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Beyond Age Barriers in Youth Development Programming

How Institutional Contradictions Reveal Structural Exclusion

Tyrone Havnar Foundation, Zambia

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Abstract

This paper examines age-based eligibility barriers in development programmes by documenting Tyrone Havnar Foundation's institutional audit of its own age restrictions. Although the Foundation pioneered disability-inclusive programming for blind and deaf participants, it maintained arbitrary age cutoffs (18-35 years) across other programmes. This contradiction prompted analysis of 15 rejected applicants from 2025. The paper traces how historical educational access deficits in Southern Africa result in late-stage entry to formal learning for rural and low-income individuals, rendering them ineligible for age-restricted youth programmes. Integrating the Capability Approach (Sen, 1999) with programme data from three Tyrone Havnar Foundation cohorts (N=19 participants in 2025), the paper argues that age-based exclusion reproduces structural inequality. The paper presents Tyrone Havnar Foundation's Nile Cohort (launching February 2027) as a

model for age-inclusive leadership development and concludes with recommendations for the development sector.

Keywords: Age discrimination; youth development; capability approach; structural inclusion; Africa; programme design

1. Introduction

In 2024, Tyrone Havnar Foundation launched "Lead Without Limits," a leadership programme designed with rigorous accessibility modifications for blind and deaf youth. The Foundation invested in accessible platforms, adapted curricula, and individualized support. The tagline "Leading With Purpose" positioned the organization as committed to removing systemic barriers to leadership opportunity.

In 2026, the Foundation conducted an internal audit of rejected applicants. Staff reviewed 2024-2025 applications turned away from core programmes. The discovery was striking: 15 qualified applicants had been rejected primarily for age reasons falling outside the standard 18-35 age bracket. Upon examination, these 15 applicants possessed the exact competencies the programmes were designed to build. Yet they had been systematically excluded based on one criterion: age. The Foundation asked itself: if disability inclusion was non-negotiable, why was age inclusion optional?

This paper documents that institutional audit that ran from February 2026 to August 2026. It argues that age-based programme exclusions are structural mechanisms that reproduce inequality, particularly for individuals from rural and economically disadvantaged backgrounds. Individuals who experienced interrupted access to formal education during Africa's "lost decades" arrive at leadership training opportunities later than age-restricted programmes allow. By excluding them, organizations punish those who overcome the greatest structural barriers and forfeit the knowledge and experience those individuals bring.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 The Capability Approach

Amartya Sen's Capability Approach asks: what substantive freedoms and real opportunities does a person have to achieve functionings they have reason to value? (Sen, 1999). Functionings are "beings and doings" living a long life, being educated, participating in community. Capabilities are the freedoms and opportunities to achieve these functionings.

Applied to development programming, this inverts conventional eligibility logic. Rather than asking "Is this person the right demographic?", capability-based design asks: "What capability deprivation does this person experience, and what opportunity would this programme unlock?" (Nussbaum, 2006). A 45-year-old who arrived late to formal education due to structural barriers has the same capability claim to leadership training as a

25-year-old in fact, potentially a stronger one, having overcome greater obstacles. Age becomes analytically irrelevant; capability becomes the organizing principle.

2.2 Educational Access Deficits in Southern Africa

Southern Africa experienced "lost decades" 1974-1994 marked by structural adjustment, conflict, economic collapse and underinvestment in rural infrastructure (Simson, 2020). The consequences cascaded through educational systems. UNESCO data shows approximately 25 percent of Africans aged 15-24 remain outside education and employment systems, exacerbated by historical access barriers.

For an individual born in rural Zimbabwe in 1985, the reality was concrete: primary education disrupted by economic crisis, secondary education delayed by family constraints, vocational training entirely absent in her locality. By the time she accessed quality learning perhaps at age 40 through a cooperative programme the arbitrary age cutoff had already excluded her from youth development initiatives. The barrier was not her capacity. It was institutional gatekeeping treating historical disadvantage as permanent disqualification.

3. Tyrone Havnar Foundation: Institutional Audit

3.1 The Contradiction

Tyrone Havnar Foundation operates integrated leadership programmes rooted in Egyptian-centered African philosophy. "Lead Without Limits," launched October 2025, incorporated VisionBot (voice-based submission tool), Telegram-based support and multiple accessibility channels. The 9-participant cohort (8 completely blind, 1 visually impaired) from Ethiopia, Namibia, Zambia and Nigeria all completed the programme. The Foundation's disability inclusion was institutional, not performative. Yet across other core programmes, age restrictions remained standard: 18-35. This was not because of research evidence or donor requirement. It was institutional convention.

