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PART ONE

Introduction

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Youth futures under construction

Anna Barford

Abstract: The articles presented here engage with some of the multifaceted and intersecting challenges faced by young people today – these include conflict, insecurity, limited government support, deep-set gender discrimination, climate change, infectious disease and a widespread lack of decent jobs. While recognising the structural influences on young people's circumstances, the articles gathered here bring young people's perspectives, experiences and actions to the fore. With an eye on the future, and a sense of the past, this collection is situated in the present. Most of the research presented here stems from the British Academy's Youth Futures research funding scheme. The results showcased here remind us how the present matters in and of itself, while influenced by the past and playing a key role in shaping the future. Thus there is a triple significance to understanding young people's challenges: they matter for today and for how they impact tomorrow, and will be best understood with reference to the past.

Keywords: young people, participation, conflict, discrimination, climate change, employment

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Laying the foundations for youth futures

Over recent decades the age-bound category of ‘youth’ has gained traction across political, activist and academic spheres. This youth focus is a response to the distinct challenges faced by young people as they navigate life transitions, their heightened exposure to shocks and stresses and their sheer numerical dominance of population structures in many lower-income countries. In this context, young people are variously framed, from threats to civil stability and security, to the key-holders of future economic growth, green innovation and wider human development. The articles in this special issue depict young people working and reworking their lives, responding to challenges according to their means, while constrained and influenced by the wider contexts in which they live. The optimistic vision of young people as proactive drivers of widespread change is often compromised by insufficient rights, opportunities, resources, security and social protection.

The future is pervasive in discussions of young people’s current challenges – after all the young people of today are the older adults of the future. Yet care is needed in how and why we invoke the future. This future-focus is partially rooted in the concentration of (unevenly distributed) political and economic power among older cohorts, conveying greater importance of the middle and later life stages. We should be careful not to prioritise *young people as adults-in-the-making* to the detriment of *young people here-and-now*. Displacement of the present through focusing on more distant horizons, be they temporal or spatial, risks distracting attention from the local and contemporary where more tangible improvements could be made. Nevertheless, a future-focus also adds weight to calls for change when the benefits could be enjoyed now and in the future.

The novelist Bernadine Evaristo (2019) captures these temporal interconnections in writing ‘we are all part of a continuum … the future is in the past and the past is in the present’ (p.221). The present influences our futures, while the past leads us to where we are today. The articles collected here capture this broad and interconnected time span, with research into young people’s memories of the past, activities and experiences in the present, and visions and hopes for our shared futures. Yet the message from this collection is not deterministic, as it resists reducing ‘young people’s positions to victims of enduring systems and structures’ (Moles *et al.* 2023). Instead, the studies presented here unify around their acknowledgement of the proactive roles young people take in navigating the past and present to build their adult lives (Barford & Cieslik 2019). The research articles presented in this issue also acknowledge how this takes place within wider circumstances which, as one interviewee from Yaoundé might say, ‘give young people a headache’ (Wignall *et al.* 2023: 139).[1]

[1] Note that this term was used specifically to discuss the lack of decent work, which is a broad multifaceted term.

The *headaches* described in this volume are many. They include trying to find a job when there are few, gambling to earn 'easy money' with all risks this entails, trying to build your life in a context of random house demolitions with little recourse to legal justice, and facing a climate crisis set to worsen within your own lifetime (Jones *et al.* 2023; Beckwith *et al.* 2023; Glozah *et al.* 2023). The studies in this issue do not focus specifically on the COVID-19 pandemic, as our funding applications were submitted just three days after the first known case of COVID-19 was admitted to hospital in the city of Wuhan (McMullan 2021). As the global reach and impact of COVID-19 spread, it brought many more challenges for young people, often pausing or derailing plans to complete education and training or to work. Pre-existing challenges in earning a living exacerbated, social isolation led to mental ill-health, care work increased, while the COVID-19 virus also heralded immediate physical ill-health and loss of life for many (Porter *et al.* 2021; Mueller *et al.* 2022). Thus, while COVID-19 was not the focus of the research, its impacts do feature within the articles in this collection.

In understanding these headaches, the articles in this volume collectively consider some causes, implications and responses. Starting in the past, the articles identify how constellations of conflict, politics and policies shape the present. In the Occupied Palestinian Territories, multiple and overlapping authorities, paired with flawed legal accountability, push young people to seek accountability beyond the state when faced with devastating illegal house demolitions (Beckwith *et al.* 2023). In Uganda decades of conflict and violence, traced in part to colonial times, involved the mass displacement of millions of people, with tens of thousands of children being forced to become soldiers or sex slaves (some of whom are the young people of today) (Moles *et al.* 2023). Turning to the online gambling boom in sub-Saharan Africa, this is enabled by the rise of 'neoliberal ideologies of market deregulation and economic competition' fuelled by the industry seeking new markets as European and North American countries tighten their own regulations (Glozah *et al.* 2023: 154). Looking to the past to explain young people's headaches invites a broader perspective, with greater potential to find solutions which extend beyond young people fixing things for themselves.

Disruptions can have notable scarring effects on young people (O'Higgins *et al.* 2023; Verick 2023). For example, gambling at a young age can disrupt education and training, strain relationships and lead to debt (Glozah *et al.* 2023). Extreme weather events linked to climate change – be these slow onset droughts or rapid onset flooding or landslides – can damage shopkeepers' stock, cause crops to fail and livestock to die and ruin farmland and dwellings, causing psychological stress and financial loss with possible longer-term consequences (Barford *et al.* 2021, 2023). On the impacts of COVID-19 on young people, scholars remind us that scarring is not wholly attributable to that one event, but instead to the wider set of circumstances that heightened risk

exposure and constrained the social safety nets which could have otherwise buffered shocks or even pre-empted these crises (Verick *et al.* 2022; MacDonald *et al.* 2023). Confronted with challenges, the research articles presented here detail young people's proactive responses, for instance, judging political situations to decide how and when to act (Beckwith *et al.* 2023), or imagining their futures with hope while processing the violent past (Moles *et al*. 2023).

The emphasis on engaging young people in the research process was a key feature of the British Academy's *Youth Futures* scheme.[2] This research, which demonstrates young people's agency, is the result of projects that built youth engagement into design and implementation (Spencer *et al.* 2023; Jones *et al.* 2023; Proefke & Barford 2023). These projects engage young people's insights, recognise their proactive solutions, yet also acknowledge how young people struggle to solve headaches of such magnitude alone. Also relevant here is that some so-called 'solutions' might result in longer-term problems, the inherent risks of gambling being a case in point. With reference to such tensions, Tatiana Thieme sets the challenge of working with youth agency while also recognising persistent structural challenges:

> Without displacing, romanticizing, or appropriating the hustle, we need to work with its progressive and generative dimensions, without condoning or collaborating with the structures that render young people's lives precarious and vulnerable, as they face an attachment to yet dispossession by volatile and uncertain futures. (Thieme 2018: 543)

Before proceeding any further, it is necessary to first define and complicate the term young people. Then, three broad themes from the collected articles are addressed: young people's research, economic and civic lives. These themes are reflected in the structure of this special issue, yet the articles often speak to more than one theme. The challenges raised relate to persistent policy issues which could benefit from the experiences and perspectives of young people detailed here. These perspectives offer geographically and thematically diverse insights helping to make sense of the broader context in which we struggle towards meeting the global Sustainable Development Goals. At present, despite numerous youth targeted policies, we are yet to make a substantial step towards resolving young people's headaches.

[2] All but one of the papers in this special issue were funded at least in part by the *Youth Futures* scheme of the British Academy, supported by the UK Government's Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, as part of Official Development Assistance.

Heterogeneous young people

In 2019, the United Nations estimated that people aged 15–25 numbered 1.21 billion and constituted 15.5 per cent of the world population. This number is expected to rise to 1.29 billion by 2030 (United Nations 2019). Beneath these global figures is substantial regional variation, with Africa expecting further growth of the youth populations throughout this century, Asia's youth population peaking around now, and Europe thoroughly contracting in the wake of its peak in the early 1980s (*ibid.*). There are also national and subnational variations, which together with intersecting forms of discrimination, influence the divergent experiences and trajectories of young people today. Recent international research shows that amongst young people, being female, disabled or living in a rural area increases the chance of being outside education, employment and training (ILO 2023). Racial and sexual identities and poverty are linked to discrimination. Thus, while young people face some shared challenges, there are distinct patterns of disadvantage and privilege.

Youth has been defined in terms of activities as well as by age. However, the activities of 'youth' can be problematic because of the variety of experiences (and their timing). For instance, typical 'youth' transitions are school to work, parental home to own home and into marriage and parenthood. Yet for some these occur at a very early age – a child taken out of school to work; for others this is taking place much later – at times a lack of income postpones marriage and the move into one's own home. Others skip certain transitions altogether, for example due to child marriage or early motherhood. Further, reducing childhood and youth to transitions overlooks these as times of being as well as becoming (Uprichard 2008; Barford *et al.* 2021). The point is that youth matters for the moment and the future that is under construction.

Neatly sidestepping these complexities, and most likely due to a preference of national statistical agencies for a standard, measurable and comparable definition, age is most often used to demarcate 'youth'. In 1985, an international definition of youth was agreed, as persons aged 15–24 years (UN 2001). Yet the stated ages of 'youth' varies between countries, and some official definitions extend up to the age of 35 years (ILO 2012). The practical application of the term youth can be broader still, as seen in the Youth Futures project led by Ben Jones. During his research in the Teso region of Uganda, Ben was asked to stand with the 'young people' in church where the cut-off age for youth was 50 years. Even with a cut-off age of 30, Uganda ranks as having one of the world's youngest populations. This youthful population, combined with the colonial legacy linking Uganda and the UK, may in part explain why Uganda features prominently within the articles presented here (i.e. Moles *et al*. 2023; Barford *et al.* 2023; and Proefke & Barford 2023).

Many activists and scholars, including myself, have called for greater youth

representation and participation in research and decision making. Given the inequalities between young people, there is a need to ensure youth representatives are selected from diverse groups, including from less privileged backgrounds. This can ensure that the wide-ranging experiences and needs of young people can come to the fore – highlighting the many roles young people assume including as parents, carers, breadwinners, job seekers and volunteers (Baillie Smith *et al.* 2022). The articles in this special issue pay attention to groups who are often overlooked. The many roles played by young people remind how they are far from being a separate and sealed off group, disconnected from the rest of society. Instead, young people are often deeply embedded in intergenerational learning, support, politics and here also research. Youth engagement doesn't need to be to the exclusion of other groups, but can recognise how young people co-exist and interact intergenerationally. This collection presents the fruits of intergenerational and international collaborations – the resulting articles demonstrate the ethical and empirical value of this approach.

Young people's research lives

Most of the articles in this collection sought to equitably engage young people in the research process. The three articles in this section share a focus on youth engagement in research, with two focused on youth advisory boards (an approach also used by other articles in this collection). Youth engagement in research can improve understandings while empowering young people. Including young people's perspectives and insights can result in research that is more attuned to lived realities – both conceptually and practically. Further, in the Afterword Barbara Stocking emphasises how young people's vocabularies and phraseologies proffer intergenerational and international insight. Meanwhile, young researchers gain new skills, connections and knowledge through research. These projects took place in 2020–2 during the COVID-19 pandemic, so like for many researchers, considerable work occurred over great distances (Mueller *et al.* 2023). This may have shifted power and responsibility towards young researchers, while others were excluded by the heightened reliance on digital technologies which they could not access.

The first article in this methods section, 'Creating spaces for co-research', focuses on models of youth engagement in research, arguing for the creation of heterotopic spaces where alternative, fairer power relationships between young people and technical researchers can play out. The article proposes a spectrum of youth participation, ranging from youth-focused research to youth-led participatory action research. Building on the theme of intergenerational collaboration, also implicit in the other articles presented in this section, Rachel Proefke and I advocate for a middle ground

of co-research. In this, we aim to acknowledge the value of bringing together the complementary skills and insights of young researchers and technical researchers (Proefke & Barford 2023). We present a matrix to assess the type of involvement of youth and technical researchers, which considers the levels of authority and inclusion of both groups of researchers at six key stages of the research process. The article shares examples of international youth co-research in action, namely a study of youth people's responses to climate change in Uganda, a diary study of youth livelihoods in Nepal and Indonesia during the Delta wave of COVID-19, and a Youth Think Tank on economic opportunities in Sub-Saharan Africa.

The second and third articles in this section are both concerned with youth advisory boards. In 'Young people's involvement in migration research – opportunities for (re)shaping research priorities and practices', Grace Spencer and colleagues (2023) set up the Young Person Advisory Group of five young Ghanaians overseeing a research project on migration. The young people, aged 20–32 and based in both Ghana and the UK, were recruited for their experiences of migration, knowledge of Ghana and advocacy roles. The group's purpose was to ensure the research was guided by young people's perspectives. As such the advisory group oversaw many aspects of the research including recruitment, data collection, website design, analysis and dissemination. The article focuses on the advisory group's experiences of, and vision for, youth involved research. The group called for youth engagement to go beyond tokenistic consultations and instead drive policy change. As the meaningful participation of young people in research, and other arenas, is increasingly seen as a hallmark of good practice, this article offers an important youth perspective on its benefits, opportunities, as well as pitfalls. A lasting message is that:

> The best way to address [the] power imbalance between senior researchers and the young people could be done through mutual respect for one another, and also encourage young people to share their personal experiences and opinions without any fear of being wrong. (Young Advisor, in Spencer *et al.* 2023: 60)

'Conversations on grief and hope: a collaborative autoethnographic account exploring the lifeworlds of international youth engaged with climate action', which is the last article in this section, also takes youth advisory boards as its starting point. The research team and international youth advisory board together conducted a collaborative autoethnography of the life worlds of young people involved with climate action (Jones *et al.* 2023). The overall rationale for having a youth advisory board for the research project was two-fold, firstly to ensure a youth lens for the work, and secondly to offer peer-to-peer learning to the young research participants based in Vietnam. This article focuses on the youth advisory board members, as young people who are concerned about climate change and taking some action. The ensuing collaborative

autoethnography involved sharing life stories and experiences, through self-reflection and dialogue. Notably, the youth advisory board members, guided by the research team, proposed which questions they should be asked. This strong youth collaboration extended to the writing of this article, of which nine of the 15 youth advisory board members are authors. This is a progressive demonstration of how young people can be more fully involving young people in academic publications.

Young people's economic lives

Many articles in this special issue focus on young people's quest for current and future security in some form. Broadly, this often involved making a life for themselves, in a context of economic, environmental, historical, political or legal difficulties. This section focuses on how young people are striving to get by, despite the odds. Here the odds involve deep-set gender discrimination, low labour market demand, a predatory and unregulated gambling industry, worsening climate change and very little in the way of a social safety net. In this context, all three articles describe young people making the most of the opportunities available to them. These articles reach similar conclusions about the need for broader structural change to support young people – structural change which will likely be best informed by an intergenerational dialogue.

The first article in this section, 'Imagining the future through skills: TVET, gender and transitions towards decent employability for young women in Cameroon and Sierra Leone', focuses on skills development in preparation for work. Ross Wignall and colleagues research the possibility of gender mentoring in Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) addressing gender inequality in work and beyond. The article highlights how in Cameroon and Sierra Leone, as in many other countries, young women are disadvantaged compared to young men in the labour market and this worsened during the COVID-19 pandemic. The research team studied the Don Bosco TVET centres, which cater for girls who are neglected, orphaned or in extreme poverty. They found that by mentoring individual women, rather than seeking community or societal change, young women still encountered discrimination. At times potential employers were vocal about their preference for hiring young men over young women, saying 'if you can send me a boy, a man, it would be better' (Wignall *et al.* 2023: 137). This was largely due to the expectation that young women would soon become mothers, and that this would reduce their availability to work. The authors conclude that targeting TVET for women should be accompanied by measures to address wider stereotypes and create real opportunities. This article adds skills-related evidence to the contention that training without stimulating labour market demand and addressing discrimination is often insufficient (Isaacs *et al.* 2023).

Another youth response to low labour market demand is gambling. In 'Young people and gambling in sub-Saharan Africa: towards a critical research agenda', Franklin Glozah and colleagues' (2023) literature review depicts the emergence of gambling as a form of work in Sub-Saharan Africa. This is a time-consuming activity, as gamblers must inform themselves, as well as doing the actual betting. The authors use a 'gambling harms' lens, which explains the harm caused by gambling in terms of the wider economic and regulatory system which has allowed damaging gambling options to proliferate. This stands in contrast to more popular narratives which blame individual gamblers for the problems they may experience. In a wider context of underemployment and scarce opportunities, the authors describe how young people turn to gambling for material security. However, the negative consequences of gambling – losing money, missing opportunities, compromising relationships – can lead to damage which is especially enduring for young people. The article challenges us to understand gambling as a form of 'neoliberal neo-colonialism', highlighting the injustice of blaming individual bettors for the negative impacts they experience.

The last article of this economic lives section, 'Young people "making it work" in a changing climate', considers how young people's livelihoods are impacted by climate disruptions. We address how young people in the Karamoja and Busoga regions of Uganda are experiencing and responding to climate disruptions in their daily lives (Barford *et al.* 2023). The wider context is one of widespread youth underemployment, low wages, and structural disadvantage. In this context, one interviewee explained, 'young people don't have a choice, they have to make it work.' The article shares the livelihoods of three young people, who use various strategies to manage the intersecting risks that they face. This involves sustaining several income streams to boost and smooth their income, while also working with other young people to seek support from local politicians. In addition to young people's responses as details in these three articles, complementary interventions are needed which learn from, underwrite and reinforce young people's efforts. In this way the ingenuity of young people could blossom in more favourable circumstances, with lower costs associated with misfortune or failure.

Young people's civic lives

Young people are often thought of as an age group more inclined towards political and social action than those who are older and more settled, or younger and less able to engage. The articles in this section show how 'making a life' requires young people to navigate conflict, violence and insecurity. Here researchers work with young people to identify how young people respond to past and present violence in reasonable,

careful and at times hopeful ways. In Uganda, young people make sense of the past and imagine a more hopeful future. In Palestine, some seek to defend their homes from demolition, while others bide their time until they are more empowered to act. Thus, the civic lives of young people can play a key role in building a life for themselves and others.

The first article in this section, 'Imagining futures/future imaginings: creative heritage work with young people in Uganda', focuses on post-conflict Uganda, a country with decades of violence within recent memory. In this research, Kate Moles and colleagues (2023) connect memory work to the future, thinking through the past to imagine the future. Working with young people, the researchers developed a touring exhibition, to collect and share the many voices, experiences and values surrounding past conflict, and to imagine a more hopeful future. The arts-based participatory approach opened spaces for dialogue – with artwork and material objects, including weapons as objects of both war and resistance, curated for this exhibition. While concern about conflict reigniting were present in all research sites, young people also identified pathways towards more peaceful co-existence. For example, building positive relationships within and between groups, or the potential for sport to bridge differences. Overall, many young people considered dialogue and communication to be at the heart of a more peaceful future.

The second article, 'Young Palestinians' struggles for accountability and participation: beyond formal systems and public resistance', concerns how young people in Palestine are seeking accountability in the context of illegal house demolitions. In the context of fragile governance, Laura Beckwith and colleagues research how young people contribute to decision making and seek (rather illusive) accountability. Research kits, co-designed with young people, were used to prompt discussions about future dreams, preparation for house demolitions and resistance. Similar to the work of Moles *et al*. (2023), there was also an option to collect objects which were meaningful to them. Youth responses included protests against Israeli authorities which were sometimes supressed using violence. Documenting oppression through photography and film was another approach, used to recount events via online platforms to build international support. Alongside this, quieter and longer-term strategies were used, such as studying to strengthen personal influence. One young woman was training to be a lawyer in order to defend people in the future. The authors acknowledge inaction as a valid response in the face of extreme imbalances of power. The young Palestinians in this article carefully navigate a tricky terrain, doing what they can despite their disempowerment in the face of illegal yet hard-to-contest home demolitions.

Conclusion

A common message has organically emerged from this collection, regarding how young people approach the substantial challenges they face. The articles presented here identify multifaceted and intersecting challenges for young people – including conflict, insecurity, limited government support, deep set gender discrimination, climate change, infectious disease and a widespread lack of decent jobs. While recognising the enormous influence of the circumstances in which young people find themselves on outcomes, the articles gathered here also ensure young people's perspectives, experiences and actions come to the fore. These articles, with an eye on the future, and a sense of the past, situate themselves in the present. The present matters in and of itself, while also shaping the future. Temporally speaking, there is a triple significance to understanding young people's challenges: they are shaped by the past, matter for today and impact tomorrow.

While decent work is rare, labour market demand is low, incomes are often at poverty-levels and gender-discrimination is rife; governments are not yet fully responding and new stresses continue to emerge. For most young people it is unlikely that strong motivation and high ambitions will be enough to solve the magnitude of this challenge. The resounding message that comes from this collection is that this is a challenge that needs to be met with structural change. And this requires determination from many actors including governments, businesses and foundations. Laura Beckwith and colleagues (2023) emphasise that young people cannot be left without allies. As young people seek to *actively* build their lives, intergenerational solidarity involving those with decision making power could support young people by improving the foundations upon which they build. At present, young people – who are integral members of society – have been short changed.

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PART TWO

Young people's research lives

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Creating spaces for co-research

Rachel Proefke and Anna Barford

Abstract: In the current era of peak youth, young people's voices and authentic participation are needed more than ever. This article focuses on how youth participation in research can enhance wider understanding of young people's experiences, perspectives and solutions, while also empowering young people. There is an established tradition of engaging young people and children with the qualitative research process, ranging from youth focussed research to youth-led participatory action research. Within this we occupy a middle ground, arguing for the need to create heterotopic spaces for participation in which both young researchers and professional researchers learn from one another's expertise. Mindful of the roadblocks to authentic participation, this article systematically approaches engaging young people at six critical stages in the research process, namely: setting the framework; question design; data collection; analysis; validation; and sharing results for discussion and action. Youth co-research offers methodological rigour grounded in a reconceptualization of where expertise can be found, a committed approach to research training and youth empowerment, greater access to hard-to-reach groups of young people and data validity built upon close engagement with young researchers. To demonstrate our approach, we share in this article three youth co-research case studies, which focus on young people experiencing climate change disruptions in Uganda, young people impacted by COVID-19 in Indonesia and Nepal and a youth think tank convened between East, West and Southern Africa. The rigour and value of youth-engaged qualitative methodologies can benefit young people, as well as the academics, policymakers and NGOs with whom they work.

Keywords: inclusion, authority, participation, young people, Africa, Uganda, Indonesia, Nepal

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Introduction

> There is a critical difference between going through the empty ritual of participation and having the real power needed to affect the outcome of the process. (Arnstein 1969: 216)

Young people are on the agenda like never before. The United Nations (UN) has a Special Envoy for Youth and within the UN Young UN advocates for the visions of young employees, while the climate change protest movement is increasingly led by young people (Nakate 2021; Young UN 2022). Young people have a growing presence at international meetings – sometimes challenging the status quo, sometimes fitting into prescribed developmental roles (Bersaglio *et al.* 2015; Barford & Cieslik 2019). Demographically speaking, young people are centre stage too. In many lower- and middle-income settings youth populations are large and, in some countries, peaking; in much of sub-Saharan Africa population momentum means young populations are likely to grow for many decades to come (UN Population Fund 2022). Alongside these population trends and organisational structures, there are calls for youth engagement alongside recognition of past failures to listen to young people. Academics are increasingly engaging young people's experiences, perspectives and aspirations (e.g. Punch 2002; Newell 2006; Jeffrey and Dyson 2008; Denov *et al.* 2022; O'Loughlin & Sloam 2022), a response to a longer standing critique which highlighted the limited engagement and empowerment of young people (Dyson 2008: 163; Mitchell 2008; Ayele *et al.* 2017; Denov *et al.* 2022).

This article offers an approach to meaningfully, effectively and rigorously engage young people with research.[1] Beyond finding out about young people in order to better respond to their needs, we explore engaging young people in the research process itself, with young people occupying both sides of the researcher-researched relationship alongside 'technical researchers'.[2] This article builds upon longer trends of

[1] Throughout this article, we use the term 'young people' to refer to those aged 18 to 35, otherwise often referred to as 'youth'. We take a more expansive age definition than that used by the UN, for example, to reflect the definition of 'youth' in the sub-Saharan African countries where much of our work has focused. In practice our work has predominantly engaged those aged 18–30. We refer to 'young people', rather than 'youth,' as the young people we have worked with prefer the former and find the latter demeaning.

[2] We use the term 'technical researcher' to differentiate between the young researchers whom we create more space for in the youth co-research process. These 'technical researchers' are the professional researchers – academics and others – who typically lead the research process and who are typically slightly older, have university-level training, and have several years of professional research experience. Our approach does not differentiate between where these technical researchers come from or where they are based; so, this includes both local and international experts. We invite others to further unpack this nuance.

participatory and co-research research (e.g. Hartley & Benington 2000; Littlechild *et al.* 2015; Cargo & Mercer 2008). Ideally, equitable participation offers an antidote to top-down or more extractive approaches, as it can empower those involved (e.g. Haynes & Tanner 2015; Oladeinde *et al.* 2020; Goessling & Wager 2021). However, this is difficult to achieve. As with wider critiques of participation, what looks superficially participatory can hide 'new tyrannies' (Kothari & Cooke 2001). Power relationships are hard to escape, and research projects can reinvent inequitable relationships despite the best intentions (*ibid.*). While our positionalities and those of the people with whom we work are embodied and embedded (Noxolo 2009), our approach reworks possibilities in purposefully created alternative spaces, or *heterotopias* (Foucault 1984).

This article establishes the value and rigour of youth co-research. The central value of co-research includes equitable engagement and co-learning for young people, policy- and practice-oriented researchers and academics which can strengthen research outcomes and subsequent impact. Firstly, we consider the meaning of, and potential for, participatory approaches by drawing upon concepts of heterotopia and dialogue. Then, based on the wider literature and first-hand experience, we briefly review participatory and youth-engaged approaches to research. We conceptualize youth-involved approaches to research, mapping out the varying degrees to which young people are engaged in research processes, and paying attention to both sides of this relationship. We use levels of inclusion and authority to understand the relative roles of young and technical researchers at different stages in the research process. Case studies of our earlier co-research projects are shared to demonstrate these ideas in practice. Overall, we take a realistic and practical approach to making research do-able and youth inclusive, while benefitting from the diverse skillsets within the team.

Participation and participatory spaces

Participation in research and politics has a long history, becoming increasingly widespread and fashionable during the past two decades for practical and ethical reasons (Ozkul 2020; Kothari & Cooke 2001; Cornwall 2011). The various approaches to bringing 'would-be subjects' into research include emancipatory research, decolonizing methodologies and empowerment evaluation (Cargo & Mercer 2008). This builds upon a history of often unmet demands for full inclusion and representation of marginalised groups. With respect to citizen participation, Arnstein (1969: 217), and later Hart (1992), helpfully set out a continuum or ladder of participation in which the lower rungs of manipulation, informing and consultation are more 'substitutes for participation' than authentic participation

Table 1. Youth-involved research mapped onto Arnstein and Hart's ladders of participation.

Youth-related research type	**Arnstein's (1969) ladder**	**Hart's (1992) ladder of participation** (adapted to youth)
Youth participatory action research	8. Citizen control	8. Youth-initiated shared decisions with adults 7. Youth-initiated and -directed
Youth co-research	7. Delegated power 6. Partnership	6. Adult-initiated shared decisions with youth
Youth-focused research	5. Placation 4. Consultation 3. Informing	5. Youth consulted and informed 4. Youth assigned and informed
Co-option of young people	2. Therapy 1. Manipulation	3. Tokenism 2. Decoration 1. Manipulation

(as shown in Table 1). Moving up the rungs, Arnstein progresses through practices of engagement, partnership, delegated power and at the topmost rung: citizen control. The upper rungs offer an alternative to the closely observed exclusion of some groups from research (Chambers 2017, 1994). At its best participation is empowering and equalising:

> Participation is a political process that recognises and enables those at the heart of the issue to address it and learn from the process. Recognising that people's chances of being healthy are affected by social structures and systems, the approach is not simply a target-oriented intervention, but is instrumental and substantive, an interchangeable means and end. (Oladeinde *et al.* 2020: 2)

There is, however, considerable debate about the potential that participatory programmes have to challenge or overthrow existing power structures. Cooke & Kothari's (2001) influential book *Participation: the new Tyranny?* focuses on the downfalls of participation, arguing that hopes for more equitable relationships are sometimes destroyed when participation – sometimes unintentionally – reinforces power structures and inequalities, to the extent that participation may even be imposed upon supposed collaborators. And these power imbalances can run deep, sometimes blocking genuine participation:

> These roadblocks lie on both sides of the simplistic fence. On the power-holders' side, they include racism, paternalism, and resistance to power redistribution. On the have-nots' side, they include inadequacies of the poor community's political socioeconomic infrastructure and knowledge-base, plus difficulties of organizing a representative and accountable citizens' group in the face of futility, alienation, and distrust. (Arnstein 1969: 217)

Such roadblocks should not be enough to destroy the principles and ambitions for productive participation. Here we draw upon the writings of De Sousa Santos (2007, 2008) who welcomes the acknowledgement of and working with the perplexity of such power structures, the colonial histories and their legacy, the challenges of capitalism, the deep and urgent inequalities we face today. Instead of allowing these perplexities to result in immobilisation, De Sousa Santos sees potential for 'an open field of contradictions… open[ing] space for social and political innovation;… help[ing] people and movements to travel without reliable maps.' (De Sousa Santos 2008: 251). Making space for contradictions and disagreement is essential to ensuring engagement and avoiding co-option.

In his writings, De Sousa Santos recognises the many sides of the participatory relationship, rather than focusing predominantly upon a more marginalised group – the people who Kothari & Cooke (2001) identify as having participation 'done to' them. Instead, the *interaction* and *intercultural dialogue* across differences, such as the south and north, female and male, rural and urban, is key in the bringing together what he calls 'an ecology of knowledges' (De Sousa Santos 2008: 259). In this formulation, diversity can become the foundation of unity, an opportunity to connect. Ongoing vigilance is needed as such dialogues play out, given existing power structures and historical precedent (*ibid.*). This leads to a call for the creation of 'contexts for debate' (De Sousa Santos 2008: 260), for which we find parallels to this idea of alternative spaces in Foucault's writings on heterotopia.

Heterotopia is distinguished from its perfect but imaginary counterpart, utopia, by being real (Foucault 1984). The concept of heterotopia offers a way to make sense of participatory spaces as alternative spaces – perhaps akin to De Sousa Santos' 'contexts for debate' (2008: 260). Heterotopias offer counter-sites, which differ from the other real sites to which they refer. These sites allow a distancing from other spaces and juxtaposing realities, offering the distance required for self-reflection and even reconstitution of the self (Foucault 1984). Heterotopias can form alternative spaces which compensate for the problematic realities beyond (*ibid.*). Applied to participation, heterotopias can offer options for redlining hierarchies and bringing people together on different terms to those entrenched in other spaces. Complementary thinking can be found in Goessling and Wager's (2020) arts-based concept of 'places of possibility.'

Heterotopic spaces can be spaces of co-research. The following section discusses existing approaches to participatory research, focusing specifically on the dynamics of technical researchers collaborating with young people. A full account of the fascinating dynamics between young researchers, or among technical researchers, is beyond the scope of this article. Overall, participatory research aims to connect research and practice while enabling increased control from people who would most often be

responding to externally driven processes (Cargo & Mercer 2008). Of course, no single method can fully resolve deeply ingrained inequalities (Langevang 2007). Despite the well-documented shortfalls of participatory approaches (Kothari & Cooke 2001), the aim of creating spaces for open-ended approaches based upon unity built upon differences (Foucault 1984; De Sousa Santos 2008) necessitates that we continue this endeavour, cautiously and reflectively. And to assess the outcomes, De Sousa Santos proposes the following:

> Success is measured not by the correctness of the theoretical positions assumed, but by the extent of concrete transformation of unequal power relations into shared authority relations in the specific social field in which the collective action takes place. (De Sousa Santos 2008, 260–1)

Approaching youth-involved research

It is widely recognised that young people are usually absent or marginal within research and policy design (Enns & Bersaglio 2015); in response many researchers recommend a deeper form of engagement with young people (Ayele *et al.* 2017; Punch 2002). Following increasing recognition of the benefits and importance of participatory research (discussed above), there has been an increasing acknowledgement that young people can, and arguably should, play a role in research processes that examine the issues that affect them. There is also evidence of young researchers actively seeking to increase their involvement and responsibility within research projects (Denov *et al.* 2022). When excluded, young people stand to lose out from decisions and policies that do not take their perspectives and experiences into account (London 2003), and wider society misses out on young people's direct and local insight into youth issues (Wallerstein 2010; Scott *et al.* 2020). This approach to inclusion must also be applied to sub-groups of the youth population, as more disadvantaged and marginalised young people are often the least heard.

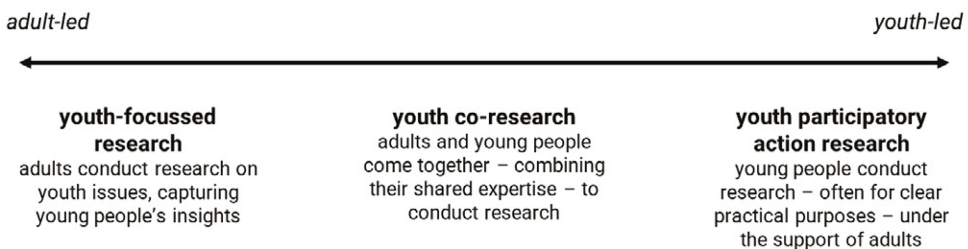

Figure 1. How Youth Co-Research Compares to Other Methodologies.

Recent studies have therefore begun to identify concrete roles that young people can play in discrete stages of the research process – either through the development of the research tools and protocols (Tsang *et al.* 2020; Moss *et al.* 2023), through analysis and dissemination approaches (Scott *et al.* 2020; Mueller *et al.* 2023) and through advisory roles (Spencer *et al.* 2023). Youth participatory action research (frequently referred to as YPAR) offers an alternative way to structure the research process with youth at the forefront. It places value on young people's in-depth knowledge of the issues they face and on 'the ability of [young] people to critically reflect upon their own experiences to generate scientific knowledge without the intermediary of the outside researcher' (London 2007: 407). In contrast with more extractive models of youth participation in research, young people stand to benefit from leading research, developing soft skills that contribute to their broader development as individuals, as members of communities and as engaged citizens (Suleiman *et al.* 2006).

Distinct from youth participatory action research, we find particular value in a middle ground, which we refer to as youth co-research. Figure 1 characterises youth co-research in comparison to other methodologies employed by those investigating youth issues. While youth participatory action research puts youth at the forefront of examining – and acting on – an issue that matters to them, the vast majority of research on youth issues has instead been youth-focussed. Youth-focussed research typically collects data from young people without meaningfully engaging them in the research process. Youth co-research operates in the middle of this continuum of leadership, aiming for a collaborative interaction between young people (who possess in-depth lived expertise) and adults (technical researchers who possess broader professional expertise in sector trends and research methodologies).

Oliveira & Veary (2020) recognise that in such collaborative research spaces the equalising of technical expertise is not merely an ethical move but also a political move, opening up new intellectual and practical spaces. In its remaking of who does what in the research process and of how young people engage in academic research on the issues that matter to them, youth co-research is less concerned with elevating youth voices than with creating heterotopic spaces – compensatory alternatives to the traditional patterns of knowledge production based on intergenerational dialogue (Foucault 1984). Further, learning is by no means one-way, which also has practical benefits. For instance, when young people are confident to disagree, they can reject unworkable or misaligned elements of a research design (e.g. Moss *et al.* 2023; Goessling & Wager 2021). Just as combining the sight of both the left and right eyes allows for vision that has depth perception, we find that a research process that combines these two types of expertise produces a richer, more nuanced perspective of youth issues. Even amongst young people, it is important to consider the expertise and knowledge offered by disadvantaged young people, for

whom peer-to-peer research can be especially effective in accessing and learning. Therefore, youth co-research does not replace technical researchers' expertise with that of young people but instead reframes the relationship between them.

Interpersonal dynamics, positionality and skills make a great difference to the effectiveness of youth co-research. Just as researchers consider their own identities and their impact on the research process and findings, it is important to also consider positionality and soft skills. One useful skill for technical researchers is that of an 'animator', the ability to 'give life to the potential in young people' (Hart 1992: 14). In recruiting young researchers, we have valued recruiting on *potential* to do research, and then providing training given that most young researchers have not previously done social research (Denov *et al.* 2022 took a similar approach to recruiting youth researchers). Nevertheless, certain pre-existing foundational skills are required to enable young researchers to meaningfully participate in research. These include communication and interpersonal skills, literacy and numeracy skills and the ability to communicate in both the local language and that used by the technical researchers. In addition, young researchers' deep understanding of the research context stemming from their direct lived experience is immensely valuable.

Similarly, we find that co-research works best where technical researchers have positive perceptions of working with young people and are already reflective about their positionality and contribution to power dynamics. This awareness is usefully complemented by strong interpersonal and facilitation skills to create adequate space for young researchers. We acknowledge that young people with certain pre-existing skills and technical researchers predisposed to working with young people are both distinct subsets of wider populations. This combination could boost the potential for reshaping power dynamics or instil other forms of exclusion and reinforce hierarchies. Future research could usefully address the tensions around which young people are engaged as youth researchers and the dynamics within this group. Moving beyond these descriptors, Hart's (1992) discussion of child participation can be extended to describe the interpersonal dynamic that we seek to achieve within youth co-research:

> Adults do, however, need to learn to listen, support, and guide; and to know when and when not to speak… One should rather think of what a child might be able to achieve in collaboration with other children and with supportive adults. (Hart 1992: 31)

London (2007) proposes two parameters for reflecting on young people's involvement in the research process: *authority*, which is the extent and depth of youth decision-making, and *inclusion*, which is the quantity and frequency of youth involvement in the research process (409). We employ these parameters to characterise the relationship between – and the role of both – young researchers and technical researchers in the youth co-research model (as shown in Table 2). While

Table 2. Typical roles of Young Researchers and Technical Researchers in the Heterotopic Spaces in the Youth Co-Research Process.

The roles detailed here show the general arc of youth and technical researcher engagement for the research studies detailed in this article (as detailed in section 4). Others might find this format helpful for mapping out young and technical researchers' engagement throughout a project.

	Stages of the Youth Co-Research Process					
	1. Setting the Framework	**2. Designing the Research**	**3. Collecting the Data**	**4. Analysing the Data**	**5. Validating the Findings**[3]	**6. Disseminating the Findings**
Role of Technical Researchers	**High Authority, High Inclusion** Design funding application and research objectives Identify research focus and research questions Training[4] to young researchers on research design and collection	**High Authority, High Inclusion** Design the research tools and organise translation Provide technical expertise on methods Lead ethical review	**Shared Authority, Low Inclusion** Establish and oversee data management quality control Provide ongoing coaching to young researchers	**Shared Authority, High Inclusion (UNITY)** Determine the analytical framework[5] Provide capacity-building to young researchers on analysis Conduct second-level analysis of data	**Low Authority, Low Inclusion** Determine validation exercises Co-develop facilitation plan with young researchers	**High Authority, High Inclusion** Lead academic dissemination Contribute to public dissemination
Role of Young Researchers	**Low Authority, Mixed Inclusion** Contribute to the research objectives Provide feedback on the research focus and research questions	**Low Authority, High Inclusion** Draft questions for research tools Providing input on research methods	**Shared Authority, High Inclusion** Operationalize data collection plans, identifying subjects Directly collect primary data, build rapport with participants	**Shared Authority, High Inclusion (UNITY)** Conduct first-level analysis of data Collate/interpret field-level observations Provide feedback on second-level analysis	**High Authority, High Inclusion** Operationalize facilitation plan, identifying spaces and participants Determine how feedback is shared/ incorporated	**Mixed[6] Authority, Mixed Inclusion** *For broader dissemination:* Ideate creative, impactful approaches Co-lead dissemination strategy

[3] This step is not present in all research processes; however, for us it has been integral to the practice of creating inclusive, heterotopic spaces for sense-making. In this step of the youth co-research process, young researchers take the findings back to a sub-sample of the respondents of the study to validate the findings, confirming that they have accurately captured the experience of those they interviewed and identifying any gaps or clarifications to be addressed in the final documentation of the findings.

[4] To date capacity-building has been concentrated on technical researchers providing training in key research skills to young researchers who do not have prior formal research exposure. This has not been complemented with capacity-building provided to technical researchers, in part due to the aforementioned limitation of having worked predominantly with technical researchers who are predisposed to value young people's contributions often built from prior exposure to youth engagement. However, we do acknowledge that technical researchers build greater awareness of how to work with young researchers – and better appreciate the meaningful insights that they provide – by working with this approach. We invite future researchers using a youth co-research approach to expand on this.

[5] Analysis takes a grounded theory approach, in order to protect space for new ideas and approaches to emerge.

[6] Young researchers' authority is mixed at this stage because it differs based on the audience that findings are disseminated to. Young people's decision-making tends to be most welcome amongst broader, less technical audiences.

London applies authority and inclusion to reflect upon young people's involvement in research, we use the same parameters to characterise the roles of technical researchers, thus more fully describing the relationship between these two groups of researchers. London (2007) reminds us that low authority or inclusion of young people is not necessarily bad, as this should be dictated by the research team's capacity to provide appropriate support to young people. We identify how young researchers' and technical researchers' authority and inclusion fluctuates between research stages; this flexibility facilitates the maximisation of the teams' collective skills and expertise.

As Table 2 shows, young researchers and technical researchers have different levels of inclusion and authority at different stages of the research process. In youth co-research, the authority and inclusion of technical researchers at any step in the research process is not necessarily the inverse of young people's. Instead, we identify stages where young researchers and technical researchers share authority – complemented by the high inclusion of both parties – which supports the creation of shared, heterotopic spaces. In the analytical stage, complementary youth-led and professional-led analysis processes allow for both parties to play a strong role in the sense-making of the data. Both parties have a high level of authority and inclusion – a unique moment in the youth co-research process and a space of shared power where it matters most, which we refer to as 'unity.' Unity at this stage depends upon a degree of shared authority and inclusion at previous stages, to form the basis of a mutually trusting partnership. We recognise that there could be further opportunities for 'unity' based on how a research project is conceived and designed.

4. Youth co-research case studies

Having shared the thinking behind youth co-research and its goals, and the arc of youth and technical researcher engagement (as shown in Table 2), this section offers three case studies of research projects in which this approach has been applied. These examples show how despite having a shared core approach, the details have flexed between research settings, project design and funder. This variation allows a necessarily pragmatic approach to fitting co-research within the wider parameters and limits of a project, while proactively creating spaces for young people and technical researchers to share their complementary skills. The three research projects referred to below all recruited young researchers not on their prior exposure to formal research training and processes but instead on their ability to conduct research, given the right conditions and support to do so. This widens the pool of potential young researchers to include those with in-depth lived experience of a particular context

but less access to formal education and skilling opportunities. Technical researchers who are amenable to working with young researchers are supported to understand the youth co-research process, highlighting how to: build spaces for young researchers' authority and inclusion; use targeted training materials for each step of young researchers' participation; and facilitate young researchers' participation. Thus, both sets of researchers gain new knowledge, perspectives, skills and work experience. The case studies refer to research with young people experiencing climate change disruptions in Uganda, young people impacted by COVID-19 in Indonesia and Nepal and a youth think tank convened between East, West and Southern Africa.

Case study 1. Peak youth, climate change and the role of young people in seizing their future

This youth co-research project focuses on young people's working lives in Uganda, in particular, examining the impacts of climate change on young people's livelihoods and how they have responded. This research topic was chosen due to several influences, some youth-focused, some youth-directed. Earlier research with young people had identified their challenges in getting by and making a life, while scientific reports describe the devastating impacts of climate change on vulnerable people and some young people express their serious concerns regarding climate change (IPCC 2014; Nakate 2021; Barford *et al.* 2021; Barford, Coombe & Proefke 2020, 2021). Informed by these wider trends, this research project was designed by technical researchers at Restless Development, the University of Cambridge, and Makerere University. The project was funded by the British Academy's Youth Futures programme, which purposefully aimed to bring 'a youth lens to the global sustainable development challenges' (British Academy 2019).

The methods were identified when writing the research grant which, as with most research grants, allowed a period of several months in which to respond to the funding call. Methods, chosen by the technical researchers while building a team and designing the project, included interviews, focus groups, a survey and policy panels. While the technical researchers selected these headline methods, young people advised on the detailed design through three wide ranging discussions about young people and climate change, followed by further discussion with the Ugandan National Youth Working group. These discussions with young people were carefully formulated, ensuring that most of the group was made up of that age group and only involved one member of the technical research team to put the young contributors at ease and help reduce any shyness about speaking openly. This group composition ensured that young people were the experts in the virtual room. In addition to discussion, white board-based exercises were used to encourage other forms of communication.

These conversations identified the issues faced, feeding directly into the questions posed by the research tools; tools that were later tested by young people before being rolled out.

The research tools were subject to their own time and bureaucratic pressures which prevented more active youth involvement. A two-stage ethical review process in Uganda meant that early application for ethical clearance was critical to delivering the project in good time. To keep to the timescales the research tools were designed and translated, then submitted for ethical review. This process lasted over six months and delayed the start of data collection. Thus, practical and legal requirements needed a pragmatic response, with youth collaboration reduced accordingly as time pressure limited the team's capacity to create authentic heterotopic opportunities to collaborate. While equitable co-research has been prioritised, it is at times in tension with other demands of the research process, good project management means delivering on these *together*.

