018; Ongbali and Afolalu, 2019; Mekonnen, 2021; Mohammed Shuker and Hashim Sadik, 2024), which highlight how migration increases job competition in cities, worsening unemployment for youth.

Despite seeking better opportunities, migrants often face limited job prospects, contributing to urban overpopulation, poverty, and inequality. Current government policies have only partially addressed these challenges (Figure 5).

Figure 6 presents respondents' perceptions of the quality of education policy and its impact on youth unemployment, specifically evaluating how well educational policies equip youth with essential job skills. Among the 400 respondents, 10.3% (41 individuals) strongly disagreed and 17.3% (69 individuals) disagreed with the view that current educational policies are ineffective. Additionally, 18.3% (73

respondents) took a neutral stance, suggesting uncertainty or insufficient information on the matter (Figure 5).

Figure 5. Rural-Urban Migration as causes of youth unemployment



Source: Survey data Gurage Zone, 2024.

In contrast, 27.3% (109 respondents) agreed, and 27.0% (108 respondents) strongly agreed that ineffective educational policies significantly contribute to the lack of job skills among youth. Overall, 54.3% of respondents perceive these policies as a major factor in youth unemployment. The mean score of 3.21 and standard deviation of 1.156 indicate a moderate agreement, with some variability in responses.

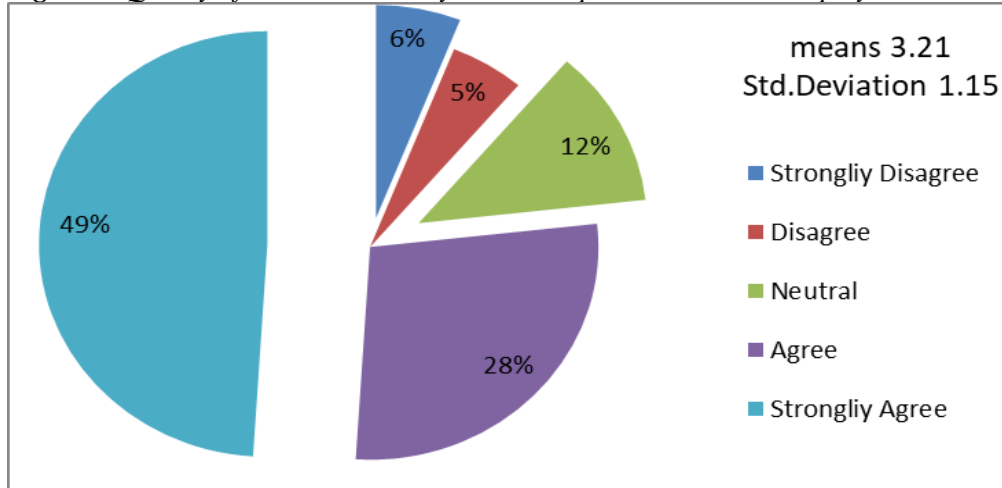
These findings align with research by Refrigeri and Aleandri (2013), Mekonnen (2021), and Nwogbo and Ishola (2020), which emphasize the importance of improving educational policies to better match job skills with market demands and reduce youth unemployment.

Figure 7 illustrates respondents' perceptions regarding the relationship between skill mismatch and youth unemployment. Of the 400 participants, 6.5% (26 individuals) strongly disagreed with the notion that skill mismatch is a significant issue, suggesting that they are satisfied with the alignment between educational policies and job market needs. In contrast, a substantial majority of 35.0% (140 respondents) agreed, and 31.5% (126 respondents) strongly agreed that discrepancies between educational training and market demands significantly contribute to high youth unemployment rates.

Overall, 66.5% (266 respondents) acknowledge that current educational frameworks inadequately prepare youth for the workforce, pointing to a critical need for educational reform. The mean score of 3.21 suggests that, on average, participants lean toward agreeing that skill mismatch is a key factor in youth unemployment,

while the standard deviation of 1.156 indicates moderate variability in responses, showing some divergence in opinions about the extent of the issue (Figure 7).

Figure 6. *Quality of Education Policy and Its Impact on Youth Unemployment*



Source: Survey data Gurage Zone, 2024.