3.2 The 2026 Audit

In the February 2026 to August 2026 window, the Foundation audited rejected applications from 2024-2025. Of 15 rejected applicants, the primary barrier was age, typically 36-50 range. What struck staff was their profile: a 42-year-old farmer who had completed cooperative business training and sought to formalize her enterprise; a 47-year-old health worker running a maternal care network; a 38-year-old teacher leading a youth education initiative; a 51-year-old pastor operating an orphan-care programme. All possessed leadership capacity and existing community work. All demonstrated commitment to community benefit. Yet the age criterion had excluded them wholesale. The Foundation then asked: Why is disability inclusion non-negotiable for us, but age inclusion optional?

4. Programme Data: Three Tyrone Havnar Foundation Cohorts, 2025

4.1 Leadership and Governance Online Training (June-July 2025)

Cohort: 10 enrolled, 9 completed (90% completion rate), 3 weeks, online delivery. Demographics: Male 6 (67%), Female 3 (33%), Zambia 8, DRC 1, Zimbabwe 1. Dropout: 1 male from Zambia due to internet challenges. Assessment: Trailblazer Value Points (TVP). All 9 graduates earned a full 30 TVP. Assignment submission rate: 100%. Attendance rate: 95%. Outcome: All 9 advanced to Sekhmet Crucible (12-month incubation). Three selected as Foundation Ambassadors.

4.2 Lead Without Limits (October 2025)

Cohort: 9 participants (8 completely blind, 1 visually impaired), 3 weeks online plus 12-month mentorship, Zoom, Google Meet, Telegram, voice-based submissions. Geographic Distribution: Ethiopia 4 (44%), Namibia 2 (22%), Zambia 2 (22%), Nigeria 1 (11%). Pan-African cohort. Accessibility: VisionBot proved most successful. Telegram most-used platform. Multiple submission channels accommodated different access needs. Calendar/time-zone coordination required explicit attention (Ethiopian calendar differences; 3 participants missed Week 1, resolved via recorded access). Completion: 100%. All 9 advanced to mentorship. Participant feedback now informs all foundation programmes.

4.3 Trailblazer Mentorship Program (May-June 2025)

Cohort: 1 participant, 7 weeks, virtual (Microsoft Teams). Assignment Completion: 100% (10/10 on time). Pass Rate: 90% first submission (1 revision Week 1). Completion: 100%. Outcome: Participant completed mentorship, restructured business model, identified new enterprise name, progressed to formal business registration. Intensive one-on-one model informed the NDANJI Method (leadership framework now embedded in all foundation programmes).

4.4 Synthesis

Three programmes yielded 19 total participants in 2025. This is high-touch, individualized, pedagogically intensive work. Each participant received detailed feedback on every assignment. Mentors knew participants' names, histories, community contexts and specific learning needs. The 19 participants represented diverse ages, geographies and abilities. The audit raised a question: who would have succeeded had age barriers been absent?

5. Analysis: Institutional Contradiction and Structural Exclusion

5.1 The Contradiction

An organization branding itself "Lead Without Limits" (disability-focused) while maintaining age limits (36+ excluded) reproduces the logic of exclusion it claims to oppose. The contradiction reveals how structural inequality operates. Disability inclusion required visible institutional change: curriculum redesign, technology investment, staff training. These were made because the moral principle ("everyone deserves access") was clear. Yet the principle that "everyone deserves access regardless of when they arrived at opportunity" was not operationalized likely because it demanded only deletion of one line. Inertia masqueraded as policy.

5.2 The Rejected Applicants: Three Profiles

First, rural and recently-urban participants who accessed education after late childhood. Geographic barriers delayed formal education. By the time it was accessible, they exceeded the age cutoff. Example: the 42-year-old farmer from rural Selous who had recently completed cooperative business training and sought to scale her enterprise. The education was recent, the need was there, the potential was evident. The age was disqualifying.