Young researchers were recruited in two groups, one for the qualitative and one for the quantitative strand of work. Each group was split between the Busoga and Karamoja subregions of Uganda, but they joined for research methods training, a critical review and testing of the research tools (Barford *et al.* 2021). Following this, the team returned to their home regions, where they have substantial insight into local livelihoods and economic dynamics, climate change disruptions, languages and culture. With training, support and guidance from the technical researchers when needed, the young researchers undertook the first steps with data collection, collation, translation and analysis. This required high levels of authority and inclusion from young researchers, as they were responsible for recruiting interviewees and survey respondents, for managing their timetables and for handling research data. At this stage the technical researchers had lower inclusion, except for the research co-ordinator who was available to tackle issues as they arose.

A major issue that did arise was COVID-19. A strict lockdown began just as the research team were embarking upon the data collection, making it impossible to do the in-person interviews and surveys that had been scheduled. Working our way around this challenge required the skills and know-how of the whole team – using the local networks and contextual knowledge of young researchers in conjunction with the technical researchers' knowledge of other projects' approaches to similar problems and oversight of research methods. The strategy was to use telephone interviews to collect data, ensuring that the young researchers and their respondents were properly compensated for the costs of phone use. Recognising that key groups would be excluded by this approach, some respondents lent their mobile telephones to those who did not have one of their own. After the lockdown, the research team prioritised data collection from groups who were underrepresented due to these changes in data

collection techniques. This example shows the value of bringing together the skills and knowledge of diverse groups within the research team.

The analysis stage was particularly useful as a moment for unity between young and technical researchers, as the young researchers drew upon their considerable knowledge and experience of conducting data collection, and shared their insights into key themes and issues, which technical researchers were then able to follow up in their slower, technology-enabled analysis and write ups. Following this, young and professional researchers came together to disseminate the research through presentations and policy discussions with local stakeholders. These were held in person in the capital city Kampala, as well as in the regional capitals, Jinja and Moroto. One of the young researchers was also an invited speaker to a session we ran at the Education Rewired summit in Dubai in 2021, and many others took up speaking opportunities at the numerous other events we contributed to.

The write up of academic findings was limited to the technical research group in this case, due to the time needed for detailed writing. While the young researchers were not involved, the technical team consisted of several early career researchers who have been deeply involved in writing up findings for the media and for academic journals. For collaborative write ups to become more of a practical reality, we would recommend designing this into the proposal complete with the correct time and financial allocations to allow for this, as well as writing workshops to offer the necessary oversight and to hone the skills needed for this part of the research process. We are certain that a lot could be gained from such an approach in terms of insights and co-learning.

Case study 2. Youth in a time of crisis: livelihood diaries from Nepal and Indonesia during COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic began in late 2019 and quickly spread across the world. Its novel, highly infectious and deadly nature resulted in national lockdowns which brought national economies to repeated temporary standstills during 2020 and 2021. Young people were especially impacted by this due to their collectively weaker labour market positions; particular subgroups of young people were worse impacted than others (ILO 2021). Furthermore, young people often lacked policy support to mitigate these impacts (Barford, Coutts & Sahai 2021). At a time when in-person research was unpredictable and often impossible due to public health containment measures, diary methods offered a viable and interesting approach to collecting accounts of how young people were impacted (Mueller *et al.* 2023). In this case, our qualitative research focused on those who were especially unprotected from the impacts of COVID-19. The theme and subgroups were proposed by the technical research team

and the funder (the Asian Development Bank) and refined in conversation with project partners Restless Nepal and Rutgers WPF, young people in Indonesia and Nepal, as well as through discussions with the National Resident Missions of the Asian Development Bank.

In this research, young researchers were recruited as 'rapporteurs', each of whom oversaw a cluster of diary writers with a shared characteristic. Their language skills, local expertise and similar demographics enabled a peer-to-peer engagement between young rapporteurs and research participants. The research clusters comprised young mothers, migrant waste pickers, health care workers, trekking and tourism workers, people living with disability and people who self-define as LGBTQI+. Young rapporteurs were trained and then supported to engage the diary writers on a weekly basis, quickly identifying and often solving problems as they worked. Here the high authority and high inclusion of young researchers made it possible for them to make these decisions themselves, referring to the technical researchers when needed. The young rapporteurs were experts in their own clusters and ran the first round of analysis for their individual cluster based on their in-depth knowledge of the cluster and the local context in which they were situated. The rapporteurs also ran focus group discussions, during which we made a conscious effort to manage and balance the intergenerational and international power dynamics by briefing more experienced group members on the importance of respectful listening and resisting being the first to respond to questions. It was important to remain aware of these underlying power dynamics in seeking to create heterotopic spaces.

Some of the young researchers on the team were highly involved in dissemination of the research findings. This took the form of international online events to present research findings. Due to there being ten rapporteurs, no one was obliged to present in this way, but every speaking opportunity was filled by willing volunteers; those not presenting were often in the audience and actively participating in the parallel online chat. Thus, the dissemination enabled a heterotopic space in which young people were speaking with authority about their research findings, in spaces usually reserved for more traditional-looking experts. In terms of the write up of the findings, the authors were the technical research team, including the country co-ordinators from each country. As suggested above, a study resourced to support the engagement of young researchers in the academic write up would offer an opportunity to explore the potential for boosting youth inclusion and authority in stages of the research process where they are typically less involved.

Case study 3. Youth think tank: a five-year strategic investment in investigating topics in youth economic opportunities in sub-Saharan Africa

Through a five-year partnership with Mastercard Foundation, Restless Development received funding to train and support 100 young researchers from seven sub-Saharan African countries to conduct six studies on youth economic opportunities, each delivered by a different cohort of young researchers. It is worth highlighting here that this case is distinct from the others presented in that the ratio of young researchers to technical researchers was significantly higher. This was because this initiative did not involve a partnership with academic researchers but rather included a few technical researchers within Restless Development for technical backstopping and engaging Mastercard Foundation partners at key moments. This led to greater spaces for young people's authority and inclusion in the research process but also meant that the project benefitted less from varied perspectives that a research team with more diverse experiences can bring.

Following an initial open-ended scoping study on the state of youth economic opportunities across East Africa, which focused on research questions identified by the young people themselves, Mastercard Foundation identified the next two topics that the Youth Think Tank researchers would focus on. Both these topics stemmed from the key unanswered questions from the scoping study. However, the focus of all future studies was identified – and proposed – by the young researchers themselves, based on what they saw as being key priorities for young people's economic opportunities. The short list of potential topics that they provided were then reviewed by technical researchers at Restless Development and by Mastercard Foundation partners for alignment to ongoing academic and technical conversations. Later cohorts of young researchers then investigated the finalised research topics and questions, as identified through this consultative process. To a large extent in this approach, then, young researchers had a high level of authority in the process of setting the research framework. Because this funding did not require prior research proposals of all research topics, cohorts of young researchers could iteratively determine a shortlist of research priorities that also aligned to the priorities of young people like themselves. In co-designing the research topics and questions that youth co-research projects would focus on, technical and young researchers created heterotopic spaces where both groups co-identified the strategic research priorities that would determine how research investments were utilised. Therefore, this investment showcases how there can be opportunities for 'unity' at other stages of the youth co-research process, dependent on grant and funding structures that allow for more inclusion at the research design phase.

Once the research objectives were collaboratively determined, technical researchers from Restless Development facilitated young researchers in how to move from

research objectives to research questions through an in-person two-week workshop, and young researchers identified the research questions that would be most meaningful to them based on the priorities of young people. However, technical researchers' support was needed to reformulate the research questions in a concrete way with appropriate focus, given the scale of the research and to advise on which methods would be best placed to answer these research questions. Similarly, technical researchers provided young researchers with guidance on how to design the research tools; young researchers worked in small groups to develop drafts; and these drafts were then finalised by the technical researchers at Restless Development. Therefore, while young researchers had a high level of inclusion in this stage of the research process – taking the first step to identify both general research questions and those addressed to respondents – they had a lower level of authority. We found that a certain level of experience-based expertise is required to phrase strong research questions, determine which methods should be applied and to translate research questions into specific questions directed to respondents. However, we encourage other researchers to identify better ways to expand young researchers' authority in this process, perhaps by concentrating on how to provide more accessible but also more in-depth capacity-building in this skill.

Following training in how to collect data according to the methods identified for each study and guidance on who and how to sample respondents, young researchers led on data collection within their countries themselves, reaching out to the technical researchers at Restless Development only as needed to help troubleshoot challenges that they faced. As technical researchers provided ongoing guidance, and young researchers provided field leadership, this stage of the research process represented a moment of shared authority – but varying levels of inclusion between technical and young researchers with the latter having less inclusion. Instead, analysis represented a unique moment of unity, where young researchers and technical researchers both had a high level of authority in identifying the emerging findings and a high level of inclusion in the process of doing so. Through another in-person two-week session, technical researchers and young researchers worked together to identify key themes and trends emerging from the data. While technical researchers provided the analytical framework for analysis based on their technical experience, young researchers – organized into smaller working groups – worked with the data to identify key findings. These were then peer-reviewed by the other groups of young researchers as well as by the technical researchers who played the role of 'critical friend' asking key open-ended questions about emerging trends and themes to ensure that they were well substantiated with the evidence captured. In this moment of unity, the co-analysis process in the analysis workshop represented both a physical and conceptual heterotopic space for sense-making that allowed for greater inclusion of young people's insights than other

less-participatory approaches. Similarly, writing up the results reflected a process of high inclusion for both technical researchers and some young researchers. Writing responsibilities were shared between technical researchers at Restless Development and a subset of young researchers from each study who came together to form a writing group, authoring key sections of the report.

Young researchers also had a high level of authority and inclusion during the validation exercises that they led following the analysis stage of each research project. Following analysis, technical researchers supported young researchers to identify outstanding questions that could be addressed through the validation exercise and to develop a facilitation guide for these exercises. Technical researchers then identified a sampling strategy that would guide young researchers in selecting locations and participants for these exercises. Within this framework, young researchers took on the role of identifying and mobilising participants, as well as facilitating and documenting the discussions. Following these validation exercises, young researchers then discussed how to utilise the lessons from the validation exercises to add further nuance to the findings, as captured in the research reports. Therefore, while technical researchers took a role in determining a structure for this stage of the youth co-research process, young researchers led on the sense-making from this process.

Findings from each of these studies were disseminated through multiple forums and channels in an example of mixed authority and inclusion between young researchers and technical researchers. Technical researchers from Restless Development and partners from Mastercard Foundation convened in-person national dissemination workshops targeting key government and development partner stakeholders, leveraging our combined networks. One such event was held per study in one of the seven countries, where Restless Development and Mastercard Foundation deemed that the research would be most relevant, based on key topics and discussions in policy and practice in that country. However, young researchers determined how these events would be facilitated and led all discussions of the research findings within them, creating heterotopic spaces to discussion and dialogue. These national dissemination events were complemented by in-country dissemination plans developed by the young researcher country teams, based on what they felt would be the most impactful audiences to target with the findings and which channel should be used to do so. They often used a mix of bespoke engagements with key stakeholders, in-country launch events, radio shows and several other creative approaches. In developing these dissemination plans, technical researchers from Restless Development instead played a technical assistance role, providing advice on which stakeholders to include, which findings might resonate most with them and how to reach them with these messages; however, this support was on-demand, not directive. So, in practice, these youth-led localised dissemination activities created heterotopic spaces in the research process,

challenging who 'owned' the findings and who determined how they were presented and shared with others, representing a high level of authority and inclusion for young researchers in sense-making of the research.

We acknowledge that what these case studies do not address is how to reconcile issues of power and inequality within the two groups of researchers – between young researchers and between technical researchers – which were at times live issues during our case studies. However, these are still open questions, and we invite other researchers to expand on answering them.

Conclusion

Long-standing trends towards collaborative and participatory research have great potential when applied to youth studies. This article situates our approach to youth co-research within the wider range of approaches which span from youth-focused (about young people) to youth-led (initiated and directed by young people). Here we present our approach to engaging young people on a fruitful middle ground, whereby young researchers collaborate with technical researchers. As others have argued, there is much to be gained from interaction and partnership across differences (Hart 2008; De Sousa Santos 2008). This involves learning and sharing skills and expertise across groups, with each group bringing something distinctive and valuable to the table which deepens cross-group understanding and improves the relevance, reach and insight offered by shared research. This collaboration also offers a reformulation of the type and quality of interaction between adult and young researchers – a compensatory heterotopia in which the nature of collaborations can be reworked as an antidote to dominant social norms (Foucault 1984).

There is a tendency for research methods that involve young people to focus primarily on young people, overlooking the positionality and attributes of the technical researchers with whom they are working. In this article we intentionally consider the dynamic relationship between these groups. We hope to follow De Sousa Santos (2008) in creating unity across difference, so both sides of this difference require acknowledgement. Positionality matters a great deal, yet it is important to make sense of this not only in terms of the demographic descriptors of age, gender, race and class; but also in terms of attitude, group dynamic, ability to listen and approach to facilitation. These features are also stressed by Hart (2008) as being crucial to enabling younger people to effectively participate. We have described the shifting roles of young and technical researchers, in terms of their inclusion and authority in the research process (after London 2007), mapping out how this is distributed across different stages of the research collaboration (as shown in Table 2). Future methods articles might helpfully

explore ways to promote inclusive dynamics *between* young researchers, or *amongst* technical researchers.

Collaboration is important for moving ahead to solve some of the deep and pressing issues that concern young people and wider society. We have seen this in the climate change movement, with calls for international and intergenerational solidarity (e.g. Nakate 2021). What we present here is a formulation of how to effectively draw upon the different and often complementary skills of young people and professional researchers. Our approach has been used in many international studies so far and will benefit from future development. Areas where greater shared inclusion and shared authority might be developed in the future are particularly around the initial formulation of the research and the academic write up of the findings. A key message for fellow researchers interested in pursuing youth co-research is this: if you don't budget for it, you won't be able to do it. Here, budgeting refers to money, but also to time and space, reminding us to design in young researchers from the start. Looking ahead, we are eager to learn of new ways to shift the authority/inclusion balance and generate more stages of researcher unity within the research process.

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Young people's involvement in migration research – opportunities for (re)shaping research priorities and practices

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Abstract: Young people are frequently involved in research about their own lives and their contributions to the shaping of research priorities increasingly valued. Recently, young people's participation in research has been extended to advisory group roles including supporting the planning, design and delivery of projects. Such involvement marks an important shift towards valuing young people's views on how research should be conducted and is often required as part of research funding processes. In this article, we explore the value and contribution of young people's involvement in a research project focusing on the livelihoods of young migrants in Ghana and the related possibilities for empowerment. Our collaborations remind us of the pitfalls of working from an adult centric lens, and how this may inadvertently contribute to the reproduction of adult ways of understanding young lives. Here, our project Young Person Advisory Group members share their experiences of being youth advisors – highlighting both challenges and opportunities for young people's meaningful involvement in research.

Keywords: young people, participation, Young Person Advisory Group, empowerment, migrants, youth advisors

Note on the authors: see end of article.

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Introduction

Young people's involvement in research has increased rapidly in recent times and in line with the United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN 1989) (particularly Article 12), which sets out the civil, political, economic, social, health and cultural rights of children. This is happening at a time when new research methods and forms of engagement have been developed to aid the more meaningful and effective participation of young people in research about their own lives (for some examples see Christensen & James 2008; Ansell *et al.* 2012; Twum-Danso Imoh & Okyere 2020). Different forms of involvement offer different ways of engaging young people in research including as active research participants, co-researchers, peer researchers and as research advisory group members (Porter 2016). Despite these advances, involving young people in research is not without important ethical and methodological challenges and considerations, which are often complicated by the inherent power imbalances between adult researchers and younger participants (James 2007; Holland *et al.* 2010; Spyrou 2016; Spencer, Fairbrother &Thompson 2020).

In this article co-authored with our project youth advisors, we share our experiences of working with young people as part of the Young Person Advisory Group (YPAG) for an international project focusing on the livelihoods of young migrants in Ghana, and the related possibilities for understanding empowerment. In doing so, we offer a careful reflection and critique on how young people are involved in the project as advisors, including advancing understanding of what meaningful participation (as defined by young people) might look like in practice and how this (for our young advisors) ties to broader research impacts and possibilities for social change. Issues of diversity and power come to the fore – reminding us of how research agendas often remain adult-led, despite best intentions. Yet, these reflections also open up new ways of thinking about, and enabling, young people's meaningful involvement in research as our later analysis unpacks.

The article commences with an overview of the contributions to young people's involvement in research, including charting some of the practical, ethical and methodological challenges documented in the literature to date. Together with our young advisors as co-authors, we reflect on and pay particular attention to the complexities of engaging young people in a research study located in different countries and how dominant assumptions tied to Western notions of youth participation can shape our understanding of 'youth involvement'. We then proceed to detail the genesis, aims and activities of our YPAG and their specific contributions to the project – setting out how this differs from peer or co-research with young people. Drawing directly upon our young advisors' perspectives, we share our experiences of the opportunities and challenges young people's involvement in our project has afforded. We conclude

by highlighting some of the possible 'dangers' of adult centric research and how these might inadvertently reinforce dominant power relations.

Young people's involvement in research

The involvement of young people in research has expanded rapidly and the literature highlights many examples of young people's engagement in research – and in varying capacities and roles (e.g. as research participant, advisor, co-researcher). Contemporary examples of young people's research participation can be found across a range of disciplines and areas, including (but not limited to) education (see Can & Göksenin 2017; Forde *et al.* 2018), health (see From 2019; Martin *et al.* 2018), family life (see Shah *et al.* 2021), and social media and peer relationships (see Goodyear, Armour & Wood 2018; Hunter, van Blerk & Shand 2021). The increasing commitment to the 'meaningful' engagement of young people in research has been largely triggered in response to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (UN 1989). The UNCRC heralded the rights of young people to participate in cultural life – crucially, positioning young people's perspectives at the forefront of decisions that directly affect their lives (Porter, Townsend & Hampshire 2012). Such an emphasis offers a direct challenge to the invisibility of children across a number of spaces; including migration studies (see Bhabha 2003; Stalford 2018).

The UNCRC marked an important shift in emphasis from young people as the passive subjects *of* research to more active participants *in* research (James & Prout 2015), particularly in relation to Article 12, which sets out the rights of all children to express their views on matters that affect them and crucially, that such views are taken seriously. In research, this emphasis signals a move away from adult centrism towards understanding and conceptualising issues from young people's own frames of reference. Such a shift is regarded as important within childhood and youth studies, both from a moral or rights-based perspective, but also in terms of the contributions that young people can make to research through their 'lived experiences' and opening up important debates about whether young people have the right to be involved in research about their own lives (for discussions see Ennew & Plateau 2004; Lundy & McEvoy 2012). Indeed, ethically, undertaking research *with* young people is considered 'the right thing to do', with the idea that such an approach respects young people's contributions and agency compared to more traditional approaches that have a tendency to privilege research *on* or *about* young people (Ansell *et al.* 2012).

As part of the movement towards more active participation in research, methodological advances have sought new ways to enable the meaningful inclusion of young people in research, along with frameworks that usefully describe and conceptualise

young people's participation (and at different 'levels') (e.g., Arnstein's 1969) ladder of participation, Shier's 2001) pathways to participation, and Lundy's 2007) model of participation). These models reflect varying understandings of 'meaningful participation', which has been differentially used in the literature, but seldom defined from young people's own meanings of the term. As our analysis reveals, meaningful participation may have specific connotations to young people.

Expansion of methods such as participatory drawing (Pavarini *et al.* 2021), PhotoVoice (a qualitative method that asks participants to take photos of their experiences, alongside their narratives) (Volpe 2019), visual mapping or timelines (Thomson 2008) and the use of drama and performance arts (Shabtay 2022) have been positively advocated as 'youth-friendly' data collection approaches and because of their potential to redress (to some extent) the inherent power imbalances between adult researchers and younger participants. Other advances seek different ways to involve young people in research beyond the role of participant to that of co-researcher, peer researcher and advisory group member (for some examples see Ansell *et al.* 2012; Chappell *et al.* 2014; Porter 2016; Cluver *et al.* 2021). These approaches focus on the importance of co-production of knowledge and harnessing young people's ways of knowing, and are often (sometimes uncritically) advocated as enabling greater 'power-sharing' as young people influence the design and direction of research in partnership with adult researchers. In contrast to peer research, where young people are trained to undertake the research, appointing a youth advisory group reflects young people's governance of the project and thus, the accountability of adult researchers to young people and their perspectives (Cluver *et al.* 2021).

Despite offering important advances, there is often a tendency to conflate these very different types of youth involvement as evidence of their 'active participation' without a full consideration of the different opportunities (and challenges) these approaches afford young people, their ethical consequences, or indeed whether young people want to be involved and in what capacity. Ansell *et al.* (2012) caution against the over-simplification of such 'power-sharing' and remind us of the (ongoing) dangers of exploitation. Further critiques of such approaches highlight how possibilities for tokenism remain (Alderson 2001; Lundy 2007), along with neglect of how young people's social identities and diverse backgrounds (e.g., socio-economic position, ethnicity, education, gender) may differentially privilege (or deny) some young people's involvement, especially in contexts of adversity or vulnerability. Ultimately, how we engage with such diversity may determine whose perspectives are accessed, 'get counted' and represented in our research (see also Spencer, Fairbrother & Thompson 2020). Such critiques draw important attention to the ways existing social relations and structures shape the relative power and privilege occupied by different groups of young people – and the wider landscape in which the research is located

(Porter, Townsend & Hampshire 2012). Ansell *et al.* (2012) highlight how some young people may be better enabled to share their knowledge because of their social position – thereby potentially exacerbating existing power inequities and inequalities. In the context of this study, our participants were migrants many of whom lived and worked in precarious circumstances with no fixed abode. This precarity raises important questions about which young people might be best placed to advise the project team on the aims and directions of the research – a point we return to in our final discussion.

Power inequities are especially relevant when working across different country and cultural contexts (Duramy & Gal 2020) and with different groups of young people. Indeed, the very idea of youth participation may reflect adult centric Western notions of, and priorities for, participation, which might be especially difficult to achieve in contexts where socio-cultural norms continue to position young people as subservient to adults and discourage (or even deny) young people the freedom to express their opinions until they reach a particular age (Duramy & Gal 2020). Such challenges once again remind us of the dangers of oversimplifying young people's participation in research as being a 'good thing', and without due regard to socio-cultural understandings of childhood and youth and how these shape the workings of power in, and through, research. Or indeed, neglect the possibility that young people might not want to be involved in research and have other priorities in their lives.

James (2007) also encourages researchers to be mindful of not undertaking 'ethnographic ventriloquism' within projects, claiming to speak for, or on behalf of, young people – something that is particularly challenging when trying to authentically share young people's perspectives on involvement, all the while trying to avoid the dangers of suggesting 'truth'. This is especially relevant during the analytical stages of research and how young people's interpretations of findings are harnessed, taken-up or otherwise reframed or 'explained away', all the while suggesting an 'authentic' representation of young people and their 'voices' (see Spencer, Fairbrother & Thompson 2020 for a critique). These complexities are reflected here as we work towards co-authoring some of the opportunities and challenges of young people's involvement in research as youth advisors located in two different countries (see Deszcz-Tryhubczak & Marecki 2022 for further discussion on co-authorship).

Establishing a cross-national (UK, Ghana) Young Person Advisory Group (YPAG)

This article draws on our experiences of working with a cross-national Young Person Advisory Group (YPAG) as part of a research project examining the livelihoods of young migrants in Ghana and funded by the British Academy's Youth Futures

Programme[1]. The project's main aim was to advance understandings of empowerment as it relates to the everyday working lives of young migrants (aged 15–24 years) in Ghana and harness these understandings within the development of sustainable policy approaches that enhance positive youth futures. Migration was both internal (e.g., from regional/rural areas to the city) and international from neighbouring West African countries. In this context, migration was usually for economic reasons to escape poverty and poor living circumstances. Whilst such migration might be defined as 'voluntary, economic migration', our study findings suggest this is too simplistic a definition as our participants described how they had little choice, but to move for work and a 'better life' and escape such hardships.

The study included focus groups, dyads, interviews and observation with fifty-nine young migrants from six different countries in Western Africa. These methods aimed to capture a detailed account of young migrants' working lives and migration experiences. Ethical approval for the main study was granted by a UK research ethics committee and the respective committee in Ghana. All participants were fully informed about the study and their involvement prior to consent being ascertained. A further key aspect of the project aimed to identify the methods and methodologies that sensitively and effectively ascertain young migrants' own perspectives on their livelihoods, crucially, building cross-national youth partnerships and capacity-building that maximises opportunities for youth-led responses to new policy approaches and forms of knowledge exchange and advancement. The project commenced in March 2020, but was then on-hold during the initial stages of the pandemic. The project ended in September 2022.

As part of our commitment to the meaningful involvement of young people and the importance of harnessing young people's perspectives in the development of the project, we established a cross-national (UK, Ghana) Young Person Advisory Group (YPAG). The YPAG comprises of five young Ghanaians (three young men, two young women) aged between 20 and 32 years, reflecting the African Youth Charter definition of youth, of whom two live in the UK and three live in Ghana. As such, our understanding of 'cross-national' focuses on the current geographical locations in which YPAG members are located, rather than them being from different nations. Our young advisors were recruited for their knowledge and experiences of living in Ghana, migration and their advocacy work in relation to young people and in particular, Ghanaian youth. For example, our YPAG members are actively involved with enhancing the voices and participation of young people in issues directly affecting their lives (in the UK and Ghana). In the UK, we approached the Ghana Student

[1] For a description of the programme, please see: https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/projects/youth-futures-promoting-sustainable-livelihoods-unpacking-possibilities-empowerment-migrants-ghana/

Society to identify and invite expressions of interest from potential young advisors representing young Ghanaians in the UK. In Ghana, we identified student advocates working with local organisations with an interest in migration issues affecting young people. Our decision to recruit young Ghanaians located in the UK and Ghana was largely guided by our commitment to developing cross-national youth partnerships, but also to ensure our YPAG members had direct experience of migration (albeit in a different context) and an understanding of the implications for young lives.

The YPAG were not recruited as study participants or peer researchers, but rather, were involved in an advisory capacity to ensure our research processes were guided directly by (and accountable to) the perspectives of young people. As such, our YPAG advised on different aspects of the project including our recruitment strategy and development of study materials, our data collection plans, organisation of our dissemination workshops and the design and development of our project website and online youth forum.[2] The latter was specifically designed to offer a platform to engage young people in the project and for them to contribute their ideas to contemporary debates on the project's main themes; namely, empowerment, livelihoods and migration. Opportunities for our YPAG to be involved with the data analysis and dissemination events and study outputs, including co-authorship, were maximised as far as possible to ensure meaningful and effective pathways for impact that are led directly by young people. Our engagement with our YPAG included bi-monthly online meetings and regular emails, as well as via our online youth forum and social media sites. As described, our discussions focused on different aspects of the research process, including recruitment strategies, the development of interview questions and preparation of dissemination materials for young people. Opportunities for face-to-face discussions were explored, but were largely limited by the COVID-19 pandemic. Our YPAG members were offered a small honorarium to acknowledge their contributions to the project – and to reflect the time taken from their studies and advocacy work to participate in discussions and project activities.

This article draws directly on our consultations with our YPAG members and their experiences of working on the project as advisors. As part of this, we asked our YPAG members to respond to a series of questions about their involvement in the project (see Table 1). For example, we asked our YPAG about their specific experiences of being involved in this study and their broader reflections on young people's involvement in research. These questions were circulated via email by our project Youth Co-Researcher (YCR) (FF) to collect individual written responses from each YPAG member. These written responses were followed-up with online group discussions led by our YCR to develop a deeper understanding of young people's involvement in the

[2] See: https://www.youngmigrantsghana.com/

Table 1. Discussion questions for our Young Person Advisory Group (YPAG).

1. What is it like to be a young person involved in a research project?
2. What have been some of the most positive aspects? What have you gained/what did you like about the experience?
3. Have there been any challenges of working as an YPAG member?
4. What impact would you hope to see from the research?
5. How can research (our project) be more relatable to young people?
6. What would be the best ways for researchers to involve young people in research?

project and research more broadly. Our online discussions were audio-recorded and transcribed to ensure an accurate record of the discussions was captured and then analysed thematically by the team in collaboration with our YPAG members.

What follows is a careful and critical reflection on these experiences to help advance understanding of both the complexities and opportunities offered by young people's participation in research as project advisors – along with our YPAG's thoughts on young people's involvement in research more broadly. To avoid 'ethnographic ventriloquism' or 'sanitising' young people's accounts with academic conventions, our YPAG members share their first-hand accounts of their involvement in the project (see also Box 1). These accounts were selected here by our YPAG members to best capture their thoughts on the discussion areas. We then offer some further analytical reflections on what these insights might tell us more broadly about young people's participation in research within the final discussion.

Young Person Advisory Group Experiences

In the section that follows, our young advisors share their experiences of being part of a cross-national advisory group, including what their involvement means to them. Our advisors reflect on both their experiences of being an YPAG member, but also their broader thoughts on young people's involvement in research. These latter discussions highlight the crucial importance of young people's meaningful participation in, and through, research and how this might be achieved in practice; and through, for example, developing real-world impacts and social change. The value of acknowledging the diversity of young people's perspectives is especially important, yet also draws attention to the tricky issues of power in research and how best to reconcile different perspectives. During these moments, the inherent power imbalances between young people and academic researchers come to the fore – highlighting the value of building trusting relationships with young people premised on mutual respect and reciprocity. Our young advisors remind us of the importance of maximising opportunities for

Box 1. First-hand accounts of YPAG members' involvement in research: meaningful participation, effecting change and power relations

Amidatu (Youth Advisor, Ghana)
I'm interested in seeing how migration might improve people's quality of life. People's social lives are improved as they learn about other cultures, customs and languages. I also expect to see that the research makes a difference. I mean there have been research like different research going on, but after the research, we do not see any difference in what they have been researching. So, I hope that after this project, research can make a difference, you see a difference. And I also hope that it shifts the policy on migration through advocacy. So, advocating about the livelihoods of young people in Ghana, researching about it, it will be able to shape some of the policies we have.

Divine (Youth Advisor, UK)
[I]ncorporating the views of young people throughout the research project as evident in our current research enhance participatory action research, which is designed toward findings bespoke solutions to societal problems […]. Theoretically, I hope the research will add to existing knowledge about the conceptualisation of empowerment and its various dimensions. More importantly, I hope the findings will highlight the idea of empowerment in the Ghanaian context as a case study of the Global south. This will not only provide a different perspective of empowerment, but expand the debate on what empowerment actually means to people of different ethnic background. And how this changes across location […]. Involving myself in a research project presents the opportunity for me to share my experiences and opinions about a research theme. Importantly, it also offers me the platform to be directly engaged in a research project. Engaging in a research project connected me to people of different levels of research experience, age and expertise […]. One major challenge that surfaced in the running of the young people in a research project is the issue of time and mode of meeting. In terms of time, it appears there is always the challenge of finding the most suitable time for a meeting. This results from our diverse engagements.

Jemima (Youth Advisor, Ghana)
Involving young people in projects like this, makes them feel very useful, and makes them want to be available to offer any help they can […]. With a position like

advisory role, in a research involving doctors and professors, it is a big privilege for me. I can confidently say that, I have learnt a lot from this engagement with different people from diverse backgrounds, and I am still learning. I like the fact that young people are being engaged through platforms (social media) that are known to be young people-dominant. I am happy about this research and I'm hopeful that this will not be the end of young people engagement, especially in topics/matters of their concern […]. One thing I know is young people share more views on topics they understand and relate well to. In future researches, this can help when young people's views are needed.

George (Youth Advisor, UK)

Overall, it has been wonderful being part of this project, and I hope the results and recommendations will go a long way to help empower young people in Ghana […]. The main positive has been the opportunity to learn from senior and experienced researchers. I have learnt a lot about the design of research project, which will be very beneficial to me as an aspiring researcher. Being part of this research has also enhanced my team play as I work with people from different academic backgrounds and different level of expertise. This project also gave me the opportunity to reflect about myself as a youth and what the various themes and concepts such as empowerment meant to me […]. From the bottom up, especially with the engagement of young people, we've been able to understand what empowerment is, using those social media platforms, sharing our ideas. It sort of enlightened us, and gives us broader knowledge about what's empowerment and what's the general consequences and everything about migration […]. So, in a way it empowers us being part of the research to gain more knowledge about the topic being studied. So, yeah, apart from the top down, which is the influencing policy, it also empowers us, and it helps us in that bottom-up sense.

Michael (Youth Advisor, Ghana)

Just like any other activity, research into any problem will not interest you if you do not understand what it is seeking to achieve. For young people to better relate to research and the areas it seeks to explore, we'd need to understand how we're affected and how important it is to our day-to-day lives. This should be devoid of technical jargon as much as possible […]. The positives for me is how we (the young people) are involved every step of the way. How the thoughts we share as an advisory group are respected and how they influence decisions. As a result of this initiative, I have developed a budding interest for research into social issues that affect livelihood

> *and hope that I would get the opportunity to lead a research project of this kind someday […]. For me, it just reemphasises how important it is that young people are involved in things that affect their lives. Because most of the time (and especially on this side of the globe), a child is seen as a child and nothing more, as such there are regular expectations on the things you should focus on, and things you shouldn't. However, I know from personal experience that being involved in designing solutions to the challenges that young people face contributes to your development, builds your interest and makes you more oriented and proactive, making you more likely to want to solve a problem, rather than just stand by and watch.*

everyone to express their views and to look for (different) ways to harness young people's ways of developing knowledge and understanding of issues more effectively – as we illustrate in our final discussion. Crucially, our advisors emphasise how young people's involvement in research (whatever their role) should go beyond tokenistic forms of consultation and instead be at the forefront of effecting change at the policy level.

Young people's meaningful participation in research

> It is different from the regular data collection I am privy to, it gives me the hope that meaningful youth participation would gradually become something that's intentionally practised. By giving young people the opportunities to make contributions right from ideation to implementation, it positions us to develop interests in areas we wouldn't have hitherto. As young people, we possess different skills and come from different backgrounds, this should be leveraged. Researchers should give young people the opportunity to meaningfully participate, not just mere representation. It shouldn't be assumed that young people are uninterested or have nothing to contribute to the process. (Michael, Young Advisor Ghana)

> It feels very stimulating and fulfilling to be part of this project as a young person. I take satisfaction in the fact that I am making a contribution to address a particular developmental challenge in my country. Being part of this research emboldened me; it made me feel like my voice is being heard and that I am not just an interviewee or onlooker, but an active participant who helps in shaping and directing the research. (George, Young Advisor UK)

> It's basically involving young people when it comes to decision making. When it's about meaningful youth participation, it's like bringing all these young people together in order to contribute. (Amidatu, Young Advisor Ghana)

Our YPAG's reflections on their participation as project advisors highlights a strong preference for what they describe as 'meaningful participation', which for them extends beyond data collection. When asked further about their involvement in the project – including the things they enjoyed and gained from participating, our young advisors positively shared their perspectives on what participation means for them. Certain aspects were particularly valued including opportunities to learn new (research) skills and build their confidence (e.g. through participating in project meetings and suggesting items for discussion, producing recruitment materials), along with collaborating with experienced researchers. Crucially, for our young advisors, the project provided a space for their ideas and contributions to inform key priorities on issues affecting young people and specifically, young migrants in Ghana. For example, as a team, we sought ways to encourage the exchange of ideas via our online forum – learning directly from the experiences of our YPAG members.

> It's fulfilling to [be] a young person involved in a research project. Getting to share my ideas and thoughts on issues around me and how it can be resolved is one thing I'm passionate about […]. I like the fact that everyone was involved. I got the privilege to do a flier to help sharpen my creative design skills. I'm really grateful for this great opportunity and experience. (Amidatu, Young Advisor Ghana)

> I have been able to sharpen my human/social relations skills through working with the team. The periodic meetings involving deliberations and planning of activities of different kinds have taught me to appreciate diverse views and always put forward the interests of the group above my personal interests. Additionally, being able to relate with senior academics for the running of the project has built on my experience about how to relate with people of higher status. (Divine, Young Advisor UK)

> I see this as a learning opportunity, and I am glad to be a part. (Jemima, Young Advisor Ghana)

Our advisors also shared what they thought about young people's meaningful engagement in research more broadly. These discussions highlighted the ways in which efforts to engage young people are often tokenistic or even denied. Michael, for example, talked about the dangers of tokenistic representation of young people in research. In these examples, adult researchers often continue to lead the focus and direction of research – despite best intentions. Likewise, Divine and George signalled the importance of involving young people at each stage of the research. Meaningful participation thus means going beyond conducting data collection on, or with, young people to offering active opportunities for young people to take part in all stages of the research. Our project aimed to achieve this through, for example,

our youth forum and social media accounts, but also via our meetings and ongoing discussions with the YPAG members

> It's important that we are intentionally involved, and at every step. As such, our participation shouldn't be just for the sake of it. That will be tokenism. (Michael, Young Advisor Ghana)

> [M]eaningful participation […] it's not really about being a respondent to a research project, but […] taking part in all the other phases of the research, including defining the research methods and taking part in the writing and dissemination of findings. (Divine, Young Advisor UK)

> [M]eaningful participation means that you've been active throughout the research purposes from the design […]. We've been active throughout the research purposes from the design up to data collection and everything. And also it gives us that opportunity to just not be participants or we've been the object studied but then we also got that dual role, it makes you as an active participant. (George, Young Advisor UK)

Despite such positive experiences, barriers to effective participation were also shared and help us to think about new ways of supporting cross-national exchange of perspectives. Particular issues have been experienced with the internet, which at times, fragmented and hindered some of our discussions. Although our cross-national YPAG enabled the bringing together of young people living in different countries/regions, the different localities of our advisors also presented obstacles to deeper-level discussions and the coming together in a shared space to discuss ideas.

> [F]inding an appropriate time to conduct meetings has always been successful. Our different locations demand that we meet online, which is swifter and more efficient in terms of time management. However, the relatively poor network which characterizes other places, especially in Accra does slow our meetings sometimes. This results in missing out on important conversations with our counterparts in Accra. Nonetheless, there is always a frantic effort to ensure that contributions and discussions are collated using other platforms such as emails. (Divine, Young Advisor UK)

As indicated, such challenges offered new ways for us to think about how to maximise meaningful engagement across countries, particularly when internet connections were poor. Reverting to other modes of dialogue and exchange including email, WhatsApp video meetings and via our project website and social media sites, enabled us to maintain open communication and ensure regular updates on the project are shared with the full team. These platforms helped to ensure that opportunities for listening to a range of perspectives from the full team, and through different fora, were offered.

> I like how no one's idea is unwelcome and how accommodating everyone is with everyone. (Jemima, Young Advisor Ghana)

Our YPAG's accounts of meaningful participation reflects the importance of developing an open approach that accommodates diverse ideas to be shared and welcomed – and crucially, to move towards impact activities directly informed by young people's perspectives.

Impact and effecting social change

One way to ensure young people's participation moves beyond tokenism is to secure clear pathways to impact with young people and identify possibilities to effect social change. Our young advisors shared passionately their desires for any research with young people to inform policy agendas and, in the context of this project, contribute to sustainable development debates. These discussions provided broader implications for the ways in which young people's involvement in research can, and should, effect change. Crucially, impact activities can support processes that enhance young people's capacities and opportunities for empowerment (part of our original study aim):

> Most often, research projects end after findings. It is my hope that the outcomes of this research will be disseminated into the right spaces in order to influence policy and program[me]s that affect the lives of young people […]. Young people are important. And so, when it comes to research, we are like any other important stakeholder in the research, and it's imperative that we are involved, and that we are heard. And not just heard for the sake of it, like a classic case of tokenism where you are invited to the table, you get to say something but no one cares afterwards. […]. Whatever we have to say should also affect decisions because that is the purpose. (Michael, Young Advisor Ghana)

> Given that the research seeks to unpack the meaning of empowerment among young people in Ghana, I hope that the findings will go a long way to inform national policies on youth development, empowerment and employment at the national, regional and local levels. This can be done by translating the findings into policy briefs for government agencies. The findings can be disseminated through workshops and seminars with these institutions. Such platforms will inform and shape the process and approach used for engaging youth people and building their capacities. (Divine, Young Advisor UK)

> I am hoping that this research will influence youth development policies in Ghana. I believe the participation of young people who are directly affected by youth policies will bring out first-hand experience, which will enrich future policy development in Ghana. (George, Young Advisor UK)

Prerequisites for effecting change led by young people include enhancing accessible modes of participation (e.g. online and via social media), as well as the use

of language that is free from technical or academic terms and conventions. For example, the team debated at length how best to operationalise terms such as power and empowerment to ensure relevance and meaning to young people. Such techniques help to ensure discussions are more relatable to young people, but also provided new opportunities for learning from others from different backgrounds and experiences.

> People's social lives are improved as they learn about other cultures, customs and languages. (Amidatu, Young Advisor Ghana)

> One of the ways of making our research relatable is by engaging in interactive activities. The running of a website and social media accounts offers an important platform for discussing everyday issues concerning young people. These platforms can also be used to provide up-to-date information on critical issues affecting young people and the opportunities available to them. Additionally, employing everyday jargon used by young people in their daily conversations will help the research to situate itself within the lived experiences of young people. I anticipate such an approach will give young people the comfort and leverage to interact and relate with the research. (Divine, Young Advisor UK)

Of significance is the importance of recognising young people as experts on young lives. Such recognition is a necessary first step towards redressing the inherent power imbalances between adult researchers and younger participants and advisors which we discuss in the section that follows.

> I think that with the young people involved my colleagues and I, we, become experts on youth issues. And that is especially when it comes to the issue of migration. (Amidatu, Young Advisor Ghana)

Diversity and power structures

A key strength of the project for our advisors was the recognition of, and space for, diversity to be embraced. As outlined, our young advisors were located in different countries and have different genders, ages, socio-economic backgrounds and educational experiences (although all have attended, or were currently studying at, university). Whilst all share commonalities in terms of being a young Ghanaian with experience of youth advocacy work, this diversity is welcomed as an opportunity to learn from each other and open up space for the genesis of new ideas to inform the research. Our advisors described how such diversity positively enabled multiple perspectives to be shared and as an important marker of respect for their contributions. Indeed, the notion of respect is seen as a crucial prerequisite for building meaningful partnerships with young people (Spencer 2013).

> If there is one thing I have learnt, it is to be accommodating and ask questions from quite a number of people, to have diverse ideas and suggestions. (Jemima, Young Advisor Ghana)

> [T]here is a whole strength for me to go into because there is this kind of different perspectives to define an idea. Depending on where I grew up, I will see things differently. For instance, what I will say will differ from what George says because of where he either grew up, where he schooled or even in terms of religion, or even his home orientation. This underpins how we perceive things and how we discussed it differently. I see that as a challenge, but more of a strength which contributes to the diversity of the group. (Divine, Young Advisor UK)

Yet embracing diversity has not been without challenges, including the difficulties of reconciling different perspectives on topical issues. For example, how different ideas on the project should be developed and prioritised, as Divine alludes to above. Inevitably, the project's main aim, activities and milestones needed to be met and were largely determined by the intended original focus of the project (e.g. understanding empowerment in the context of young migrants' lives and livelihoods) and within a particular timeframe. The issue of time is crucially important to maximise meaningful involvement and something that our advisors felt should not be overlooked when seeking to engage young people in research. The need to ensure the project followed its intended course reminds us of the ultimate power that resides with adult researchers – despite best intentions. Our young advisors spoke openly about power relations, what this means for research and young people's broader involvement – often reflecting on the negative ways power can operate to exclude or dismiss young people's perspectives. Yet, also sharing ways that power might be addressed and through developing respect for everyone's contributions.

> [T]he diversity and power structure can pose as a challenge. Even though we've not witnessed it much here within this group. But it could be a challenge looking at the power structure, the level of experience or age. Sometimes […] for others to sharing their views because I may think that what I'm saying is wrong or I might put it in the right context, what others think of me that I have no knowledge about what I'm talking about. So that sort of power balance can also be a challenge for a diversified group like this […]. But then to think about how to overcome it, I think […] this group that's about giving everybody the opportunity and not looking down on anybody within the group. I think that's one key way of addressing that power structure within a diversified group. (George, Young Advisor UK)

> And for me in the beginning (during the introductory stage), I felt like 'Well, what do I have to say that these people can't say already?' and so I was a little intimidated […] But later when our real work began, I thought about it and realized that, I was

> representing a demographic and my role in the group was to share what I thought and believed was the reality of young people based on my experience, and it doesn't necessarily have to be right or wrong. I'm also representing a group of young people who are also going to be affected by what the research looks to achieve. So, it's important for me to play my role in that regard, irrespective of who else is a member of the advisory group. I think diversity is very important, we just have to be intentional about how meetings are moderated and create a safe space where everyone gets to feel that we are on the same level. (Michael, Young Advisor Ghana)

Ensuring the team remained 'on the same level' reflected a shift in power relations and more traditional forms of research that are typically led by senior academics. Achieving such a shift requires all perspectives to be valued and taken seriously as one way to build trust and respect for and with young people and their contributions. In this study, the team comprised highly experienced childhood and youth researchers, which aided the building of rapport and through, for example, demonstrating interest and respect for the lives of young people. The importance of developing an inclusive approach, as Divine and George describe below, is especially valued for its potential to break down dominant power relations and offer space for diverse ideas to be shared and respected. For example, in our study, we aimed to offer different platforms for the exchange of ideas and perspectives, but also sought to ensure our YPAG had diverse experiences related to the project's aim. A dedicated project role (e.g. our YCR) also aimed at ensuring the constant involvement of our advisors.