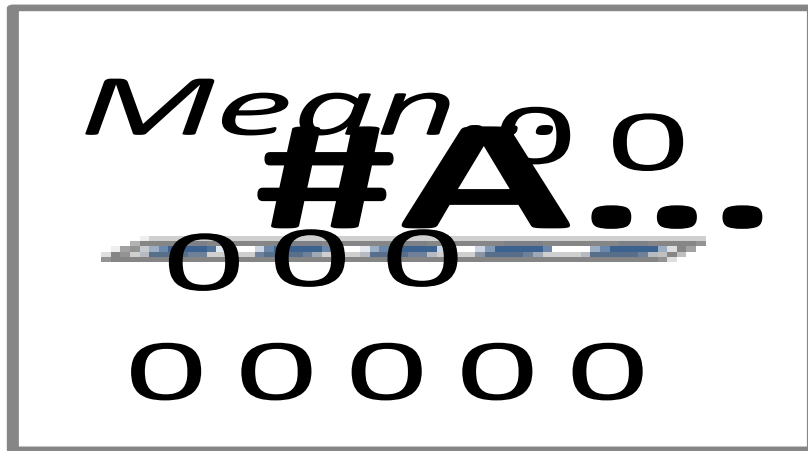
These findings are consistent with the recommendations of Refrigeri and Aleandri (2013) and Mekonnen (2021), who advocate for integrating vocational training and work placement programs to improve youth employability. Additionally, Sharaf (2023) highlights the need for equitable access to quality education and vocational training as essential strategies to reduce youth unemployment.

Figure 8 presents respondents' views on the impact of political instability and conflict on youth unemployment. Among the 400 respondents, a small minority—6.0% (24 individuals) who strongly disagreed and 5.3% (21 individuals) who disagreed—believes that political instability and conflict do not significantly disrupt economic conditions. 12.0% (48 respondents) remained neutral, suggesting some uncertainty about the extent of these factors' impact.

In contrast, a significant majority—27.8% (111 respondents) who agreed and 49.0% (196 respondents) who strongly agreed—recognize that political instability and conflict significantly exacerbate youth unemployment. Overall, 76.8% (307 respondents) agree that these issues have a profound influence on youth unemployment, indicating widespread acknowledgment of the negative effects of political instability on youth employment prospects (Figure 8).

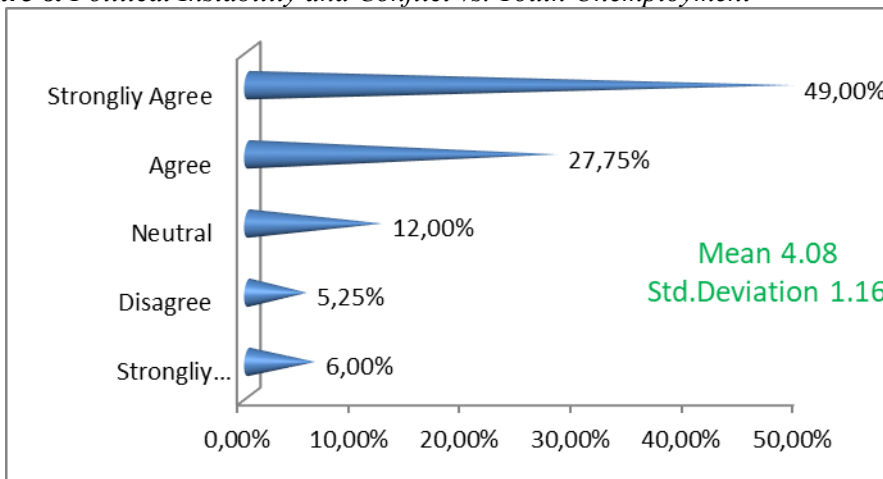
The mean score of 4.08 suggests strong agreement with the statement, while the standard deviation of 1.16 indicates moderate variability in responses, meaning that while the majority agree on the impact of political instability, there is some variation in how strongly respondents feel about it.

Figure 7. Skill Mismatch and Its Impact on Youth Unemployment



Source: Survey data Gurage Zone, 2024.

Figure 8. Political Instability and Conflict vs. Youth Unemployment



Source: Survey data Gurage Zone, 2024.