Second, mid-career community practitioners already leading but lacking formal training. These ran programmes, managed staff, made strategic decisions without formal development. They sought to systematize and scale existing work. Example: the 47-year-old health worker running a maternal care network sought to structure it into sustainable organization. Her leadership was already happening; training would formalize it.

Third, second-career entrants and late-stage transitioners: teachers building civic initiatives, faith leaders expanding community work, agricultural workers building cooperatives. They arrived at formalized leadership development later not from incapacity but because their first pathway had been survival, family support, community work outside formal structures.

What connected all 15: they had overcome structural barriers to education. The very thing making them development candidates was the same thing making them exceed the age cutoff. Their history of disadvantage was their disqualification.

6. Age-Inclusive Design: The Nile Cohort Model

In response to the 2026 audit, Tyrone Havnar Foundation is consolidating programmes into a unified model: the Nile Cohort (launching February 2027). It embodies three principles:

Capability-Based Eligibility: Instead of "18-35 years," applications ask: "Do you seek to develop leadership or entrepreneurial capacity? Do you have demonstrated commitment to community benefit? Are you prepared to engage seriously with the curriculum?" Age does not appear in the eligibility matrix, only asked to help document persons profile and reporting needs.

Parallel Pathways Within Single Cohorts: The Nile Cohort offers three parallel options Sprint (8 weeks), Flow (16 weeks), Immersive (6 months) within a single unified cohort. A 22-year-old doing AI for social change sits alongside a 45-year-old doing social entrepreneurship, in the same mentor circle, learning from each other's different life experience.

Intergenerational Learning as Pedagogy: Research shows mixed-age cohorts outperform age-homogenous ones on engagement, retention and application (Moschetti et al., 2018; Glomb et al., 2006). Older participants bring implementation experience; younger participants bring technical fluency. The programme intentionally structures cross-generational mentorship.

The Nile Cohort will maintain Tyrone Havnar Foundation's commitment to individualized feedback on every assignment limiting cohort size to approximately 100-150 participants pan-African. Within that size, age diversity will be structural.

6.1 Why we ran this audit

An unexpected strategic insight: Tyrone Havnar Foundation's institutional honesty about its own contradiction became an asset. Instead of quietly removing restrictions, the Foundation made visible its evolution: "We had age barriers. We saw them. We are changing. When organizations claim inclusion while maintaining hidden exclusions, that is performative. When organizations audit themselves, find contradictions, and transparently change, that is institutional learning. Donors increasingly value the latter. A foundation saying "we were wrong about age barriers and here's our evidence" has more credibility than one never acknowledging the barrier. This is essentially helpful to majority of organizations world-wide and we hope this discovery will spark self institutional audits in being inclusive.

6.2 Sector-Wide Implications

If Tyrone Havnar Foundation's 15 rejected applicants represent a typical pattern, the sector is systematically excluding capable individuals. Multiplied across hundreds of organizations and thousands of programmes, the aggregate impact is significant. People with the greatest demonstrated resilience to structural barriers are told they are too old to develop further. Other organizations should conduct similar audits: Who did we turn away? Of those rejected for age, what was their profile? Do we have evidence our age cutoffs improve outcomes, or are they inherited conventions? If disability inclusion is non-negotiable for us, why is age inclusion optional?

7. Conclusion

An individual at 42 who overcame structural barriers to education and now seeks to lead community enterprises, coach younger leaders and create employment has not aged out of development relevance. They represent precisely the outcome development programmes claim to cultivate even if their timeline exceeded institutional age cutoffs. Yet standard practice excludes them based on birth year.

Tyrone Havnar Foundation's 2026 audit reveals that institutional contradictions provide entry points for examining structural inequality within organizations ostensibly opposing it. The contradiction is sector-wide. Yet at Tyrone Havnar Foundation because the organization invested heavily in disability inclusion, making the contrast stark it becomes analytically useful. The shift toward the Nile Cohort represents not charity toward older applicants but institutional integrity: removing exclusion mechanisms that contradicted stated values.

The Capability Approach provides the normative frame: development programmes exist to expand human capability to create real freedom to achieve functionings people have reason to value. That purpose does not change based on birth year.

Institutional change is operationally simple, removal of one criterion, not addition of burden. What remains is will. Organizations that audit themselves, acknowledge contradictions and shift to capability-based design will position themselves as thought leaders in inclusive development. Those maintaining age barriers by default will increasingly be seen as performing inclusion while practicing restriction.

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