> Sometimes it feels a bit frightening or intimidating working with senior researchers. There comes the feeling that senior colleagues know more about the subject area than you do and you are tempted not to say anything or share any ideas with the fear of getting it wrong [...]. The best way to address power imbalance between senior researchers and the young people could be done through mutual respect for one another, and also encourage young people to share their personal experiences and opinions without any fear of being wrong. (George, Young Advisor UK)

> I think that one other thing I find interesting was how the research we are engaged in now, kind of serves as a moment of building trust. Because you know that we're getting this information from people who ordinarily should have been part of the 'research object' but they are also part of the research design [...]. Because we ourselves are young people and what you are asking us is, what we are telling you; it's kind of a representation of what you would have found out there. So overall, this builds some sort of trust within the entire research. So collaborative research is kind of trustworthy. (Divine, Young Advisor UK)

These reflections tell us more about the importance of trust and reciprocity as important markers of respect for young people and having their perspectives valued. As

our YPAG members suggest, collaboration with young people needs to ensure inclusivity and diversity are respected and harnessed in the development and direction of research and at every stage. Offering opportunities for research to be relatable to young people including their involvement in the analysis stages and project impact activities, may lend itself to further meaningful engagement. Yet these next steps may also expose new challenges that centre on reconciling different interpretations of the data and the intricate workings of power within these analytical and dissemination stages that may privilege particular perspectives over others (see James 2007; Spencer, Fairbrother & Thompson 2020 for critiques).

Discussion

Our discussions and reflections with our project youth advisors offer important insights into what meaningful participation in research might 'look like' for young people and how this tied closely to the impact of our project and broader contribution to enhancing young lives and futures. For example, our research aims sought to identify how young people's perspectives on work, migration and empowerment might be harnessed in policy initiatives. Creating meaningful opportunities for young people to be involved in research – and at every stage – marked one important step towards the centring of young people's perspectives and experiences as dominant ways of knowing and doing (Spencer 2013). As our YPAG members have shared, young people are experts on young lives and the issues that affect them and thus, such experiences should be at the forefront of the shaping of research and policy agendas, priorities and processes. Yet, here we are reminded of some of the assumptions and challenges that can be all too often overlooked when seeking to (uncritically) engage young people in research – and without a full-fledged engagement with how dominant relations of power can shape the research landscape and ultimately privilege particular perspectives or ways of knowing and doing (James 2007; Lundy 2007; Holland *et al.* 2010; Spyrou 2016; Spencer, Fairbrother & Thompson 2020).

Adult centrism can play out in different ways as young people are 'identified' as potential participants, contributors and advisors in research. For example, our recruitment of the YPAG members ultimately 'selected' which young people were involved – and largely those with experience of migration, development challenges and youth advocacy work in Ghana and university educated (and thus, less typical of our sample who were socio-economically disadvantaged, although some had attended, but not completed, tertiary education). The research team were keen to ensure our YPAG remained committed to the project for its duration and had access to means of communication (e.g. internet) to enable discussions. These 'requirements' influenced our

decision not to recruit young people that more closely matched our study sample who were more mobile, marginalised and living in contexts of vulnerability and thus, perhaps less able to take up an advisory role. Such decisions, perversely, reinforced the ways in which our study may have contributed to the invisibility of young migrants in shaping the direction of the research, not just as study participants. Furthermore, this approach also raises questions about how well we engaged with diversity and through, for example, implying that young people from different backgrounds can speak on behalf of other young people and thereby inadvertently homogenising young people – a position the team have always sought to work against in recognition of the diversity of young people and their experiences.

These reflections remind us of how dominant power relations between adult researchers and young people continue to (sometimes unknowingly) shape the research landscape – often defining which young people are included and whose perspectives 'get counted' (see Holland *et al.* 2010; Spencer & Doull 2015; Spencer, Fairbrother & Thompson 2020). Indeed, our initial research proposal detailing the research design and methods was largely determined prior to establishing our YPAG as part of the funding application process. Our YPAG was established thereafter. However, arguably, establishing our YPAG without confirmation of funding may have been equally problematic – raising expectations, but also asking for young people's time commitment without knowing if the research would progress. Such an approach may well have centred the research and its aims from the perspectives of adult researchers – despite our intentions.

As our YPAG members have openly shared, creating meaningful opportunities for diverse perspectives to be taken seriously is an important step towards de-centring adult ways of knowing. Yet, time is needed to build trusting relationships and the forms of mutual respect and reciprocity that give way to power-sharing and to co-create research contexts in which young people feel comfortable and able to share how they would like to be involved (or not) in different stages and aspects of the research (Spencer & Doull 2015). The concept of reciprocity underscores the importance of developing a shared purpose and a 'mutual recognition of meaning and power' (Lather 1986: 263). Our discussions with our YPAG suggest that research reciprocity should move beyond young people's involvement in data collection and work towards the building of relationships that support ongoing exchange and dialogue that fosters realistic opportunities for social and political change (Thi Lin & Jones 2005). This might be achieved by ensuring advisory group members have knowledge and experience of the field of research and context, but also through creating a 'safe' space where all views are welcomed irrespective of knowledge and experience and where mutual learning and exchange is made possible throughout the research process (Robertson 2000). Here, we have sought to offer such spaces in a variety of formats (email, online

forums, project meetings online and face-to-face). Yet, the relative successes of each of these approaches may well depend on cultural norms about childhood and adulthood and the 'acceptability' of young people challenging adults. In many African countries, children and young people occupy a subservient position to adults. Asking young people to 'speak out' or offer a different way of thinking about the research may be difficult when dominant cultural norms uphold respect for adult authority.

Recognition of the varying ways in which different groups of young people may like to be involved in research (or not), and what they would like to get out of the experience, is also a crucial reminder about diversity and the importance of critically questioning whose interests young people's involvement in research actually serves. The increasing focus on involving young people in research within funding calls uncritically assumes this is something young people might want. Researchers must be mindful of the purpose of engaging with young people, what it is hoped will be achieved and refrain from over stating claims of 'giving voice' (James 2007; Porter, Townsend & Hampshire 2012; Spencer, Fairbrother & Thompson 2020). Indeed, it is important to recognise that different roles fulfil different purposes and young people themselves will have different preferences about how they would like to be involved (or not) in research. As our YPAG reflect in their accounts, some members welcomed the opportunity to utilise their creative skills through producing research fliers, some preferred the writing and dissemination tasks, whilst others enjoyed the team working and networking aspects of the project. However, as highlighted, our YPAG reflect on their experiences as advisors, rather than as study participants or peer researchers. The latter group may have different thoughts on young people's involvement in research and how this should be supported.

Of particular value to the project were our YPAG's connections with organisations supporting youth, which enabled us to expand our discussions and consultations with stakeholders and develop our knowledge exchange activities. Feeding back to young people and other dissemination activities are important marks of respect for their contributions and to illustrate to them the impact and outcomes of their involvement, which, as described, is especially valued by our young advisors. Yet, opportunities for social and policy change often extend well beyond the completion of a project and thus, young people may remain uninformed of the wider impacts of their contributions, unless processes for ongoing dialogue are agreed and established in advance of the project end. For example, our study participants were young migrants with no fixed abode and thus, ensuring effective knowledge exchange with study participants will be difficult to achieve, even with support from the YPAG.

Indeed, despite best efforts, our project was ultimately led by the main goals of the research and the timeframes in which these must be achieved, which (in part) shapes the roles young people are afforded within the confines of the project and

its milestones, as well as the opportunities for meaningful knowledge exchange with young people. We have sought ways to 'push back' on adult-defined parameters and through, for example, co-creating an online youth forum led directly by our YCR and young advisors, but, at times, the broader engagement of young people with this was limited. Together, we have discussed at length some of the complexities of operationalising concepts such as power and empowerment in our data collection methods and analysis. Such discussions have provided new insights into how young people understand key terms that are often applied to their lives, but without their input or perspectives on their meaningfulness and relevance to young lives.

This ongoing critical dialogue with our YPAG reflects our commitment and collective efforts to create space for diverse perspectives to come to the fore and challenge existing (adult) frames of reference on young lives. We thus continued collaboratively, yet cautiously, to keep a check on how our research processes may inadvertently contribute to the reproduction of adult centrism and power. Crucially, leveraging young people's understandings without reframing them within (or against) a dominant adult narrative challenges us to consider alternative ways of knowing and conceptualising young lives. As Divine shares with us, this may offer further challenges to the unpacking of what 'meaningful participation' might look like from (different) young people's perspectives – offering new perspectives to the understanding, and strengthening, of participatory forms of research *with* young people.

Conclusion

This co-authored article with our YPAG members aims to expose and critically reflect on one type of youth involvement in research and namely, as advisory members. Our project's main aim to examine concepts of empowerment as they relate to the lives and livelihoods of young migrants in Ghana offered both opportunities and challenges to the 'meaningful participation' of young people in research – raising critical questions about whose interests such participation serves, particularly when much research is pre-determined by funding or institutional requirements and academic conventions. We thus offer caution and criticality when advocating for young people's involvement in research – particularly when issues of power, diversity and inclusion can be all too often overlooked as 'youth participation' continues to be popularised. We encourage researchers to thus, work closely and flexibly with young people to design, develop and undertake research – all the while acknowledging that young people have their own lives and may not want to participate in every aspect. Identifying opportunities for youth-led and youth-informed impact is an important mark of their contributions

and desired outcomes of research, which may call upon researchers to rethink their ways of knowledge exchange and how to effect change in line with young people's perspectives.

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Conversations on grief and hope: a collaborative autoethnographic account exploring the lifeworlds of international youth engaged with climate action

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Abstract: This paper explores the lifeworlds of international youth involved in climate and/or environmental social action, narratives that have been largely absent from a literature that has tended to focus on 'traditional' youth activists located in the urban Global North. Written as a novel collaborative autoethnography involving youth as co-authors, the paper a) collectively reflects on the stories of youth from different countries and cultures on their journeys towards climate action, and b) foregrounds an emotional framing to examine these experiences. The youth co-authors, whose experiences are the focus of this paper, form part of innovative international Youth Advisory Board, set up to provide peer support to youth new to climate and environmental social action, as part of our British Academy Youth Futures-funded participatory action research project. We examine the youth's narratives exploring opportunities and barriers they have navigated, their inspirations and the intersections with a range of other socio-cultural factors.

Keywords: youth; climate action; international; activism; participatory

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Introduction

Climate change is a severe threat to humanity and the natural world. Scientific evidence unequivocally shows that human activity is rapidly warming the planet and unless drastic efforts are taken to limit greenhouse gas emissions, impacts on societies will be catastrophic, with more extreme weather, famine and rapid biodiversity loss across the globe (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change – IPCC 2018; 2021). In 2015, 196 Parties signed the Paris Agreement, a legally binding treaty that came into force in 2016 with a clear goal to limit global warming to below 2°C, and preferably to 1.5°C compared to pre-industrial levels (UNFCCC 2023). However, evidence shows current actions are not sufficient or rapid enough and consequently we are on the path to significantly overshoot these global temperature rises. Importantly, the IPCC's Working Group 1 Report (IPCC 2021) illustrates that we are already dangerously close to surpassing 1.5°C of warming, leading the UN Secretary-General to say it is 'a code red for humanity' (UN 2021) to act.

The climate emergency is also an ongoing injustice, with those least responsible for contributing to the crisis both most at risk from its impacts and least empowered to make required adaptations and systemic changes (Robinson 2019; Islam & Winkel 2017; UNICEF 2015). The crisis' unjust nature is both between and within countries, with poorer nations and communities, along with Indigenous peoples, particularly at risk (Givens *et al.* 2019; Hallegate *et al.* 2015). Chancel (2022) has recently highlighted that 'since 1990, the bottom [economically disadvantaged] 50% of the world population has been responsible for only 16% of all emissions growth, whereas the top 1% has been responsible for 23% of the total'. Whilst 'developing' countries in the Global South with high CO_2 emissions do exist, substantial proportions of their emissions result from their supply of exports and labour for countries in the Global North (Prell & Sun 2015). Issues of inequality and poverty are also compounded by, and intersect with, social categories and identities such as race, age, social class and gender (Pellow 2016).

Systemic climate inaction is maintained by rich societies in the Global North, which have 'climate/environmental privilege' (Norgaard 2012; Williams 2020), delaying action, and which, at present, are relatively isolated from the direct impacts of climate change (though these impacts are increasing). The political will to act is lacking and there is widespread disconnect amongst citizens, even those with awareness of climate change, who feel that its impacts are happening to somebody else and in a distant future (McAdam 2017). This disconnect is fuelled by significant sections of the media (mainstream and social) which at times dismiss experts who warn of the dangers of the climate crisis and platform climate denial, misconceptions and 'fake news' (Willis 2020; DeNicola & Subramaniam 2014). Across the globe, climate activists risk

their freedom, and sometimes lives, to protest, whilst they are maligned as dangerous, deviants and extremists. Even open democracies such as the UK are seeking to limit rights to protest, justifying these changes by the disruptions caused in part by recent climate change protests.

For many people in the Global North, climate change is perceived to have little pertinence or pose little direct threat, leading to a reluctance to change (McAdam 2017). This future/distant framing of climate change, alongside the negative positioning of collective activism, permeates public consciousness. This divides opinion and fuels denial whilst hiding structures of power that filter information, disenfranchising many from engaging in climate action. Further hierarchical and unequal power relations further inhibit collective action (Sovacool 2018; Woroniecki *et al* 2019) leaving youth, Indigenous peoples and poorer communities at significant risk of injustices. For instance, the climate movement in the Global North is perceived to be very white (Walker 2021), and as also having a 'class problem', being the terrain of white middle-class '*Guardian readers*' who have the 'luxury' of being concerned about climate change because their lives are not otherwise precarious or immediately under threat (Willis 2020). Uncritical framings of climate change as future-oriented pit this 'future' problem as unimportant compared to fighting against more imminent concerns of working-class people and poor communities including a lack of jobs, job insecurity, low wages, unaffordable housing and food poverty (Happer 2019). The growing discourse of environmental sustainability can also alienate and marginalise the lived experiences of poorer communities. Increasingly linked into discourses of moral consumer and lifestyle choices, social and cultural practices that feel unashamedly white and middle class are championed as those that will save the planet. This ignores the forced necessity of 'sustainable' lifestyles of poor and working-class communities through lower incomes and more localised living in the Global North (Bell 2020) as well as the Global South. It also ignores ongoing social action struggles of environmental defenders and Indigenous peoples around the world (Irlbacher-Fox & MacNeill 2020).

A growing research literature has also highlighted *climate anxiety*, broadly defined as a negative cognitive and emotional response to concerns about climate change (e.g. Clayton & Karazsia 2020). This phenomenon is particularly prevalent in climate-engaged children and youth (e.g. Hickman 2021; Halstead *et al.* 2021). Indeed, Hickman's (2021) findings highlighted that climate anxiety and dissatisfaction with government responses are widespread in children and youth in countries across the world, and is now impacting their daily functioning. 84 per cent of those surveyed admitted to being at least moderately worried by climate change.

Despite these significant challenges, and diverse people and communities pushing for more rapid climate action, there is still scant (though growing) literature on

the real-life experiences of people campaigning for climate action, especially in the Global South. Researching these journeys is important, as they help us to understand how people discover the movement and what it means to be active citizens, illuminating routes into sustained climate action, and discovering what support is needed. To address this research gap, we use collaborative autoethnography (CAE), an innovative method that allows us to collectively reflect on the often-emotional personal stories of nine youth from different countries and cultures on their journey towards climate action. From these narratives we identify opportunities and barriers that youth navigate, recognising how age, gender, socio-economic status and culture influence how youth[1] come to act in addressing the greatest global challenge.

We first contextualise our research by discussing the role of youth and the importance of emotions in climate action. We then explore our unique methodological approach and contextualise the youth who co-authored this paper. A series of discursive 'provocations' are used to share experiences of youth climate action. Finally, we consider broader implications for action on climate change and climate injustices.

Emotions and youth climate action

Knowledge and awareness of climate change is important. However, evidence demonstrates that knowledge on climate change is not directly correlated with climate action for a significant majority of people (Morris *et al.* 2019). For many decades, science communication has operated with a knowledge deficit approach, an assumption that the underlying issue is that people do not fully understand what is happening, and that once they do, this will lead to action (Suldovsky 2017). This has typically not been the case. Moreover, there is also evidence that knowledge of the issues without a clear sense of agency and self-efficacy can also discourage action (Heald 2017), including for youth (Hickman *et al.* 2021).

In Jones *et al.* (2021) we explored this inaction conundrum through an emotional framing, comparing the process of becoming aware of climate change to loss and bereavement. We made the case that a person's emotional journey towards climate action echoes the five stages of grief model from Kübler-Ross (1969). We argued that it may be represented by a 'wave of change' (Jones *et al.* 2021: 39), whereby shock and denial leads to fear and anger, with all of these disrupting our emotions, before

[1] We use the term 'youth' throughout to refer to the youth involved in this paper and on the project's Youth Advisory Board with this being the preferred term internationally when working with people up to the age of 30 although we recognise that others use 'young people' to refer to the same age group and therefore we are sensitive to the way others use it throughout.

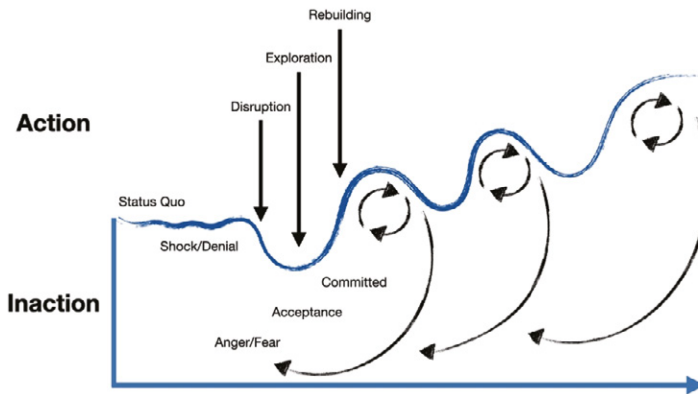

Figure 1. Wave of Change in a Sea of Emotion (from Jones *et al*. 2021).

acceptance of the issue, which in turn leads to a commitment to action that typically involves exploration and rebuilding (as shown in Figure 1). Much like the grief cycle, this is not linear, and events, emotions and thoughts, for example, can push us back into previous stages.

As the climate crisis accelerates, research is increasingly seeking to understand reasons for climate (in)action (Gifford 2011), with some beginning to explore links between emotion and inaction. For instance, Stanley *et al.* (2021) used national survey data in Australia to show how 'anger' maps onto climate action better than 'depression'. This supports our own view that different emotions evoke different climate responses and are thus deeply intertwined (Halstead *et al.* 2021; Jones *et al.* 2021). However, in Jones *et al.* (2021) we argued that whilst negative emotions, such as depression and anger, are important sensitising steps towards action, action is most likely to happen when linked to both a positive, and possible, vision, allowing a 'story of transformation' (Willis 2020: 94) to emerge and making the actor feel empowered rather than powerless. Emotions are therefore key to understanding climate (in)action (Gustafsson *et al.* 2009; Ojala 2015) but whilst the affective dimensions of injustices and social movements are growing (Barford 2017), they are still under-explored (McAdam 2017).

One of our central arguments concerning mobilisation on climate action was that there is not only a need to foreground emotions, but that we need to seek hope through looking horizontally for leadership from those already engaged in climate action, including youth (Jones *et al.* 2021). We believe youth are best placed to lead given they are amongst those 'showing the way despite having more barriers to overcome' (Robinson 2019: 143). Sanson & Burke (2020: 343) argued that the climate crisis is 'an issue of structural violence and intergenerational justice' whereby youth will face the devastations of climate change caused by generations

before them. This injustice is at least three-fold, as they are amongst the least responsible for climate change, yet are most at risk from its impacts and the least empowered to make the necessary systemic changes across most hierarchically and generationally ordered societies (Robinson 2019; Barford *et al.* 2021). Youth have increasingly gained knowledge of this injustice, resulting in a growing youth movement calling for climate action. Since 2018 Greta Thunberg has emerged as a key figurehead, based upon her own climate action of direct protest that inspired the global movement #FridaysforFuture (Wallis & Loy 2021). Globally, the youth climate movement has made clear its discontent with adults' poor stewardship of the Earth (Bandura & Cherry 2019) and September 2019 saw the largest school climate strikes in history. However, in 2020, COVID-19 curbed the momentum of the youth climate movement (Civicus 2020), although it has continued to build globally (Parker 2020), notably via online connectivity. Whilst awareness of youth's concerns and the movement has grown, some politicians and media outlets have simultaneously sought to discredit both youth's evidence and youth activists themselves (Trajber *et al.* 2019; Pinheiro 2020). This appears to increase when youth are perceived to be moving beyond notions of 'dutiful', through 'disruptive' and into 'dangerous' forms of political and social dissent (O'Brien *et al.* 2018), which challenge power and the status quo of neoliberalism and capitalism (Klein 2014).

Despite these barriers, youth across the globe continue to address the climate crisis through varied forms of activism, social action and climate action leadership (Krieger 2020). As such there is a growing body of literature focused on climate activists, especially since the significant wave of youth climate action from 2019 (Sloam *et al.* 2022). Yet there is still relatively little research enabling us to learn from youth's varied journeys towards that action (Sloam *et al.* 2022), especially with a global perspective, given most of this research has focused on the experiences of youth concentrated in the urban, Global North (Walker 2020; 2021). Moreover, such studies have revealed that those involved in climate activism within this urban Global North were more likely to be well educated, concentrated in cosmopolitan locales, and from more affluent backgrounds (Henn *et al.* 2022; Neas *et al.* 2022). Such research therefore has a tendency to focus on 'action' in the form of traditional activism linked to protest and political participation (Sloam *et al.* 2022; Boulianne & Ohme 2022; Gaborit 2020; Haugestad *et al.* 2021), that might also be perceived to focus on predominantly 'white' discourses of what 'action' looks like (Flanagan *et al.* 2022; Walker 2021). Otherwise, they focus on the types of personal (and collective) actions linked to specific contexts of Westernised, 'democratic', capitalist societies, such as exercising consumer choice via 'buycotts' (Pikard 2022) and so-called 'everyday activism', including making green transport choices such as bike

rather than car use, cutting down on meat consumption as well as eating more local/ seasonal produce and convincing others to do the same (Navne & Skovdal 2021). Other research has explored youth action in non-white, poorer and disadvantaged communities in the Global North (Flanagan *et al.* 2022) and there is also a growing body of research focused on youth action within the Global South highlighting the importance of place-based and context-specific examples of action (Vogel *et al.* 2022; Börner *et al.* 2021). However, still scarce in the literature are accounts focusing on youth across many countries and contexts (with a few exceptions, notably Fisher 2016; Eide & Kunelius 2021), especially those where youth are in conversation with each other. This paper attempts to address this gap whilst also addressing the gap identified by Neas *et al.* (2022), that most studies about youth climate activism are written by adults about youth, rather than with them.

Several studies have noted the importance of emotions in youth climate action. For example, Bright & Eames (2022) and Martiskainen *et al.* (2020) explored emotions as motivations for climate action amongst strikers/strike leaders, whilst others have highlighted the importance of emotions within their studies of local, place-based climate action and adaptive practices (Börner *et al.* 2021). Halstead *et al.* (2021) set the scene for exploring these dynamics, particularly through a collaborative approach to capturing and co-creating the written accounts of a young person's emotional journey. However, the work explored only a singular, young, UK-based climate activist, so there remains a need for this approach to go beyond understandings that only situate youth climate action as white and in the Global North (Jones *et al.* 2020). Therefore, in developing this paper, we concur with Börner (2023: 2) 'that we need to learn from the experiences in the global South for promoting (emotional) resilience when facing natural hazards' and learning to live with climate change. Herein we add to this growing and important literature, offering important insights specifically in those areas where literature is still relatively scant. We do this through dialogue with our international Youth Advisory Board in a project focusing on youth participation in climate action in Vietnam.

Methodology

The objective of this paper and its underpinning research is to explore the lifeworlds of international youth involved in climate and/or environmental social action. This involves a) collectively reflecting on the stories of youth from different countries and cultures on their journey towards climate action (exploring opportunities, inspirations and barriers) and b) foregrounding an emotional framing to examine these experiences. The paper utilises an innovative collaborative autoethnographic approach. We

draw on the lifeworlds of nine youth engaged in climate-related social action, who have all co-authored this paper. They are all members of the Youth Advisory Board (YAB) for our British Academy funded project exploring the dynamics of youth participation in climate action in Vietnam.

Collaborative autoethnography

Autoethnography seeks to investigate the personal experiences, usually of researchers, as the primary 'data'. However, as Chang (2016: 108) notes, 'the purpose of autoethnography, at least from the social science perspective, is not only to tell personal stories. It intends to expand the understanding of social realities through the lens of the researcher's personal experiences'. Chang goes on to add 'personal stories become vehicles for social critiques through which readers gain understandings of autoethnographers' social realities and of the social forces contextualizing their experiences' (109). Autoethnography can utilise autobiographical data such as memories, memorabilia, documents about oneself, official records, photos, interviews with others and ongoing self-reflective and self-observational memos, amongst other sources (Chang 2016). Collaborative autoethnography (CAE) involves more than one person sharing life stories and experiences whilst engaging in a process of critical self-reflection and dialogue to seek out connections and explore differences on a shared focus or social reality (Roy & Uekusa 2020). Chang *et al.* (2013: 24) argue that this collaboration is a strength because 'the combination of multiple voices to interrogate a social phenomenon creates a unique synergy and harmony that autoethnographers cannot attain in isolation'. We make a novel extension to the CAE approach by disrupting the traditional researcher-participant relationship: those whose experiences are explored in the study are also involved as researchers and authors. This has important, but as yet not fully explored or realised, benefits over some more traditional, researcher-led methods of enquiry. This is because the collaboration goes well beyond 'member checking' (other forms of qualitative research that simply asks participants to check what is reported is accurate) (Pennington & Hughes 2017) approaches utilised in other forms of qualitative research. Instead, participation is self-directed rather than filtered solely through the analytical gaze of researchers.

Levels of involvement in CAE can vary from full collaboration across all elements of the process, through to partial forms of collaboration, for instance limited to the initial scoping/pooling of experiences, to analysis, or to writing. Inevitably, such a process with many voices that attempts to democratically value all of them equally requires a clear framework to manage logistical dimensions (data collection, analysis, writing, etc.). It also brings challenges, such as those related to ethics and power (Hernandez *et al.* 2017). Supporting relationship development (especially where it may not already exist) and ensuring participants have ample opportunity to commu-

nicate is an important part of CAE (Chang *et al.* 2013). CAE is an iterative research approach: as Chang (2016: 119) notes, one 'cannot overemphasize' the process of iteration, which we adopt herein.

Our research broadly followed the stages outlined by Chang *et al.* (2013) in containing a mixture of individual and collective writing/reflection time. However, before these stages began, we refined our framework for exploring youth's lifeworlds focused on their environmental and climate-related social action. We had already identified emotions as key motivators for youth action, as theorised in Jones *et al.* (2021) and Halstead *et al.* (2021). Indeed, this is emerging as an important conceptual and theoretical area across different disciplines when focusing on climate action (see Bright & Eames 2022). However, we were mindful that Jones *et al*. focused on developing these understandings conceptually and Halstead *et al*. focused on a single young UK-based climate activist. We therefore shared these papers with our international YAB as a starting point for collaboratively designing an appropriate framework for exploring the members' own journeys. Drawing on CAE to write this paper reflects the point that YAB members are not 'typical' research participants. They have joined a project specifically to advise both the academics and youth participants. All contributing youth are co-researchers, co-authors and co-creators of the critical discourse shaping the paper. CAE was thus felt to be the only approach that would respect and capture this co-creation. Importantly, as strong advocates for youth, utilising an approach that fully foregrounds and values youth contributions as full co-creators and co-researchers (Cutter-Mackenzie & Rousell 2019) also recognises that 'authorial responsibility' provides the youth a further opportunity for 'action' (through authorship) (Dunlop *et al.* 2021). At this point, it is important to clarify that the choice of the term lifeworlds throughout relates directly to both the method of CAE but also importantly about what this process enabled access to, youth's accounts of their own experiences. Routed in phenomenology and first used by Husserl (2002), the concept of lifeworlds evolved to take account of subjective and relative standpoints that are self-evidenced and grounded in people's experiences of the everyday and everyday phenomena contained within (thus in this case, the experience of being involved in climate action).

The first step was for the youth to generate the questions that would shape the discussions to discover and share their individual lifeworlds. Thus, during our first online meeting in early 2022, YAB members were invited to co-create prompts that would frame their individual written narratives. These prompts were turned into a set of questions that were sent around all YAB members on a digital survey tool (Microsoft Forms), to individually reflect upon and answer (hereafter referred to as the 'survey'). Two more online workshops followed in which all YAB members were invited to reconvene and reflect on everyone's responses, exploring similarities and differences, identifying themes, and then considering how these could be analysed

(see details below). Finally, we progressed to the report-writing stage. A first draft of the paper without the discussion or conclusion was written by core members of the research team and circulated to all YAB members and the wider research team. All YAB members were invited to edit and comment on the written narrative, to enable all participants to reflect on their lifeworlds, to reshape, add to and reformulate the writing. This offered further meaning-making opportunities across the wider team.

All meetings were held on the online platform Microsoft Teams to enable international collaboration. The workshops were informal and included the opportunity to speak and write comments in the chat and via the free online digital whiteboard collaboration tool Mural (https://www.mural.co/). This allowed participants to contribute to discussion points in real time. Mural was also used to start formulating themes arising from the discussions. Other virtual collaboration tools were also used to facilitate participation at different points including shared documents through Microsoft or Google as appropriate. The workshops were recorded to enable recollection of conversations and capture verbatim responses.

Ethics, power and positionality

Participation on this paper was voluntary on top of wider commitments to the work of the YAB supporting our broader Vietnam-based research project. Choosing or declining participation did not impact engagement with other YAB work. A significant ethical issue was that YAB members who chose to be full co-authors would forgo the opportunity for anonymity; however, all participating YAB wanted to be named. In addition, whilst most participating youth were aged over 16 (with most over 18), younger members were also involved at the outset (though all were over 16 once the writing/editing/submission process was complete). Informed consent and ethical permission were originally sought for engagement with the wider project by all youth and parents/carers where necessary (including signing up to a digital protocol for online/digital research). This received ethical clearance through the University of Hull's processes and was in coherence with BERA's Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research (2018). However, further specific amendment permission was also sought prior to publishing this paper including the permission for using real names throughout alongside co-authorship. Following best practice the ethical process was ongoing through verbal assent in workshops and meetings. The opportunity to read the paper was also offered and formed part of the consent process. Whilst these cover procedural notions of ethics, our process was underpinned by a strong ethos of doing no harm and supporting an inclusive and participatory environment. This is why several methods were utilised to facilitate contributions from all members, while also respecting that not all

members wanted to contribute equally to all elements and making it clear that this was acceptable.

Importantly, this collaboration also includes academic researchers from universities in both the UK and Vietnam. Whilst there are some important differences between these groups (e.g. in relation to power, status and life experiences), what unites the researchers and YAB members is our focus on and commitment to climate action. Many of the researchers did not start their careers in climate-focused research, instead following a path towards developing a critical consciousness of the need for climate action, a process Freire (1970) more broadly calls 'conscientisation'. To this end, all the researchers' work has become increasingly focused on climate action and, for most, that journey has been an emotional one. As such the researchers also have a strong positionality on climate action. Given this existing interest and research, it was important to ensure that the balance of power was as equitable as possible from the outset in providing existing work as a stimulus and starting point, but with YAB members developing the key areas to focus on and included in all aspects of the process and reflection. However, whilst such actions can facilitate trust in the evolving collaboration, existing views and experiences shape interactions, interpretations and create meaning, which are important in understanding the dynamics of the collaboration. Details of YAB contributors are provided in Table 1, which illustrates how some YAB members took part in all activities, while others chose to be in just some, allowing them the flexibility and time for reflection as part of the process.

YAB membership and co-authors

A pre-requisite for applications to join the YAB were that its members would be engaged in climate or other environmental social action. They should also be aged 14–29 at the time of applying (the definition of 'youth' in Vietnam). This was because the YAB's prime focus was to offer a) a youth lens to the research team with youth social action at the forefront and b) peer-to-peer learning opportunities to the youth participants of the research project located in Vietnam. To recruit YAB members, an application pack and form were developed and published on the University of Hull's website. The pack asked applicants to detail their experience relating to social action, what they would be able to offer the project and what they hoped to get out of it. We then circulated details through social media (e.g. Twitter, Facebook groups linked to youth climate action) and existing social and professional networks, including those linked to youth and/or climate action such as iWill, YOUNGO and Earthday. YAB membership was thus self-selecting. Youth had to be engaged in social action and interested in longer-term participation in the project. They also were likely to have

access to or be part of existing networks (or have contacts with people who were) focused on youth social action. As a research team, we had no pre-conceived ideas as to the size of the YAB beyond manageability and workability as this was an innovation on our part to ensure youth involvement throughout. We received 16 applications by the deadline (though we were later approached by and accepted another youth to the YAB who became an active member). We made a team decision to invite all 16 to join the YAB based on reviewing their applications, seeing the diversity of home countries, interests and experience, plus allowing for the expectation that commitments would change and we were likely to lose membership along the way for a project spanning over two years. Applications were received from England, Wales, France, Rwanda, Senegal, Hungary, Vietnam, India, USA, Cambodia, Malaysia and Australia. Of those initial 16, 14 (plus the youth who joined slightly later making 15) went on to have some engagement with us in the YAB; we lost two at the outset (from Australia and Hungary). Levels of experience varied from those running their own social action initiatives supporting others and their own eco-focused businesses, through to those nearer the start of their journey into social action.

Nine of the 15 engaged YAB members identified as female, and six as male. Whilst we explicitly welcomed the representation of diverse backgrounds, countries and experiences and applications from youth of different ages, backgrounds, races and religions (and made clear we could support a variety of learning needs and physical abilities), we did not collect any information on socio-economic demographics of the youth, given that our selection process focused on social action engagement. We also advertised and communicated during the YAB exclusively in English. As all participation on the YAB was voluntary and working across multiple time zones it often meant finding times suitable for all to attend was challenging and levels of participation varied but throughout we have had a core group involved in meetings as and when available and able to contribute (as shown in Table 1). Involvement in this paper was again entirely voluntary and reflected to some extent, though not entirely, active engagement in the YAB at the time of working on this paper.

This paper does not make any claims to generalisability for youth engaged in climate action, and moreover, this is not its intention. What the paper does offer is an insight into youth climate action, taking a diverse global perspective of youth engaged in various forms of action across different social, political and cultural contexts and presenting these insights through an innovative working 'with' rather than doing research 'to' or 'on' youth.

Table 1. YAB members

YAB member	Age[3]	Country of origin	Actions (self-drafted)	Completed 'survey'	Participated in workshops	Contributed to paper drafting/ editing
Diep	24	Vietnam	Interested in how science can support climate change mitigation and adaptation. Currently a researcher in the Euro-Mediterranean Center for Climate Change. Research focuses on evaluating climate-related risks and vulnerabilities and impacts of extreme weather events on coastal ecosystems. Interested in the use of decision support systems and nature-based solutions in coastal planning and climate strategies.	Yes	Yes (one)	Yes
Huong	29	Vietnam	Works for a non-profit organisation as an income generation officer. Very interested in solutions to mitigate and respond to climate change, especially in the agricultural sector.	Yes	No	No
Mae	16	Malaysia	Harnesses the power of policy, storytelling and technology to champion the role of Indigenous knowledge in strengthening resilience against environmental degradation. Led youth mobilisation efforts for a campaign to re-gazette the Kuala Langat North Forest Reserve. Founded The 14% Project, a network of young Malaysians at the forefront of the fight for equitable Indigenous participation in natural resource management. Recognised as a WWF-Malaysia Eco-Champion, Malaysian Intervarsity Public Policy Competition winner and National River Care Fund grantee for her leadership in river conservation. Member of the Malaysian Youth Parliament. EarthEcho Youth Leadership Council member.	No	Yes (one)	No

[3] Age at the start of the project/joining the YAB rather than at time of writing/editing/publishing the paper. The youth parameters used for the project was ages 14–29, the parameters used in Vietnam where the project is set. The decision was also made that members would be able to remain involved, even if they passed the upper age limit within the duration of the project.

Table 1. (continued)

YAB member	Age	Country of origin	Actions (self-drafted)	Completed 'survey'	Participated in workshops	Contributed to paper drafting/ editing
Amy	17	UK	At age of 12, co-founded and co-ran the educational charity Kids Against Plastic with younger sister. Since then, Kids Against Plastic has engaged a team of over 240 young people around the world as part of the KAP Club, and its Plastic Clever scheme has had over 1,500 schools and numerous cafes and businesses sign up since its launch in early 2019. Plus, we've collected over 100,000 pieces of plastic litter along the way and developed an app to log it.	Yes	No	No
Esther	14	UK	Mainly works in the environmental and education sectors, attempting to ensure that young people have a seat at the table and a space where their voices can be heard. This work includes reducing inequality in education and taking action help prevent climate change.	Yes	Yes	No
Sam	25	UK	Works in both academic and non-academic contexts to understand how to steward societal transformations for overcoming the world's growing interlinked environmental and social crises, including climate change. A transdisciplinary social scientist based at the University of York with the FixOurFood project, first as a Research Assistant and currently as a PhD researcher. FixOurFood aims to understand how a transformation towards a regenerative food system could be achieved in Yorkshire and beyond. Research Associate with Global Assessment for a New Economics (GANE), which aims to synthesise new economic thinking that challenges the global hegemony of neoliberal capitalism. Has worked with numerous British nature conservation NGOs, including the RSPB and Wildlife Trusts, and with the University of Cambridge to produce its Biodiversity Action Plan. Activism is mostly online, involving a lot of tweeting, posting, sharing, email-writing, petition-signing and donating; has produced guides and given presentations on these methods. Has also joined climate marches.	Yes	Yes	Yes

Charlotte	23	UK	Currently runs a digital platform all about children's wellbeing on the basis of seven key themes, one of these being Sustainability. Believes the awareness we provide to children at a young age is crucial for them to instil healthy values in terms of caring for the environment and what they can do to combat climate change. Reflects on personal actions in daily life in regards to climate change and the small actions that can make a difference. For example, switching to a reusable water bottle, washable make-up remover pads, recycling, avoiding fast fashion and signing petitions for action.	Yes	Yes	Yes
Dinh-Long	27	France	Mainly working on: 1) climate education (with the belief that we can only take relevant action once we understand the problem) for youth at any phase of their climate advocacy journey, and; 2) building a community of young climate activists (with the belief that we can only take sustained action if we are surrounded with inspiring and like-minded people). Within a team, developing many fun and interactive workshops for youth to learn about climate and climate-related issues and to understand what actions they can take, and, with all the youth participants, foster connections, peer-to-peer learning and mentorship, in order to build a safe space for ongoing interaction.	Yes	Yes	Yes
Khang	20	Vietnam	Has participated in previous project working with academics from Japan in Vietnam focused on beach/coastline engaging in action such as collecting rubbish, soil core, marine debris in the mangrove and mudflat with the quadrat method.	Yes	No	No

Data analysis and analytical framework: exploring youth participation in climate action

All data generated were subjected to a form of iterative thematic analysis that moved between inductive and deductive analysis, exploring both 'semantic' (evident in narratives themselves) and more 'latent' themes to aid interpretation across the group (Braun & Clarke 2006). Given our focus on action, we drew on a review and reconceptualisation of youth participation frameworks by Cahill & Dadvand (2018), who use their new framework to explore critical understandings of what participation involves, directly linking them to practical responses of participation and youth action. What results is their 'P7 model' which focuses on seven interacting domains, the seven Ps, which are: i) Purpose, ii) Positioning, iii) Perspective, iv) Power relations, v) Protection, vi) Place and vii) Process. This model (outlined in Figure 2) explores the different dimensions of participation and, in our view, overcomes many of the shortcomings of other models that perceive participation as moving linearly, and without a focus on action. Thew *et al.* (2022) adopted the framework of Cahill & Dadvand (2018) to explore young people's lived experiences of the UN's climate change negotiations, arguing that the last of the Ps, 'process', focuses predominantly on issues of methodology rather than analysis and interpretation. As such, they replaced the final P with 'psychological factors' which they felt was key in exploring youth participation in issues linked to the environment and climate change. Given our concern with emotions and participation in action, we adopted Thew *et al.*'s (2022) 'psychological

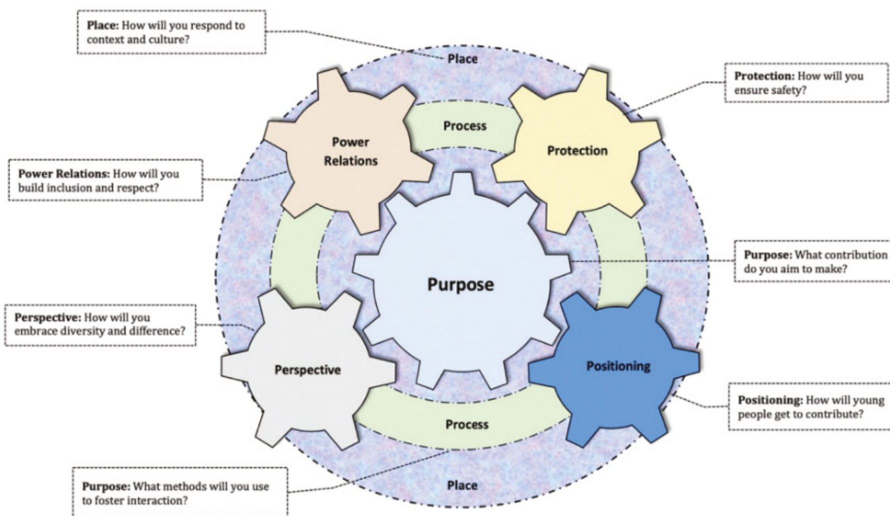

Figure 2. Cahill & Dadvand's (2018) P7 Model.

factors' but also kept Cahill & Dadvand's (2018) 'process', as we felt it was nonetheless important for exploring how action is taken. We therefore adopted a 'P8' version of the model to make sense of the different narratives, actions and interactions that result from the journey.

The narrative that follows is from a mixture of the initial responses from the workshops in which we collectively explored the questions, reflected further and analysed. We present these around six 'provocations' that prompted thinking and discussion. We use the word 'provocations' because our purpose in asking questions was not to have them answered, but rather to provoke critical reflection and to a large extent, polemic, speculative and deeply personal reflections (Mills 1998) that were also in keeping with the autoethnographic approach deployed. Moreover, as Brewis & Bell (2020: 534) note:

> In everyday language, a provocation is a form of action or speech that, often intentionally, gives rise to strong emotional reactions – usually negative or unwelcome ones, in particular, anger… By opening up spaces in academic journals to provoke – emotions, thoughts and ideas – we are also speaking to the importance of being moved by what we write and read.

Thus, in line with the wider emotional framing within this paper, Brewis and Bell are arguing that the 'provocation' has an important role to play in academia because:

> Being moved emotionally forms an important basis for learning (Höpfl and Linstead 1997) and change, enabling us to be moved by thoughts and ideas, develop our thinking, pedagogical and organisational practices, as well as our ethical commitments and actions (534).

The lifeworlds of youth engaged in climate action

Provocation 1: Why does climate change concern us?

We began by exploring the motivations of the YAB, which we feel addresses the first four 'Ps' – namely Purpose, Positioning, Perspective, Place and how these enter into the YAB's lifeworlds, providing their contextual situations and how this, and their experiences, have shaped their views.

First, we detail the initial survey responses, with Huong saying:

> *I live in Vietnam, one of the countries suffering the most from climate change. Climate change affects the daily lives of our people and their livelihoods. As an Income Generation Officer working for a non-profit organization, my work is related to livelihood develop-*

> *ment for people in mountainous and rural areas. I am very interested in solutions to mitigate and respond to climate change, especially in agriculture, and sustainable production and consumption solutions to limit negative impacts in the future.*

Diep added:

> *Climate change concerns me because it is what is actually happening. We humans are a part of the ecosystem, whose activities are affected by climate change and vice versa. In recent years, there have been extreme events happening with higher frequency and intensity such as heatwaves, wildfires, flooding, and so on, that have never been recorded in modern history.*

Khang similarly noted extreme changes in their locality, stating: 'Climate change results in many of the extreme weather events.'

This was an account shared by Mae:

> *The Indigenous identity is inextricable from the natural world. As a part-Kenyah by ethnicity, my own childhood growing up next to the Baram River in Sarawak, Malaysia was shaped by the belief that life begins and ends in water; that our ancestral connections lie with the river. Today, through my work with Orang Asli communities in Peninsular Malaysia, I witness first-hand the devastating implications that climate change has on native sacred lands.*

Dinh-Long added:

> *I'm lucky enough not to be too exposed to climate change personally. But all the climate news, natural disasters (especially those happening in France or Vietnam) always make me very sad and angry.*

As well as observing what is already happening, a key concern expressed in the survey was the trajectory of change because of the climate crisis. Youth also shared concerns surrounding the scale of widespread inaction and how societies were inadequately addressing the climate crisis. In this regard Amy stated:

> *Climate change concerns me for a few reasons, but mainly because of how huge an issue it is, in both its causes and its effects. This includes seeing the intersectionality of different environmental issues with climate change and what needs to be done to address each, and also seeing the scale of the devastation that could occur if we don't do enough to further prevent climate change.*

Sam followed this theme, adding:

> *It disrupts my peace of mind to know that the climate is becoming more dangerous to humans and is contributing to population declines and extinctions of other species… Robin Wall Kimmerer's way of saying that eco-anxiety is linked to knowing that the Earth is not loving us is something that resonates with me – we are steadily losing the Indigenous reciprocity between humans and the Earth that has helped to maintain a*

> *hospitable climate for life to flourish. I'm appalled at the human greed and selfishness that drives continued climate breakdown and inaction to address it, and the lies and conspiracy theories that are spreading despite the urgency of the crisis – powerful interests are trying so hard to cling on to business-as-usual. Climate change also concerns me because of how huge and pervasive it seems, reinforcing a sense of individual powerlessness. I hate the sense that things are gradually getting worse – steadily, but too slowly for it to really kick humanity into action. I'm tired of living in an era of spiralling negative change. I want to return to the 'constant change', the reliable, regular, comforting change of the seasons.*

Esther broadened the discussion on the wider impacts on biodiversity:

> *As with many, if not most, other young people, climate change is a massive concern to me, not only as it poses a threat to my very future and the future of my whole generation, but also due to the immense threat that it creates for the whole planet and all of the many species that call it home. Climate change is not only life-threatening and devastating, but it is also largely avoidable if we act immediately.*

Following on from the survey data, we gathered with the YAB to analyse the data, focusing on the differences between the international and UK-based responses. Charlotte said that she has seen climate change events elsewhere but: 'it doesn't feel as though the UK have had it here as significantly as other places.'