Table 6. Other Perceptions of causes contributing to Youth Unemployment

No	Statements	SD	D	N	A	SA	Mean	Std. D.
1	Neglect of the agricultural sector decreases job opportunities for rural youth, increasing unemployment	29 (7.3%)	52 (13.0%)	54 (13.5%)	145 (36.2%)	120 (30.0%)	3.687	1.23030
2	Lack of support for small and medium enterprises (SMEs) limits job creation, increasing youth	30 (7.5%)	41 (10.3%)	58 (14.5%)	161 (40.3%)	110 (27.4%)	3.700	1.19103

	unemployment.							
3	During economic downturns, companies reduce hiring and cut jobs, leading to higher youth unemployment.	30 (7.5%)	41 (10.3%)	55 (13.8%)	150 (37.5%)	124 (31.0%)	3.742	1.21238
4	Unreliable electricity supply affects businesses, reducing job opportunities for youth.	52 (13.0%)	78 (19.4%)	55 (13.8%)	123 (30.8%)	92 (23.0%)	3.312	1.359
5	Absence of programs supporting youth employment increases unemployment rates.	16 (4.0%)	45 (11.3%)	16 (4.0%)	186 (46.5%)	137 (34.2%)	3.957	1.0925

Source: Survey data Gurage Zone, 2024.

Table 6 presents respondents' perceptions of various factors contributing to youth unemployment. The table includes five statements, along with the corresponding frequency distribution of responses, mean scores, and standard deviations. Below is an interpretation of each statement:

- *Neglect of the agricultural sector decreases job opportunities for rural youth; increasing unemployment:*

The statement received a mean score of 3.687, suggesting moderate agreement among respondents. This indicates that a significant number of respondents believe that neglecting the agricultural sector plays a role in increasing youth unemployment, particularly in rural areas. With a standard deviation of 1.230, there is some variation in responses, but most respondents (66.2%) agreed or strongly agreed with the statement.

This reflects the consensus that the agricultural sector is an important factor in youth employment in rural areas. These perceptions align with research by Schmidt and Woldeyes (2019) and Wossen and Ayele (2018), which highlight the impact of agricultural sector neglect on employment opportunities in rural areas, particularly for youth.

- *Lack of support for small and medium enterprises (SMEs) limits job creation, increasing youth unemployment.*

The mean score of 3.700 indicates moderate agreement with this statement, suggesting that respondents perceive the lack of support for SMEs as a significant barrier to job creation and a factor contributing to youth unemployment.

The standard deviation of 1.191 shows a relatively consistent response pattern, with 67.7% of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing with this view. These findings support the idea that policies aimed at strengthening SMEs could help alleviate

youth unemployment. This finding highlights the critical role of SMEs in providing employment opportunities, aligning with the views of Muwanga (2023) and the Commission for Western Asia (2024), both of which emphasize the importance of strengthening SME support to combat unemployment.

- *During economic downturns, companies reduce hiring and cut jobs, leading to higher youth unemployment.*

With a mean score of 3.742, this statement has the strongest agreement among the factors listed in Table 4. The majority of respondents (68.5%) believe that economic downturns lead to reduced hiring and increased job cuts, exacerbating youth unemployment. The standard deviation of 1.212 suggests moderate variability in responses, indicating that while most respondents agree, there are some differences in how strongly they feel about the issue.

This supports the view that economic instability directly impacts youth employment opportunities. This perception aligns with findings from Ruth et al. (2014) and Gould and Kassa (2020), which document the negative impact of economic recessions on youth employment.

- *Unreliable electricity supply affects businesses, reducing job opportunities for youth.*

The mean score of 3.312 reflects moderate agreement, but with a greater degree of variation compared to the other statements. The standard deviation of 1.359 indicates a wider spread of opinions, with some respondents strongly agreeing, while others disagree or remain neutral.

Despite this variability, a significant portion of respondents (54%) acknowledged that unreliable electricity negatively affects business operations, which in turn reduces youth employment opportunities. This finding underscores the critical role of reliable electricity in supporting business activities and job creation, as highlighted by Scott et al. 2014) and Now (2016).

- *Absence of programs supporting youth employment increases unemployment rates.*

This statement received the highest mean score of 3.957, indicating strong agreement among respondents. The majority (80.7%) agreed or strongly agreed that the lack of youth employment programs is a major factor contributing to youth unemployment.

The relatively low standard deviation of 1.0925 suggests strong consensus on this issue, with respondents largely agreeing that such programs are crucial for reducing unemployment rates among youth. This overwhelming consensus underscores the

critical need for targeted employment programs to effectively address youth unemployment, reflecting findings by Namita *et al.* (2018) on the role of such programs in reducing unemployment and promoting economic stability.