However, she recognises that:

> *the warmer weather we have been getting is probably climate change. I have seen on TV big extreme weather events and how these are devastating to futures. The future generations, how is this going to affect the children?*

During the subsequent editing of the paper Dinh-Long, added to the conversation: 'I also feel the same way being in France. Now that I live in Asia, it is a bit different, but growing up until my 20s, I definitely had the same feeling.'

Sam agreed, suggesting that:

> *climate change impacts are not as strong here in the UK as in the rest of the world. But as a naturalist I notice that the seasons here are being disrupted and that worries me. On a personal level you feel guilty as you are not experiencing the impacts first-hand... there is less incentive to act… both from individuals and governments.*

In contrast with this perceived lack of action, Diep voiced how what she experiences has a huge impact on her life:

> *I feel responsible to help the farmers and to help with knowledge. That is why I chose my career to help develop communities. Developing countries tend to suffer more from climate change. They are much more vulnerable as they don't have the resources.*

Diep has chosen to study climate change as she has seen extreme climate events impact the Mekong Delta over recent years, explaining: 'Farmers suffer from weather

in Vietnam, and they don't know what they can do. There is not enough support or resources.'

Sam moved on to say that he felt: 'Not sure if it's guilt but more grief for what's going on around the world … the government in the UK has a massive responsibility that it is not living up to.' He concluded that, for him: 'influencing others to change their behavioural norms is one of the most powerful things to do.'

The above discourse highlights a strong and collective narrative of concern for environmental changes, both present and future, that are linked to climate change. These are positioned alongside clear concerns on the urgency for action to address these challenges. For those based in the UK, climate change is presently seen as something more at a distance from their everyday lives, albeit causing significant concern for what is to come, alongside empathy for others elsewhere facing the issues now.[2] Experiences of other YAB members around the world, notably Diep, Khang, Huong and Mae, speak to how climate change is already strongly impacting their communities, and therefore proximity to climate change appeared significant in understanding motivations and urgency.

Provocation 2: What steps have you taken towards climate action?

We moved on to explore what steps and actions the YAB members had already taken as individuals towards climate/environmental action, addressing Process, Purpose, Power, Positioning and Protection. Charlotte, who is relatively new to engaging with the climate crisis, told us that her actions so far had included 'joining the YAB board, going on a climate change course, discussing climate change in my children's wellbeing platform and with friends and family.'

Esther however has been engaged for much longer:

> *I have been a climate activist for around 4 years now, with my action spanning from small-scale projects in my local community to national projects attempting to make large and meaningful change. Much of this action has been communication-based, attempting to inspire and help other young people to raise their voices and start taking even just small action for the climate, but some has been hands-on, for example by tree-planting. Some of the work that I am most passionate and excited about is the work I do giving out grants to projects around the country as part of the Youth Advisory Board for the Green Influencers Scheme. This has allowed me to hear about, and be inspired by, many different projects being started all over the country by other like-minded young people desperate to make change.*

[2] Since writing the paper, the UK, along with much of Europe, has seen and widely experienced record heatwaves.

Like Esther, Amy also chose to engage others into action:

> *Along with my sister, I run an environmental charity called Kids Against Plastic, which we started when we were 10 and 12. Our charity is focused on education and action against plastic pollution. We run our Plastic Clever scheme to support different sectors to take action to reduce their use of single-use plastics, which has been adopted by over 1,300 schools, as well as by cafes, businesses, councils and festivals around the world. And we also have a Club of over 180 kids globally that we support with their own action against plastic pollution.*

Amy's action expanded from concerns over plastics to wider climate change communication, culminating in publishing a book titled *Be Climate Clever* in 2023.

Esther and Amy's actions have centred on beginning their own charities or initiatives, whereas Huong, Diep, Dinh-Long and Sam have chosen careers or studies that directly have an interaction with themes addressing the environment and/or climate change. Huong outlined how she had been:

> *Proposing initiatives and solutions to reduce environmental pollution and greenhouse gas emissions in agricultural production, such as raising earthworms to treat livestock waste, using organic fertilizers in farming, using renewable energy in production or using drip irrigation systems in cultivation to save water.*

Huong has also been involved in activities such as:

> *Organising training courses on good agricultural practices for farmers, proposing livelihood groups and working with cooperatives to pack products with environmentally friendly packaging such as leaves and paper bags.*

Mae drew upon the ways she communicates climate change around climate justice, especially for Indigenous people:

> *Storytelling is a cultural cornerstone of my Kenyah heritage, and I seek every opportunity to catalyse change through my voice. Whether I am presenting policy recommendations to the State Assembly, or leading climate justice workshops in Jakun and Temuan settlements, stories give meaning to the science I sometimes struggle to convey, allowing me to connect and find common ground. Film is another medium that I harness to capture and amplify Orang Asli narratives. Recording fieldwork with the Center for Orang Asli Concerns and volunteering for the Freedom Film Network's production of 'Klinik Ku Hutan' has allowed me to create visual stories that highlight the intersectionality of climate change and the need for more inclusive climate action approaches. Having represented Malaysia at the Stockholm Junior Water Prize, the HKU International STEM Symposium, and other innovation exhibitions, I am also motivated to create social impact at the intersection of technology and the environment.*

Diep outlined how climate action has been central to her career choices, as well as some personal changes:

The biggest step I have taken so far is to engage in a career of a researcher in climate change and extreme event studies, considering the interactions between human and nature. I have also reduced red meat and milk in my diet to reduce the greenhouse gas emissions from the food I consume. I also buy groceries locally.

Finally, Dinh-Long said:

I have joined many different climate trainings and workshops, I have designed several training courses on climate, oceans, biodiversity and trained hundreds of youth on these topics through my full-time work. I have also designed and implemented a few programs to support youth, in the long run, to understand climate change and take individual and collective action and to support them to scale up their actions.

He also highlighted changes to his lifestyle:

to make my lifestyle more sustainable – I am always cycling, consuming less stuff, trying to reduce meat, buying second-hand, and also host a podcast where I interview changemakers taking action for the SDGs [Sustainable Development Goals] – many of them on SDG13: Climate Action.

Sam further adds to the multiple ways in which people can take action, by discussing how his activism is linked to a range of online actions:

I'm subscribed to emails from lots of campaign organisations... Via these organisations I take actions such as signing petitions, emailing my MP/businesses/other organisations, contributing to Twitterstorms, sharing actions on social media and donating – especially to crowdfunded legal challenges. I've taken part in marches. I'm largely vegan, for environmental reasons, and don't drive – I tend to walk, cycle or take public transport – and fly extremely rarely. I'm a very conscious consumer, taking care that the products I buy have a minimal environmental impact (even if this means paying more). I also buy a lot second-hand from charity shops and don't tend to buy a lot of new 'stuff'. I've dedicated my academic and working career to overcoming crises such as the climate crisis, especially from the perspective of nature conservation and transforming economics and food systems.

During the workshop and analysing the survey answers, Diep, with agreement from others, articulated that these actions could be categorised as '…a personal or collective level and then on an activist or systemic level – like individual and then community.'

Dinh-Long highlighted that each level of action 'influences the other, and the 3 levels of action are needed.'

Towards the end of the discussion, the group concluded that they feel as though action would depend on the characteristic of the person. Sam voiced that he '… feel[s] more confident in workshops rather than public speaking. I'm inspired by public speakers but I do not feel I could do that.'

Diep noted that '….my actions are at a personal level and from within my career as I am introvert and do not like speaking on stage.'

Dinh-Long followed this up in later revisions of the paper, questioning whether Sam's form of action would work in every context *saying* 'while I admire Sam's action to reach out to his MP, I wonder to what extent this is possible in other contexts, like in Vietnam, Cambodia, etc.'

Esther felt that her:

> *… momentum and activism increased due to networks and meeting more people involved through the pandemic. I feel as I get older I am becoming an influencer for others to activism by helping other young people to find their route to taking action. When I was younger it was more about what I could do, such as planting trees."*

She feels her experiences help her do this and recognises that her age enables her communication with others. Reflecting on this, Sam acknowledged that 'my actions have changed by moving from the natural sciences to the social sciences. I think more about economics. The problems I deal with are all about people and more firmly in the social sciences now.'

Overall, the group concluded that long-term action on the climate is important to make a difference, but that people tend to have a fight or flight response to this. In collectively exploring actions already being taken, there is a sense that action is varied and includes the changes individuals make to their own lives, including lifestyles and consumption, individual 'activism' such as signing petitions and campaigning, all the way through to following career paths or making education-focused choices that address the climate change crisis and/or engaging with – and sometimes setting up – their own initiatives/charities focused on supporting others.

Provocation 3: What are your inspirations for action?

We moved on to explore inspirations, addressing who or what inspired, and in some cases supported, the YAB to take action. Here we cover the Ps Purpose, Power, Process and Positioning. Specific role-models to action were noted by several YAB members. Khang said 'Greta Thunberg, who is a young environmental activist, inspired me to take action to defend our environment.'

Amy added:

> *The main inspirations for me and my sister were Melati and Isabel Wijsen – we watched their TEDx talk when we were just starting our campaign, and were so motivated by the difference they achieved as young girls of similar ages when they began.*

Sam extended his reflections beyond specific people, drawing upon his emotional responses:

The urgency of the crises we're facing, and anger at the lack of political action, inspires my action. My love of the natural world, and people such as George Monbiot, who fearlessly address issues that no-one else seems brave enough to talk about, also inspire me.

Huong added a different flavour in her response – flagging the local community she works with as inspirational saying 'people around me who have good actions to the environment inspire me. Programs and communication campaigns to raise awareness about the environment and climate change are initiated by NGOs and youth organizations.'

This was similar to Mae, who was inspired by 'the leadership of the Indigenous communities that I work with, whose work I hope to continue and build upon. Even in the face of environmental destruction and development aggression, their determination to protect their lands and waters is fierce and unyielding.'

Charlotte felt her journey was inspired by 'becoming more aware of what was happening, not particularly a who, more just knowledge passed from other individuals.'

Esther articulated that:

"For me, there was no single lightbulb moment that made me decide to take action, but instead the accumulation of interest and concern as well as the momentum of what I had already started to do driving me forwards. I first started taking action simply because I wanted to make a petition and I was concerned with the number of single use plastic bottles being thrown away in my school so I thought I would combine the two. I suppose the inspiration for this worry about the plastic came from many sources – David Attenborough's Blue Planet Series, my parents' own interests and concerns for the environment and the news I was seeing around me about the planet to name a few. But I guess it was really by chance, and the incredible charity Action for Conservation who do so much work in helping young people to take action, that is why I am where I am, which is why I am so passionate that other young people should find the same opportunities and be helped to see how they can make change – 6 in 10 young people say that they are keen to help others and/or the environment; however, 35 per cent say that they don't know how to get involved and that they've never been asked.

These experiences are echoed by Diep in a situated way. She said:

I do not have any specific role model to be inspired. The actions I take are from my observations. Back in time in Vietnam, I saw farmers suffer from droughts, floods, saline intrusion, etc. It made me want to be a researcher in the field of water and coastal management to support farmers and authorities in making decisions. The more I study and go abroad, the more I see that not only poor farmers in the Mekong Delta, but we humans all over the world are suffering from the climate crisis, even in developed countries like Germany or Australia. Also, from films and documentaries I watch on Netflix. That forces me to take personal actions to cope with climate change.

Whereas for Dinh-Long, understanding the science and what could be done was a key motivation:

> *Understanding the problem automatically made me understand what possible solutions are. Then, meeting a lot of changemakers, discovering what they do, gave me a lot of inspiration. Calculating my personal carbon footprint helped a lot, especially putting it into perspective with the Paris Agreement, where the global average footprint needs to decrease to 2tCO2eq/person/year by 2050 to align with the 1.5°C target.*

In the workshops, we delved into the significance of people and events in shaping behaviours and inspiring action across the YAB. In response, Sam said that:

> *Some people are particularly inspiring… Seeing people being fearless to take action helps inspire people. Who else would be talking if George Monbiot wasn't? The danger is that we get complacent with these role models doing the heavy lifting, but equally, they're needed for motivation.*

In response, Esther commented that momentum and engaging others was important to these journeys:

> *There are not many routes for young people into activism. Once you've started taking action, momentum means you can carry on. The network grows. So it's important to share opportunities with other young people, make sure it's not the same young people raising their voices again and again. It is better to broaden the conversation to others.*

These discussions allowed the group to talk about the facilitating factors that have contributed to their action. Esther highlighted that:

> *My parents have been supportive and inspiring, providing transport. Without them, I wouldn't be taking the action I am. That's why it's important to encourage other people to take action. Home environment is an important factor.*

However, for Charlotte, who is at a different stage in her journey compared to the others, said of her future that her 'intimate circle don't get it so I don't find as much support here. As a parent myself in the future, I would approach climate change more responsively.'

Esther added that 'once you connect with networks, then the networks become a stronger source of support. Over time this has changed the relationship with my parents and I am now finding my own opportunities without them.'

As we continued to explore the theme of family, Amy said her support was 'mainly my parents. They encouraged me and my sister to first start taking action as part of our charity, introducing us to environmental issues in the first place, and have helped and advised us along the way.'

The topic of creating a community, whether local groups, national groups accessible through social media or charitable groups, was a theme that drew resonance across the YAB. Sam mentioned ‘community organisers and campaign organisations’, Huong highlighted ‘consultant NGOs, donors, local authorities and social media’, whilst Khang chose to cite interactions with ‘environment volunteers’.

Esther further detailed and highlighted her interactions, stating:

> *So many charities and organisations as well as individuals have helped me in taking action. As an ambassador for both Action for Conservation and the #IWill campaign, I have been exposed to and being offered so many opportunities that I otherwise could not have dreamed of finding and the help from these organisations has been extraordinary and life-changing.*

Diep highlighted the importance of financial support and the accompanying privilege, access to education and networks that have supported her journey:

> *There are a lot of funds that help me develop my career for climate actions, both nationally in Vietnam and internationally to support my Master's study in Europe. There are forums, conferences, seminars and webinars to share knowledge on climate change. There are youth communities that support in taking action together. And there are social media and internet access that enable me to find knowledge, to answer my questions and to access groups and communities for climate actions.*

Dinh-Long spoke at length about collective community-based interactions, highlighting how important these are in motivating and inspiring him, including ‘a Climate Fresk Workshop, Movers Workshop on Climate Action and Movers Community and meeting like-minded people. Being surrounded with a community of like-minded people is inspiring.’

The YAB found this important in overcoming the negative emotions they sometimes experienced when tackling the climate crisis. Additionally, when exploring the comments in the workshops Esther added that ‘social facilitators are vital for inspiration, but organisations can provide money/food etc. When we have money, we don't think about it as much because it's just ‘there’. Which is perhaps why there's a focus on social facilitators in these responses.’

And Charlotte suggested that ‘getting inspired by other people is helpful for facilitation. Sustainable products are also an important facilitation. Can I afford it and is it accessible in my area? I think once you've got people on board, once you've addressed the financial barrier, hopefully the intrinsic motivation connected with the project would become strongest.’

In summary, this provocation resulted in a range of responses, with inspiration being multi-layered and personal as well as collective experiences resonating with everyone. Many of the YAB members highlighted how opportunities and enablers

within their social environments assisted them in starting and continuing their climate journey. Community was a powerful tool, notably to work within and be valued by – an important theme in terms of maintaining activist momentum. The group began to hint at social capital as a facilitator, explored further in Provocation 5 and the Discussion.

Provocation 4: What spaces for action are available to you?

Here we explored the spaces the YAB have available to take action, mapping to Place, Power and Positioning. Many of the YAB felt as though online spaces were a good place for them to take action. Sam explains ‘it feels like I’ve got a lot of spaces available to me, especially online. I know I’m able to contact my MP and that they will respond – even though their responses are often disappointing!

Extended networks also came up as an important space to take action. Charlotte detailed how she speaks about ‘climate change and sustainability on my children’s wellbeing platform, at my workplace and among my family and friends.’

This resonated with Diep, who shares details on climate action in her *‘personal life, on social media and within my networks.’*

Khang’s primary space for action is her university, whilst Dinh-Long’s spaces are community-based: ‘I belong to a Movers Community, and through my personal project (Life Line Podcast), through my social networks and through individual actions at home, I can take action.’

Mae found space within her local heritage and championed this within both community and political spaces. Like Mae, Esther and Amy have also created spaces to have their voices heard in wider organisations and through global networks, speaking to diverse audiences in a range of ways. Amy highlights how her action takes place in her ‘own charity Kids Against Plastic, but also organisations such as the #IWill campaign, UNESCO Green Citizens, and advisory roles I have as part of businesses and organisations.’

Esther’s spaces encompass, and are realised through, her role as:

> *an ambassador or board member for many national organisations as well as being a passionate and vocal figure in the local community. I believe that I occupy spaces where I can reach out to many other young people as well as having the support from these organisations to take action to the members and the young people who they reach out to.*

In the workshops, Sam highlighted that ‘it is important to reach out to spaces that DON’T usually talk or engage with climate.’

Esther’s comments resonated with this and she shared that:

> *…the spaces that I am currently taking action are important but are with a lot of like-minded people. For me taking action in school is different because it’s a more diverse*

> *group. When you open up to make change in those spaces, you do make yourself vulnerable. It's nerve-racking but it's so vital to engage people who weren't previously in the conversation.*

Sam added 'I agree with Esther – be brave! The most powerful thing you can do is to change other people's norms – be relentless!' Charlotte then joined into the discussion to add her view that 'it is really brave that Esther takes action at school. Spaces that are more uncomfortable are more important to get the message out there'.

However, Charlotte added that 'online spaces are important to me – my wellbeing platform is online. I put some stuff on Facebook. The best spaces are those where other people get it. Like the YAB group.'

As well as focusing on space for action, we also explored how and where youth do not have the opportunities and space to take action and/or share their voice. Drawing upon their own personal experiences within their communities, we explored this further to address Power, Place, Perspective, Positioning and Protection. As relayed above, Charlotte has struggled with her support network when engaging with the climate crisis, reiterating that though she has a voice, she struggles to use it in what she considers to be the *right* way. Indeed, in Dinh-Long's case, he feels his voice is strongest within his chosen community where he says he:

> *feels fortunate that my community lets me have a voice. Community is a broad word that can mean a lot. Movers Community: as a core member of the community, I contributed to building it, so most people in the community know me and I've also been in charge of developing the climate curricula for the community. So people use it – even without knowing me, they would use the curriculum to learn more and mobilise their community! My friends: they usually know the work that I'm doing, and that I've been doing this forever so it gives me some credibility. I also have a prestigious degree which maybe gives me some more credibility.*

As Dinh-Long articulates, community is a multidimensional word, with these youth being a part of many communities, both those they are almost automatically enrolled into (i.e. family, place they live, cultural heritage) and those they forge themselves (i.e. friends, online places, professional/environmental networks). Esther reflects on her self-sought community, what she called her 'circle', revealing that her *'community has been so incredibly supportive in helping me to take action and have a voice. Though, I still think that it is a challenge to be seen by some, such as the local MP, in anything other than a tokenistic light.'*

Returning to her local community and those she works with to support directly, Huong reflects that trust has been gained over time: 'The community gives me the opportunity to share and listens to me because they trust me. And then when they find that what I suggest can help them in their production and their life, I help apply it.'

For Amy, she is leading within her community:

> *With it being our own charity, we're leading the young people we work with, so we have the loudest voice. So for us it's almost been a case of doing the opposite, and trying to support the kids we work with to start to find their voices from a young age. We were incredibly lucky to get the support from family and friends to start our own action, and now we're trying to do the same for other kids and share the platform we've built.*

Sam, who finds 'power' and 'purpose' using online spaces feels less confident in relation to his local community's allowance and acceptance of his voice: 'I would find it hard to speak out about this kind of thing in my community, but that may be just because of the kind of person I am rather than the community.'

This vulnerability and indeed life experience varies across the YAB. Diep reflects on her position: 'When I was in Vietnam working within communities, the voice of young females was less heard. We do not tend to lead when there are meetings in community.'

Charlotte agreed stating that 'It can be hard to speak out in some communities where I don't feel confident'.

Esther concluded that getting people to gain confidence in you, your message and actions, does not happen overnight and that 'it's about building yourself into the community. You need to prove that you're worth listening to! Once you have, you do have a voice. I now have an important role in having an opinion about town direction etc. but I am also providing opportunities for other young people and giving them a voice.'

The YAB members occupy a range of spaces for their engagement and activities. Interestingly some of the YAB have created their own spaces – both online and with new structures that engage others. Community was again a key theme that emerged from the discussion, with some societal barriers such as age, ethnicity and gender appearing. Confidence to speak in public spaces was not innate in many of these youth, and some took alternative actions to compensate for this, diverting away from traditional forms of activism. These themes feed into Provocation 5.

Provocation 5: What barriers have you faced when taking action?

Following on from the above, we explored questions around the various hurdles faced by the YAB in taking action, addressing Power, Place, Perspective, Positioning, Protection and Process. As previously illustrated, Diep sees many barriers in her community because of her gender and age:

> *I would say prejudices on female and young people are a barrier. I don't face any barriers in taking my personal actions, but on my career, I do feel it. Opinions of females are less valued, even more with a young female. When coming to community meetings, the voices of woman are less heard and appreciated.*

Indeed, being taken seriously causes Sam to worry:

> *Politicians are failing to take the demands of young people seriously. Fear of violence from people who've been fed so much disinformation by powerful people interested in maintaining the status quo. During the pandemic, there have been additional barriers from restrictions on large gatherings.*

Mae felt similar notions within her personal action and through many of her projects:

> *In Malaysia, existing environmental policies don't really prioritise multi-stakeholder coordination between the government, NGOs and the public. Public participation measures in development projects and natural resource management are not always implemented, excluding minority/vulnerable groups from decision-making processes. For instance, even though Indigenous peoples are the primary frontliners of the climate crisis, our communities are hardly ever consulted by environmental management bodies, decreasing our capacity to defend our stakes and contribute our traditional knowledge toward climate resilience strategies.*

Khang feels a lack of opportunity for youth engagement can act as a significant barrier that manifests in a range of ways: 'Small organizations do not always act as a big inspiration for youth in engagement. There is a lack of [re]sources like funding and members, but a clear strategy.'

Whereas Amy explains that time has been a big barrier for her: 'Primarily, lack of time. Until this last year – and from this September – all of my environmental action has been balanced alongside school, which has been limiting of how much I can do as part of our charity (frustratingly!).'

Esther suggests time has similarly been a barrier but also the lack of space for the youth to have a voice:

> *I suppose the main barriers and hurdles that I've faced in taking action is finding the time. Although my activism is really important to me, I do find it hard sometimes to ensure that I can balance it with my schoolwork and that I have enough time to do the work that I want to be doing. Another hurdle that I've had to face is the tokenism that much of society has when it comes to action that young people take and the lack of voice that is given to young people compared to other groups. However, I think that as young people we are changing this perspective, be it with famous individuals such as Greta Thunberg or collectives such as the Youth Strikes For Climate movement.'*

In a more general sense, for Charlotte and Huong, education, knowledge and the sheer scale of climate change were the biggest barriers to engagement. Charlotte stated: 'I have found a lot of people around me find that they do not have the energy or bandwidth to deal with climate change as they think it is too big of a topic to digest.'

Huong added that:

> *The awareness and interest of some classes of people on environmental issues and climate change are still limited. There are economic impacts and trade-offs with convenience. For example, the use of plastic bags brings more convenience in daily life, nylon bags are cheaper than paper bags. Living habits and production habits are not environmentally friendly.*

For Dinh-Long, the ways in which societies are set up make even his individual choices difficult to achieve and thus act as a significant barrier: 'Some habits that are difficult to reduce, such as eating meat, sometimes you HAVE to have some single-use plastics, convincing your friends to adopt eco-friendly lifestyles ... it is very difficult to stop flying as my family lives on another continent too.'

Towards the end of the discussion, Sam noted that 'Time is a theme arising here. I make my own time – however I recognise that I am at a different life stage to others on the YAB. Those at school face additional barriers.'

Sam moves on to say that:

> *It's easy in the UK to think that 'oh it must be such a struggle elsewhere' but when you look, some amazing things are actually happening. If the actions of others elsewhere were more visible we would see how far behind we are in the UK. There are other places doing amazing things. Government has a huge influence.*

Charlotte suggested that 'Interest seems to be a UK point of view; our older generation and our politicians are not so motivated. But in Vietnam for example there seems to be more of a whole-country action from what I have seen.'

Charlotte also referred to barriers more broadly and how action can sometimes be more difficult for some, noting that some members of society ' … need to focus on food, for example, if you are from a working-class background, you have less bandwidth for other things.'

Here, Sam added that he 'feels lucky' as he considers himself middle-class: 'Those in the working classes face different issues and immediate needs that take priority. This is the reason we campaign for key systematic change that currently acts as a barrier.'

On the subject of class and politics, Esther added that '… [we] can't necessarily have big policy change, but that we have to trust politicians and try to vote in sympathetic politicians'.

The YAB thus shared several barriers to their own personal action, with time being a common theme given other commitments, choices and trade-offs. Barriers to the actions led by others fed into interesting discussions, notably in terms of a lack of voice given to youth. The YAB also recognised challenges for individual action alongside a need for systemic changes.

Provocation 6: What are your hopes and fears for climate action?

Our final discussion point across the surveys and within the workshops focused on hopes and fears for the future of climate action, addressing Purpose, Perspective, Positioning, Process and Protection. Allowing this space to explore the future is especially important to explore the role of emotions and, as illustrated in the narratives thus far, there is genuine fear being experienced. Yet, as outlined below, hope and courage also shine through. On these themes Sam began by describing how he:

> *… fear[s] that we'll need to experience a number of acute catastrophes before there is strong political action to mitigate climate change – the pandemic and the Ukraine war seem to corroborate this notion that humanity needs crises before transforming … I feel grief and anger that we may have already passed some planetary thresholds that it may be impossible to come back from … I also fear that disinformation, right-wing populism and authoritarianism may hinder action on climate change, and that we'll end up with a kind of techno-optimist response that just creates new environmental and social problems.*

However, Sam feels 'hope in the rise of grassroots movements crying out for transformation, and that up-and-coming generations are increasingly sick of political inaction. It's got to be reflected in the results of democratic elections eventually.'

Charlotte built on this narrative stating: 'I hope at some point people do take notice and we can address the climate emergency with the abundance of support it needs. I fear this won't happen and it will affect future generations badly.'

Amy responded and built on these points, sharing that she remains optimistic:

> *I'm hoping that we see delivery of climate action promises by governments and business before 2030 that keep the 1.5 warming target in reach. This decade will be really telling of what our future planet and environment will look like, and whilst it's been encouraging to see plans and targets for reducing warming already, I'm worried that they're just words. Climate change is not a new issue, it's been around for decades and we've still done very little to prevent it in this time. It seems to be human nature to leave crises to the last minute before frantically dealing with them, and whilst we've managed to just pull it off so far, this approach will clearly not work with climate action. So, I'm trying to remain realistically optimistic of a cleaner future for the time being, and work for delivery of the action needed to reach it.*

Esther, however, was a little more cautious in terms of optimism for climate action although still felt hope, saying:

> *Who knows. Currently it is hard to feel optimistic, especially with the government particularly in this country [the UK] as well as in many others making little long-lasting*

> *and impactful change or even aims to prevent the climate catastrophe we face. However, we must feel hopeful otherwise why are we taking action? There is time to curb the crisis and I believe that with so many people across the world working hard to make change we can stop the climate crisis in its tracks if we work together with the common goal of saving this planet and protecting the futures of my generation.*

Diep added that:

> *"With the sustainable goals set by UN and other international conventions, countries are working to achieve it. Even though I think it's not easy to revert the climate and the ecosystem, I do hope we humans could be more responsible for our actions and could improve the situation. However, I suppose that developing and low-income countries will be the ones whose suffer most from climate change and biodiversity loss. It is because most of them are agricultural countries, that depend mostly on climate and natural resources. Additionally, they don't have that much technological and financial capability to cope with climate change.*

Dinh-Long added points on a similar theme, highlighting that he is:

> *surrounded by young changemakers working hard to make the world a better place – at individual, collective and systemic levels – so I'm very hopeful. While designing all the trainings related to climate, analysing the different net zero pledges from corporates or countries, looking at different greenwashing cases, it does make me scared, but I'm not losing my optimism.*

Such hope fuelled by youth was shared by Mae, who said:

> *"I hope that the broadening youth participation in climate policy processes will allow youth to hold public and private authorities liable through inclusive participation in policy formulation, which is essential to address different legitimate needs, reduce risks of policy failure, and open ways for transformational strategies and game-changing partnerships. I am also hopeful that this type of youth empowerment will promote greater international collaboration and harness the whole-of-society approach to scale up climate action.*

Huong, in sharing a vision of the future, suggested that 'Cities will have more trees. People travel by public transport using clean energy. Large green forests [where] animals roam. Humans can live in a safe environment, without serious environmental disasters.'

Diep also shared that she feels that 'Hope and fears can go together… [and] … when we see action, we feel more hope. When we see disasters we feel more fear, but this can motivate us to take action. So they're closely related.'

Building on this, Sam explains how his viewpoint '… shifts in response to political and environmental change. It's hard to think of a time before the climate crisis, and I feel as though this has defined me as a character. I see myself as being positive, but I can get into the cycle of negativity'.

Charlotte concluded the discussion with: '… hopes are there because we know what we need to do – we just need to do it. It seems to be that the more you know, the more you fear. You almost need the fear and worry to drive action … the world will literally need to be on fire for people to wake up!'

This provocation invoked a range of engaged input across the YAB. The YAB thoughtfully discussed the complex relationships between hopes and fears related to climate change and climate action, concluding that emotion is important for determining and shaping action both for themselves, but also within the groups they interact and interface with.

Discussion

The thematic workshops and discussions detailed above allowed a range of emotions and perceptions to surface. There are similarities shared across the discussions between the YAB members, notably in terms of their motivations of engagement towards the action they were taking. However, a range of differences were also expressed in the details of their individual journeys, which seemingly resulted in different emotions concerned with their fears and hopes. Based on Cahill & Dadvand's (2018) model, and taking inspiration from Thew *et al.* (2022), we structure our discussion around the modified P7 model, which allows identification and exploration of intersecting factors that shape the YAB narratives. In a similar approach to Thew *et al*., the analytical model and framework we adopt herein allows us to explore the broader context in terms of Power and Place and how these intersect and interact with the engagement structures these Ps create, especially regarding Purpose, Positioning, Perspectives and Protection (Thew *et al.* 2022). Considering each of the Ps below allows us to examine the factors shaping the YAB's views, which provides a useful analytical lens. We therefore discuss the themes from the workshop and discussions, drawing from theory and prior work to explore wider implications. Finally, it is important to re-emphasise that this paper is co-authored with the YAB, and their ideas to the interpretations as they emerged within and across this thematic discussion are embedded throughout.

Psychological Factors

The YAB discussed the role of emotions in terms of climate action and activism. Emotions were seen as important, with fear a motivational, but not a sustaining, part of action. Instead, the YAB saw hope and aspiration as key to positive actions that make a long-term difference. Thew *et al.* (2022: 17) suggest that framing psychological factors helps to 'illuminate the intersections between youth's participatory experiences

in formal processes and their daily lives'. With similarities to Thew *et al.* (2022) we believe we surfaced and thus identify the same dynamics in the YAB discussions. We found a range of intersecting fears and worries in relation to climate change, with discussions suggesting this was not only concern for their futures but concern for other people's futures too (Brügger *et al.* 2020; Kowasch *et al.* 2021; Ojala 2012). The workshop discussions however had significant elements of positive visions and hope embedded within the discourses. This is aligned with other recent work on youth climate activism, which has detailed hope as essential for sustainability of climate-related activism and advocacy (MacKay *et al.* 2020; Börner 2023).

Budziszewska & Głód (2021) also detail how projections and feelings of hope concerning climate action helped build self-confidence and empowerment in youth participants. These are not new concepts: Klar & Kasser (2009) discuss the psychological importance of participation, with activism being associated with higher psychological wellbeing, at least for conventional, as opposed to what they termed high-risk, activism. Moreover, Curhan *et al.* (2006) highlighted how the psychological outcomes of participation can be linked to people feeling positive about themselves, the overall process they are engaged with, and their relationships with other actors. This final point resonates with the workshop discussions, in which the importance of community was elevated.

Indeed, for sustained climate advocacy the YAB reiterated the importance of finding like-minded communities with whom they learn, take action and share similar feelings and emotions. This is similar to Mort *et al.* (2018) who, in working with flood-affected young people, found that a sense of collective action promoted wellbeing and agency. This appeared necessary because conversations also divulged the loneliness that can ensue from climate action. Thus, overcoming this relied on the key psychological motivation of action in a supportive and safe community. This is particularly important as climate action may also require drastic lifestyle changes which might not be compatible with the lifestyle of some of the YAB members' 'historical friends', family members, or existing communities, who had not always been supportive of the YAB members' journeys. Having a supportive community to retain a sense of hope and optimism is, in the words of Dinh-Long: 'so, so, sooo important in order not to feel alone versus the rest of the world.'

Purpose, Positioning and Power

The YAB discussions, which intersected the elements of Purpose, Positioning and Power, often related to climate narratives – that is, the stories surrounding climate change and what they meant for people. Climate narratives were returned to throughout the workshop, with several YAB Members referring to negative perception of

climate action portrayed as a threat to current lifestyles and that climate action means sacrifice. Indeed, Thaller *et al.* (2020) have discussed how perceptions of sacrifice are potent drivers of inaction in the general population. Moreover, Chung *et al.* (2019), found community acceptance of a need to act on biodiversity issues that in turn impacted pro-environmental behaviour, yet no such willingness for any kinds of sacrifice existed for addressing broader climate change mitigation. The YAB spoke eloquently about the need for a positive vision of a sustainable future, which could address these shortcomings (Nairn 2019; Thaller *et al.* 2020), making a strong link back to the psychological factor of hope.

Power was an implicit theme throughout the discussions, notably when discussing barriers to, spaces for and levels of action. A lack of power can prevent people and communities from taking climate action, with feelings of powerlessness consistently found to negatively influence conservation behaviours (Corner *et al.* 2015). Thaller *et al.* (2020) suggest perceptions of powerlessness, perhaps at times displayed by the YAB, can serve as an excuse for inaction. Such powerlessness can minimise the cognitive dissonance arising from climate-unfriendly behaviour and high levels of environmental awareness, which remains a key challenge in environmental policy (Kollmuss & Agyemann 2002). However, the YAB's feelings around power are not unfounded. Climate change is messy, commands the action of many people from all walks of life and is largely in the hands of politicians and large corporations. The YAB displayed clear awareness of this and articulated many of the obstacles they had faced as members of the public, youth and, for some, as females. Mae, in particular, highlighted the structural obstacles for Indigenous people. Having knowledge of where one lacks power may discourage action, although it appears that this was channelled positively by some, particularly those YAB members who decided to create their own spaces, both on and offline, forming charities, taking ownership and evolving their own view of action and power.

The YAB also demonstrated an awareness of the interface between social class and action. As noted by both Charlotte and Sam, there was a sense that focusing on climate change was easier for the middle classes because they did not face as many structural barriers within their everyday lives compared to the working classes. Here, they also acknowledged that the climate movement, particularly in richer, consumerist Global North countries like the UK, might be perceived by some to have a 'class problem'. Climate action may be seen as the terrain of the white middle-classes who are perceived to have the 'luxury' of being concerned about climate change because their lives are not otherwise precarious or immediately under threat (Willis 2020). This perception is not helped by consumer framing of the sustainability agenda, that can alienate and marginalise the lived experiences of working-class people, especially where middle-class social and cultural practices are championed (and marketed) as

those that will save the planet. However, the often-significant cost implication, as highlighted by Huong and Charlotte, as well as the forced necessity of 'sustainable' lifestyles of working-class people through lower incomes and more 'local' living, run the risk of fetishising poverty (Bell 2020). This is similar to the Global North/South divide, where low-income countries with high rates of poverty and reliance on agricultural or manufacturing practices for economic growth, are framed as high CO_2 emitters – even though many of these unsustainable practices are to meet the consumer demand of high-income countries (Prell & Sun 2015). This resonates with much of the work Mae is doing in Indigenous communities.

Gender also appeared to intersect the power that youth felt they had (and had realised by others). This was most clearly articulated by Diep, who suggested that being both young and female meant community members did not value her opinions, at the very least making her journey to purposeful action more complex, with numerous systematic societal barriers faced. Gender and power are inherently intertwined, with feminist literature making these connections abundantly clear (Kenny 2007; Okin 1989). In relation to climate change, there is a growing body of evidence that highlights women's muted voice in climate decision-making processes, despite the fact that women are some of the most impacted by climate change (Shahbaz *et al.* 2022; Sultana 2014). In Diep's experience, this marginalisation appears to be compounded by her age – and leaves her voice, and that of many female peers, excluded from decision-making processes. With her work taking place in Vietnam, a conservative, hierarchical and patriarchal society underpinned by Confucianism, these barriers are likely magnified compared to those in more liberal (yet still hierarchical and patriarchal) societies such as the UK where the other female respondents resided.

The social and political differences between countries extends beyond gender, however, and interacts with all citizens' available routes to influence and take action. Such action and the locale of power is critically dependent on the political environment and definition of activism within that context (e.g. Marquart-Pyatt 2012, 2018), with rights to protest being non-existent in some countries, for example. This was perhaps most strongly surfaced in Dinh-Long's response to Sam who said that writing to his local MP was a key action for him, to which Dinh-Long queried to what extent this was possible, and how much of a difference it would make in other countries with higher authoritarian control and negative views of activism.

Place, Perspectives and Protection

In discussing inspirations for their activism, the YAB drew upon both individuals and communities. Many highlighted the importance of role models, ranging from supportive family members to internationally known individuals at the forefront of the

environmental movement. There is a growing evidence base that highlights the correlation between parental and child pro-environmental behaviours, with many parents being the gatekeepers to knowledge and opportunities (Evans *et al.* 2018). This parental support appeared to be leveraged by many in the YAB, but others felt resistance within their social circles. For them, and indeed those that *did* have familial support, they drew upon environmental figures, and the devastating facts of climate change. Some of the YAB nodded to David Attenborough and the BBC's *Blue Planet II* series as highlighting many of these concerns to them (a finding consistent with others, e.g. Halstead *et al.* (2021); Hynes *et al.* (2021) – though admittedly the findings of Hynes *et al*. suggest the programme highlighted the issue, but did not necessarily transfer to behavioural change), whilst others pointed towards individual activist figures such as Greta Thunberg. Recent research into the role of individuals in social change has highlighted how exposure to Greta Thunberg predicts intentions and willingness to engage in collective action to address climate change (Sabherwal *et al.* 2021). However, expressions of anger in some climate activist approaches have resulted in some commentators describing the current period as a new "age of dissent". This framing comes with negative stereotypes, leading the public to view such activists as militant and eccentric (Bashir *et al.* 2013). Discussions with the YAB were measured, however, and the view of climate activists was positive, instead highlighting how they demonstrate possibilities and a new way of living, push back against the status quo and inspire. These figures are an important motivator in youth climate action.

In addition to particular individuals, some of the YAB highlighted how they took inspiration and found protection in the communities within which they interacted. As previously discussed, collective action is increasingly regarded as a vehicle for both social change, and for minimising the mental health impacts that the climate crisis is ensuing on many (Halstead *et al.* 2021; Jones *et al.* 2021). The fact that many of our YAB found inspiration in their social networks, using this to find hope and as a focus for continued engagement, is thus of little surprise to us. We therefore suggest that finding a safe place to execute activism, and a place to reap the benefits of collective agency, is a useful tool in continued and meaningful engagement. We continue the theme of place below.

Place, Process and Proximity

According to Massey (1994), 'place', and its conceptual partner 'space', might usefully be seen as a complex set of time-sensitive inter-relationships that involves both domination and subordination – yet again another theme unable to detach from power. In considering how place influences the experiences of YAB members, Massey's approach enables us to think about the ways in which YAB members felt able to legit-

imately act – or rather, where they felt 'safe' and comfortable engaging in action, as well as where they did not. For some members (e.g. Amy and Esther), the community in which they lived was the place and space that felt comfortable for action, whereas for others, such as Sam, online spaces offered an important arena. Often, subordination and domination are extremely nuanced. From birth, through adolescence and into adulthood, our social, cultural and political context shape our experiences as well as understandings of self and agency (Bandura 2000). This transfers over to how we view our opportunities for climate action. Hodkinson & Sparkes (1997) helpfully refer to this process for young people as their 'horizons for action', that is, what they can see (or their horizon) is always shaped by the position they are in (their experiences), thus shaping what options are available to them. These are invariably different for everyone. For instance, family and supportive networks were clearly important for supporting and enabling action (as picked up by Amy and Esther). Being able to partake in a group of like-minded people who care about the environment and climate change can act here as a supporting mechanism for action (Bouman *et al.* 2021). Nevertheless, whilst sometimes operating as a facilitator, a horizon or outlook can also be constrained by boundaries (physical, spatial, cultural, etc.). Valentine & Sadgrove (2013) refer to something similar when they discuss 'containing narratives'. For example, being a young person in a hierarchical society can contain and restrict opportunities for action, or gender might also act as a containing narrative (such as for Diep). Likewise, these can also operate invisibly by closing people off to others who are not like them, whereby people may remain stuck in silos or echo chambers.

Linked to this and within 'Place' we might also think of a sub-P – proximity, both spatially and temporally. McAdam (2017) for instance makes a strong argument that climate change often fails to mobilise people into action because they see it as something that happens in the future and/or far from a place that affects them. Scannell and Gifford (2013: 62) similarly highlight at least part of the problem lies in 'perceptions of psychological distance' with such distance existing in 'temporal, spatial, social, and hypothetical (i.e. real vs. imaginary) dimensions'. These arguments are used to explain the (lack of) engagement with climate action, but we suggest that the *type* of climate action YAB members engaged in might also be shaped by the perceived proximity to tangible/physical manifestations of climate change.

For example, Diep and Mae have seen the impact of climate change on their local community, and thus focus on societal mitigation, adaptation, awareness and decision-making within these local communities. Conversely, many of those in the UK who understand that the biggest impacts are felt elsewhere, focus on raising awareness and personal mitigation to reduce their carbon footprints and create an overall more sustainable livelihood. Dinh-Long's positioning is interesting, with his work transcending education, personal actions, digital and face-to-face and NGO

adaptation and mitigation activities. Whilst Dinh-Long is currently residing in Cambodia, he expresses how news of climate impacts in Vietnam (a country with which he has a strong family heritage) and France (where he grew up but no longer resides) appear to evoke stronger feelings of sadness and anger than news elsewhere. Though explaining he has seen few climate impacts first-hand, his emotional attachments appear to extend beyond physical proximity and draws upon more emotional and social dimensions. This social dimension is also visible in Mae, who draws upon her Kenyah heritage as reason for working directly with Indigenous communities.

The conversations underpinning this paper took place before the record-breaking heatwaves and drought that have since occurred in the UK and much of mainland Europe from 2022. Particularly when compounded by the ongoing economic cost of COVID-19, the war in Ukraine and subsequent soaring food and fuel prices, these more severe climate impacts are starting to be felt more acutely in many countries. How this interacts with youths' action requires ongoing investigation. Furthermore, this analysis does not intend to suggest that one action is more important than another, more that in tackling climate issues close in temporal, spatial, social and hypothetical proximity to the individual or community, negative emotional responses (i.e. psychological factors) such as fear and hopelessness, can be turned around to those that are more positive and associated with positive action, providing a sense of hope and agency.

Conclusions

This paper utilised an innovative method of CAE between academic researchers and youth from across the globe. In doing so, we have circumvented the researcher/researched imbalance, and created a robust paper to aid future work with youth either engaged in climate action, who wish to be engaged, or whom we as researchers and practitioners hope to engage. In framing this process within a P8 model made up of i) Purpose, ii) Positioning, iii) Perspective, iv) Power relations, v) Protection, vi) Place, vii) Process and viii) Psychological factors – informed by Cahill & Dadvand (2018) and Thew *et al.* (2022), such a method has offered several contributions to the knowledge base of youth climate action. These are two-fold: firstly, informing our understanding of youth motivations towards climate action within an emotional framework; and secondly, how CAE can itself be used as a tool to work with youth in exploring their lifeworlds to reach insightful conclusions.

Despite the wide social, cultural, geographical and political differences that this group of youth have experienced, there are common themes arising from their reflections. Each youth's action was somewhat driven by a sense of hope, even where this was multi-layered and embedded with fear for the future. This reinforces previous

findings by the academic authors that, indeed, such emotions are essential as we tackle the ongoing and future climate crisis. Further, finding one's 'place' was also key, be that within existing circles or looking further afield online and/or in other climate action-oriented spaces. These places fostered a sense of hope, one that offered both collective and individual agency. It also appeared that youth's place more generally in the world, that is, the physical space in which they reside, influenced the type of action they took, with actions linked to issues that appeared to pose the biggest threat to them and their communities, or that were within their influence. This reinforces the importance of proximity to climate change in taking action. However, we have built upon this to argue and suggest that proximity does not just influence whether or not someone takes climate action, but the type of action they take.

Several barriers to action were also highlighted, most often linked to the dimension of power (or lack thereof). The lack of power afforded to youth, and to women as was the case for some of our youth, appeared to influence both the actual action they could take, and their sense of agency. We believe this is somewhat manipulated by the socio-political conditions that surround the youth, with these narratives – particularly in relation to gender – being stronger within some countries than others.

Overall, these findings and underpinning discourse highlight a need to utilise emotions, from fear to hope, to leverage action. They also highlight the need for situated understandings of climate change, whereby the physical, temporal, social and hypothetical proximity of climate change is brought closer to individuals. Importantly however, in encouraging youth into climate action, the actions made available to them need to utilise this such that youth increase their agency and self-efficacy.

Working as collaborative auto-ethnographers was a powerful approach in highlighting a suite of relationships and perceptions. The process took time, iteration and periods of clarification and reflection that resulted in improved understanding from all parties involved. However, we all strongly believe in the method's power and would encourage others to build on these approaches and findings, particularly when working with youth whose lifeworlds and experiences will often remain beyond the remit and understanding of adult researchers and traditional, adult-led, non-collaborative research.

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PART THREE

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Imagining the future through skills: TVET, gender and transitions towards decent employability for young women in Cameroon and Sierra Leone

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Abstract: This article presents findings from the Upskilling for Future Generations Project (Gen-Up), a participatory, collaborative project designed with and for young women in Cameroon and Sierra Leone to understand the links between technical and vocational education and training (TVET) and sustainable employment. The aim of the project is to provide a model of gender mentoring that can help communities to challenge gender stereotypes and to empower young women to build careers in male-dominated labour sectors. The article calls for a deeper, gender-just understanding of 'skills' necessary to fulfil the United Nations' 'decent work' goals in the context of deepening urban inequality and gender discrimination. The article situates gender at the centre of future TVET policy, arguing that without a gender-just and gender-sensitive approach, skills programming will continue to have limited success in rebalancing patriarchal and discriminatory labour markets.

Keywords: TVET, decent work, skills, gender disparities, aspirations, transition to employment, Cameroon, Sierra Leone

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Introduction

African cities are undergoing unprecedented growth, with the United Nations (UN) predicting that over half of Africa's population will live in urban areas by 2050 (UN-Habitat 2016). Within these urban centres, expanding informal settlements (slums) act as 'spatial poverty traps' (Unterhalter 2009: 16) with limited social services and work opportunities, and with exploitative relationships of (gendered) power and patronage that come to bear particularly heavily on young women (Chant & McIlwaine 2016). In many sub-Saharan African economies, as many as two-thirds of young people are unemployed, employed irregularly (mainly in the informal sector but also in undignified conditions within the formal sector) or not engaged in either education or training (Elder & Koné 2014). Nearly 70 per cent of those who are working live in extreme or moderate poverty (ILO 2016).

Cutting across these aggregate trends is the persistence of gender gaps in decent work opportunities. Despite improvements in education and skills, labour force participation rates among women in Africa remain well below those for their male counterparts, and when they do participate women face a higher likelihood of being unemployed or in vulnerable employment, as socio-cultural norms and stereotypes shape gender roles that identify women with restrictive capabilities in the labour market. Young slum-dwelling women in particular are profoundly disadvantaged compared with men (Tacoli & Satterthwaite 2013) and are at risk of being 'left behind' in settings in which poor infrastructure, deficient services and weak local economies, coupled with patriarchal systems, a huge burden of unpaid domestic labour and experiences of violence, frequently constrain their access to education, job opportunities, and socio-economic and geographical mobilities (Brouder & Sweetman 2015; Chant & McIlwaine 2016; Chant *et al.* 2017).

While there is growing recognition that different forms of skills provisioning can offer significant opportunities for young women to overcome these issues by combining individual change with social, economic and political empowerment (McLean & Modi 2016; Morton *et al.* 2014; UN Women 2013), significant challenges remain for governments and (inter)national civil society in knowing how to expand access to sufficient and equitable opportunities for decent work through 'gender justice' (Nussbaum 2011). Consequently, 'gender just' policies seek programming with an awareness of entrenched gender inequalities at their core, situating young women in complex webs of relationships with multiple layers of vulnerability including early marriage, sexual and gender-based violence and the neglect of female education (Marcus & Harper 2014; Najoli 2019; UN Women 2022; UNESCO 2016). However, while a strong gender and development lobby has brought the issue of gender inequalities into the mainstream, this has largely translated into a narrow focus on achieving gender parity

or economic growth, rather than challenging the socio-cultural norms underlying and maintaining gender inequalities (Harper & Marcus 2018: 26).

This article addresses these issues through preliminary findings from the pioneering Upskilling for Future Generations Project (Gen-Up). Working with technical and vocational education and training (TVET) providers in Sierra Leone and Cameroon, Gen-Up targets a gender gap in current TVET provision by focusing on gender equality as an essential foundation of 'decent' work and the Sustainable Development Goals in creating more inclusive and work-ready TVET programmes for aspirational young women and mentorship in their transition from training to employment. Working in partnership with the largest skills provider in Africa, the Salesian Don Bosco professional centres, in two rapidly expanding cities, Yaoundé in Cameroon and Freetown in Sierra Leone, Gen-Up is working with youth researchers to explore how TVET can operate as a vehicle to challenge wider societal gender discrimination.

Our primary local partner is Don Bosco Technical Schools, part of a network of 102 vocational training centres situated in forty-two countries in Africa. With a focus on marginalised young people including slum-dwellers and street children, Don Bosco is an internationally recognised vocational training service provider at the forefront of local, national and international TVET initiatives. We focus on the particular model of TVET training offered by the Don Bosco holistic approach, which is designed to endow specific skills combined with an 'intensive values formation program to form them into responsible members of their communities' (Don Bosco 2022). This unusual injection of personal empowerment into TVET programming offers a new vision of holistic skills development which contradicts a narrow focus on 'skills for employment' and sees skills training as part of broader 'social' landscapes (see Brennan 2014; McGrath 2012).

Methods

The Gen-Up project uses a combination of youth-led ethnographic and participatory methods to generate in-depth empirical data. Our research design and impact strategy are locally grounded, comprising female-led knowledge creation (through peer-to-peer research) and exchange, user engagement and co-production of evidence-led solutions to overcome gendered barriers in transition to decent work. The data collected for this article stem from qualitative interviews with Don Bosco staff members in both countries (fifteen in each country) and preliminary focus group discussions (FGDs) (ten in Cameroon and eleven in Sierra Leone) and follow-up interviews (seventy-five in Cameroon and 100 in Sierra Leone) with young women either currently engaged in TVET courses or seeking jobs after completing training (aged 16–35). Staff informants

were identified on the basis of their experience working with young people, with informants ranging in role from everyday trainers to centre managers. Where possible we tried to select informants from a range of different roles and levels to give a fuller portrait of everyday life at a Don Bosco centre.

As such, our partnership offers a fruitful platform to explore the potential of TVET centres to act as levers for gender transformation in wider society. Local researchers have been selected for their experience of working on participatory projects involving youth researchers, a history of work on gender and their ability to broker local networks. The phase of the project reported here is part of our stakeholder engagement and mapping process, which attempts to situate the Don Bosco model of holistic TVET programming in both the broader skills landscape and the local landscapes of gender equality and policy around education–employment transitions. We aim to trace the contribution of the Don Bosco TVET approach towards more gender-sensitive and responsive skills programmes and to understand the complex connection between gender, social change, skills and education–employment transitions. In the following section we outline our preliminary findings to date, beginning with a discussion of the specific Don Bosco model before exploring how gender and TVET intersect in the work of Don Bosco educators and staff.

Gender in TVET policy

In the late 1980s, gender studies began to emphasise how patriarchal gender stereotypes and divides have permeated not only wider society but also education and training systems. As such, girls and women have experienced persistent discrimination in labour markets, schooling and TVET (Bray-Collins *et al.* 2022; Niemeyer & Colley 2015: 1). In time, these insights fed into policy attempts to broaden 'education for all' (McGrath 2010; see also Chisamya *et al.* 2012; McGrath *et al.* 2020a, 2020b), as demonstrated in the gender objectives of the UN Convention on Technical and Vocational Education (UNESCO 1989), the World Declaration on Education (1990) and the UNESCO Education for All (EFA) Framework for Action (1990) (King & Palmer 2007). At the turn of the millennium, the link between gender and universal education was further reinforced (Jackson 2009) through the UN's Millennium Development Goal to 'Promote gender equality and empower women' (Lewin 2020: 1–2; UNESCO 2000), the gender objectives of the World Education Forum (2000) and the UNESCO (2003) Gender and Education for All: The Leap to Equality Global Monitoring Report. Yet as these attempts were largely geared towards primary and basic education, policy attention to TVET – and gender within TVET – was neglected (King & Palmer 2007; McGrath 2010: 538; Palmer 2007). For instance, the UNEVOC

Network is UNESCO's global network for institutions specialized in technical and vocational education and training (TVET) and was developed in 2002 to cater exclusively to TVET development, the agencies' first 'Strategy for TVET 1', which was not implemented until 2010 (running until 2015), despite referring to girls and women, offered no gender-specific objectives or targets (Broek *et al.* 2015: 47).

More recently, however, attention to TVET – and its gender dynamics – has been renewed by international calls to harness female-focused training towards alleviating development concerns (Idris & Aluko 2013), including growing youth unemployment and gender disparities beyond basic education (Chea & Huijsmans 2018: 39; Hilal 2012: 686; Meath *et al.* 2021). A significant influence has been the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the seventeen Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Cheruiyot & Munyi 2019), as implemented in 2015 by UN member states. In particular, SDG 5, towards achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls (UN Women 2022: 5–8), has worked alongside SDG 4, which acknowledges the importance of TVET in ensuring decent, sustainable and gender-just employment. Aimed at these objectives, TVET is now acknowledged as a 'necessary element in the development strategies of developing countries' (Wilkins, in Miller 2020: 2). Illustratively, UNESCO's 2016–21 and 2022–9 TVET strategies urge governments to develop gender-responsive policy frameworks and to increase funding, data monitoring and gender mainstreaming at local and national levels.

Recent literature has also highlighted how contemporary changes to education, employment and labour organisation have had profound impacts on women's relationships with TVET (Bray-Collins *et al.* 2022 Niemeyer & Colley 2015). In some respects, the impacts have been positive. For instance, the globalisation of certain trades has raised the status of some feminised occupations, such as Ghana's hairdressing sector, which, due to global marketisation, has become a high-status career choice. This has birthed multiple Ghanian hairdressing TVET courses, which are applauded by young women for their relevance and employment prospects (Langevang *et al.* 2015). Moreover, employment needs within typically 'male' professions, skills mismatches and labour migration have all disturbed gender divides, thus broadening policy approaches towards male-dominated roles and widening female opportunities and aspirations (Bray-Collins *et al.* 2022; Niemeyer & Colley 2015).

However, such processes have also had disproportionate consequences throughout the Global South (Newman *et al.* 2014; Niemeyer & Colley 2015). For instance, increasing privatisation of the TVET sector and low governmental budgeting towards TVET means that girls often incur unaffordable costs and lack financial support from training providers. Moreover, growing youth unemployment across many African countries has reduced the availability of apprenticeships (with those that remain prioritising males) and led many young men to migrate in search of better employment,

which further constrains women's access to TVET due to additional work and domestic demands (Gaidwanza 2008: 8–9, 30; Niemeyer & Colley 2015: 5).

In recent years, the COVID-19 crisis has only heightened inequalities. Namely, the closures of training institutions and a shift towards online working and learning have disadvantaged girls and women across Africa, due to their lower access to information technology (IT) and internet connectivity (Langthaler & Bazafkan 2020; Porter *et al.* 2020). In particular, those living in poverty and informal contexts such as slum areas struggle to use or access digital technology due to a lack of resources or literacy and basic education (Ayyappan & Shalaby 2021). Thus, the pandemic has amplified an existing digital gender divide while narrowing female access to TVET (African Union & UNICEF 2021; Chun *et al.* 2021: 43, 46). However, the COVID-19 crisis also appears to have opened up some opportunities for girls in poor communities across sub-Saharan Africa due to increased use of distance learning and more flexible or hybrid approaches to instruction, though there remain significant doubts over the long-term viability of this mode of learning (Odondi *et al.* 2022).

Is adding women enough?

As stated, attention to gender in TVET has been reinvigorated. However, prevailing inequalities have led to debate regarding the most effective approach to achieving gender equality (see Bray-Collins *et al.* 2022; Lopes Cardozo *et al.* 2015; McGrath 2012). Simply put, this approach involves integrating gender within policy not only as a means of equality, but also as a crucial element of wider sustainable development and economic growth (Meath *et al.* 2021: 8; North 2010). Having roots in human capital theory, this economic development approach stresses that female inclusion in TVET makes 'good economic sense' (Bray-Collins *et al.* 2022: 155) as it will increase employability, productivity and earning potential (Carneiro *et al.* 2010). This is also the dominant approach in Africa, where female inclusion across education, employment and training has become an essential component of remedying youth unemployment and achieving a sustainable social and economic vision (Meath *et al.* 2021; Najoli 2019). For instance, goal 6 of Africa's Agenda 2063 towards 'transforming the continent into a global powerhouse' aims to ensure 'an Africa, whose development is people-driven, relying on the potential of African people, especially its women and youth' (African Union 2022).

Sometimes described as the 'add women and stir' approach, many commentators argue that gender action has become a 'de-politicised, technical exercise' (Parkes *et al.* 2020: 2) which fails to address structural issues that limit women's access to both individual job opportunities and broader labour markets (Eyben & Napier-Moore 2009:

298; Månsson & Färnsveden 2012: 7). Across most African countries, men consistently fare better in terms of enrolment, participation and pass rates, and the continent continues to have the lowest global rates of female participation in 'technical' TVET subjects (UNESCO & UNEVOC 2020: 12; ILO 2017). For instance, in 2019, only 30 per cent of Kenya's TVET trainees were female (Najoli 2019) and just 991 of the 5,251 students who sat for Uganda's November–December TVET examinations were girls and women (Mawanda 2020). Moreover, although noting some increases in female participation, critics maintain that the economic development approach has failed to address the root causes of inequality and that women continue to experience discrimination and subjugation (Bray-Collins *et al.* 2022; Niemeyer & Colley 2015).

Signs of transformation

In a positive shift, the recent evidence shows that a number of organisations are, in differing ways, providing policy and programming which demonstrate a commitment to both understanding and challenging the causes of disparities (Crea 2016; Pongo *et al.* 2014). At the regional level, UN bodies including UNICEF (2016: 3), UN Women (2022) and UNESCO (2015) have all developed agendas which seek to address barriers such as child marriage, gender-based violence and the de-prioritisation of female education (Najoli 2019). The African Union (AU) is developing a continent-wide gender-transformative TVET framework and programming network in order to challenge gender inequalities, assumptions and divides, as well as undertaking community-based research on how gender norms play out in localities (Pongo *et al.* 2014).

Moreover, some recent interventions demonstrating attempts to harness girls' education to challenge the foundations of patriarchal structures (Maclure & Denov 2009; 613), or recognising that female participation in policy and programming development has often been tokenistic (Asante & Shepherd 2020), have attempted to centre local women's perspectives, either in TVET design or by utilising TVET as a vehicle for public participation. For instance, Jesuit Commons 'Higher Education at the Margins' (JC:HEM) not only offers girls opportunities to undertake an online university diploma but also aims to empower women to become gender role models with an eye to enhancing local non-governmental organisation (NGO) and community action. In discussing the programme, a trainee in Malawi's Dzaleka refugee camp stated that in the light of constrictive gender stereotypes and domestic constraints, the programme 'uplifted' and 'empowered' her 'as a girl' (Crea 2016: 14–16).

Similarly, Baraka Women's Centre, in the Kibera slum of Nairobi, Kenya, combines skills building with gender transformation, offering courses in local trades such

as sewing, IT and banking, while it also provides gender violence training for men and women, leading to both profitable enterprises and self-transformations (First United Lutheran Church 2021; First Love International 2021). As one graduate stated, 'I am in tears of joy when I recall where Baraka Women's Centre removed me from and who I am today … If it were not for BWC, I would not be who I am today' (Women's Centers International 2021). Additionally, the NGO 50/50 in Sierra Leone aims to achieve gender equality in the country's political system. Combining education with advocacy, the group offers training to equip women with the skills and resources to become actively engaged in political processes – particularly surrounding gender issues – as well as providing women and community leaders with workshops on how to ensure that women's rights provisions make a tangible difference 'on the ground' (Maclure & Denov 2009: 617–18).

As we discuss in the next section, positive developments such as these need to be situated in relation to ongoing global instability and the precarity of sub-Saharan African nations already struggling with deep-rooted structural issues. As we show, TVET in each research context needs to be understood as part of broader gender norms and ingrained socio-cultural aspects which are often not taken into account when attempts are made to implement complex TVET policy.

Sierra Leone

The impact of the 2014 Ebola outbreak – which led to 3,145 deaths in the country (WHO 2015) – on top of legacies of a decade of civil war that ended in 2002, accelerated an economic downturn, exacerbated already deeply rooted gender inequalities (UNDP 2014), increased the cost of living and heightened political and social tensions in the run-up to the 2018 elections. The destruction in rural areas also led to a stream of migrants arriving in large urban areas, particularly the capital Freetown, with informal urban settlements expanding in the city and beyond the city limits, in some cases creating dangerous potential for erosion and mudslides (World Bank Group 2018). By 2030 the country's total population is projected to be 8.6 million, with 44 per cent living in urban areas (UNDP 2014). This is coupled with one of the highest unemployment rates in West Africa, with one in two youths unemployed in 2015, 78.5 per cent of employed youths either in vulnerable employment or unpaid family workers, and nine in ten young workers in informal employment. According to World Bank and International Labour Organization (ILO) data, youth employment is growing rapidly, with the share of young people neither in employment nor in education or training was 13.4 per cent in 2014, with young women more likely than their male counterparts to be out of school and not working (ILO 2017). The country has high

youth labour underutilisation rates, particularly among young women at 72.8 per cent (in contrast to 59.9 per cent for male youth) (ILO 2017).

TVET in Sierra Leone

Sierra Leone has a rich history of educational aspirations and programmes, with an academic system based on British standards which led to it being seen as the 'Athens of West Africa', with scholars coming from all over sub-Saharan Africa to study at its new universities. However, as education came to be seen as the primary route to social mobility and thus social status, this system also inherited some of the prejudices inherent in the British academic tradition which placed vocational education at the bottom of the educational pyramid (Matsumoto 2018: 16). This changed following the decade-long civil war which partly resulted from, and led to, the existence of large groups of disenfranchised young men. Since the 2000s, policy emphasis has increasingly been placed on TVET programmes, initially as part of the disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) process which focused on incorporating ex-combatants back into society (Paulson 2009). New TVET programmes were implemented and incorporated into the educational system, creating a more sustained flow of students and graduates for the workforce. However, this project has stalled in recent years, with a relatively small number of TVET centres compared with secondary schools and a minor budgetary allocation in the government education strategy, leaving the TVET system suffering from 'low quality, low relevance, limited access, inefficiencies, and cutbacks' (Peeters *et al.* 2009: 102).

However, the Government of Sierra Leone (GoSL) takes TVET as a key priority to support youth employment and economic growth incorporated it into the Medium-Term National Development Plan 2019–2023: Education for Development. In the recent past, formidable organisations, for example TVET Coalition Sierra Leone and National TVET, have been founded to support the cause of the TVET scheme by helping to improve the employability of TVET graduates nationwide. In terms of access to education, girls have been hit hardest by the impact of the civil war, Ebola and most recently COVID-19. TVET has been promoted as a missing link between education systems and labour markets (Peeters *et al.* 2009), but the legacy of the focus on civil war combatants and victims has left it, like many youth-focused policies, leaning heavily towards young men. For example, for many young men, driving motorbike taxis (*okadas*) has proven an important mode of simultaneously earning a decent living and practising a form of autonomous, stylised manhood in keeping with the independence, power and prestige they developed during the conflict (Bolten 2012; Buccitelli & Denov 2015; Menzel 2019.

The TVET policy framework features three key aims. The first aim is to address inadequate key skills responsible for market failures, which prevent private sector

firms from increasing productivity and maximising economic benefits in the sectors prioritised by the government. The second goal is to address the major challenges confronting the TVET system in Sierra Leone with the aim of transforming and positioning it to contribute to economic development through demand-driven skills for employment. The third aim is to produce a highly skilled workforce to support the government's economic transformation objectives, with a focus on key sectors as stated in the National Development Plan 2019–2023 (National Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) Policy for Sierra Leone 2019).

Despite these ambitions, the implementation of TVET policy has been uneven, with riots and protests erupting around the placement of skills centres and training institutes in 2016 highlighting their symbolic significance (David 2016). These issues have perpetuated the lingering intergenerational tensions which led to the conflict and which have continued to create feelings of economic and social marginalisation among the youth, including their strong reaction against mistreatment by chiefs and elders, prompting young people to 'revolt' against their elders and the corrupt state in pursuit of recognition and empowerment (Tom 2014). This has led to a surge of youth mobilisation structured around Western human rights discourses aiming 'to secure economic and political advantage' as 'youth who view traditional authorities as corrupt and failing to protect their interests against politicians are claiming accountability from below' (Tom 2014: 335). Despite this movement, traditional authorities continue to dominate, with elders, chiefs and politicians invoking customs and traditions to maintain their authority, leading to an ongoing need for policies and programmes that foster dialogue across different cultural and social boundaries (Tom 2014: 336).

For young women, the 2014 Ebola crisis had a devastating effect on an already weak economy and reversed important development and equality gains made after the end of the civil war. This increased young women's vulnerability to multiple forms of sexual and gender-based violence such as transactional sex and severely hampered their efforts to achieve parity with their male peers. For many uneducated young women in rural areas, the options were stark as economic insecurity became more prevalent with early marriage and sex work becoming increasingly common (Menzel 2019; Oosterom *et al.* 2017). This can also lead to other problems as when a girl falls pregnant ('gets hard belly') out of wedlock, she can be disowned or abandoned by her family or forced into early marriage leaving her further vulnerable. Despite these multi-layered challenges, some women in Sierra Leone were also challenging gender boundaries in order to find work, as we describe below, fighting discrimination and stigma at each stage of their journey. Even as they try to find work through vocational training they are still not guaranteed a secure job, even when starting at a very low entry level, or entering into insecure self-employment to make use of one's new skills. Many of the young women in the study displayed great resilience in the face of both

short-term shocks and longer-term systemic problems, but only through interventions designed around them and what they are already doing to challenge gender norms can sustainable economic empowerment be created through vocational programmes.

Cameroon

In Cameroon, the economic crisis of the 1980s caused a disruption of the agropastoral economic model that was in place in the 1960s and 1970s. This led to several changes in terms of job restructuring, redefinition of priorities in terms of education and vocational training offer, and reconsideration of the economic and social roles of women (Maïrama 2014). These reforms led to rapid urban migrations, resulting in more than half of Cameroonians living in urban areas (53 per cent) and an estimated 60 per cent of urban inhabitants living in informal settlements and slums (UN-Habitat 2016).

With an urban growth rate of around 5 per cent, the challenge of aiding slum-dwellers in Cameroon remains critical (UN-Habitat 2016). The proportion of youths not in employment, education or training is estimated to be 17 per cent, with women almost twice as likely as men not to be in employment, education or training. Overall, young people comprise 52 per cent of the total unemployed population (ILO 2017), with female youth unemployment rates higher (6.8 per cent) than those for young men (5.8 per cent). Consequently, the dynamics of women's participation in the labour market are underpinned by three key factors: limited employment prospects, differences in education level and power dynamics within households. In 2014, the informal sector was the main provider of jobs, accounting for nearly nine out of ten workers (89.5 per cent), of which 86 per cent were men and 93.2 per cent were women. These informal jobs are divided between the agricultural (48.6 per cent) and non-agricultural (40.9 per cent) sectors. In addition, jobs are mostly informal: 30.1 per cent of workers are informal agricultural operators, 27.2 per cent are self-employed informal non-agricultural workers, and 14.6 per cent are non-agricultural informal employees.

TVET in Cameroon

There is also an ongoing gap between the employment policies set up by the public authorities and the intrinsic aspirations of young people. For young people, aspirations in the employment market are circumscribed by these limiting policies and the lack of essential infrastructure to help them transition from education to employment. While recent years have seen the increasing implementation of employment promotion agencies such as the National Fund for Employment, the informal sector remains the starting point for many young people in the search for work. As a result

of this continuing fragmentation, family and friends remain the primary channels through which young people enter the labour market and sustain a professional position. Recent analyses note that family plays an essential role in the decision-making process of young people when entering the labour market, with family influence overriding salary expectations (Alpes 2014).

The cost of schooling and funding constraints are also inhibiting factors. Girls especially are subject to child labour where household work is needed to contribute to family income. Furthermore, the economic value of girls through marriages makes them an important source income (the dowry and other presents during marriage alliances), thus limiting their access to education and employment. ‘Girls have to face the widespread belief that it is a waste of money to educate a girl who will leave home when she gets married, and will not contribute to the maintenance of her birth household’ (Mouchingam Mefire 2006). Schools are not neutral, as educational and training institutions play an active part, with the support of families and communities, in the construction of responses to traditional gender roles. The educational institution is a place of transmission and reproduction of gender stereotypes with a strong gender bias in vocational training courses which is slowly being addressed by giving women better access to traditional male professions.

It is also important to note that public discussions around Islam and religion play into traditional gender stereotypes, discouraging some parents from sending their female children to schools seen to be promoting ‘Western’ ideals or values. The armed conflict in the north of Cameroon instigated by the insurgent group Boko Haram, which translates loosely as ‘Western education is forbidden’, has, since 2009, killed tens of thousands of people in Nigeria and displaced more than two million others mainly affected the north-eastern Anglophone regions of Cameroon. The group is considered a violent Islamist group, and this has led to a focus on its religious ideologies as the main motivator for people to support or join its activities, while the conflict is often framed as a religious one between Islam and Christian communities (Mang 2014). Its formation has also been linked to international Islamist groups within the global context of terrorism. However, Dowd (2015) shows that an Islamist group such as Boko Haram emerges from *local* conditions, from a long history of economic and political marginalisation of certain groups at subnational level, and a history of violence on which Islamist militants capitalise. In fact, some parents opt to enrol their daughters in Khoranic schools for fear that a Western education will promote values and behaviours contrary to cultural and religious norms among girls.

Since 2013, the Ministry of Employment and Vocational Training (MINEFOP), responsible for post-primary education and vocational training, has set up new training structures including vocational training centres offering non-agricultural training in rural areas, rapid vocational training centres and vocational training centres

of excellence. Pending its effective implementation, the skills system in Cameroon still faces significant challenges incorporating gender balance into its TVET systems. These include (1) fragmented governance of TVET (if gender policies are included: eleven ministries have some policies related to TVET, gender and employability); (2) limited training offer, particularly offers attractive and affordable for the most vulnerable and for those involved in the informal sector; and (3) insufficient material, financial and human resources, including trained teachers and up-to-date didactic material.

Furthermore, apart from gender-disaggregated data, gender considerations are mainly absent from TVET policy. Data from the Ministry for Secondary Education's statistical directory shows that, for the year 2015/16, the number of students in public TVET was 343,597 students, including 117,601 girls (i.e. 34.2 per cent), while in 2011, 145,516 students were enrolled in the public TVET, of which 53,450 were girls (or 36 per cent) (Ngathe Kom 2015: 2–4). However, these statistics do not take into account formal vocational training regulated by MINEFOP. TVET covers formal training, non-formal or informal training, including apprenticeship training and accelerated training for entry into the world of work. Traditionally, apprenticeship in Cameroon consisted of on-the-job training implemented by the informal sector. The existing literature shows that most workers (66.9 per cent) in the informal sector learn or have learned a trade on their own or through practice; a significant number (24.4 per cent) were trained in small businesses; and only 5.3 per cent of employed workers learned a trade in a TVET establishment (Ngathe Kom 2015: 2–4).

TVET policy and programming can offer a mechanism to address a number of these issues, providing a motor for broader gender and generational changes. As we discuss in the next section, the Don Bosco model focuses on the 'whole person' and in doing so addresses some of the ways current TVET programming is failing its learners.

'A place of sense': lessons learned from the Don Bosco pedagogical model

> 'We must train the whole man: the head, the heart, his faith.'
>
> – Mr Guy, Don Bosco Trainer

The Don Bosco model (also known as the Salesian Preventive system) is built on similar characteristics worldwide. It is an integral/holistic model built over four spaces. The first space, the school, provides training and technical development skills. Secondly, the recreational ground provides a safe and secure space to develop social skills and share experiences through the development of a friendly and comfortable

atmosphere and a place of trust. This is an essential part of the pedagogical process which aims to create a community of learning and a community of practice, peer-to-peer learning, and to celebrate success through sports and cultural events. The third space is a shelter and a home for displaced youth and street children, with a home atmosphere for those returning to their family and community at night. Young people need a place 'of their own', where they feel at home and where they get the necessary space to be themselves, to express their feelings and to shape their own personality. Finally, the fourth space is a parish where values and ethics are the basis of pastoral care but also of youth behaviours. As a Christian organisation, the Salesian community integrates spiritual values in their pedagogical project, which is open to youths of all faiths. It becomes a 'place of sense', where young people have the possibility to search for meaning in their lives. As one trainer put it: 'Don B'sco's preventive system allows us to get closer to our young people, to know them better, to listen to them, to be attentive to their daily concerns and thus to better support them' (Interview, Yaoundé, November 2021).

Another characteristic of the Don Bosco pedagogical model is that it avoids short-term programmes targeting only technical skills (except for joint 'non-formal' projects, for example on demobilisation of child soldiers, usually seen as a step towards reintegration in the formal sector). The integral approach, which goes beyond technical skills development, calls for long-term training; it is quite common that a vocational training will be developed over two to four years including quality education, practical training and, when possible, work placements in order to support access to 'decent work'. It is difficult to train a qualified technician in a couple of months, but just as importantly, it is even more difficult to develop social skills in a couple of months.

An emphasis on social skills and holistic development reflects calls in the literature to reorient TVET around 'human-centred' training programmes which also empower young people to be more autonomous (McGrath 2012: 629). Don Bosco carries this strategy through their work in two ways. Firstly, the entire Don Bosco community is included in the educator's team, from the gatekeeper to the secretary and the youth 'facilitators' (animators), developing their sense of responsibility towards others and becoming role models as well. Peer-to-peer learning is part of the pedagogical project, as is the provision of support by the alumni organisation (financial, internships, networks, experiences/success sharing). Secondly, advocacy on social issues is incorporated into the young people's education, primarily around employment, civic engagement and emergencies such as COVID-19. Our informants reported a lack of direct action on gender stereotyping, with more of an emphasis on employment as a catalyst for social change, with all efforts leading back to the following combination of factors: quality vocational training, social skills, civic engagement and responsibilities, and Christian/spiritual values.

Many Don Bosco trainers acknowledge these limitations while extolling the Don Bosco success story. In the next section, we first address some of the gendered issues Don Bosco faces when trying to turn its training into sustainable employment opportunities. Secondly, we look at some of the ways Don Bosco is challenging these stereotypes. Finally, we analyse how the staff and system of Don Bosco can offer pathways for a more gender-just and inclusive skills landscape which can be synergised with the 'decent work' agenda.

Gender perspectives from the field

'If you can send us a boy, it would be better': discrimination and durable gender bias in employment

The Don Bosco professional centres have employment bureaus which rely on building long-term relationships with employers, creating a network of possible placements for young people as they move from their skills training programme to the real-world labour market. This point of transition is seen as key by the Don Bosco personnel for creating a sustainable livelihood for the young people they work with but is also often the pivot point for discussions around gender. Specifically, it is at these crucial transition points that prejudice and discrimination against young women and in favour of young men tends to mobilise. As one trainer told us, employers will often say: 'If you can send us a boy, it would be better' (Interview, Yaoundé, November 2021).

As the trainers in Cameroon told us, the complexity in young girls' lives often begins before they even encounter the Don Bosco institution as they are burdened with household chores, domestic responsibilities or adding to the household income, or they are subjected to early marriage or pregnancy (see Harper *et al.* 2014):

> It is not easy for them to follow the training and at the same time to be a mother … At the beginning, some came because they are pushed, but afterwards, when they arrive at the centre and discover the atmosphere they feel interested and make an effort to get started. (Interview, Yaoundé, November 2021)

This was also reported in Sierra Leone, where young mothers especially were targeted as a group who would benefit most from the care and training at a Don Bosco centre, but who also found it most difficult to commit to and complete a training programme. As one coordinator put it, many of the young women attending his sessions had 'mixed feelings' about the programmes and were unsure about their continued commitments as they juggled their many responsibilities. However, he also observed that

most of the young women enjoyed the training once they got used to it as ‘they really want to change their lives and are working hard to make things happen. They have passion for what they are doing … and are working hard to change things’ (Interview, Yaoundé, November 2021).

In both contexts, gender bias was ever present, and the difficulties faced by young women engaging in Don Bosco training were also reflected in biases stemming from the employers with whom the Don Bosco TVET centre tried to place the young learners during and after their training. Young men were generally seen as better prospects due partly to their physical strength in some roles but also heavily linked to the perception that young men were ‘freer’, as this instructor stated:

> In companies, especially in our field, men are more in demand than women, given their physical strength. Given their occupation, women are less considered, they are not often free. Women are already mothers … have concerns about children who go to school, children who are sick. Then there is security, at work hours, it can be late hours. They are exposed to assault, and often companies make us understand that. There are companies that solicit more men and tell us clearly, if you can send us a boy, a man, it would be better. (Interview, Yaoundé, November 2021)

This ingrained perception around the availability and flexibility of young men as opposed to young women tied down by household responsibilities and motherhood was just one of the stereotypes and assumptions which Don Bosco institutions struggled with when placing their young learners. We heard instructors in both centres discuss this disparity. As one female instructor told us, discrimination was often linked to family responsibilities for young women, which meant that during the recruitment process ‘the young girl is less considered than the young boy, because we think that there will be cases of maternity [leave] and childcare’, with employers assuming that ‘the young girl after childbirth will have a long maternity leave. Then she is the one who sometimes has to accompany the children to school, she must ensure the family duty, that is to say, to clean her home’ (Interview, Yaoundé, November 2021).

Moreover, she also cautioned that some of these perceptions are based on everyday realities of the lives of young women, who do often have more responsibilities than age-equivalent boys and also often have to travel further due to the lack of local opportunities. This can have a significant impact on their ability to engage with training, keep up with the young men and subsequently give potential employers the impression that they are equally reliable. ‘Sometimes the girl arrives a little late and the boy is there on time, sometimes it’s the girl who picks up the child from school, what do we do with these experiences?’ For this trainer, extra care and attention built into the Don Bosco pedagogical system can counter these prejudices and give young women vital support at points of crisis: ‘I always have to go back to work with those

who have these problems, who have special cases' (Interview, Yaoundé, November 2021).

This added layer of individual care extends throughout the Don Bosco model and is helping to change the relationship between employment and gender equality. Trainers in Yaoundé seemed to be more proactive on this point, telling us how they were specially targeting these points of connection between young learners and their employers to overturn prejudicial practices and cultures:

> Let's say that in companies, the integration of a young girl is not always easy, you see, if we don't reject her at the beginning, she can have long-term difficulties, in particular of harassment, so the young girl is really vulnerable to the company. What do we do, at our level? We sensitise them, we prepare them for that, to know how they are going to go about it, and when we put them in companies, we talk at length with those in charge of the structures to which they are sent, and we follow up on a daily basis, to make sure that the young girl is at ease. It is the same thing to find work. Sometimes, the young girl is recruited if she is competent, other unorthodox practices are imposed on her. So, I think, we have to sensitise society for respect vis-à-vis the girl; respect for their dignity, for their choices. (Interview, Ebolowa, December 2021)

In both contexts, the young women who came to Don Bosco were highly vulnerable. However, it is worth noting that the girls in Yaoundé were often slightly older, more experienced and less often susceptible to sexual forms of exploitation. In Freetown, gender discrimination had increased during the conflict/post-conflict period and the Ebola and COVID-19 pandemics, creating multiple layers of gendered discrimination and vulnerability which were not present in some of the young women's lives in Yaoundé. As such, each Don Bosco centre had to tackle idiosyncrasies specific to the particular locale. In Sierra Leone, some of the young women used the Don Bosco centre as an informal form of social protection, coming for food, financial assistance, medical help, mental health help and day-to-day support. Many of the girls in Sierra Leone had been alienated, and in some cases they were being protected from their families, creating a dependency on the Don Bosco staff and centres. For the Yaoundé learners, the Don Bosco centre also offered this form of holistic support but as the girls were less vulnerable and less isolated from other support networks (i.e. family and friends), their experience at Don Bosco had a powerful professional focus which helped emphasise the pathways from education to employment as paramount.

For trainers, social workers and staff in both locales, the Don Bosco pedagogical system not only created productive and effective workers but also threaded the holistic model through the training–employment connection, aiming to empower young women as well as make them into reliable and skilled workers. As we now explore, in a number of ways they are using their training programmes as a vehicle to challenge these persistent and obdurate gender inequalities in a variety of interesting ways.

'A holy environment, a holy workspace': decent work and COVID-19 at Don Bosco training centres

> Decent work is work … which does not give young people headaches. (Don Bosco Social Worker, Interview, Yaoundé, November 2021)

It is also important to note that the Don Bosco system emphasises the quality of the employment young women can find. 'Decent work' in this context was often vernacularised along Don Bosco teams' terms as involving 'working conditions', 'dignity', 'safety', 'happiness', 'comfort' and 'trust'. For young women, this was defined by one trainer as having economic autonomy:

> Yes, in a nutshell, as a friend I would say, work is decent, it's work that feeds her man, that allows her to be supported, the girl to be supported, in our context it's maybe: paying the rent, getting food, clothing, medical care … for me, that's decent work. (Trainee Interview, Yaoundé, November 2021)

Another trainer in Cameroon, for example, discussed the importance of having enough security ('safety') to be able to retire comfortably (Interview, Yaoundé, November 2021), with a heavy emphasis on a fair salary. 'Without salary, we do not speak of work, when there is a salary that corresponds to the profile of the person, we can already speak of decent work.' Reflecting on this, he also stressed the need for a sociable workplace where the employer respects the employee:

> In an environment where no one can say hello to you, so you also need a holy environment, a holy workspace, so that the employee feels comfortable, it takes a relationship of trust between employee and employer, when there is this trust, the employee will be able to feel, use and be able to give the best of him, to achieve better results. So, there's a bit of my perception of decent work. (Interview, Yaoundé, November 2021)

The invocation of the term 'holy' here is something that would not always be used in more secular settings; however, in the work of the Don Bosco trainers, it seems appropriate as they are trying to foster a culture in line with the Don Bosco principles. 'Holy' in this context is also a container term for values, well-being and the holistic approach to skills development and 'decent work', which encapsulates many of these aspects of employment and training in secular terms and also captures the difficulties of attaining this type of secure, stable employment. Learners during our focus group discussions insisted on the importance of the spiritual aspects supporting the development of value-based attitudes at work based on (self) respect and (self) discipline, solidarity and empathy towards others. Many said they came to understand the importance of this aspect gradually. 'At the beginning we did not like it, we were there for a technical training and not for being treated as a child, though we were already mothers, but slowly we realised that it was one of the most important aspects of our

learning experience that will last and be transferable to other work or aspects of our lives' (FGD, Yaoundé, March 2022).

In fact, despite the group's Catholic origins and observation of Catholic ritual and celebration, Don Bosco centres pride themselves on their inclusive nature, with spaces for different forms of worship, and they were often commended by informants for the spiritual nature of their work. Spirituality more broadly was seen as a positive element of the Don Bosco programmes, creating greater emotional and personal investment and a greater sense of community. When we asked specifically about being a Muslim at Don Bosco, the learners emphasised that they were given space to worship as they needed, though some mentioned that they had become attracted to Christianity by being at Don Bosco and because of the generosity of the trainers and the Don Bosco priests.

This sense of Don Bosco as an inclusive safety net has also helped Don Bosco learners navigate recent crises. For example, when we asked further about 'decent work', it was also often linked to the COVID-19 crisis by the Don Bosco trainers and to the ability of their graduates to find opportunities in a decimated economy. For Don Bosco personnel, COVID-19 has had a largely negative impact, with restrictions on movement and contact meaning they have been hampered in recruiting new students from both local schools and other settings such as children's shelters. They have also found it difficult to place young learners into roles with local employers, as one trainer in Sierra Leone told us: 'food centres were closed as well as tailoring and designing …. Restaurants were closed and even those who were on training had to stop. Most of the employers are now saying that they don't have to pay workers and so most were laid off and even to help the young people with internship opportunities is difficult' (Trainer Interview, Freetown, December 2021). For young women this was particularly hazardous as it could mean losing an entire year of work, education or training, though much of this was mitigated by the Don Bosco system, which tried to keep contact with all their learners throughout the various lockdown restrictions:

> We worked during the confinement period with lessons on Zoom, Skype and even WhatsApp. We tried with the means of edge, to tinker with something, and among the centres, we were much congratulated, because we did not really stop our activities. (Trainer Interview, Yaoundé, November 2021)

However, as other trainers told us, there were false starts and obstacles to be overcome as the crisis deepened, with unequal access to lessons and facilities causing issues: 'it was the reality a bit difficult because not all houses are electrified for example, or all houses do not have a computer and not all children have Android phones, so it was already a big difficulty for us, to transmit the lessons online' (Trainer Interview, Yaoundé, November 2021).

Equally, many trainers noted the difficulties faced by young women returning to training or trying to find work. As one trainer observed in Yaoundé, even as they tried to reintegrate their learners, they found that some young women who had previously been in training could no longer continue as they had fallen pregnant during the pandemic, with added health risks due to their isolation. ‘In the recovery, some of the women, found themselves in situations where they could no longer really easily continue training, I mean pregnancies for some who had painful pregnancies, pregnancies at risk’ (Trainer Interview, Yaoundé, November 2021). Another knock-on effect has been the increased levels of childcare, with one trainer reporting how young women were caring for the younger children of their relatives who could no longer attend school. Finally, one trainer told us how the scarce employment placements, which already prioritised young men, had now shifted even further away from a gender balance. ‘Very quickly those who ask you, for example, to place a young person who has been trained as a priority’ it’s the young boy we take … so it will always happen that all the young boys who have been trained, are more quickly recruited, inserted. While young girls toil a little more’ (Trainer Interview, Yaoundé, November 2021).

‘We are now a family’: TVET at Don Bosco’s professional centres

For young women in both Cameroon and Sierra Leone, Don Bosco’s professional centres provide a welcome relief and offer a chance of success in an economy weighted against them. In both contexts, girls engaged in TVET often face multiple prejudices, with families often preferring formal educational pathways, secure formal employment or even migratory routes out of the country, even when these pathways are dangerous or unrealistic (Maïrama 2014). In such a context, TVET is frowned upon because it does not offer many formal job opportunities and may keep the young graduate in informal jobs or in precarious self-employment. It is stigmatised as a less lucrative option, particularly as families often support TVET trainees financially. However, as a young woman from the Don Bosco centre in Ebolowa (Cameroon) recounts, the particular Don Bosco system of pastoral care, with its religious connotations and personal touch, helped convince her mother that the course was worthwhile:

> Coming here (to the Don Bosco training institute) was not easy because my mother wanted something else for me, for me to go to another school where you can obtain the BTS (Brevet de Technicien Supérieur) or a professional BA, but I told her I am looking for a training course where I will be supported, a centre that does professional integration. … but really it was difficult for her to let me come her’, I’m not going to lie to you. She said to me, what is it going to do for you, she was really against this training, I had to call on the pastor of our church to convince her, but she was still

> reluctant, Finally, she saw the way we treat visitors here to Don Bosco, that convinced her. (Trainee Interview, 24Ebolowa, November 2021)

For many of the girls we spoke to, finding their way to TVET courses was far from a linear or straightforward experience. In Cameroon, a number of girls have tried one career or another, been unemployed or in some cases even tried university courses, though they realised that university courses did not give them the right skills for finding a job: 'During job interviews, employers asked me, "what can you do practically", and I realised that I could not do practical work' (FGD, Yaoundé, November 2021). Many families choose to give priority to the schooling of young boys, considering that it is more profitable in the long term. Moreover, for many female trainees, starting a TVET training meant navigating the multiple care, work and familial responsibilities placed upon them:

> It is always the woman who takes care of everything at home. I have a colleague who lives in ODJA, he takes his motorcycle at 5am, he parks it at Mobil ÉMANA, he takes a taxi, he comes to work, he is on time every day. I arrived at work one day with my baby, his nappies and his bottles. He had a lot of respect for me; he explained to me that when he gets up in the morning, he is just getting ready, his wife has already prepared his breakfast, he takes his breakfast, he goes to work. I have to get up, I prepare breakfast, I have to put the house in order, I get the children who go to school ready to go, before I get ready 'it's really not easy'. It's not easy for mothers who still have young babies; those who have older children are better off because the first children can take care of the others but until then it's not easy for mothers. (Trainee, 23, Yaoundé, November 2021)

In Sierra Leone, Don Bosco targets young women from marginalised backgrounds, many of whom have are orphaned and/or neglected children who permanently live on the street, or primarily depend on illegal activities, including commercial sex work, for survival. Testimonies from girls indicate that some girls enter into commercial sex work as early as 12 years, staying on in the practice for a long time. It is in the street that Don Bosco social work teams initiate relationships with most of the girls that the organisation has supported. To these girls, Don Bosco is perceived as a provider of rescue services, as one girl told us: 'Don Bosco has done a lot of things for me, because I am alive because of Don Bosco, because they saved me from the street. If it was not Don Bosco I would still be on the street' (Trainee Interview, 16, During Town). Due to its approach of building relationships with the girls while in the street, and over time influencing their decision to exit the street and enrol in TVET, and for some to return to school, Don Bosco was often referred to as a family:

> They [Don Bosco] paid our fees and supported us with other needs until we graduated, and up till now they are supporting us; sometimes they supply us with food, and we are now a family and I'm confident with what I have achieved. (Trainee Interview, 17, During Town)

Most girls targeted by Don Bosco come from difficult family situations, including parental neglect, orphaned, extreme poverty and depravity in the household. This is the backdrop to why the girls drop out of school in the first place then live much of their lives on the street until they come into contact with Don Bosco social workers, who eventually enrol them in Don Bosco services. For a number of girls the Don Bosco environment allied with the more immediate returns of practical skills training suits their more immediate needs, as this informant details:

> I do not have the intelligence for school, that is why I like skills training, because in school it takes one year to get promoted but in skills training you can learn a lot in months. Like for one hair style that you plait someone, they can pay you 1.5 million Leones. I like skills more than school because that is what my heart tells me to learn. (Trainee Interview, 16, During Town)

TVET is not for everyone though, and for many of the girls joining a TVET programme requires some initial vetting to see if the girls can fully commit, with Don Bosco offering a carefully calibrated infrastructure which begins with medical and psychological support before girls are identified as suitable for the commitment of a long TVET course. Some girls take short starter courses to prepare them for TVET training, which can take up to two years. In Freetown and their nearby complex at During Town, Don Bosco mostly offers TVET courses in the hospitality sector, including catering, hairdressing and cosmetology, and tailoring and dressmaking, with most of the training currently outsourced. While this feeds into traditional gender profiling around TVET training, importantly an increasing number of girls are training in male-dominated professions. One trainee told us how she was breaking the mould by learning welding due to the career prospects and the social respectability it offered. 'It is rare to find women learning welding in this country. We know that with the focus that we have on learning welding, the men will be admiring us when we graduate' (Trainee Interview, 18, During Town).