5. Policy Implications, Strengths, Limitations, and Conclusion

5.1 Policy Implications

The findings highlight critical areas for policy intervention to reduce youth unemployment in the Gurage Zone. Policymakers should prioritize agricultural development, particularly in rural areas, as a sustainable source of employment. Supporting small and medium enterprises (SMEs) through improved financial access, tax incentives, and targeted training programs can foster local entrepreneurship and job creation.

Educational reforms are necessary to align curricula with labor market needs by emphasizing vocational and technical skills. Investing in youth employment programs, including job placement services, mentorship, and career counselling, can help bridge the education-to-employment gap. Additionally, strengthening infrastructure and ensuring political stability are crucial for business growth and investment attraction. Managing rural-urban migration through decentralized economic development policies can also reduce pressure on urban labor markets.

To enhance the effectiveness of these policies, it is essential to specify job creation strategies tailored to the region. Key sectors with high employment potential include poultry, cattle, and sheep farming, block making, cobblestone production, modern farming techniques, dairy and meat production, and irrigation.

Establishing modern marketplaces and ensuring access to necessary inputs can further support youth employment. Given the limited industrial activity in the zone, targeted government and non-governmental support for these sectors can significantly reduce unemployment and drive sustainable economic growth.

5.2 Strengths

One of the study's key strengths is its large sample size of 400 participants, which increases the reliability and generalizability of the findings. The study also provides a comprehensive analysis by addressing multiple contributing factors—demographic, economic, and policy-related—providing a holistic view of youth unemployment.

Furthermore, the study reveals a strong consensus among respondents about the primary factors driving unemployment, which strengthens the validity of the conclusions. The practical recommendations based on the study's findings offer actionable solutions for policymakers and stakeholders.

Finally, the multi-dimensional approach of the study, considering socio-economic and political factors, highlights the complexity of the issue and emphasizes the need for collaboration among various sectors to effectively address youth unemployment.

5.3 Limitations

Despite its strengths, the study has certain limitations. The focus on a single region, the Gurage Zone, limits the generalizability of the findings to other areas with different socio-economic or demographic characteristics. The use of cross-sectional data captures a snapshot of the situation at a single point in time but does not allow for the examination of trends over time or the establishment of causal relationships.

Additionally, the reliance on self-reported data may introduce biases such as social desirability bias or inaccuracies in how participants perceive and report factors contributing to youth unemployment. The study also excludes some potential variables such as cultural attitudes and international economic factors, which could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the issue.

Lastly, while the role of government policies is mentioned, the study does not delve deeply into the effectiveness or shortcomings of existing policies.

6. Conclusion

This study highlights the key factors contributing to youth unemployment in the Gurage Zone and underscores the need for targeted policy interventions. A comprehensive approach is essential, focusing on agricultural development, SME support, education reform, and investment in youth employment programs.

Additionally, improving infrastructure, ensuring political stability, and managing rural-urban migration through decentralized economic policies are crucial for sustainable job creation. Prioritizing high-potential sectors such as poultry, cattle, and sheep farming, block making, cobblestone production, modern farming techniques, dairy and meat production, and irrigation can significantly enhance employment opportunities.

Establishing modern marketplaces and ensuring access to necessary inputs will further facilitate youth engagement in these sectors. By implementing these strategic measures, policymakers and stakeholders can effectively reduce youth unemployment, drive economic growth, and create a more inclusive and sustainable future for young people in the Gurage Zone.

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Author Contributions:

M.D.G. (Mule Dejene Guta) conceptualized the study, designed the methodology, and conducted data collection and analysis. M.D.G. also wrote the initial manuscript draft. K.A.G. (Kinfe Abraha Gebre-Egziabher) and M.K. (Mekonen Kassahun) supervised the research, provided critical revisions, and guided the theoretical framework. All authors reviewed and approved the final manuscript.

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Data Availability:

The data and materials used in this study are available upon reasonable request from the corresponding author. Due to privacy concerns and the nature of the collected information, access will be granted in accordance with ethical guidelines and may require a confidentiality agreement.

Declarations:

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate:

The study was performed in line with the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki. Ethical approval was obtained from the College of Health Sciences / Ayder Comprehensive Specialized Hospital Institutional Review Board, Mekelle University; with reference number MU-IRB 2253/2024. The authors confirm that all methods were carried out in accordance with relevant guidelines and regulations. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to their involvement in the study.

Consent to Publish:

Participants provided consent for the anonymized findings of this study to be published. No identifying information is included in the manuscript.

Competing Interests:

The authors declare no competing interests.

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