Despite the fact that the situation of female trainees in Cameroon is not as difficult as that of those from Sierra Leone, the Don Bosco professional centres are still perceived as peaceful places which allow them to escape everyday hardships and concentrate on their dreams and the development of their future, and they perceive the staff and their fellow trainees as a second family.

In Sierra Leone, the precarious nature of everyday life made the Don Bosco trainees much more vulnerable. For a number of the young women we spoke to in Sierra Leone, despite a package of support from Don Bosco, entering the labour market had proved a challenging process. Don Bosco TVET programme delivery is structured such that the transition to employment begins in the closing months of training, when trainees are placed with industry and businesses for a three-month

internship. Job placements have a dual objective. The first is to expose the trainee to the professional practice of skills in the market setting, providing the opportunity for the trainee to improve their technical proficiency through more and intensive practical experience while simultaneously creating the space to interact with clients and customers in the market environment. Secondly, internships create the space for trainees on the verge of completing their training to build relationships with prospective employers through which they may find a job. Results from these pathways proved mixed, with low salaries, difficult employers and a lack of jobs local to their homes meaning it has been difficult for many of the girls to retain regular employment: 'Don Bosco helped us find work, but that job is also difficult. The pay is so small, and we have kids … that is why we have continued to work there' (Trainee Interview, 23, Freetown).

The Don Bosco workers were deeply frustrated by this situation but explained that a lack of continuous funding coupled with the deteriorating job market in Sierra Leone made finding secure work very difficult. For example, catering jobs had dried up due to the lack of tourist and business visitors, with most jobs being taken quickly by the ever-expanding pool of catering graduates. In this context, in a setting where jobs are scarce, many Don Bosco graduates are forced either to rely on informal networks and relationships to seek and eventually land a job or to start a business on their own. When graduates spoke about 'having connections', they referred to having someone in a network that can open the door to potential employment. The network might comprise family and relatives, politicians and other influential people in society. The aspiration for most graduates is to set up and operate a business in the sector for which they have been trained, sometimes with the support of their networks. Graduates in hairdressing and cosmetology naturally desire to run hairdressing salons, while graduates in catering express a preference for cookery and the fast-food business.

In addition to acquiring technical competencies in their respective TVET occupations, most graduates acknowledged that the TVET provider taught basic business management skills, which seemed to have promoted an understanding of managing business revenue, marketing skills and so forth. Graduates generally believed that if they had the opportunity to start a business now, they could manage it successfully, with significant growth in the size of the business in the next five years. However, the major barrier to realising this aspiration is the lack of capital for business start-ups. Graduates believe £200–300 is a reasonable amount of money with which to launch a start-up. Don Bosco has in the past provided micro-business start-ups, but that depends on the availability of funds for individual projects, and even where they have provided support many Don Bosco staff noted that success was never guaranteed.

Conclusion

As we have shown, the potential for gender-transformative TVET systems in precarious contexts where young women are most vulnerable is nearly unlimited, with significant opportunities to directly challenge persistent and sometimes invisible gender barriers through the development of social and transferrable life skills as well as integration in the concrete world of work and employment. According to trainers at Don Bosco, empowering young women to follow and achieve their broader goals will lead to economic empowerment and autonomy, as well as broader social changes. However, the limitations of the job market, attitudes of employers and everyday constraints may hinder actual opportunities.

However, if the Don Bosco pedagogical model offers many innovative and well-grounded positive aspects, some points of improvement may need further investigation. The fact that the model targets individual development and does not directly challenge community or structural inequalities except through the role model approach of successful young men and women may be questioned further. Another area for improvement which is shared with other local organisations may be the need for ongoing monitoring of the context in order to have reliable data on the social realities and the evolution of the labour market.

As we move forward with our project and explore more directly the everyday lived realities of young women engaged in TVET programmes, we encounter multiple and intersecting challenges which show that the potential of TVET to transform gender realities exists but needs to be put in synergy with a careful reflection on labour market stereotypes and real opportunities; impacts of sanitary, political and economic crises; and improvement of social care facilities. As the literature suggests, overcoming 'durable' gender inequalities (Kabeer 2006) which negatively impact the lives of young women cannot be accomplished overnight, and complex barriers must be overcome if young women are to experience any real changes as they transition to precarious employment landscapes.

As we discussed at the beginning of this article, policymakers need to find new ways of understanding girls' lives and livelihoods as they move through the TVET architecture and experience the gendered realities of education, training and employment transitions. With young girls facing reduced pathways in terms of work, especially after long periods of school absence and rising vulnerability during times of crises, the dream of 'decent work' seems even more remote. In this context, the concept of 'decent work' urgently needs to be redrawn in terms which more accurately chime with lived experiences, entrenched gender inequalities and the fragmented local job markets in which workers live. While the girls we worked with did have aspirations which matched the decent work objectives, in most cases they struggled to achieve their own

modest aspirations (feeding their children, getting by), let alone to achieve more difficult targets such as having job security, dignity and safety. If girls in the Global South are to have a 'decent future' as envisaged by the UN and ILO, then a greater understanding of intersections between gendered identity and experience and skills training is now more urgent than ever.

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Young people and gambling in sub-Saharan Africa: towards a critical research agenda

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Abstract: Recent decades have seen gambling become a highly lucrative industry across sub-Saharan Africa. Fuelled by the democratisation of access to digital finance and internet technologies, this gambling boom has been concentrated in Africa's urban economies, where expanding youth populations are increasingly connected to global circuits of sport, popular culture and speculative forms of consumption. This has engendered growing interest in gambling as a distinct and emerging field of academic enquiry across sub-Saharan Africa. To date, psychiatric, epidemiological and behavioural sciences have provided the dominant frame for measuring the extent of 'problem gambling' and addiction, but there remains the need to expand and diversify the field to encompass more critical and interdisciplinary approaches that recognise gambling as a densely significant social and cultural phenomenon. This article aims to provide a point of departure for a critical research agenda on the differentiated impacts of gambling on young people and their communities across the continent.

Keywords: gambling, young people, sub-Saharan Africa, future research

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Introduction

Recent decades have seen gambling become a multi-billion-dollar industry across sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) (iGB 2020).[1] Fuelled by the democratisation of access to digital finance and internet technologies, this gambling boom has been concentrated in SSA's urban economies, where expanding youth populations are increasingly connected to global circuits of sport, popular culture and speculative forms of consumption. To date, legislation has largely failed to keep pace with this unprecedented market expansion and diversification, with many governments torn between the need for containment and the benefits of revenue generation (Sichali *et al.* 2022).

We use the term 'gambling' in a specific sense here. Gambling essentially involves wagering something of value (usually money) on an uncertain outcome for a potential prize or profit. This activity has a long history and takes a number of forms, ranging from children's penny games of pitch and toss to stock market speculation as well as loot box gaming (Reith 1999). However, our focus in this article is the specific type of commercial gambling that is produced by a global industry and promoted as a form of leisure and consumption. The products of this industry range from sports betting and lotteries to electronic gaming machines, casinos, bingo and – most recently – the migration of all of these games onto internet platforms, handheld devices and apps. Since the 1980s, the industry has grown in size and scope, boosted by political-economic neoliberal ideologies of market deregulation and economic competition, to become an increasingly powerful and global force. At a time when countries throughout North America, Australasia and Europe encouraged the proliferation of gambling as a source of wealth generation and tax revenue, the industry itself mobilised cutting-edge technological and financial systems to promote ever more profitable products and market them across a range of platforms.

More recently, with a number of countries across Europe and North America introducing tighter regulations around gambling, industry players have attempted to establish new markets. They have begun to refine their products to 'fit' national gambling habits and to colonise what they regard as emergent markets. The countries of Southeast Asia, Eastern Europe and particularly sub-Saharan Africa, which they

[1] The geographical category of 'sub-Saharan Africa' has been the subject of contention in recent years. Some have suggested that the category is loaded with racial and racist assumptions and it is undoubtedly true that it has been used in this way (Ekwe-Ekwe 2020). Like all geographical categories, such as North and South America, 'sub-Saharan Africa' is inherently reductionist, subsuming a complex and varied set of cultural and social realities that exceed the boundaries of states. However, such categories can be useful when exploring regional trends (Economist 2019). In this review, we have deployed the term 'sub-Saharan Africa' with the intent of describing regional trends in gambling practices among young people. While delineating our literature review in this way, we draw attention to specific subregions and countries where the studies we draw on do so.

regard as an 'untapped market for gambling' (Liggero 2020), have been a key focus of industry efforts.

In this distinctly neoliberal African context, gambling has also become a focal point for wider political-economic and cultural concerns, with politicians and policymakers alike cautioning against the detrimental consequences associated with gambling harms. Many have raised concerns about the destabilising and extractive effects of commercial gambling on local economies, where relations of work are often precarious and informalised, and where many struggle to navigate opportunities for wealth, livelihood and social mobility, with significant consequences for development (Amutabi 2018).

The risks to youth demographics have been highlighted as a particular area of concern (Yunus 2022). It is known from the international evidence that children and young people are more vulnerable to the harms of gambling than older adults and that these harms can be particularly enduring (Messerlian *et al.* 2005). The experience of gambling problems at an early age can negatively affect young people's development in myriad ways by, for example, interrupting education or training opportunities, curtailing the growth of interpersonal relationships, and creating debt. The cumulative effects of such harms have an ongoing and detrimental impact on future life chances.

All these trends – the proliferation of commercial gambling throughout the region, as well as increasing concern about its impacts – have engendered growing interest in gambling as a distinct and emerging field of academic enquiry across SSA. Reflecting the traditions of Euro-American academic enquiry, the dominant framing of gambling and its associated problems within African scholarship has come from the psychological and behavioural sciences. The knowledge that has been produced through this perspective relates mainly to the prevalence and epidemiology of gambling, and to the risk factors that shape gambling practices (Bitanihirwe & Ssewanyana 2021). While vital in establishing a robust research agenda, there is a need to expand and diversify the field to encompass more critical and interdisciplinary approaches that recognise gambling as a significant cultural phenomenon laden with meaning, imaginaries and complex entanglements of biology and culture, history and economics, morality, religion and class (Reith 1999). Such an expansive project requires a commitment to 'scaling up' our analytic frame to appraise the diverse social realities that shape the changing significance and allure of gambling across the continent.

This scholarly challenge opens up a new and interesting set of questions about what we can learn about the varied territories and cultures of SSA from gambling and how, theoretically and methodologically, we might go about learning it. What, for example, does the uptake of particular gambling practices, including those powered by digital technologies, tell us about the ways in which young people understand, imagine and navigate their aspirations for the future? And, in turn, how are youth futures

(re)shaped and transformed by the changing salience of gambling at this 'human–material nexus' (Pickles 2014: 215)? To ask such questions is also to confront the analytic blind spots of the emerging field, extending its critical parameters to interrogate the genealogies of gambling practices in the region, the political economy, promotional culture and regulatory regimes that shape gambling as an expansionist global industry.

This article aims to offer fruitful provocation and a point of departure towards such a critical research agenda. It begins by establishing what we know about the status quo in the field, summarising extant knowledge on the prevalence and categorisation of gambling practices among youth demographics. There then follows a turn to explore the rich potential of interdisciplinary approaches to the critical analyses of gambling in SSA, before tracing some of the notable contributions underpinning these developments and exploring where lessons can be learned from the wider field of gambling studies. These insights will lead us to consider the differentiated impacts of gambling on young people and their communities across the continent, signposting emerging issues and areas of neglect and generating a critical agenda for the future of research in the field.

Dominant constructions of gambling: pathology, epidemiology, and demographic and behavioural associations

The emerging literature on gambling among young people in SSA is dominated by psychiatric, epidemiological and psychological framings. That is to say, scholarship to date has tended to focus on the prevalence and incidence of 'problem gambling' or 'addiction' and has sought to identify demographic and behavioural drivers of gambling. Many of the assumptions and methodological approaches that frame gambling research in North America, Europe and Australasia have been exported to the countries of SSA, often without consideration of their applicability in different cultures and contexts. So, for example, the same conceptualisations of gambling – that it is an individual psychological problem – and the same methodological tools – clinical screens and questionnaire items – have been used on different population groups, in different social settings to the ones for which they were originally designed.

Despite this, a body of African scholarship has nonetheless made essential contributions to our understanding of contemporary gambling practices among the young people of diverse SSA countries. It has outlined the extent of gambling throughout the region, particularly its perceived relation to income generation, as well as its interconnections with other risky behaviours such as alcohol and drug use.

For example, survey-based approaches have suggested that gambling is widespread among underage populations and is more popular among youth than older

adults (Abdi *et al.* 2013; Ahaibwe *et al.* 2016; Aguocha *et al.* 2019). In addition, a systematic review of gambling patterns and 'problem gambling' among young people in SSA noted that, despite heterogeneous approaches to measurement, the prevalence of 'pathological gambling' among young people ranged from 2–3 per cent in Southern Africa to approximately 10 per cent in Eastern Africa (Bitanihirwe & Ssewanyana 2021).

Other studies have quantified the scale of everyday gambling practices. In Uganda, for example, one survey documented that the majority of young people aged 18–30 placed bets daily (30.2 per cent), weekly (34.7 per cent) or bi-weekly (20.1 per cent), although we note that the denominator is not reported in this article (Ahaibwe *et al.* 2016). Such intensive betting practices have also been documented among young people in Nigeria (Uzochukwu & Ekene 2021), Kenya (Gathuru 2021) and Ghana (Glozah *et al.* 2019).

A number of studies have also sought to quantify demographic and behavioural factors which influence gambling practices. A common finding reported by cross-sectional surveys is that gambling is more common among young men than young women. Studies in Ethiopia (Abdi *et al.* 2013), Ghana (Glozah *et al.* 2019), Kenya (Gathuru 2021), Nigeria (Mustapha & Enilolobo 2019; Temitope *et al.* 2019; Ayandele *et al.* 2020) and Uganda (Kiwujja & Mugisha 2019) all reported higher rates of gambling or more positive attitudes towards gambling among young men than young women. However, not all studies reported such stark differences, with one in rural Ghana reporting similar levels of problem gambling in both males and females (Odame *et al.* 2021).

As well as identifying young men as being most engaged in gambling and at risk of harms, survey-based literature has also presented a range of behavioural and motivational associations. Some studies have suggested that there are links between multiple risk-taking behaviours, such as alcohol and drug consumption, engaging in crime, unprotected sex and physical fighting (Muchimba *et al.* 2013).

The motivations of young gamblers have also been subject to scrutiny, with a number of studies pointing to the importance of the idea of gambling as a source of wealth. In Nigeria, surveys have consistently identified financial motivations, such as the need to earn extra income, unemployment, financial strain and the pursuit of 'quick money', as drivers of gambling participation among young people (Mustapha & Enilolobo 2019; Temitope *et al.* 2019; Olaore *et al.* 2020; Ayandele *et al.* 2021; Uzochukwu & Ekene 2021). In Kenya, one study observed that the pursuit of additional income was a significant motivator for young (predominantly male) sports bettors and that sports betting was strongly associated with some form of employment, the income from which stakes were derived (Gathuru 2021). Other research has pointed to the role of gambling as a source of social acceptance among peers (Aguocha *et al.* 2019).

The literature reviewed here has been valuable in establishing the scale and nature of gambling participation, as well as estimates of its harmful manifestations among youth. These approaches have also highlighted how gambling practices are often entangled with other risk-taking behaviours and driven by attempts to increase income. While extremely valuable, psychiatric, epidemiological and behavioural approaches are unable to address the broader genealogies in which youth gambling in SSA is enmeshed, the political-economic dimensions of the phenomenon, and the lived experiences of gambling among young people who gamble. We turn to these now.

Before the 'problem' of gambling: historical approaches to folk gambling in SSA

While the recent influx of digitally mediated commercial forms of gambling in SSA has undoubtedly produced a dramatic shift in the region's gambling landscape, gambling itself is by no means 'new'. Indeed, the SSA region is home to a rich variety of folk forms of gambling, of complex historical and cultural significance. Limited, but rich, scholarship has documented and traced the trajectories of some of these folk gambling practices, noting their intersections with pre-colonial social formations, the slave trade and colonial rule (Reefe 1987). One such game is *abbia*, a 'pitch-and-toss' game in which a collection of nuts or wooden chips, carved on one side, are thrown into the air, with players betting on how their chip will fall in a complex array of potential combinations (Quinn 1971). *Abbia* is usually positioned as a West African game and historical accounts have linked it to complex forms of social exchange. Reefe (1987) describes how *abbia* was woven into forms of male domination, with women staked in games, enabling frequent winners to accumulate wives and use them to secure loyalty from other men by 'loaning' wives to them. Reefe (1987) also notes that enslaved humans were frequently used as stakes on the Guinea Coast during the slave trade, as well as in pre-colonial communities situated between southern Nigeria and the East African Lakes.

Among the conclusions of Reefe's unique historical survey of gambling in Africa is that:

> Gambling has been the unexamined exchange system of Africa. In some societies, it ranked just behind bridewealth as a nonmarket mechanism for transferring goods, services and rights in people. Food, salt, iron tools and weapons, beads and cowries were commonly staked. Cattle were redistributed … Land was bet. (1987: 64–5)

Since Reefe's survey, historians have made few advances in documenting the history of folk gambling practices in the SSA region and the networks of social and material

exchange they produce remain underexamined. A notable exception is Stephen Louw's (2018) study of the South African game of *fahfee*, a form of informal lottery operated by people of Chinese origin since at least the start of the 20th century. Louw describes how *fahfee* is enmeshed in a complex set of relations of exchange, with Chinese operators seeking to extract wealth to enable social mobility for their children, 'runners' employed from within the communities providing cultural mediation and players viewing it as offering a realistic chance of acquiring lump sums of money to facilitate purchases that are ordinarily out of reach.

As well as drawing our attention to the complex social and material exchanges which folk gambling practices enable, Reefe and Louw also highlight the metaphysical dimensions attributed to these practices by players. For example, Reefe (1987) notes that *abbia* players commonly sought fortification from a range of folk medicines, special meals and pre-game rituals intended to provide insight into the winning chip combinations that would manifest the following day. Louw (2018) describes how *fahfee* players often invoke dreams, bodily movements (e.g. a twitching eye) or ancestral forces in their explanations of what guides their number choice.

Through these accounts, both Reefe and Louw expand our understanding of folk gambling in the region, positioning it as spanning social, material and metaphysical domains. In doing so, they prompt us to ask how these folk framings might influence young people's contemporary gambling practices, configuring responses to the new commercial offerings with understandings that are culturally distinctive and have been passed down through the generations.

Gambling in colonial and post-colonial perspective

Historical accounts of folk gambling practices not only reveal potential frames which contribute to the construction of contemporary practices but also offer insight into the displacements and impositions of the colonial and post-colonial periods. As Reefe (1987) notes, colonial powers often prohibited folk gambling practices, contributing to the wider repressive cultural and material violence that characterised the colonial regimes established in SSA (Fanon 1963). Such prohibitions provided the space in which new forms of gambling could be, and were, introduced.

In Zimbabwe, for example, a state lottery, horse racing and, latterly, football pools were all introduced, at various points, by the British colonisers (Roberts 2007). African access to gambling was, however, prohibited by racist legislation from 1914 until 1959, when Africans were first permitted to purchase state lottery tickets. Following the amendment of discriminatory laws, the country underwent a significant liberalisation of its gambling landscape with the formal legalisation of football pools. The example

of Zimbabwe provides us with insight into how precursors to popular contemporary forms of gambling were bound up in the discriminatory logics and practices of colonial violence. As with scholarship on folk gambling practices in the SSA region, however, the literature on colonial-era gambling practices is limited, leaving substantial questions unanswered.

Gambling during the immediate post-colonial period is also under-documented. One area that *has* received some attention is state lotteries (Brenner & Servet 1995; van Wyk 2012, 2013, 2021). These contributions illuminate the ways in which post-colonial state lotteries across SSA became vehicles for raising what van Wyk characterises as 'soft' revenue, in contexts where building tax bases was politically painful. Such lotteries, van Wyk contends, also speak to the themes of dignity and citizenship. Following the racist nature of gambling legislation in colonised countries such as Zimbabwe, the launch of state lotteries offered citizens of newly independent African states the opportunity to participate in an activity that had previously demarcated the discriminatory intersecting boundaries of race, class and status.

While scholarship on colonial and post-colonial gambling in the SSA region is underdeveloped, what there is speaks powerfully to the contemporary contexts in which young people across the region are situated. As with approaches to folk practices set out by Reefe and Louw, colonial and post-colonial perspectives prompt us to consider how the legacy of racist discrimination and the subsequent pursuit of state building have shaped the regulatory, economic and socio-cultural environments in which contemporary gambling practices are enacted.

Political economies of gambling in contemporary SSA

Contemporary forms of gambling have made significant departures from the lotteries, football pools, horse racing and folk games which characterised gambling in SSA in the pre-digital era. With rapidly increasing access to internet technologies and mobile money (Statista 2022), SSA has been targeted by gambling corporations seeking to expand their markets into new territories. Encouraged by positive market assessments from consultancy firms (KPMG 2016), these corporations have introduced an array of sports betting, lottery and electronic gaming products into a region where legislation commonly pre-dated the digital era (Sichali *et al.* 2021).

As gambling corporations have been met with increasing criticism and stricter regulatory regimes in a number of countries across Europe and North America, they have looked to new 'untapped' markets as potential sources of profit. Their expansion into SSA has drawn comparisons to the strategy of the tobacco industry when it became subject to more stringent forms of control and shifted its attention to Africa,

China and South America (Reith *et al.* 2019). This movement can be seen as a form of neo-colonisation: the drive that David Harvey (2006) spoke of when he described the tendency of capitalism to seek out new sources of profit through geographical expansion (Reith 2018).

A comparative policy analysis on regulation of gambling was conducted on forty-nine countries to understand how SSA states currently legislate for and regulate gambling (Sichali *et al.* 2021). The study reported that gambling is regulated in forty-one of the forty-nine SSA countries, with explicit provision for lotteries (95.1 per cent, 39/41), casinos (95.1 per cent, 39/41) and sports betting (80.5 per cent, 33/42) common in these countries. However, the study noted that across the region, there is limited explicit legislative provision for online products (36.6 per cent, 15/41), electronic gaming machines (31.7 per cent, 13/41), slot machines (22 per cent, 9/41) and advertising (43.9 per cent, 18/41). The study also suggests that 87.8 per cent (36/41) of the countries do not publicly publish regulator reports.

With limited legislative provision for contemporary gambling technologies and formats, corporations have established significant markets for their products across the SSA region, collecting billions of dollars of revenue each year (iGB 2020). Research in Malawi has analysed how the leading provider of sports betting products, and the licensee for the country's National Lottery, established its market (Bunn *et al.* 2020, 2022). In the first of these studies, the authors noted that after receiving its license, this provider used seven key strategies to build a customer base: it adopted a mobile network franchise model built on mobile data technologies and vending approaches familiar to Malawians; used media coverage to draw attention to winners and its business; purchased high-visibility advertising near areas of high footfall; sponsored local events and teams; built a strong association with (European) football through its name and its marketing; appealed to aspects of hegemonic masculinity, using the tropes of masculine competition; and constructed narratives of individual and collective benefit that the business was bringing to Malawi (Bunn *et al.* 2020). A standout finding of this study is that representatives of the provider studied were quoted in newspaper reports framing gambling as a way to 'get money', that is, generate income.

The second study extended this analysis, via interviews with regular sports bettors aged 18–35, to identify how the provider used a network of street-level agents in urban Malawi to pursue customers, in a manner comparable to the indirect rule strategies often deployed by colonial interests. It also describes how the sports betting provider has extended into legally grey territory by cross-selling a range of casino-style electronic gaming products through its sports betting outlets (Bunn *et al.* 2022). Conclusions of these two studies suggest that the industry is operating in an extractive manner, co-opting Malawians in the process of extraction, and that it presents its products as a means to earn money and escape poverty.

It is clear that the legislative environments in which gambling corporations operate across SSA have significant limitations that provide commercial interests with few regulatory barriers and considerable freedoms when constructing business models. As research from Malawi has illustrated, this enables dubious claims about products to be published by newspapers, indirect rule-style forms of wealth extraction and cross-selling of casino-style products in an ambiguous legal space.

The meanings and futures of youth gambling

A significant body of scholarship has explored how young people make sense of and construct their betting practices across SSA contexts. This literature is largely made up of interview studies but includes some important contributions from ethnographers. Common themes in the literature include connecting gambling to European football fandoms, to work and skill, to income and routes out of poverty, to sociality and friendship, to danger and 'addiction', and to religious values.

A substantial body of literature has argued that contemporary gambling practices in SSA are intimately connected to European football. Researchers in Nigeria and Zimbabwe have offered nuanced accounts of the entanglement of European football fandom and betting practices (Akanle & Fageyinbo 2019; Chiweshe 2020). Multiple studies have argued that the popularity of European football and the associated 'trans-local stadia' (Akindes 2011) are drivers of contemporary sports betting among young people in SSA (Akanle & Fageyinbo 2019; Glozah *et al.* 2019; Schmidt 2019; Bunn *et al.* 2020; Chiweshe 2020; Olaore *et al.* 2020; Owonikoko 2020; Adebisi *et al.* 2021; Chinyama 2021; Gathuru 2021; Nabifo *et al.* 2021). While some of the research suggests that young people place bets to demonstrate allegiance to the European teams that they support (Chiweshe 2020), others have documented critical reflection on this practice, with interviewees describing how they attempt to place bets dispassionately (Bunn *et al.* 2022). Whether bets are placed with allegiance or calculation, it is clear that the commodification and globalisation of European football is a motor driving contemporary youth gambling practices in SSA.

An important dimension of the connection between European football fandoms in SSA and contemporary betting practices is the framing of sports betting as a form of skilful work. Industry representatives have publicly positioned sports betting as a game of skill, in which knowledge is a determining factor (Bunn *et al.* 2020). A study in Uganda describes how young people have conceptualised 'work' to include gambling because they consider it to be 'working smart' and they believe that sports betting is full-time employment (Namuggala 2017). For example, one of the youths in Namuggala's study asserted:

> 'Sports betting is a full-time job. It is not easy I'm telling you. You have to keep informed in sports. We listen to radio, read newspapers in order to bet right. You have to know how teams are performing in the season, which team is likely to win or lose … otherwise you make losses.' (2017: 74)

While this 'work' does not fall within conventional approaches to formal employment, it is clear that the social practice described by this interviewee is indeed a form of 'work', in that considerable time and effort is invested in the pursuit of sports betting.

Positioning of sports betting as a form of work is closely related to youth narratives which frame gambling practices as forms of income and routes out of poverty. In Malawi, one participant in an interview study explained that vendors suggested that sports betting offered a route to 'easy money', while another began gambling in an attempt to earn funds to rebuild his family's storm-damaged house (Bunn *et al.* 2022). Studies in Nigeria and Kenya have also observed that young people perceive the pursuit of sports betting as offering the chance of a better economic future (Schmidt 2019; Olaore *et al.* 2020).

Youth approaches to gambling in SSA are not just economic and instrumental; they are also deeply rooted in social connection and friendship. In Nigeria, Adebisi and colleagues (2021) describe how youth gambling practices are entwined with concerns for social connection, belonging and community. Research in Malawi has also offered this perspective, suggesting that youth sports betting practices are entwined with friendships and communities built on a shared interest in European football (Bunn *et al.* 2022).

Alongside these 'positive' narratives relating to youth gambling, research has also documented a range of narratives which present the lived concerns of young people in SSA. For example, some young people from the region presented gambling as a 'bittersweet' practice, as it has the potential of giving both pleasure and pain, while others felt that gambling is a time bomb, as it has the ability to destroy one's life in a flash (Adebisi *et al.* 2021). Other studies suggest that young people have come to understand gambling as a form of 'addiction' which dominates their lives and waking thoughts (Bunn *et al.* 2022).

Islamic perspectives have also been presented in research on youth gambling. Although gambling is not permitted by Islam and is perceived as a sin against God, the number of Islamic youths participating in gambling has increased substantially in recent years (Sule & Adam 2018). Islamic teachings deter gambling participation because they believe it turns people away from the values required of followers of Allah, destroys families and causes loss of wealth (Sule & Adam 2018). Accordingly, scholars informed by Islamic teachings suggest that gambling must be declared illegal and that gamblers should be arrested and punished by the government in Nigeria (Sule & Adam 2018).

Reframing gambling: youth harms and futures

Researchers in Australia, New Zealand, North America and Great Britain have increasingly called for gambling to be viewed and responded to using a public health lens (Shaffer & Korn 2002; Reith *et al.* 2019; Wardle *et al.* 2019). Specifically, some researchers have argued for a move away from the 'responsible gambling' discourse, which presents gambling problems as stemming from individual loss of control and avoids discussion of structural drivers of what is re-framed as 'gambling harms' (Francis & Livingstone 2021). In contrast to the 'responsibilisation' (Rose 1996) strategy that the gambling industry has used to individualise gambling problems, the concept of 'gambling harms' shifts the focus away from pathologised individuals towards a multi-level perspective which highlights the role played by the industry and the state in producing, promoting and making available products that cause harms to individuals as well as their families, social networks and wider communities (Wardle *et al.* 2019).

This broader, harms-based perspective offers a fruitful inspiration for the research agenda in SSA. The literature to date has identified a range of issues which illustrate how gambling harms are manifesting across the region. In a study that sought to assess the effects of gambling on the welfare of 415 youths aged 18–35 years, it was found that about 12.5 per cent experienced negative consequences from gambling, including redirecting money meant for household expenditure, domestic violence and selling household assets (Mustapha & Enilolobo 2019). Further research in the SSA region has documented negative impacts on bettors' household diets, hygiene, education, relationships, moods and cognitive resources (Amutabi 2018; Bitanihirwe & Ssewanyana 2021; Bunn *et al.* 2022). At the most serious end of the harms spectrum, researchers have also reported a range of gambling-related suicides across the region (Kaggwa *et al.* 2022), including among minors (Sichali *et al.* 2021), as well as a significant burden of harmful play in underage adolescent populations (Abdi *et al.* 2013; Ahaibwe *et al.* 2016; Aguocha *et al.* 2019; Sichali *et al.* 2021).

While these gambling harms are problematic in their own right and need to be addressed, they are experienced in a context of intersecting risks, precarities and inequalities. A study of thirty SSA countries estimates that 67 per cent of children are growing up in situations of multiple deprivation (de Milliano & Plavgo 2018). A central aspect of this deprivation is often undernutrition, which remains a significant problem in the region, with an average of 41 per cent of children experiencing stunting (Quamme & Iversen 2022). Young people across SSA also remain the most educationally disadvantaged, with UNESCO estimating that just 81 per cent of primary-aged children enrol in primary education and only 63 per cent complete

primary education (UNESCO 2019). Establishing stable income is a further challenge faced by young people across the region, who remain heavily reliant on the informal sector and struggle to find long-term formal employment (Fox *et al.* 2016). Navigating transition to sexual activity also presents a significant challenge to young people in SSA, with young people experiencing a higher incidence of sexually transmitted infections than their peers in high-income regions (Zheng *et al.* 2022). High levels of gender-based violence (Wado *et al.* 2021) and child marriage (Yaya *et al.* 2019) deepen the challenges faced by young people during their formative years.

Towards a critical interdisciplinary research agenda

In this review, we have set out the range of scholarship and perspectives that address the rapidly shifting terrain of youth gambling in SSA. In this concluding section, we draw together the critical observations we have made to suggest multiple directions for future research.

It is clear from the psychiatric, epidemiological and behavioural literature that contemporary youth gambling is widespread, often intensive and associated with a range of other risk-taking behaviours. Yet this literature is underpinned using questionnaires or ‘measures’ that have not been developed for or tested in the multiple socio-cultural contexts that make up the SSA region. Our first recommendation for future interdisciplinary research is therefore:

1. *To study historical and contemporary folk gambling traditions across the SSA region.*

Scholarship on folk gambling practices, both historical and contemporary, is an important yet understudied domain of gambling research in SSA in general and as it relates to young people specifically. The rich survey of historical folk gambling traditions offered by Reefe points to significant socio-historical phenomena. However, his account of games and practices draws the majority of its evidence, as is often the case, from colonial observers and white scholars. Therefore, we recommend deeper exploration of historical and folk gambling traditions across the SSA region.

Addressing this important area of enquiry will deepen our understanding of the rich multiplicity of SSA gambling traditions. This is an important research agenda in its own right that would document a vital aspect of the social and cultural formations of both past and contemporary SSA societies, providing a novel lens through which to view life in these communities. Beyond this, such research is likely to provide insight into how folk knowledge systems might shape the reception of contemporary commercial gambling products.

Accounts of how colonial and post-colonial social arrangements positioned gambling practices are, as with folk practices, understudied. As we have highlighted through the example of Zimbabwe, colonial regimes produced a range of racist legislation that discriminated against Africans. Such colonial-era prohibitions, as van Wyk has argued, have shaped how post-colonial independent states and their populations have responded to gambling, notably through state lotteries. However, the way in which gambling intersects with the colonial and post-colonial remains understudied, and therefore we suggest future research seeks:

2. *To study gambling's colonial and post-colonial formations and trajectories.*

As with our previous recommendation, this agenda would enable researchers to address an important research gap that is of interest as a novel area of socio-historical enquiry. In addition to this, studying the ways in which gambling is positioned in colonial and post-colonial formations will further enhance the genealogies of contemporary gambling practices across the region, offering insights into the complex relations of power through which these practices are produced.

The political economy of gambling in the SSA region is another area in which limited research has been done. Policy research to date has identified a range of limitations in the legislative environments of the SSA region. A notable issue is that the digital revolution has enabled rapid growth of online and internet-mediated markets which legislation has, in the majority of SSA countries, yet to explicitly address. This, along with other regulatory challenges, has created a political-economic environment in which gambling corporations have achieved rapid growth with limited oversight. We therefore encourage researchers:

3. *To study how contemporary gambling corporations exploit the intersection of political and economic systems across SSA.*

Pursuing such research would enhance our understanding of the diverse political and economic formations across the region, and the gambling industry's relationship to them. It would also help policymakers and public health practitioners identify potential approaches to limiting harm through legislation and regulation.

Research on the ways in which young people in SSA make sense of and practise gambling has produced some important insights. The centrality of European football for many young bettors has been well documented, as has the complex relationship between gambling and informal income generation. The social and peer networks in which gambling is situated have also been explored thoroughly. The next step for this body of scholarship, we suggest, is to utilise alternative methods of enquiry that go beyond semi-structured interviews, which have been so central to its development. Research should therefore aim:

4. *To study how young people make meaning with and practise gambling using a full range of qualitative methods.*

Such research would ideally include more ethnographic work in settings beyond sports betting halls, including research on the spaces in which young women gamble. The use of participatory methods, including arts- and folk-media-based approaches, would also enrich this body of research, going beyond its logocentric nature. Finally, researchers should consider exploring how gambling practices change over time using longitudinal designs, such as those that underpinned the concept of 'gambling careers', which highlighted the shifting nature of these practices and their embeddedness in particular socio-cultural contexts (Reith & Dobbie 2013).

As part of this work, researchers should be attentive to the potential importation of culturally specific research tools and assumptions from Anglo-American-based gambling scholarship and critically assess to what extent – if at all – it 'fits' the specific context of an SSA gambling research agenda. Existing gambling scholarship relies heavily on the use of screening tools and questionnaire-based approaches that privilege quantitative forms of knowledge. Part of the challenge for future research would involve, for example, exploring the applicability of these epistemological tools and approaches (which, as we have noted, were developed in specific settings, with specific population groups in mind) to the varieties of gambling behaviour and experience across diverse SSA settings.

The emerging 'gambling harms' paradigm, informed by critical sociological and public health approaches, has begun to highlight the ways in which negative impacts of gambling can exceed the individual. As such, it encourages us to think beyond pathologised individuals that are 'responsibilised' by industry to detract from critical appraisal of their products and how they are regulated. However, the harms paradigm is still developing, both in relation to SSA and globally. We therefore argue that researchers need:

5. *To develop culturally specific approaches and methods for understanding gambling among different social groups and across contexts throughout the SSA region.*

Pursuing this agenda will require at least two strands of work. Exploring and documenting the range and experiences of gambling harms in different communities and across different social groups might be one productive way to engage with this exercise. Within it, we urge researchers to focus on the range and extent of gambling harms experienced by young people in particular, as well as on the ways they evolve over time. This would involve longitudinal approaches that followed young people through (at least some of) the lifecourse and that also paid attention to the impacts of gambling on their social networks and wider communities. Moreover, given the well documented extent and nature of adolescent participation and the growing evidence

of harm, greater priority needs to be given to *responding* to these harms in ways that prevent and reduce them.

Concluding points

This article has outlined how the introduction and proliferation of commercial forms of gambling across SSA has intersected with a range of features, including precarity, poverty and inequality, that place people, and particularly young people, at increased risk of being harmed by gambling. In economic contexts of unemployment and lack of opportunities for many, gambling products have been positioned by the gambling industry, and consumed by hopeful young people, as potential future-makers that can provide material wealth and security. In doing so, the industry has skilfully aligned its offerings with the aspirations of young people in the region.

The irony of this, as we have noted, is that gambling harms can be particularly enduring for young people, who are at a significant and potentially vulnerable stage of the life cycle. Such harms can impact their life chances in terms of loss of education and training opportunities, undermining the development of interpersonal relationships, and by exacerbating their already precarious financial position. Loss of money, opportunities and relationships can be particularly damaging during a young person's formative years.

We suggest that the expansion of the gambling industry into countries which are already impoverished and experience multiple levels of disadvantage represents a form of neoliberal neo-colonisation. Just as powerful global gambling companies dominate the region economically, so hegemonic ideas about individual psychology and responsibility come to dominate the ways people think about its impacts.

We finally suggest that the development of a critical, SSA-specific research agenda that is sensitive to the cultural and social contexts of gambling across the region is crucial for understanding the harms of gambling in the lives of young people and is also a first step towards reducing, and so resisting, them.

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Young people 'making it work' in a changing climate

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Abstract: Globally, young people face weak labour market demand and have been particularly susceptible to recent livelihood stresses and shocks linked to climate change. In this article, we consider what happens when young people face intersecting challenges including climate change. While much of the literature focuses on barriers to work and how to break these, we consider young people's struggles and successes in securing and maintaining work. The focus is on Uganda, demographically one of the world's youngest countries and home to a largely 'underemployed' cohort of young people. Our findings identify some of the many ways in which climate change disrupts young people's livelihoods. Young people are already proactively responding to climate change. This points to the need for other actors to learn from young people's existing endeavours, to build in more support and opportunities, manage risk and insecurity, and construct a more climate change-resilient infrastructure.

Keywords: Uganda, climate change, interview, survey, shocks, stresses, work, livelihood

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Introduction

It is widely documented that young people, especially in lower-income countries, experience substantial structural obstacles to making a living. This is due to a combination of low labour market demand, low pay, high borrowing rates and young people's relative disadvantage within this compared with older adults due to them having weaker social networks, less collateral for loans and less work experience, at a time when youth populations are rising or peaking in many countries (Sumberg *et al.* 2021; O'Higgins 2017; Barford & Coombe 2019; Shankland *et al.* 2022; UBOS 2022). Added to this we see further stresses and strains – in recent years COVID-19 and worsening climate change are key examples – which often have a distinct and deeper impact on young people because of their age and life stage (Barford *et al.* 2021a, 2021b, 2021c, 2021d). While this particular predicament for young people is, to some extent, attended to in the Sustainable Development Goals, in the form of an indicator 8.6.1 for young people not in employment, education or training, this interim target has been missed and reset (Cieslik *et al.* 2021).

A lack of opportunities for young people has diverse impacts and risks associated with it and requires a stronger multi-sectoral response than we have seen to date. For instance, we know that a lack of opportunities can push people into work they might not otherwise choose or push them into migration which they may not want either. Some examples of this include sex work, betting, dangerous work and migrating (including forced migration) for work (Namuggala 2017; Birhanu *et al.* 2021; Bwambale *et al.* 2022). It is important to recognise that migration for work carries its own risks and sometimes illusory rewards. At the extreme, annually an estimated twenty to thirty young people travel from Uganda to the Middle East, expecting to work, but instead fall victim to organ harvesting (Muhindo & Mwanje 2022). In fact, the Federation of Ugandan Employers (2022) describes Uganda as 'a source and transit region for human trafficking' (p. 2). More commonly, however, economic migration is associated with informality, casual work, underpayment and work-related risks (Federation of Ugandan Employers 2022; Bwambale *et al.* 2022; Nakaweesi 2021).

Not only can the search for work itself be dangerous and usually does not lead to decent work outcomes, we also know that economic fragility and poverty can predispose young people to other stresses and shocks. This impacts young people as a cohort. However, when we disaggregate young people into subgroups, we see some groups are more exposed to and impacted by external shocks, including people living with a disability or in poverty, women and displaced persons (e.g. Birkmann *et al.* 2022; IPCC 2022; Scott *et al.* 2021; Mueller *et al.* 2022). These identities overlap and intersect, of course.

This article considers the wider structural challenges of underemployment for young people's lives, and how young people are actively problem solving to get by and make a life. Uganda, classified by the United Nations as one of least developed countries (UN DESA 2023), is also home to a large and growing youth population. By 2020, 80.8 per cent of the Ugandan population were projected to be under the age of 35 years, with the youth population expected to double in just twenty-five years (UBOS 2022; UNICEF n.d.). People living in Uganda are now facing the disruptive and sometimes devastating early stages of anthropogenic climate change (Nakate 2021; Mugeere *et al.* 2021). The article sets young people's livelihoods in a changing climate in the wider context in which they live. We find that young people are actively adapting and problem solving, but they are also experiencing climate change-induced losses. We argue that interventions are required to boost support to young people given the magnitude of this challenge and its worsening future trajectory.

In the next sections, we share our theoretical framework and approach to climate change, followed by detailing young people's working lives in Uganda and the research locations. We then detail our methods before turning to our findings, which first offer an overview before going into detailed learnings from three young people. We end, of course, with a discussion and conclusion.

Theorising youth responses to structural disadvantage

The theoretical framework for this article combines sustainable livelihoods approaches with structural understandings of youth disadvantage (Chambers & Conway 1992; O'Higgins 2017). Thus, the empirical patterns of widespread youth underemployment, low pay and low labour market demand are considered alongside the agency, resourcefulness and strategies young people bring to this challenge. This framing influences the methods and research focus, shaping subsequent findings and policy recommendations (Natarajan *et al.* 2022). Considering either structures or agency alone risks overlooking the ongoing inventiveness of young people (Jeffrey & Dyson 2022) or unreasonably responsibilising them despite their constrained access to levers of economic and political power.

The livelihoods approach emerged following the 1992 publication of 'Sustainable rural livelihoods' (Chambers & Conway 1992; see also Natarajan *et al.* 2022). The approach responded to how development thinking, at the time, focused on measuring productivity, employment and poverty, which Chambers and Conway argued did not capture the complexity and diversity of rural livelihoods, including the 'plural priorities of the rural poor and their many and varied strategies to obtain a living' (1992: 3). In response, they proposed sustainable livelihoods as a framework for development thinking, consisting of capabilities (coping with shock and stress, finding opportunities

and making use of these), equity (the enhancement of the most deprived and ending discrimination) and sustainability (environmentally, protecting the assets upon which livelihoods rely; and socially, resilience and building foundations for future generations) (Chambers & Conway 1992). This new thinking was subsequently built into the technical development work of governments, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and multilateral organisations (Natarajan *et al.* 2022).

A livelihood is a broader set of activities, assets and capabilities than narrowly defined employment (Serrat 2017; Conway 2022). Livelihoods can include the direct production of food and other goods alongside regular wages and other income-generating activities (Conway 2022: 88). While originally developed in rural settings, livelihoods are also relevant to urban settings as urban dwellers navigate, or hustle, various livelihood opportunities (see, e.g., Thieme 2018). Livelihoods are understood as strategies to get by, especially when times are tough. For Serrat (2017), *sustainable* livelihoods support coping and recovery in the present and future. Conway also sees resilience as central to livelihoods, with diverse activities being a strategic response: 'Diversity is a strategy for making a living, enabling people all over the world to cope with challenging and risk-prone environments and social circumstances' (2022: 88). While helpful to understand how people are coping, it is also crucial that we understand how these livelihoods have come about – foregrounding the role of economics and politics alongside gender, race, age and other factors (Natarajan *et al.* 2022).

Scholars observe that many young people are struggling to transition to adulthood. Difficulties in attaining traditional markers of adulthood – including marriage, moving out of the parental home and economic self-sufficiency – are now widespread. As such, concepts of waithood, timepass and 'extended youth' have arisen (Jeffrey & Dyson 2008; Jeffrey 2010; Honwana 2014). This must be understood in terms of a current numerical mismatch between young people seeking work and the available opportunities, a situation shaped by the colonial push towards increased wage labour, followed by IMF structural adjustment programmes which froze wages and squeezed public sector employment, which was then compounded by growth without sufficient job creation (Mamdani 1990; Pallaver 2018; Ahaibwe *et al.* 2013). These structural drivers require systemic responses. As such, our theoretical framework considers the broad situation, young people's responses and the need for youth-informed interventions from other powerful stakeholders (including government).

Uganda's changing climate

While Uganda is not alone in experiencing climatic change, it is worth offering some contextual detail. In recent years Uganda has experienced various types of disruption,

including rainfall leading to lake and river flooding, as well as landslides in volcanic areas of Bududa and Kisoro, with more frequent and severe droughts in the south-west (Nagasha *et al.* 2019; Barford *et al.* 2021c). Such climate anomalies are the main contributor to environmental migration within Uganda (Call & Gray 2020). One area of scientific interest is what can be attributed to anthropogenic climate change. For some time, experts have used the analogy of climate change 'loading the dice' to increase the likelihood of more frequent and intense weather events (Hickman 2012). More recently, climate change attribution studies can offer precise figures when sufficient background data is available (Met Office 2023).

Climate records for many African countries are limited; nevertheless, the IPCC has medium confidence that human-made causes are pushing up the number of hot extremes in the region (IPCC 2021; Toulmin 2009). Although the specific disruptions referred to in this article do not have attribution studies, the general increase in frequency and intensity is attributable to anthropogenic climate change. The young research participants, by virtue of their age, have not observed the past fifty years of change but do have first-hand experience of contemporary weather extremes and unpredictable seasonality. As many young people may not think of these changes in terms of climate change, for this research we referred to 'environmental changes', focusing on temperature, wind, rain and seasonality.

Youth livelihoods in Uganda: 'young people here are doing things, but not in line with what they want'

In Uganda roughly 700,000 young people reach working age each year, but just 75,000 new jobs are created annually (Federation of Uganda Employers 2022). It is well documented that in Uganda, young people take on diverse livelihood activities, which vary with context, season and gender (Carreras *et al.* 2021). While women in sub-Saharan Africa have higher labour force participation than in other world regions, they experience other disadvantages, specifically around the quality of work; young people also have lower levels of employment than older adults (Chakravarty *et al.* 2017). Thus, being young and female delivers double disadvantage when it comes to work.

The effects of education are also evidenced in national data, as unemployment rates among young people rise along with the level of educational attainment. This pattern of educated unemployment, whereby those with tertiary education were 11.8 per cent unemployed compared with those with no education at 3.6 per cent, is not unique to Uganda (UBOS 2016; Jeffrey 2010). In the absence of a strong welfare state and unemployment benefits, it is often only possible to not work when one has other sources of support. The School to Work Transition Survey showed that as

many as 68 per cent of young people in Uganda had only completed primary school, whereas 3.4 per cent had been educated to tertiary level (UBOS 2016). Various pressures lead to education being cut short – including the cost of school fees, short-term financial benefits of keeping children contributing to the household, the cost of sanitary products for girls, as well as pregnancy and marriage (Kikulwe *et al.* 2017; Montgomery *et al.* 2016).

In terms of wider trends, young people are decreasingly interested in agricultural work, while migration from rural to urban areas and even abroad is common. Few (12 per cent) young people aspire to agricultural work despite its contribution to 23 per cent of GDP (Awiti & Scott 2016). Young women were often less likely than young men to engage in commercial agriculture – in part due to their smaller resource bases and gender norms (Rietveld *et al.* 2020). A study of 1,537 young people in Uganda found that being an older youth boosted the likelihood of migration and improved the chances of employment (Nzabona *et al.* 2019). Yet migration can be temporary, as young women and men regularly move back and forth between rural and urban settings (Rietveld *et al.* 2020). On leaving rural areas, most young people confront the reality that the service and industrial sectors have not experienced the job-rich growth needed to employ the numbers of young people seeking work (Ahaibwe *et al.* 2013). Instead, many young people in Uganda start their own businesses (Awiti & Scott 2016), and this has become a partial solution to the lack of jobs in Uganda.

Other youth responses to the lack of job opportunities and widespread concerns about unemployment (Awiti & Scott 2016) include activities which might be socially unacceptable, or at times illegal. However, as Namuggala (2017) points out, for the formerly displaced young people she worked with in northern Uganda, activities such as sports betting or sex work, though widely pathologised, can also be economically empowering. Thus, we see young people pragmatically responding to the possibilities available to them. More broadly, young people often continue to make positive societal contributions despite these challenges (Barford *et al.* 2021a).

In addition to the challenges presented by low labour market demand, low levels of pay and minimal social protection, young people also have to navigate other shocks to their livelihoods. In recent years these have included worsening climate change, insecurity in some regions including Karamoja, the lockdowns associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, and a considerable population displacement caused by conflict and increasingly by extreme weather events.

Given the theoretical and empirical context set out above, the remainder of this article addresses the following research questions: what does it mean for young people to ‘make it work’ in the context of a changing climate? How can this be theorised? And what are the implications for policymakers?

Research focus: Karamoja and Busoga

This research article focuses on the livelihood options, opportunities and decisions of young people in Uganda aged 18–30 years old. This research focuses on two areas of Uganda (Figure 1). One is the Karamoja subregion, in the far north-east of the country, bordering Kenya. Karamoja is an arid, pastoralist region where livestock are an important livelihood asset, and the Karimojong pastoralists regard livestock as a 'moving bank', a source of nutrition (meat and milk) and quick cash income for households (Akwongo *et al.* 2022). Karamoja is especially poor within the Ugandan context, and as a result many move to the capital city of Kampala to work there and are especially visible as street hawkers. An estimated 95 per cent of street children in Kampala are from Napak, a district of Karamoja (Nabatanzi 2022), and the most recent Uganda National Household Survey (2019/20) found that 66.3 per cent of households were in the subsistence economy, with 65.7 per cent of people living in poverty (UBOS 2021).

Busoga subregion is close to the capital city and was the industrial economic centre of Uganda during colonial times. The British colonisers encouraged industry in the lakeside town of Jinja, which was connected to Mombasa on the Kenyan coast by the Uganda railway. The railway was both a political and an economic project. It enabled British political control of the source of the River Nile in Jinja (with downstream implications for Egypt and the Suez Canal) while also facilitating considerable resource extraction (Lubega 2021). Labour practices also shifted during this colonial period, as the demand for labour soared with the proliferation of railways, roads and cash crops (Fuller 1977). For example, the Uganda railway needed 22,500 workers, of whom 6,500 were incapacitated due to injuries and 2,500 died mainly from disease (Lubega 2021). While some labour demand was met through forced labour, for many this period was a time of transition from subsistence farming to waged work (Pallaver 2018). Jinja's agglomeration of industry has since been dispersed to regional centres across Uganda, and labour market demand in Busoga has subsided. Compared with Karamoja, Busoga has lower levels of subsistence households at 55.2 per cent, and fewer poor people at 29.4 per cent (UBOS 2021; Mwanika 2022).

Methods

This research used a youth co-research approach, with the aim of equitably engaging young people in the research process (Proefke & Barford 2023; Barford *et al.* 2021c). This approach offers enhanced validity and insight, aligns the questions with local need, and in the process boosts young people's skills, knowledge and empowerment. The research process was designed to create heterotopic spaces in which young people

Figure 1. Map of Uganda. The red circles indicate the study areas in Busoga to the south and Karamoja to the north. Based on United Nations map.

are treated equally, to facilitate collaboration and strong intergenerational partnerships, based on the recognition of the need for two-way learning between professional and young researchers (Proefke & Barford 2023). Young people were systematically engaged throughout the research process – from setting the framework through to dissemination of results.

The research methods include a survey of 1,214, combined with 111 interviews. In addition, we ran eleven focus groups and twelve key informant interviews as part of the wider project (Table 1). This range of methods provided a variety of data types, supporting different sorts of analysis and a broader understanding. The thirty-two young researchers (aged 18–25 years, half women) were knowledgeable about the respective geographies and had mastery of the local languages. Of them, eight focused on qualitative methods and twenty-four on quantitative methods. All young researchers received a week-long foundation training, designed to support young people to inform the research process. Research participants were 18–30 years old, based upon the Ugandan Government definition of youth (Republic of Uganda 2016: 2). Pseudonyms are used for respondents to protect their identities.

Recruitment for the survey, focus groups and interviews was stratified to ensure that young people from diverse backgrounds were included, in an attempt to avoid some of the pitfalls of research which accesses those who are easiest to reach (Chambers 1983, 2017). The stratification includes people from Karamoja and Busoga, from urban/peri-urban/rural areas, with some working in agriculture and others not, and is gender balanced. This diversity helped us to identify how climate change impacts young people from different settings. One limitation is that Uganda's recent landslides, a spatially concentrated and locally devastating impact of anthropogenic climate change, are not captured here due to our geographical focus.

For this article, the data is analysed to understand the wider patterns of opportunities and stresses which young people face, and their responses. First, the survey data was consulted to document the diversity of work young people engage in. Then, the interview data was analysed to find out what it means for young people to 'make it work' in the context of a changing climate. Having reviewed the 111 young people interview transcripts, three are presented here, spanning locations, gender and diverse income sources. As none of these three young people were parents, the influence of

Table 1. Methods and numbers of young people (aged 18–30).

Method (number)	Busoga	Karamoja
Interviews (111)	60	51
Focus groups involving five respondents (11)	6	5
Key informant interviews (12)	6	6
Surveys (1,214)	608	606

parenthood is not captured despite 40 per cent of girls being married by the age of 18, and a quarter of 15–19-year-old girls having a child or being pregnant (UNFPA n.d.). The analysis focused upon the nature of the challenges and how young people respond, and it considered (actual or potential) structural responses alongside personal strategies. The interviews offer detailed insight as to how broader trends play out in the tangible, multifaceted contexts of individuals' lives – and what policy responses might help.

Findings: 'young people don't have a choice, they have to make it work'

Portfolio livelihoods

This section details some of the main ways in which young people make a living in the Karamoja and Busoga subregions of Uganda. Through our survey and interviews, we identified a wide variety of livelihood activities in which young people are engaged, including juggling paid work (including self-employment/entrepreneurship and employment/working for someone else) with education, volunteering and unpaid tasks (including domestic and care work) (Namuggala 2017; Baillie Smith *et al.* 2022; Shankland *et al.* 2022). Before we look in more detail at how these various roles overlap and intersect in individuals' lives, this section outlines the labour market possibilities that young people have (Table 2). A key observation is that most of these possibilities are characterised by instability and studded with experiences of failure, hence the term *possibility* rather than *opportunity*. We have found that for those in work, often it doesn't last, and even the few who are in formal employment may go unpaid for long periods of time. The livelihood activities presented below are often associated with low incomes and minimal economic security. One of the young researchers explained that 'they just do what they are doing because they have nothing to do but it's the only option. So, I conclude that young people here are doing things but not in line with what they want.'

Our survey data reveals the following:

1. **Care and domestic work:** more young women reported domestic responsibilities than young men, 16 per cent and 12 per cent respectively. Bigger differences were seen between rural young people in Karamoja (22 per cent) and urban youth in Jinja (4 per cent). Respondents with little or no education take on more family responsibilities than those with secondary and post-secondary education.
2. **Self-employment:** 45 per cent of young men were self-employed, compared with 40 per cent of young women. Busoga has higher self-employment at 46 per cent compared with Karamoja at 40 per cent. Respondents with no

education had lower levels of self-employment (39 per cent) than those with primary (41 per cent), secondary (43 per cent) and post-secondary education (47 per cent). Thus, self-employment rises with education level.

3. **Formal employment:** Operationally, formal employment typically entails a written contract, social security coverage and entitlement to annual leave and sick leave (ILOSTAT 2023). Formal employment was low, with 12 per cent having jobs with contracts and an extra 5 per cent doing formal internships. Considering gender, 11 per cent of young women and 23 per cent of young men hold formal contracts. Young people with post-secondary education had higher levels of formal employment (44 per cent); respondents with no education had minimal formal employment (5 per cent).

Table 2. Variety of livelihood activities undertaken by young people in the Busoga and Karamoja subregions of Uganda. Based on survey data and interviews in 2021.

Domestic and care work: nursery attendants to care for young children, babysitting (female), housework (female), gathering water for home consumption.
Small-scale businesses: bakery, mobile money services, charcoal burning and selling, local brewing, hairdressing (female), barbering (male), traditional herbalist, liquid soap making, motorcycle repair, bicycle repair, selling music/films/computer accessories, tailoring, sanitiser making and vending, transport services as bodaboda (motorcycle taxi) riders and cyclists, drivers/conductors/luggage handlers in transport business, roadside kiosks, food selling on roadside, second-hand clothes/shoes/homewares shop, street hawking, cooks, clothes washing services, ironing and fetching water for money, arts and crafts (e.g. jewellery, thread bags, table cloths), carpentry, waste collection.
Construction activities: working as porters on construction sites, provision of welding services, brick laying, painting and decorating, brick making, gathering and heaping murram (laterite gravel) for sale, breaking rocks to make concrete stones for construction.
Agricultural activities: growing crops and raising livestock for home consumption, gathering firewood for home consumption, small-scale irrigation with easy to mature seedlings, poultry/piggery/beekeeping/goat/cattle farming, livestock trading in weekly markets, vegetable selling in markets e.g. greens, fruits, fresh foods such as matooke, cassava etc., plant nursery for trees and garden flowers, produce business with beans/sunflower/sim sim, subsistence agriculture for home consumption with maize/groundnuts/beans/sweet potatoes, sugar cane growing/cutting/weeding/loading for factories, collecting firewood to sell, fishing, digging people's gardens.
Small-scale mining: stone quarrying, mining sand from the rivers and lakes, and mining of marble stones, gold, and other precious stones in Rupa County during the rainy season.
Games and sports: joining football clubs to develop their talents, gambling, playing ludo, sports betting and playing pool for money, hunting for food provision and butchery operation.
Formal employment: factories employment e.g. BIDCO Uganda Ltd and Hot Loaf Uganda, pump attendants on fuel stations, work with NGOs as community workers, marketing officers via social media.
Other: financial services i.e. engage in Savings and Credit Cooperative Organisation/group opportunities such as savings especially bodaboda riders, street control parking, volunteer work at Uganda Red Cross Society, still in school especially tertiary institutions and post-secondary level and some are interns/apprentices.

Young people 'making it work'

We now turn to the stories of three individuals to unpack macro-level patterns of opportunities and constraints, to see how young people are proactive in making their livelihoods work. In this section we meet Naigaga, who maintains several small businesses simultaneously; Kidodo, a poultry and arable farmer; and Lokut, who is a miner and cattle trader (pseudonyms used). The stories of Naigaga, Kidodo and Lokut illustrate how climate shocks and stresses do not occur in isolation and therefore should be understood within their wider context.

Naigaga: second-hand clothes sales, mobile money kiosk, and poultry farmer, aged 22. Jinja city.

Naigaga lives in the city of Jinja, located on the northern shore of Lake Victoria. Educated to diploma level, she has several simultaneous income sources, comprising a second-hand clothes business, a mobile money kiosk and poultry farming. Many other young people also work in the market where she sells clothes, so the market trading experiences she shares here resonate with wider experiences in the city. Naigaga manages her work throughout the week, with her second-hand clothes taking priority. For example, on Mondays and Thursdays there are many customers at her clothes stall, so she pays someone else to staff her mobile money kiosk. In addition, her poultry business also engages another worker, who feeds the birds while she is working at the market. Poultry is a good business for Naigaga, as she sells the eggs and earns well from it. She manages three small businesses as well as doing housework. Of these activities, Naigaga prefers and spends most time on her clothing business:

> I can request for a bale [of second-hand clothes] from Kampala and if it's a good one with quite lots of first class pieces, then I can sell them all at a go, get my substantial margin, and re-order immediately since this all occurs in early hours of the day. But for the mobile money business I have to wait at the end of the month for the Telecom Company to calculate my profits. So, I like clothing very much compared to the rest.

Naigaga has noticed changes in seasonal weather patterns over the years. There used to be two distinct seasons in a year, but, she comments, now it seems there is only one season because the regular rains have reduced so much. There are disruptions caused by both excessive and insufficient rain, as well as the sun 'over shining'; at other times the weather is calm. Yet when there is extreme weather, the market businesses suffer. Heavy rains, floods and winds present challenges whereby flooding spoils stallholders' goods, especially if flooding occurs at night when no one is around to salvage things. This susceptibility to water damage is heightened because the roof of the market leaks,

so the market traders sought help to improve the roof and dig drainage channels to handle excessive rain.

Heavy morning rains can disrupt transportation. At times this prevents Naigaga and others from arriving at the market in time to do business with the early customers who cannot wait – so rain can directly impact income on that day. When rains fall onto unpaved roads they can quickly turn to mud, and deep mud may prevent transportation, meaning that goods, sellers and buyers do not arrive at the market. During rainy periods prices might rise due to transportation issues. When the opposite occurs and the weather is too dry, the market becomes dusty, meaning fewer people go to the market and stallholders' goods become dusty and spoilt.

Naigaga's clothing business faces other challenges too, as she explains. 'In the clothing line are the thieves who pretend to be buyers or customers, but just come with intent to steal, so that is one of the biggest challenges I face in my business.' But she is resolute, explaining that 'nonetheless, I have managed to resolve these', because the stallholders look out for one another's businesses. This way, thieves may not realise they are being watched and a couple have been caught using this approach. There is also an unpredictability with the business, whereby Naigaga receives a different type of clothing from what she had ordered, meaning she cannot fulfil her own promises to her customers and thus makes a loss. Further, lack of capital limits the size of each order as she uses the income from one set of sales to order the next bale of clothing. While Naigaga would like to scale up her clothing and poultry businesses, her operating budgets prevent such growth.

With excessive rains, Naigaga explains how 'filthiness increases within the market and the community dwellings which lead to people getting sick'. Her chickens also suffer from extreme weather, whereby fever or bird flu affects the birds, especially young birds, and can be fatal. Naigaga's birds tend to die more when it is wet, while in hotter Karamoja, chickens suffer more from excessive heat. Naigaga is managing this risk, saying 'I personally have learnt to get all that is required for the birds, so I can respond quickly when they get flu or fever, I just treat them immediately without delay. Although this limits me on the number of birds that I can afford at a time because the medication for them is quite expensive for me, thus I keep a limited number of around 300 birds.'

Returning to the research question of how young people are 'making it work' and how to support them, Naigaga navigates several simultaneous challenges. These include a changing and unpredictable climate and the lack of robust infrastructure leading to increasing susceptibility to weather-related disruptions, alongside the uncertainties associated with petty theft and unreliable supply chains. Some of these issues intersect, such as infrastructure being impacted by heavy rainfall. Naigaga's solutions include working with other stallholders to tackle crime, stocking poultry medication

and limiting her flock size. Yet there are also losses which are hard for her to avoid. Infrastructural improvements for roads, drainage systems and market buildings would tackle some of these challenges. Other policy interventions could offer livestock insurance and access to capital, increase security for market stallholders, and improve the reliability of supply chains.

Lokut: miner and cattle trader, as well as finance trainer, aged 25. Rural Karamoja.

Lokut has diploma-level education and works as a miner, cattle trader, pig raiser and trainer with a Village Loaning and Saving Association in the town of Rupa. His biggest work priority is training people on savings and loans to support new start-ups, and of his work, this role is the least susceptible to climate disruption. In contrast, mining is sensitive to weather and occurs during the rainy season because is it dependent on water. Thus droughts prevent mining, yet small rains during mining can lead to flash floods which bury mining tunnels and result in loss of life. Lokut mines with his family, seeking gemstones and gold. However, payments for mining minerals are normally taken on credit, and there is often a delay of one to two months before payment, causing cash flow problems for the miners. Further, Lokut is unsure of the accuracy of the scales for weighing minerals, and not knowing the price of gold means miners are ‘always being underpaid’:

> You find out that you may mine your gold worth 200,000/= (c. £42) and end up being given something like 50,000/= (c. £10.50). So there is a very big challenge … Although we are the owners of the land, there is a monopoly here. These investors who have already constrained locals don’t want other investors to come and buy minerals, so you find that they lower buying prices because they are the only ones.

Floods, drought and wind present a challenge for pastoralists, as when land is disrupted by weather, animals end up poorly nourished, making them more susceptible to disease. Low body weight brings down animals’ market prices, thus animal health and earnings are both impacted. Lokut noticed that ‘animals are dying because of those strange diseases which have never been in existence. Surely it’s the climate changes which have brought these.’ Droughts in the grassy areas of Kobebe and Naitai mean people bring their animals closer to the village, resulting in livestock overcrowding and the spread of disease. Lokut has been impacted by this too. ‘We had a long drought, diseases invaded my pigs and it was alleged to have been due to too much drought. It killed all my 42 pigs.’ Meanwhile, people bring their animals closer to their homes to avoid cattle theft, also causing overcrowding and disease.

In Karamoja as in Busoga, changed seasonality has resulted in people struggling to germinate seeds, resulting in low yields. Previously February was the month

for cultivation in Karamoja, but changing seasonality means seeds dry out and are wasted before the rains arrive. Lokut suggests that 'the youth of Karamoja should be sensitised to open up firms, trained at workshops on climatic changes for awareness such that they open up the food market', and he recommends a particular focus on irrigation. At other times, flash floods often claim people's and animals' lives, especially near the mountains where the Apule and Moroto Komatheniko rivers flow fast. When floods run into homesteads and kraals, goats, sheep and young calves can be pulled into the flow. Lokut explains:

> We are worried as a community, due to these climate changes, because they are too crucial in our livelihood. How are we going to curb these floods? How are we going to tackle the issue of insecurity which is a result of these impacts … as we are looking for pasture and water for our animals and livelihood opportunities, more worry comes in as how we can co-exist with our neighbours despite these impacts.

One response has been talks between district leaders, seeking peace between the Jie, Turkana and other clans. Other responses include teaching children in school not to depend entirely on the cattle, diversifying to include crops that take a few months to yield and provide food, and identifying drought-resistant crops. This has involved working with NGOs, locals and local government to, for example, curb soil erosion. At a higher level, there is also a religious response to these challenges. 'We feel so much troubled because the life of a human being like the Karamajongs who depend on cattle and on the natural texture, we feel so much nervous that we pray to God to be amidst us so that he blesses us with no such dangerous floods and droughts.'

Lokut, like Naigaga, is 'making it work' by adopting several sources of income, which spreads the risk. For him, his training work is the most climate-resilient income source. His interview detailed his own activities and those of other young people in Karamoja. Lokut highlights how work is disrupted by extreme weather events, leading to loss of livestock due to disease and flooding, while struggles over land and water aggravate insecurities between different groups. Further difficulties include exploitative relationships with minerals companies and the prevalence of cattle rustling. When considering solutions, Lokut points to town- or subregion-level responses, including talks between clans, as well as education and training. Additional interventions might include flood warning systems, enforcement of safer mining conditions, transparent information on mineral pricing, a neutral weighing process, and improving access to livestock medication and insurance.

Kidodo: poultry and arable farmer, aged 25. Nakanyonyi town, Jinja District.

Kidodo has studied to university level and is the head of his household. His main income is from poultry farming, which he does with his friends. He recounts, 'we sat and decided to do this, because we tried to look for jobs but in vain. We are qualified but there's nothing in the professional jobs we studied to get. So, we raised some small capital and we started this thing and right now I do have a thing I do for a living.' In addition, Kidodo farms half an acre of maize and volunteers with 'facilitation' (money for participation or transport). He reinvests his income into poultry farming. Other young people in his community also collaborate to get work; he explains that they 'indulge mostly in activities pertaining to groups as we save money so that we can start our own job, for example the youths who are in the bodaboda riders have their own association which leads them as youths into organisations, so they start these groups locally (referred to as circles) as they save their money to start some projects.'

As a livestock and arable farmer, Kidodo's livelihood is especially susceptible to environmental extremes. The farming they do is described as 'village mode', meaning that it is rainfed, so without irrigation systems. This makes planting and growing especially dependent upon the timing and quantity of the rains. Meanwhile, floods and drought can rot or desiccate maize, respectively. Further, disrupted seasonality means 'we may plan to plant maize say in March but due to intensive sunshine we end up planting in May yet by March the gardens were ready, thus we end up doing double work of preparing the garden twice before we plant'.

Like Naigaga, Kidodo finds that poultry farming is also affected by climatic changes. The rain can lead to disease outbreaks, while coldness also affects the birds' health. In the dry season it is hard to get water for his birds as the tap water usually dries out and the lake is far away. As such, Kidodo buys jerry cans of water at sh1000/= (c. £0.21), which is 'quite high on our side'. However, 'when you delay to give them water, especially in the night, by morning you see them panting and feeling thirst'. As Kidodo sums up the impacts, 'we incur extra costs which we did not anticipate, then we lose some of the birds due to delayed response in feeding and treatment thus end up not making any profits which is very discouraging and makes us leave with no hope for the future'.

While not Kidodo's own activities, he also speaks of how other income-generating activities are susceptible to climate change impacts. One example is the popular activity of bodaboda riding (motorcycle taxi). Bodaboda riders are affected by rain and unpaved roads becoming muddy, which can lead to more accidents. As Kidodo explains, 'in such cases if a passenger gets an accident then instead of paying the agreed fare, he/she pays half, this affects the riders in that at the end of it they fail to fulfil their obligations at their homes', as they bring less money home. Overall, rains

make it difficult for people to move, delaying the transportation of people and goods. At the same time, Kidodo and his friends also respond to the new opportunities of the rains. 'When it rains we go and do some vegetable growing which we do sell after a short while, other people get jobs selling jackets and umbrellas … Then if it shines people sell cold water, they make cold passion juices thus creating those job opportunities.'

Alongside the challenges noted above, Kidodo explains how limited money blocks the completion of projects, and that being in a town means a lack of space for group livelihood activities. In the hope of resolving these challenges, the group has contacted local leaders for support, either to bail them out or to engage with youth livelihood projects. This is not always easy given that protocols and bureaucracy can be heavy and slow, and in addition, local leaders may avoid the issue by not responding, saying the person concerned is not available or that others are also waiting for help. As Kidodo explains, 'they play or drag you around till you fail at the end of it'. Thus some potential sources of support do not pan out, and time and energy are lost when such attempts do not succeed.

Kidodo emphasises various challenges. The lack of labour market demand for university-level qualifications meant he turned to arable and pastoral farming. Both are disrupted by climate change, with heat, drought, cold and wet having different detrimental impacts, often with direct financial implications. Yet he also emphasises non-agricultural impacts of climate change. Kidodo shares various ways he and others are responding to these challenges, including requesting support from local politicians, diversifying livelihoods and working with other young people. Other possible interventions include stronger support for young people from politicians, plus climate-resilient infrastructure so that roads are passable during rains and irrigation is easier during drought. Further, policies focused on job creation could enable more young people to find work commensurate to their level of education.

Making it work?

Young people endeavour to make their livelihoods work despite a series of interlocking challenges. Livelihoods scholars show how multiple simultaneous activities can offer a level of resilience (Conway 2022). For Naigaga, Lokut and Kidodo, having several income streams can boost and smooth their income, especially when some work is highly seasonal, such as mining. Further, risk is spread between livelihood activities such that if one fails or is highly seasonal, another may provide some resilience at that time. This was evident for the three young people featured here, all of whom did several types of work with differing time scales, reliability and demands. Ideally, these

complement and compensate for one another. However, diverse livelihoods pre-date the current challenges of climate change (Chambers & Conway 1992), and diversification away from agriculture does not shield young people from climate vulnerability. Extractive and service work are also susceptible to climate disruption, such as mining, shopkeeping and bodaboda driving struggling during heavy rains.

For young people in Uganda, climate change is one of several challenges to which they must respond. Young people also face exploitation, late payment, weak support from local leaders, unreliable supply chains, theft of goods and low pay. This translates into having fewer economic and political resources to invest into solutions which could prevent, buffer or support recovery from climate change disruptions. When young people experience rain, heat and dust destroying their goods; forgo earnings due to rain-soaked muddy roads; or lose livestock, at that moment they may fall into debt or poverty or lose their means to make a living. This situation requires a wider

Table 3. Climate change impacts, youth responses and policy options.

Challenges	Youth responses	Policy options
Heavy rains and cold weather		
• Floods: loss of human lives and livestock • Roads turned to mud: disrupts supplies, customers and bodaboda work • Leaking market roof: goods damaged • Livestock disease	• Use of medication for animals • Reduce flock size • Diversify • Make losses	• Instal flood warning systems and educate on flood risk • Invest in roads and drainage systems • Fix public infrastructure such as market buildings to avoid leaky roofs • Veterinary support
Unpredictable seasonality		
• Time and seeds are wasted preparing to plant at the wrong time • Low yields • No mining due to lack of rain	• Replant later • Diversify • Make losses	• Invest in weather prediction and communication systems • Encourage seed saving
Drought and hot weather		
• Animal illness from disease and heat stress, hard to get water for animals • Desiccation of crops • Dust and heat damages goods	• Buy water and medication for chickens • Diversify • Make losses	• Instal water harvesting and irrigation systems • Advise on drought-resistant crops, learning from indigenous knowledge • Support low-energy cold storage options

Overarching interventions: build climate change-resilient infrastructure, instal weather warning systems, invest in substantial job creation for young people, ensure affordable insurance, promote universal social protection, educate the public on climate change, promote good working conditions and fair pay

lens than livelihoods to understand the broader causes and a fuller range of solutions. Many interventions could create a more predictable, fair and secure economy and society, thus reducing young people's exposure to climate change risks (see Table 3).

The concept of loss and damage from climate change embodies a recognition that climate adaptation is rarely smooth or complete, with loss being permanent and damage being reversible (Huq *et al.* 2013). While we have not focused on mental health in this article, it is relevant to note that sometimes repeated failure due to the magnitude of challenges means young people give up, feeling that they have 'tried everything and failed'. Kidodo shares that 'in Wanyama where I go shopping for my stuff, they [environmental changes] affect these businesses, therefore I feel very bad. … So me, I feel worried and concerned.' Nevertheless, the three young people above persevere despite multiple simultaneous challenges, by spreading risk, asking for help, working together and problem solving. To support young people, policymakers could learn from young people's experiences and intervene accordingly (Table 3).

Conclusion

Young people's responses to climate change range from protests to livelihood adaptations to no response at all (Nakabuye *et al.* 2020; Nakate 2021; Barford *et al.* 2021c). Right now, young people must respond to unpredictable and destructive climate change, both in moments of extreme weather but also in terms of many smaller but persistent disruptions, cost increases, risk increases and losses. There is an urgency to understanding how young people can be best supported, given that climate change is on track to worsen, while the widespread lack of good opportunities for young people remains unresolved (Barford *et al.* 2021d).

This article shows how some young people in Uganda are proactively navigating uncertainties and losses, balancing multiple income opportunities and problem solving issues that arise. In several cases this problem solving involved working together with others in the same situation, to start growing maize, to reduce market thefts or to request the support of politicians. Often young people are problem solving in the absence of wider support mechanisms. Structural, policy-level interventions are needed to complement and reinforce youth responses. In particular, weaving a stronger social and economic safety net from social protection, decent jobs and affordable insurance could limit the losses and shocks wrought by climate change, while improved infrastructure could even avert losses and damage.

Further research is needed to learn what is working and what can be done, and to build upon young people's local and indigenous knowledge to strengthen climate change responses. Theoretically, it is important to hold in mind the ingenuity and

resourcefulness of young people, while also not burdening them with the expectation of solving the substantial social, environmental and economic challenges that governments, the international community and businesses are responsible for addressing. On this note, if researchers can offer clear, evidence-based guidance for policymakers, they may tangibly contribute to supporting young people in the face of climate change.

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PART FOUR

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Young Palestinians' struggles for accountability and participation: beyond formal systems and public resistance

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Abstract: Young people worldwide are engaged in diverse forms of participation which offer a pathway for demanding accountability from governance actors. In contexts with fragile governance structures, young people face a unique set of challenges in their efforts to demand accountability or participate in decision-making. The expected relationship between participation and accountability as understood in liberal, democratic settings is often absent and instead demands for accountability are often made through strategies 'at the margins'. Using Palestine as a case study, we show how young people look for accountability beyond state institutions and the national scale, using diverse strategies depending on their embedded position in society. This analysis sheds light on the complex reality of youth participation and accountability mechanisms in socially, politically and physically contested spaces and, by extension, points towards challenges and opportunities in implementing the Sustainable Development Goals.

Keywords: Palestine, youth participation, accountability, Sustainable Development Goals, governance

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Introduction

The importance of involving young people in political processes and decision-making is increasingly recognised at local, national and international levels (UNDESA 2012; OECD n.d.). However, at the state and subnational levels, vastly different political contexts exist which may promote or prevent youth participation depending on the particular needs and interests of authorities (Theis 2007). As a result, the ways that young people participate vary from engagement in formal processes such as voting in elections, to public protest, to volunteering in community practices of mutual support. Furthermore, young people are not a homogeneous group but a diverse array of individuals who differ by ethnicity, race, religion, abilities, gender and sexual identity and other characteristics which shape their interests and preferences (Checkoway 2011). This calls for an expansive understanding of youth participation that appreciates the many roles young people play in their communities.

Regardless of the form it takes, youth participation is important both as a mechanism for the young people involved to learn about their rights and responsibilities as citizens or members of a community (Jeffrey & Staeheli 2016), and as a strategy to ensure that governing institutions are held accountable for their actions. Young people can play an important role in institutionally led accountability measures such as electoral processes or policy development and/or through individual and community-led accountability strategies, including public protest (Avis 2015). When acknowledging the potential of young people to contribute to holding decision-makers to account, it is important to also guard against assumptions of one size fits all. Typical and linear Western-based models depict youth participation as a practice that leads unproblematically to positive social change without considering the complexity and challenges present in different contexts (Cooke & Kothari 2001; Checkoway & Gutierrez 2006; Cahill & Dadvand 2018). Yet the definition of what makes up 'real, authentic or effective participation' is contested (Kiilakoski 2020: 7). The participation of young people in accountability strategies both shapes and is shaped by the context in which they operate, including but not limited to questions of scale. For example, at the global level, liberal democratic norms embedded in international organisations such as the United Nations (UN) welcome and encourage the participation of young people. However, this policy dialogue does not necessarily translate into an effective practice of participation, nor does it guarantee open space for civil society in all national contexts (Rafique *et al.* 2021).

The UN Youth Strategy states that it seeks to 'ensure [youth] engagement and participation in the implementation, review and follow-up of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development as well as other relevant global agendas and frameworks' (United Nations 2018: 5). Significantly, the UN has made explicit the view that youth

have a critical role to play in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Young people are expected to be 'full-fledged partners in the United Nations work to build a better world for all' (United Nations 2018: 6). Participation is a key component of achieving SDG 16 to: Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels (United Nations n.d.a). However, much of the implementation of the SDG agenda relies on the engagement and leadership of national governments, and doubts have been raised about the state as the custodian for a sustainable development agenda in the context of a highly unequal political and economic world order (El-Zein *et al.* 2016). National political contexts do not always align with democratic norms of youth participation and as such, the strategies young people use to demand accountability vary.

In this article we present a complex picture of the diverse strategies for accountability employed by young people, specifically focused on contexts where fragile governance arrangements challenge the expected relationship between participation and accountability as understood in liberal, democratic settings. Using Palestine as a case study, we show how young people look for accountability beyond state institutions and the national scale, choosing how and where to focus their efforts based on scale (both space and time), their lived experience in a particular place and notions of belonging and citizenship in their community. This includes the decision not to participate, particularly in situations where to do so may put their lives and futures at risk. We argue that it is critical to recognise inaction as a legitimate strategy in a situation where young people are confronted with serious risk as the result of a huge imbalance of power. This is a reminder of the need for international institutions that influence governance and accountability to support young people facing oppression and persecution; young people cannot be left without allies at the forefront of the struggle for accountability against powerful institutions that fail to safeguard their rights. This analysis will shed light on the complex reality of youth participation and accountability mechanisms in socially, politically and physically contested spaces and, by extension, point towards challenges and opportunities in implementing the SDGs.

Youth participation and accountability

Not only do youth have the ability to make valuable contributions to decision-making processes but they also have a right to be meaningfully included in society (Narksompong & Limjirikan 2015). The right to influence decision-making is affirmed in Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which upholds that children and youth are 'full-fledged persons who have the right to express their views

in all matters affecting them and requires that those views be heard and given due weight' (UN OHCHR 1989). This has been widely affirmed worldwide, resulting in the Convention on the Rights of the Child holding the distinction of being the most ratified human rights treaty in the world with 196 state parties (every country except the United States of America) (UNICEF n.d.). We have also witnessed the UN and international organisations investing in ways of engaging youth in decision-making, such as the establishment of the UN Youth Delegates programme, which gives young people the opportunity to participate in the UN General Assembly as part of their country's delegation (United Nations n.d.b). The mobilisation of young people to take action for the SDGs has often been pinpointed as being essential to the delivery of the 2030 Agenda (United Nations 2021).

Nevertheless, the experience of being young, as well as the understanding of who is young, varies from one context to another (Jeffrey 2012; Harlan 2016). Youth is often legally defined as a category based on biological age, yet the conceptualisation of young people or youth is socially constructed and varies depending on social and cultural contexts (UNESCO 2019; Hansen 2008; Worth 2016). This challenges the idea of 'youth' as a generational unit with a collective political agenda. While in some instances identifying as young can form the basis of a political position (Thew *et al.* 2020), young people also represent diverse perspectives, aspirations and plans for the future – both across and within national contexts. Furthermore, young people are often in an 'in-between space politically and legally' (Skelton 2010: 145), with different relationships with political processes and actors. As such, their interest in and ability to engage with opportunities for participation in governance are diverse.

Participation is broadly understood as the many ways that young people are involved or involve themselves in decision-making processes and institutions (Checkoway 2011; Checkoway & Aldana 2013). Participation should be seen as both a process and an outcome (Imms *et al.* 2016). In liberal, democratic contexts, public participation (inclusive of but not limited to free and fair elections) is considered to be a defining characteristic of citizenship (Dalton 2008). For young people, participating in political processes and decision-making is an important part of learning what it means to be a citizen (Jeffrey & Staeheli 2016). Participation also creates pathways for citizens to demand accountability, which helps to hold actors responsible for their actions (Gaventa & Oswald 2019; Schedler 1999; Fox 2007; Joshi 2008). Age restrictions close some channels of formal accountability to young people such as voting, which makes their experience distinct from that of older adults. As such, understanding the experience of young people in demanding accountability from decision-makers warrants deliberate attention.

Simply, accountability can be understood as a 'relationship between those responsible for something, and those who have a role in passing judgement on how well that

responsibility has been discharged' (Guerin *et al.* 2018). The legitimacy of governing bodies is rooted in a sense of responsibility to those that place their trust in them (Khotami 2017). Accountability can be interpreted differently by diverse groups and individuals; therefore, conceptualisations of accountability that go beyond formal pathways are needed (Taft & Gordon 2013; Conner & Cosner 2016). However, participation alone is insufficient to ensure accountability and needs to be complemented by an enabling environment whereby institutions have the capacity and motivation to respond to citizens' demands (Fox 2016), including those of youth.

Young people may be restricted from some mechanisms of participation and accountability such as voting due to age restrictions. At the same time, other factors including class, race, gender and geographical location influence how and whether mechanisms for participation are accessible to young people (Checkoway 2011; Beckwith *et al.* 2022; Ramasamy 2018). In fact, Harris and colleagues (2010) showed that young people are often reluctant to participate in formal political processes because they feel their voices and needs are not taken seriously within traditional power and governance structures. This feeling of not being heard was even more prominent among young women than young men (Harris *et al.* 2010: 20). Additionally, different conceptions of citizenship either as a legal status or as a sense of belonging to a community can shape how people participate in society (Staeheli 2011).

However, young people are not limited to participating in institutionally led activities and processes and may prefer to participate in individualised activities or those organised outside institutional structures (Skelton 2010). Notably, online spaces have become an important way that young people connect and engage with issues locally, nationally and even internationally (Farnham *et al.* 2012; Connolly & Miller 2017; Boulianne & Theocharis 2020). Research on the Arab Spring highlighted the use of technology and digital spaces to create innovative means for political participation in the Arab region (Bengtsson 2013; AlSayyad & Guvenc 2015; Tufecki & Wilson 2012). While some social media campaigning has been dismissed as 'slacktivism', studies have shown that rather than displacing offline political organising, online actions can act as a catalyst for further political engagement (Boykoff 2019). However, inequalities in access to digital spaces (through language, socio-economic status, gender or availability of internet connections) means many young people are excluded from online organising (Clark & Themudo 2006; Hubbard & Williams 2021).

Furthermore, there is a trend in the media as well as the academic literature to focus on the activities of young people in high-income countries (Jeffrey 2012; Hubbard & Williams 2021). However, the experience of young people in the Global South participating in decision-making and demanding accountability is diverse and gaining attention (see e.g. Belhadj & Kurze 2021; Nkrumah 2021). In both democratic and non-democratic contexts, youth are engaged in struggles for accountability, often

through the same mechanisms as their peers in the Global North such as voting, volunteering and social media (UNDP 2014). Yet there are also differences, particularly in contexts where governance structures limit or heavily constrain the participation of young people in formal institutions.

Strategies of accountability for young people in contexts with fragile governance

Although the terms accountability and participation have gained popularity among actors in the field of international development, the political will to turn rhetoric into action is not always present (Carothers & Brechenmacher 2014: 27). In areas of conflict, occupation or where political, legal and democratic systems are fragile or non-existent, states and other powerful actors can often evade traditional accountability mechanisms (Anderson *et al.* 2022). As a result, growing attention has been dedicated to accountability and how to strengthen responses and the responsiveness of governing institutions (Barnes *et al.* 2021; Gaventa 2002; Guerin *et al.* 2018). In these contexts, alternative strategies emerge which seek to engage and demand redress from institutions and actors through alternate mechanisms and pathways.

The need to expand our conception of accountability to include participation in contexts of fragile governance has led to increased attention from researchers and activists on bottom-up approaches to accountability. Scholars have shown the important role of young people and women in bringing about political change during the Arab Spring (Ali & Macharia 2013), the use of cyberspace for non-violent resistance by youth movements in Zimbabwe (Gukurume 2022) and the leadership of young people in the pro-democracy protests in Myanmar (Thant 2021). These accounts show that despite restricted civil society space, citizens (including youth) find ways to demand accountability from decision-makers through 'invented' spaces of participation, alongside or in the absence of 'invited' spaces (Miraftab 2004). Additionally, social media provides an avenue to international attention that was previously unattainable. The *#bringbackourgirls* movement was able to bring international attention to the 276 girls who were abducted from their school in Nigeria in 2014. The perceived inaction of the Nigerian government resulted in campaigning at the national and international levels with the hashtag #BBOG, which spread across the world and pushed the issue into the international spotlight (Akin Aina *et al.* 2019). Thus, this campaign sought to leverage international attention to demand accountability at the national level.

Young people residing in contexts with fragile governance systems are faced with a unique set of challenges in their efforts to demand accountability or participate in decision-making. Firstly, discussions around accountability typically assume the participation of some state power. In fragile and conflict-affected states this assumption

may be entirely without basis as power may be contested and institutions too weak to provide even basic needs, leaving an 'empty void' for other actors to fill (Hill *et al.* 2014). In other cases, state institutions may not recognise claims to citizenship from all those living under their domain, which limits the ability of those excluded to access public services or institutions (Ramasamy 2018).

Adding to this complexity, non-state actors play governance and service delivery roles in many settings, and in contexts with fragile governance, actors outside state agencies can take on an increasing importance; these diverse authorities may overlap and even compete (Barnes *et al.* 2021). The accountability mechanisms of civil society groups and NGOs are highly variable, with downward accountability to beneficiaries being a particular challenge for international NGOs with weaker community ties (van Zyl & Claeyé 2019). For example, the process of 'NGOisation' within the women's movement in Palestine has led to increased professionalisation and projectisation of civil society, which has restricted the spaces for participation for a diversity of women and instead reproduced a depoliticised, homogeneous version of civil society (Jad 2007). In other words, the 'invited' spaces of participation have taken precedence over the 'invented'.

In a similar vein, in many contexts with fragile governance, civil society actors such as NGOs have filled the void in public service delivery and governance, taking on roles typically filled by state agencies. This has been facilitated by funding arrangements that see civil society organisations as implementing agents of the agendas of other institutions (often international bilateral or multilateral agencies) and are accompanied in many places by a process of professionalisation (Roth 2012). This has turned many NGOs into 'governing' bodies, which has strengthened upward accountability to donors and led to a related depoliticisation and a decrease in their ability or desire to fill an 'activist' role (Atia & Herrold 2018). This has been made evident through an analysis showing how digital feedback harvested from NGO beneficiaries is often siloed to the programme they are interacting with and primarily used to report back to funders rather than facilitating accountability for and to beneficiaries (Madianou 2019). As a result, NGOs may become a target for accountability demands, rather than a facilitating partner.

Given this complex landscape of governance in fragile settings, there is a need to reconceptualise youth strategies for accountability that work across scales and engage non-state institutions. Young people facing an absence of state-supported opportunities for participation and accountability or 'invited' spaces will engage in alternative mechanisms to seek the fulfilment of their rights through 'invented' spaces. In many cases, this occurs through public protests and demonstrations which seek to demand attention from actors at different scales (nationally and internationally). Not all options are open to all young people: who participates in what type of activity

will depend on their embedded position in society, including whether or not they are recognised as citizens, the networks available to them and their geographical location, among many other factors. While publicly performed accountability strategies such as protest are most visible, a range of 'quieter' strategies have also emerged as everyday forms of activism (Richter-Devroe 2018). Termed 'alter-geopolitical strategies', these forms of solidarity seek to establish alternative securities,[1] particularly in contexts where securities established by state actors are inadequate (Koopman 2011: 277).

Understanding how young people seek accountability in fragile contexts can inform the delivery of the 2030 Agenda for the Sustainable Development Goals and beyond, particularly the promotion of SDG 16. If we aim to foster accountable institutions within such contexts, we need to start by recognising and supporting the range of ways young people hold institutions and actors to account.

Using the case of Palestine, we explore how issues such as scale, space and citizenship influence the strategies for accountability that young people deploy in the face of house demolitions. This article focuses specifically on young people facing house demolitions, rather than adults, given existing research highlighting the increased marginalisation of this population due to house demolitions becoming sites of trauma (Shalhoub-Kevorkian 2009). Palestine offers a lens through which to explore these ideas for three key reasons: there is a range of state and non-state actors involved in the governance landscape; the geographical location of Palestinian homes influences the risks faced by residents depending on whether they inhabit an area claimed by Israeli settlers; and Israeli authorities are unwilling to recognise Palestinians as citizens, which complicates their ability to claim their rights.

The research adopted an interdisciplinary methodological approach that drew on design anthropology and feminist methodological understandings of the situatedness of knowledge (Gunn *et al.* 2013; Haraway 1988). As such, we co-designed, with youth activists, kits that contained questions and prompts that enabled participants to explore youth experiences of house demolitions (Clarke *et al.* 2022), in which seeking accountability is viewed as a means of resisting. The co-designed kits included prompts and questions such as 'What are the future dreams for you and your community?', 'How do you prepare for demolitions?', 'Scales of effective resistance?' as well as instructions for participants to map out hope, sacred/threatening/safe spaces in their villages. The kits also contained materials to facilitate participants' responses and to document them. For example, jars were provided for participants to place into them items collected through the mapping process that resonated with their

[1] Here we use the term 'securities' in the plural to encompass ontological security, the sense of everyday security generated through order and continuity (Giddens 1991), as it intersects with other forms of security including information, economic, social and physical security.

understanding of the spaces they were asked to map, as well as paper flags, made out of small wooden sticks and small square papers, that they could use to label the maps they generated. More details regarding the kits can be found in Clarke *et al.* (2022). While the kits did not directly interrogate accountability per se, participant responses spoke to and about means of attaining accountability. The co-designed kits were then given to activists, who used them to interview and collect responses from youth within their locale and networks. More than fifty kits were used in the field, accompanied by a further ten online interviews as well as diverse stakeholder engagement via workshops and other dialogues. Data collected via the kits included photographic images of written responses made on the materials provided within the kit and audio recordings that were encrypted and transferred to password-protected drives. Rich descriptions of the images and the written responses were generated and inputted into the data corpus. Audio data was transcribed in Arabic and then translated to English by the research team. Data related to seeking accountability was extracted from the data corpus and analysed.[2]

Accountability and youth participation in the context of house demolitions in Palestine

The case of Palestine is illustrative of the challenges to youth strategies for accountability. It is not simply the case that the current structures for accountability need to be improved so they can work better; they are intentionally built to exclude Palestinian voices. The systematic oppression and domination of Palestinians by Israeli institutions wherever they exercise control has been characterised as a form of apartheid (Amnesty International 2022). Palestine itself is governed both by the Palestinian National Authority and by Hamas, while governance in the West Bank is complicated further due to the presence of the Israeli Civil Administration, which controls approximately 60 per cent of this area. Multiple, overlapping authorities mean that it can be challenging for people to know where to direct their claims. This unusual political structure creates an environment where levels of accountability can vary greatly depending on an individual's physical location, the means available to them and approaches that they deem fit.

This is particularly true for Palestinian communities close to or within areas claimed by Israeli settlements. Due to demographic and geopolitical factors and the (il)legality

[2] All quotes presented in this article are attributed to pseudonyms to preserve the anonymity of our participants. Recognising that 'youth' is an identity rather than a category determined by biological age, we have not included the age of participants along with their quotes. However, for this research, we used the UN definition of 'youth': ages 15–24.

of Israeli settlement expansion, Israel's systems of control have not been consistently applied across all areas, meaning Palestinians living in different regions have different experiences of repression (Amnesty International 2022; Joronen & Griffiths 2019). House demolitions take place more frequently in the Israeli governed area of the West Bank (Area C) as lands are claimed for Israeli settlements. Since 2009, a total of 8,368 Palestinian-owned structures have been demolished across the occupied West Bank territories. This has resulted in the displacement of 14,277 people to date (UN OCHA 2023). In addition to the devastating losses experienced by those whose houses have been demolished, an even greater number of Palestinians live under demolition orders that have been issued but not yet carried out, subjecting the residents to prolonged periods of fear and uncertainty (Joronen & Griffiths 2019).

The practice of house demolitions is widely regarded as illegal (Fourth Geneva Convention, Art. 53, International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, Art. 11) and there are very few circumstances under which such actions can be legally justified. Demolitions have a devastating impact on the lives of many Palestinians. The obstacles to legal redress illustrate the need to look beyond the formal mechanism of the court system through which those on the end of demolition orders are supposed to be able to challenge them and seek accountability. Victims of demolitions and those served with demolition orders are granted access to the Israeli court system as a pathway to recourse, but access is far from guaranteed. Practical barriers such as a lack of financial means and a general lack of awareness of their rights can prove insurmountable. 'There are means to stop the demolition actions for sure, but we don't know them, and we are prepared to do anything that might contribute to stopping such acts, for we are peace seekers; and strive to live in safety and tranquility' (Rami, male). Though difficult, some Palestinians can access the Israeli court system. They can 'challenge' a demolition order. Yet, for the most part, the system of formal and legislative accountability appears biased against the Palestinian people.

> We hired an Israeli lawyer who lied to us. We gave him 15,000 shekels. We called him when they came and started demolishing, he said I don't know they just received an order … so we told him, you know nothing about it! As they were pulling it [the house] down they told us to hire an Israeli lawyer, they, themselves Israelis advise you to hire an Israeli lawyer … unfortunately this is what we did but it was useless. … (Samer, male)

The fact that demolition orders are often issued in Hebrew is another challenge faced by Palestinians. These experiences of the highly circumscribed and flawed accountability offered to Palestinians through the legal system highlights the importance of looking beyond formal structures where those are specifically oriented *against* accountability and participation. Through this, we need to bring into view social, political,

cultural and economic practices that might not be traditionally viewed through a lens of accountability, but which express a search for it, in contexts where other avenues are closed.

Alternative strategies for accountability

In the absence of meaningful and effective formal mechanisms for accountability that are appropriate and accessible to Palestinians, our research has explored how young Palestinians have developed alternative strategies to respond to house demolitions or the threat of demolition. Within the wider narrative of Palestinian resistance, it has been highlighted that strategies and actions are not necessarily agreed upon by those resisting, and in some instances disagreements on how to resist have led to stagnation and fragmentation of the movement (Richter-Devroe 2018). Despite that, our research highlighted that these alternative strategies persist, thus highlighting their value for youth as a means of seeking accountability.

Public or performed strategies for accountability

One of the most visible strategies used is public demonstrations or protests. The young people who participated in our research had many experiences of witnessing or participating in protests against Israeli authorities, including traumatic memories of violently suppressed demonstrations. Despite this, public protest was recognised as an important strategy. Said one young woman: 'Even though I don't really like them, they [protests] are one of the most important forms of resistance. By going on protests, we can place pressure on the people responsible of making change' (Sara, female). Recognising the futility of making claims through legal channels, youth who engage in public protest instead aim to catalyse action by putting pressure on Israeli authorities.

Additionally, in our research, the notion of documentation appeared as a recurring theme. Participants referred to the need to document what is happening through photography and film, to ensure that other people, especially international audiences, can bear witness to their plight. 'Because you certainly need photography to document all the oppression against us. We have everything on tape, and we can show it to the world. The world needs to see the facts about the horrendous repercussions of the apartheid. Therefore, documenting through photography provides us with a proof' (Jad, male). A camera was described as an essential tool for young Palestinians in their strategies for accountability as it gave them the means through which to relay their stories to the world. Through telling and sharing these stories through social media and with human rights organisations and NGOs, young people perform 'emotional

labour' in order to establish and strengthen emotional bonds with current and potential supporters within and beyond Palestine, thereby building a network to support collective action (Bosco 2007).

This strategy was particularly evident in 2021 when a number of young Palestinians gained international followings on social media platforms such as Instagram and YouTube during periods of unrest (see e.g. TRT World Now 2021; Xinhua 2022). Through music, art and photography, they shared their stories with audiences across the world, spread further as they received interest and attention from high-profile public figures and celebrities (see Figure 1). The use of art and storytelling adds a human story to the ongoing violence and repression of Palestinians and also produces an emotional response in the activists themselves, which is necessary to sustain resistance (Crossa 2013).

Importantly, the use of images, songs and personal stories facilitated emotional bonds with supporters who may otherwise be geographically distant (Bosco 2007). Said one interviewee: 'Reaching out to the international community helps the rest of the world to know about the harsh reality we live in. Through talking with international

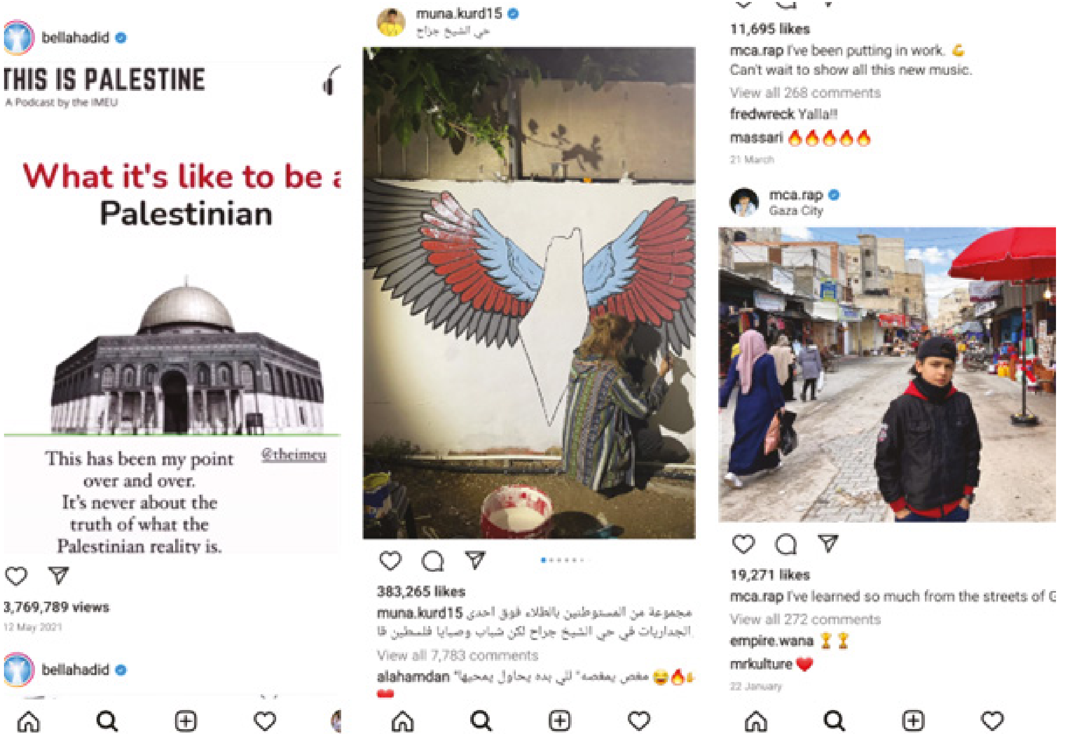

Figure 1. Social media shared by celebrities that depict art calling for accountability for Palestine.

Sources: Hadid 2021; El-Kurd 2021; MC Abdul 2022.

parties, one can find people who can help in any way or form. They advocate for your rights and stand beside you' (Jad, male). Young Palestinians extend their vision for accountability beyond national borders, looking to the international community for power with which to influence the actions of the Israeli administration.

These public strategies for demanding accountability share a focus on the creation of visibility of the problems faced by young Palestinians. Cyberspace is deployed as a platform for non-violent political action by young people who seek to make their voices heard in a context of protracted violence (Gukurume 2022). By making their persecution visible beyond the reach of the Israeli authorities, young people are calling on international actors to redress the power imbalance they face in trying to demand accountability from national authorities who do not see them as citizens with rights in the national context. This then underlines the need to look beyond both formal accountability mechanisms and those contained by the nation state and associated ideas of governance and participation. Young Palestinians, through documentation and social media, see a route to accountability through sites of power outside Israel and Palestine. However, their very public nature can obscure practices that are less easily legible as struggles for accountability since they do not fit established, and often highly problematic, public narratives of Palestinian youth.

Quiet forms of accountability

Though these public and performed strategies to demand accountability may receive significant attention, particularly at the international level, many forms of activism in Palestine are quiet and hidden from the public eye in contrast to widely held expectations of political activism (Richter-Devroe 2018). Not all young people feel public forms of protest are effective. 'I feel that protests are useless, to be honest. If they were helpful at all, we would be liberated by now. I just don't see any significant value for them in reality' (Randa, female). The systematic denial of the rights of Palestinians by governing institutions has created doubt in the minds of some young people that achieving accountability for the demolitions is a question simply of ensuring their story is told. Without the political will at either the national or international level to intervene in support of Palestinians, their efforts to increase information about and attention to housing demolitions may be in vain. For improvements in accountability to occur, governing institutions must be willing and able to meet the demands of citizens (Fox 2016).

In the absence of a conducive political environment in the present day, some young people are taking a long-term approach to accountability by trying to strengthen their position relative to state institutions through education. Said Dana (female):

> The greatest resistance you make is to complete your studies, so studying is your strong weapon. It is true that the types of resistance differ, but I see that the most significant type of resistance that has an impact and strength is studying. If I fight someone with an enlightened thought and knowledge, I will be aware of what I am doing, and I can then change the society, so this is the biggest resistance.

This strategy differs from public or performed strategies to demand accountability in multiple ways. Firstly, the time frame for change is significantly longer, looking across the life course instead of seeking change in the immediate or short-term context. This may be a reflection of the way these young people have assessed their own power with respect to the institutions they seek to challenge and their search for pathways to strengthen their ability to influence them directly over the longer term. Research on land grabs in the Global South has shown that in the face of power imbalances, strategies 'from below' go beyond resistance to include acquiescence and incorporation (Hall *et al.* 2015). This perspective recognises the diverse aspirations of community members whose demands cannot always be achieved through protest.

Additionally, these alternative geopolitical strategies are situated in the individual, their community and their society rather than seeking support for accountability at the national or international level. Young people deploy these strategies to create alternative securities and dignified futures (Cassidy & Freimane forthcoming). For example, one young interviewee aspired to become a lawyer in order to help others in her village access their rights:

> In my village, people have many rights that they can't exercise. Maybe when I realize this dream [to become a lawyer], the residents of my village can get half of their rights. The Palestinians have been deprived of many rights. For example, we are denied the right to travel abroad except for a permit from the Israelis. Working as a lawyer could help in achieving independence and defending our village in which we were born. (Hiba, female)

These quiet strategies are integral to the way they participate as members of the community. Their personal aspirations and relationships shape and are in turn shaped by their struggles for recognition and redress (Staeheli *et al.* 2012).

Young people are also adopting quiet strategies of resistance through their physical occupation of the land. One young woman said: 'Another important element of resistance is planting trees. Farming proves your ownership of the land, and the trees you have planted bear witness to this fact' (Yara, female). This strategy is similar to cases of 'guerrilla agriculture' where farmers have used cultivation as a strategy to resist land dispossession (Cavanagh & Benjaminsen 2015). Planting trees is a visible and public demonstration of their claims to their homeland without directly engaging in confrontation with authorities. Similarly, young people intend to resist efforts

by Israeli authorities to deny their rights by continuing to rebuild their homes even in the face of demolitions. One participant shared that if their home was destroyed, 'the third thing I would do is rebuild the house and live in it. Even if they demolish it again, I would keep rebuilding it because it's my home and I would never leave it' (Bouchra, female).

The limits of action: understanding inaction

Young people have found ways to participate at the margins, which is a testament to their creativity and perseverance. However, it is important to resist the urge to hierarchise these different forms of participation as each is incommensurably significant. We seek to recognise the broader political context which shapes the strategies of young people. As such, we must not overlook the validity of inaction as a choice and instead look deeper to understand what these situations can teach us about the particular political realities facing young people who feel they cannot participate. This analysis leads us to go beyond a focus on the actions of young people to understand the broader context in which they operate.

The experience of living in a particular place influences the way young people seek and are able to participate in decision-making (Beckwith *et al.* 2022; Cahill & Dadvand 2018). In Palestine, geographical location also shapes the experience of living under Israeli control (Amnesty International 2022). This is evident in our research in the areas of Palestine that are situated in lands claimed by Israeli authorities, which have experienced the highest rates of house demolitions. In the Jordan Valley, for example, an area sought after by Israeli settlers and consequently heavily guarded by Israeli authorities, our research revealed strong feelings of disillusionment with efforts to hold Israeli institutions to account. We asked young Palestinians how they would react if their house were to be demolished and, for many, their thoughts were not on the legal recourse available to them or on how they could share their experience with the world. Many simply expressed the hopelessness they feel in such situations. One young person in the Jordan Valley stated simply: 'God, there is nothing that can stop them. They see themselves as if they're above the law. That's it, decision is made, and nothing to change. They would then snarl; go away!' (Anwar, male). This was echoed by other young people: 'There is no resistance … no resistance for anyone … we're like a bird with broken wings' (Zaki, male).

Though it is important to acknowledge diverse strategies for achieving accountability, we must equally recognise the validity of inaction as a strategy in the face of such a dramatic imbalance of power, be it legal, economic, military or otherwise (Beckwith 2021). This should not be taken as a sign of apathy or passivity but rather one of a range of choices that any individual might make when faced with steep risks

and/or limited resources, including acquiescence or avoidance (Hall *et al.* 2015). While it is important to champion the steps that young people have taken to participate in accountability strategies, we must not neglect to analyse the forces at play behind inaction to understand where young people may be most in need of support to achieve their objectives. Efforts to improve accountability cannot succeed if state structures are not able (or, as in the case of Palestine, not willing) to respond to the demands of citizens (Fox 2016). In order to secure their futures, young people's demands must be heard within enabling environments which are responsive and accountable at all levels. As this case has shown, accountability must go beyond state actors and extend to both the local and international levels and reflect on how all actors, including those in academia and the third sector, should also be held accountable (Davis *et al.* 2014). This is particularly true in contexts of fragile governance systems where the state is unable or unwilling to meet its responsibilities.

Conclusion

The examples of accountability discussed in this article are not intended to be an exhaustive typology but rather serve as an overview of the diverse ways that youth participate in strategies to demand accountability. Understanding the breadth of young people's actions is critically important to realising the ambitious targets set out in the SDGs and ensure that marginalised youth, such as our research participants in Palestine, are not left behind. Young people have the capacity and, crucially, the right to participate in decision-making that affects their future. However, their voices cannot be heard if governance institutions and actors at all levels are not equipped to respond to the diverse ways that young people are calling for accountability.

Though many of the strategies identified in our research have received individual attention through social media and/or academic research, our approach seeks to bring them together to show how these approaches are shaped by the wider accountability ecosystem in which they are constructed and situated. Strategies can also be geographically and politically situated, mirroring how place influences the imposition of approaches to governance or control. Additionally, in contexts of intergenerational and ongoing oppression, such as in the case of Palestine, young people also engage in struggles for accountability which span geographic and time scales to address different aspects of their lived experiences.

This research has provided evidence for how calls for youth participation from the perspective of liberal, democratic institutions may overlook the lived experiences of how young people in contexts of fragile governance are demanding accountability 'at the margins'. Importantly, the mechanisms through which accountability will be

sought will not be the same in all cases. In contexts that lack institutionalised pathways for accountability such as voting, civil society and academia should be aware of the importance of putting in place mechanisms for redress as well as allowing young people the opportunity to 'invent' spaces and pathways of accountability. At the global level, international institutions such as the UN must recognise the limited reach of invited spaces and support youth to come together to shape and design spaces to demand accountability that are fluid and reflective of their own understanding of action.

Looking ahead to the post-2030 agenda, we need to take a broader view of what it means for young people to participate in decision-making and demand accountability, including an appreciation for strategies that work across scales. Our research has shown significant limitations in the widely held model of top-down accountability in contexts where the state (the traditional focal point of accountability) does not seek to promote the interests of all citizens. We must be mindful of the limitations of the SDGs to create real change in contexts where governance is fragile or segments of the population are unrecognised, excluded or oppressed. Rather than a focus on aims and targets, future frameworks need to identify and develop potential pathways for accountable institutions at all levels, fostering not only responsive state actors but multiple enabling environments across scales to reflect the diverse strategies of young people who seek a better future: 'We will never surrender, and we will not remain silent. We will try to the best of our abilities to preserve our lands and homes' (Amal, female).

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Imagining futures/future imaginings: creative heritage work with young people in Uganda

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Abstract: Drawing on research in Uganda, we describe our project in which we invited young people to think about their lives in ways that opened up creative and hopeful imaginaries of the future. We understand future imaginary work to be a significant part of memory work. An important component in the ways we think about the past is imagining the futures it ties to. We wanted the idea of the future to be something our young participants constructed together, in dialogue and iteratively, so that the project had a sense of collaboration and shared interests. To do so we developed the idea of a touring exhibition through which multiple voices, positions, understandings and values could be accommodated side by side. The article contributes to scholarly and public debates about reparations and memorialisation, particularly by showing the crucial role young people can play in articulating more just futures.

Keywords: youth futures, creative methods, imagined futures, Uganda

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Introduction

Uganda has the world's youngest population, with a significant majority of its population below the age of 30. The 18–30 group represents over 80 per cent of the country's unemployed but is also the first to be born in a relatively peaceful and stable country. Although the Juba peace talks (2006–8) between the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) and the Government of Uganda were never formally concluded, they marked the end of two decades of conflict and war. As the country continues to be confronted by, and confront, the enduring legacies of decades of conflict, Uganda's youth are negotiating complex legacies of the past in the present at national, community and family levels. The enduring imprint and histories of colonialism and conflict have shaped the country they live in. Associated with this are ongoing struggles over the meaning, accuracy and significance of the country's history, practices of remembering and memorialisation (Reid 2015). Thousands of lives have been lost, millions more have been displaced, and there remain physical, psychological and social wounds that continue to impact on the social worlds of these young people as they navigate their everyday lives.

These conflicts, power relations, connections to place and understandings of the past continue to influence almost every sphere of young people's lives. As in other post-conflict societies, Uganda's heritage can be distressing in character: disturbing and disruptive narratives prevail over compassionate and inspiring ones (Tankink 2007). For some, the past awakens pride, joy and celebratory emotions; for others it is a landscape of loss and anger. Both these positions have been mobilised for political purposes and culturally adopted in different regions and towards different ends (Reid 2017). The more the past is disputed, the harder it is to navigate gracefully. Across the country, Ugandans are grappling with how memorialisation and heritage reflect disputed and painful narratives of the past; these practices are embedded in broader struggles over the power to remember and forget, which are put in place by the state, heritage organisations, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and other significant stakeholders (Mwambari 2019). Heritage can become a byword for acrimony and strife, and it is unsurprising that many choose to ignore it altogether (Lowenthal 2000: 18–19). But the past persists in the present in multifaceted and complex ways, and whether they choose to or not, these young people are stewards of their country's heritage, in all its protean, complex and multivalent forms. However, young people are often marginalised or excluded from heritage work and memorialisation practices and representations, though there are increasing moves to bring young people's experience, expertise and representation into the work of narrating their past in order to understand their present.

This project worked to offer young people in Uganda the chance to narrate their past, present and future in ways that move them away from more overarching

accounts of who they are and what lives they live, and instead bring these stories back to their everyday, mundane and lively daily worlds. This follows Imoh and colleagues' (2022) call to counter dominant narratives about African young people's childhoods and lived experiences that foreground 'lacks', deprivation and universality of experience. They quote the Nigerian novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, who describes the danger of the single story because it is based on stereotypes, and 'the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story' (Adichie 2009). For our Ugandan youth, this is true on multiple levels – globally, nationally and within their own communities. There are dominant stories about the past and the ways it can shape the future that often either exclude young people or reduce young people's positions to victims of enduring systems and structures, which 'has led to a situation whereby the mundanities of the everyday lives of many children, which consists of various forms of learning, play, religious activities, family life and friendships, are overlooked in favour of narratives that centre around 'difficulties' and the 'extremities' of existence' (Imoh *et al.* 2022: 4).

Foregrounding young people's voices and experiences was the key concern we had in designing the research that informs this article. Using arts-based and participatory methods, we engaged young people to think about pasts and presents as they were lived and experienced, and to imagine shared peaceful futures. This contributes to existing scholarship on reparations and the need for young people's agency within those processes, as well as broader work on heritage, memory and hope.

One of the organisations in Uganda leading on the issues explored in this article is the Refugee Law Project (RLP). The RLP, established in 1999, is a community outreach project (stemming out of the School of Law, Makerere University) that seeks to empower asylum seekers, refugees, deportees, internally displaced people (IDPs) and host communities to enjoy their human rights and lead dignified lives in Uganda, which is currently host to the third largest refugee population in the world. It works across seven main areas, including its Conflict, Transitional Justice & Governance Programme, which collaborates with multiple stakeholders to promote dealing with legacies of violence as the basis for a just, peaceful and sustainable future. The programme supports four distinct projects, including the work of the National Memory & Peace Documentation Centre (NMPDC). This initiative, in close collaboration with Kitgum District Local Government, aims to be a living memorial of Uganda's multiple conflicts . NMPDC collects, organises, archives and communicates Uganda's conflict-related memories and efforts made towards justice and reconciliation. It does so through community outreach, research and documentation. It was with this aspect of the RLP's work that we sought to collaborate, building on existing relationships and appreciation of the important work they do.

In this project, we wanted to build on work the RLP had already done with young people in the north of Uganda, to offer another way for young people across four regions of the country to consider their pasts by redirecting their attention towards the future. By inviting young people not just to offer narratives of the past but also to imagine forwards, the project added a 'futures' dimension to memory and transitional justice work. In doing so, it allowed the past to be thought about through a different lens. 'Heritage, then, seems a productive disciplinary frame through which to pay attention to the social relations and contexts that produce the temporal subjects whose lived futures we are concerned with' (Sandford 2019: 78).

This 'future orientation' is embedded in all heritage and memory work; to think about preserving a past you must imagine that there is a future in which it is retained (Sandford 2019). Heritage is about the cultural and political choices made around what histories and memories to formally preserve, prioritise, display and narrate. As Sandford describes, 'like all social practices, the work undertaken in the present within the field contributes to constructing the eventual future, through setting the context and creating resources for future society' (2019: 7). He goes further to argue that 'heritage joins a smaller number of specific areas of human activity in representing a conscious, reflexive effort to connect the present to the future' (2019: 77).

Underpinning this is the understanding that heritage and memory work are active, social practices which are situated geographically, culturally, temporally and epistemologically, and which produce shared cultural meanings. They inform the values and narratives about who we were, who we are and who we would like to be. These are not free-floating abstractions but rather are embedded in epistemic frameworks and material cultures that shape and guide this 'meaning making' work. This makes heritage and memory a 'view from somewhere'. Importantly, rather than imagining the future as a free, abstract space open to colonisation by anyone in any way, we employ the idea of lived futures as grounded in specific social settings and interactions (Adam & Groves 2007; Sandford 2019). To bring Pierre Nora's understanding of memory into this, it is always belonging to the 'group it binds' (1989: 9), is embedded within the context of lived lives, and both reflects and produces group values and meanings. As Sandford (2019: 78) describes:

> latent futures, dispositions in the present that may contingently take on an empirical form; thick presents, durations that contain past and futures within them (fractal, or thick, or shot through with messianic time) in contrast to unextended and sequential presents; seeing both pasts and futures as unfolding processes, situated within networks of generative structures; an understanding that the construction of pasts and futures through subjects necessarily imbues them with meaning and value.

Chahine (2022) describes how the future can be used as a way of bringing the present into line with the past, offering an alternative temporal frame to investigate the

multitemporal relations of young Kalaallit (Greenlandic Inuit) to the world. Chahine describes how their work supports a move away from 'future as afterthought' towards 'future as forethought', arguing that future imagination influences the ways we (re)create the past. She proposes shifting the focus of memory studies from a unidirectional approach to a multitemporal one, allowing us to discern the 'complex interplay of past, present, and future without linear trajectory' (Szpunar & Szpunar 2016: 385 in Chahine 2022: 7). This informs the way we understand the past and extends to how we want to work with the future.

Heritage works cross-generationally: among other things, it is about inheritance and stewardship, memorialisation and commemoration. Heritage is what is passed to the next generation, and it is inherited and reframed actively and through social practices (Blakely & Moles 2019; Pennell 2018, 2020). This process involves selecting and deciding on what is valued and worthy of passing on, and this of course often produces and reproduces dominant voices, powerful perspectives and stories that are of benefit to particular social groups. All too often, this (re)produces social inequalities and divisions and reduces diversity in terms of representation and in material culture. The politics of memory, and the ways actors actively construct and use stories of the past in the present, run through all interactions and are embedded in ongoing contemporary unfoldings of past events, claims and disputes (Reid 2015). Young people are situated within these unfoldings as well, symbolically and materially.

In this article we set out the social, historical and political context in Uganda which frames our engagement with future heritages. We describe our methodological approach and the ways it opened up spaces of dialogue, interaction and engagement with the past and the future based on and in young people's everyday lives. We then introduce some key insights that we are following through the different data, creative outputs and heritage work that the young people undertook, before concluding with some reflections on the interworking of the past and the present.

Context

Uganda has a long, turbulent past involving multiple periods of conflict, violence and unrest, many of which can be directly tied to periods of British colonial rule (Otunnu 2016 and, 2017). In the years following the 1884 Berlin Conference which catalysed the 'Scramble for Africa' among the major Western powers, Uganda became a British colonial polity between 1890 and 1902 (Rempel 2018). In 1894 a British Protectorate was proclaimed over Buganda, and Uganda was born. This period is significant as colonial domination and rule fuelled inequality and division between

the north and south of Uganda, and the ways in which the country was imagined as unified caused ongoing tensions around history, identity and belonging that endure today (Reid, 2017).

During the 20th century, Uganda experienced numerous periods of conflict and division that have deeply impacted the country's development and social and political institutions (Kasozi *et al.* 1994). Long-running tensions between the north and south of Uganda can be traced back to colonial recruitment policies: people from the north were conscripted into the police, army and prison systems, while the Ganda from the central region were selected for office and administrative work (Finnström 2008). These divisions were further exacerbated after independence by events such as the Kabaka Crisis (1953–5) and the Bush War (1981–6). As a result, colonial rule and Uganda's later political leaders have concentrated power and resources among various social and ethnic groups. This has created significant problems, not only in generating inter-group conflicts but also in hindering the establishment of sustainable peace and national unity.

The 1970s in Uganda were heavily defined by the brutal rule of Idi Amin. In 1971, Amin led a coup against the government of Milton Obote and declared himself President of the Second Republic of Uganda, a position he maintained through oppressive and brutal control tactics for the following eight years (Leopold 2021; Kosozi *et al.* 1994). Amin's attempt to promote Islam in the country further paved the way for ongoing religious persecution and inter-religious conflict (Haynes 2007). Past religious conflicts and ideologies remain significant in explaining continuing violence between Christians and Muslims, making religion often more of a dividing than a uniting factor in Uganda.

An insurgency against Amin's rule began almost immediately. In 1972 a group of Acholi and Langi anti-Amin forces organised themselves into Kikosi Maalum (a militia group founded by Milton Obote). They were later joined by Yoweri Museveni's Front for National Salvation (FRONASA). The conflict spilled over into neighbouring countries, including Tanzania.

In addition to more well-known conflicts, in recent years the Uganda-based Refugee Law Project (RLP) has documented around 127 different conflicts across the country which have led to large numbers of deaths, trauma, the destruction of cultural heritage and the disruption of people's social and economic lives (see https://www.refugeelawproject.org/). The RLP national reconciliation and transitional justice audit conducted in twenty districts around Uganda shows that the current government has pacified more than thirty-two rebel movements since 1986. In effect, all parts of the country have been affected by violent conflict, which has thus far remained largely undocumented and unacknowledged. Young people have been particularly affected by periods of ongoing conflict (Bird *et al.* 2010). This means that the real work of

understanding many of these conflicts and their long-term impacts has not been done, and the true scale and horror of the various conflicts remain unaddressed.

Of particular significance has been the conflict between the LRA insurgency, led by Joseph Kony, and the Ugandan government between 1986 and 2006. The LRA originated from a rebellion against Museveni's leadership in Uganda, as Kony dubbed himself a spiritual leader and the liberator of the Acholi people of northern Uganda (Allen & Vlassenroot 2010). The LRA war in northern Uganda started in 1987 as the Lord's Resistance Movement (LRM) and later transitioned to the LRA, allegedly fighting to establish a new society with Christian morality based on the ten commandments; this happened shortly after the defeat of Alice Lakwena an Acholi spirit-medium who, as the head of the Holy Spirit Movement (HSM), led a millennial rebellion against the Ugandan government forces of President Yoweri Museveni from August 1986 until November 1987. Focused on the north of the country and spilling over into neighbouring states, this conflict led to the displacement of nearly two million and the deaths of tens of thousands of civilians. The conflict was marked by widespread human rights violations and atrocities.

The LRA became notorious for abducting and forcibly recruiting children into its ranks. It is estimated that over 60,000 children were abducted by the LRA, with many being forced to serve as sex slaves or child soldiers (Schomerus 2021). By 2005, over 1.7 million people had been forced into over 150 internal displacement camps across the Acholi region in northern Uganda. The conflict had spread to other parts of Uganda, including the areas of Teso and Lango, forcing thousands into IDP camps, alongside numerous mass killings and massacres of civilians.

In 2006, Uganda committed to the Juba peace talks with the hope that the country would be able to begin the long road to reconciliation after decades of armed conflict. The LRA and the Ugandan government committed to an Agreement on Accountability and Reconciliation. As Macdonald (2017: 225–6) notes:

> This agreement proposed a national transitional justice (TJ) framework to address widespread human rights violations and war crimes committed during the 20-year conflict in northern Uganda.

The success of the peace talks has been widely debated. Some have noted that a greater degree of stability and peace has been achieved in northern Uganda (Allen & Vlassenroot 2010: 279). Despite ongoing conflicts around land and resources and public health challenges, over 95 per cent of the displaced persons have returned to their areas of origin. The government has implemented a Peace, Recovery, and Development Plan, the second phase of which ran from 2012–15 looking at the recovery aspect in post-conflict Uganda. These efforts have allowed a number of communities to begin rebuilding the country's physical, economic and social infrastructures.

At the same time, there has been a sizeable redeployment of the Ugandan army to the northeast of the country, ostensibly for the purposes of disarming the Karimojong. These political responses to the LRA and the aftermath must be understood within a context of strategy on the part of the government as well – the control and suppression of northern Uganda is an ongoing political priority.

At a national level, the government leadership, the Justice Law and Order Sector (JLOS), civil society and other development partners have become increasingly cognisant of the national dimensions of conflicts and their legacies in Uganda. The establishment in August 2008 of a Transitional Justice Working Group within the Justice Law and Order Sector is perhaps the strongest indicator of this conceptual shift away from a narrow focus on LRA-affected areas towards looking at Uganda as a whole.

However, the limits of the peace process and the realisation of transitional justice principles has also been acknowledged (Schomerus 2021). It's important to note that the final peace agreement between the Ugandan government and the LRA was never signed (Macdonald 2017). This was due to a range of interlocking factors. The first barrier to negotiations was the attempt by the International Criminal Court prosecute Joseph Kony and four of his senior commanders. The second was the United States' designation of the LRA as a terror group and their inclusion under the broad sweep of the Global War on Terror. The insurgents wanted these revoked to fully participate and sign an agreement ending the conflict.

The third barrier was the tension between achieving a peaceful, non-violent resolution on the one hand and realising justice and accountability on the other. The fourth was the scramble for ownership of the Juba process among groups and organisations with local and regional partners, which caused confusion, mistrust and suspicion among many of the parties involved. However, while there was no signed agreement, the Juba peace talks produced a number of progressive and useful discussions. Since then, the establishment of a JLOS Transitional Justice Working Group by the Government of Uganda, and its commitment to the development and adoption of a national Transitional Justice Policy Framework, has provided an unprecedented opportunity for Uganda to engage with key issues of impunity, accountability, human rights violations, amnesty, reparations, institutional reform, truth-telling and national reconciliation. At the same time, it has become clear that stakeholders from grassroots communities to national policy and political levels are struggling to identify the range of mechanisms necessary to achieve these goals and the scope of their interventions.

The impact of these many conflicts is hard to overstate and has dramatically shaped the economic, social and political life of the country. Despite some areas of progress, in a country of over 45 million people, it's estimated that just over 30 per cent of the population are classified as living in poverty (AfroBarometer 2022).

Thinking creatively and collaboratively about the future: methods and practice

The Youth Futures study we use to inform this article is based on a research collaboration with the National Memory and Peace Documentation Centre, Gulu University and Cardiff University. It set out to use creative, participatory qualitative methods to explore questions about heritage, memory and transitional justice in Uganda with young people. Specifically, we offered arts-based methods for young people to engage with the project, which included the use of poems, drawings, stories, drama, music, paintings and proverbs and were used to think about the experiences of the young participants and how they imagined the future. This contributes to existing methodological work that is thinking creatively about imagined futures (Carabelli & Lyon 2016; Ravn 2021; Chahine 2022) and which highlights the importance of offering ways for people to engage meaningfully with thinking about the future, and to avoid the often stereotypical accounts that are produced or the refusal to engage in that sort of imaginative work at all (Shirani *et al.* 2016). Ravn (2021) describes some of the methodological concerns with researching the future, using a double focus on materiality as method, and the materiality of methods as a way of both opening up and anchoring narratives of the future in the lives of young women in Australia. Through the materiality of objects the young women brought to interviews, the future became 'within reach' of the participants and facilitated future narratives.

In the following sections, we think about how our methods align with this previous work and why we chose to work in the way we did. This will help us consider what affordances it opened up and how we offered spaces for young people to explore their imagined futures and future imaginaries in ways that related to their everyday lived experiences.

Youth advisory boards

To begin this process, we knew we had to ask the young people themselves how best to proceed, and so we established youth advisory boards and recruited two young researchers to lead the curation of and discussions at the exhibition with the young participants. We had initially planned to have one board for the four regions of Uganda in which we were working, which would be brought together in Kitgum to discuss the similarities and differences across each geographical region with diverse historical, social and economic factors. The research was undertaken in four districts of Uganda, namely Kasese, Kitgum, Amuria and Adjumani. These districts were purposively selected on the basis that they had all experienced violent conflict from the political violence that had been witnessed in the country.

However, the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted those plans and forced us to rethink the ways we would engage young people. Having paused the project during lockdown, we then did not want to bring the young people together across regions, and so instead we convened four youth advisory boards – one in each region of the project. We met the northern Uganda board at the very start to think about ways to engage young people, how to display and think with creative outputs and any other issues they thought might arise. We then met with advisory board members from the other project districts of Kasese, Amuria and Adjumani online and conducted the meetings over Zoom.

Participatory research methods disrupt hierarchies between young people and researchers to allow for more relational and dialogic spaces within sites and across sites to work with international researchers. More specifically, participatory *arts-based* research surfaces young people's thoughts, interests, knowledge and capacities in an unobtrusive way so that they grow from their own experiences. Giving youth a space, materials and some technical scaffolding allowed those involved in the project to explore topics that are more difficult to discuss through traditional methods. In this way, as a team we were committed to taking an ethical stance on our application of participatory methods – allowing young people to co-produce (Grocott 2022) and co-design (Pink *et al.* 2022) together to explore topics close to their hearts.

The advisory boards provided key ideas and raised important issues for the project team to consider as we developed the exhibition and engaged with young people around the country. They described how young people had two 'levels' of experience: the direct experience of past conflict and experiences that were mediated through narratives from parents, relatives and friends. These intermingled and produced frameworks of knowing which could be used in making sense of the future as well, and which were embedded in the everyday practices used by the young people to deal with their experiences. Speaking about these, the advisory board described how storytelling, drawings and paintings would offer productive ways for young people to communicate their frameworks for engaging with the past and the future with us, as well as working with everyday objects that can be used to situate narratives in the past and stretch them into the future. Alongside the making and designing together, the young people had conversations about topics within art compositions and the ways that modal affordances such as paint colours and brush techniques draw out key ideas and provocations that they wanted to foreground (see Figure 2). Arts-based participatory methods (Nunn 2017) allowed for a knowing through design together that we were able to analyse and follow up with the advisory group with our thoughts, experiences and lingering questions (Cutter-Mackenzie & Rousell 2019).

Touring exhibition

From this, we finalised the idea of a ‘touring exhibition’ that would move from site to site within each region. This allowed us to develop a dialogue between different places and the young people who live there. This was done with the intention of making the exhibition an iterative, dialogical event that displays content produced in other sites while at the same time inviting comment and contribution at the next site. At each site, the young people worked with a curator to exhibit the existing displays while also working to produce additional ones to add to the exhibition. This opened up dialogue around what was relevant and resonated with their own experiences of the past, while also prompting discussions about what a shared future might look like. In total, twelve meetings were conducted with young people from lower secondary schools across the four regions. Three schools per area were identified, with four participants taking part in the co-design of the exhibition and discussing it with our young researchers. Teachers from selected schools in the four districts were also interviewed to enable researchers to engage with and reflect on the legacies of the violent past in the everyday lives of the youth under their care in schools.

The touring exhibition featured artworks, poems and stories but was also a site where dancing, singing and conversations could take place. Seeing what others had contributed offered a way of thinking about the ideas they represented, and different

Figure 1. Young people engaging with art.

Figure 2. Creating the exhibition.

Figure 3. The touring exhibition on display.

themes emerged across the different exhibitions – including conflict and peace, environment, land and employment (see Figures 1 and 3). These themes were both universal and specific, serving as anchors in the present for the young people to think with, and also providing material ways for the future to be 'within reach' of their imaginations and the narratives they might tell.

Material memories

Alongside the artworks, objects such as a panga (machete), a knife, a hoe, an axe and a spear were put on display in the touring exhibition. Through these objects, war and loss were the initial narratives of meaning that were being presented. But they were also used as points of departure, where young people developed their own narratives in relation to the objects, pointing to issues of marginality and resistance. These objects were understood in their obvious ways – as objects of war or violence, for example – but also held more latent meanings, based on stories about them in relation to their object biographies, the materials used to make them and their place in the community. They were at once domestic and violent, everyday and significant for broader issues associated with conflict. For the young people, they became symbolic of resistance to the wars and the violence suffered, while at the same time they reconfigured a peaceful imagination by eliciting the dangers of war and violence. The meanings of these objects are not limited to the present but are co-constitutive of the past and also the future in a temporal intertwining that unifies the past, present and future in a simultaneous co-presence, meaning the objects and things are subject to constant imaginings and re-imaginings. This is another significant part of the interpretation of these objects. They were valued in different ways in different spaces, and they had the potential to endure conflict and retain significance, something that the young people described with hope and optimism for their own futures and Ugandan society more broadly.

The young people described situated and contextual practices of remembering that were embedded in frameworks they made with their parents, their communities and through their formal education. The past was used as a way to explain current situations to the young people – often the lack of access to education, enduring poverty or disputes over land. In this way, these objects from conflicted pasts were used by young people to describe 'futures-already-in-the-making' (Ravn 2022) – the steps were already in place for the futures to emerge as they would like.

> Interviewer: So if a museum was developed in your area, what are some of the items that you think would be put, that will relate to the past and communicate to the past, what items do you think would be put in that museum?

Participant: The weapons used and the names of the people who died under the war.
I: Wonderful, any other items?
P. Piece of bones.
I. Good.
P. Guns.
I. Guns?
P. and spears yes.

(Amuria young participant)

However, as the quote above shows, in the interviews, museums and formal sites of heritage were positioned as sites of memorialisation and recognition, places where weapons should be on display and those lost during conflict should be remembered. Formalised acts of remembrance are sparse in Uganda, with many conflicts having no memorialisation and ongoing demands for reparations and recognition for the loss the conflict has inflicted. What is notable is the fact that their selectivity does not necessarily correlate with state or wider public remembrance of the violent past.

The data revealed a strong community memory of certain conflicts and violence, which were often situated in the broader political and cultural politics of memory. For example, students in Kasese (the capital of the Ugandan Kingdom of Rwenzururu) recalled the period now known as the Kasese Killings, in November 2016, when violence erupted in the aftermath of a Ugandan police raid on the government offices of the Rwenzururu Kingdom, resulting in the arrest of Omusinga (King) of Rwenzururu Charles Mumbere and a death toll of nearly one hundred civilians. As Peterson (2012) describes, 'the architects of Rwenzururu recognized the organizing power of linear history' and 'the past was the forum wherein Rwenzururu's partisans conjured up a constituency, established a political persona, and identified a project to pursue' (Peterson & Macola 2009: 961). Peterson (2012) describes how, in this region, but of course also elsewhere, the past is a resource, a political construction to justify, lay claim to and construct identities and boundaries in ways that legitimate violence, and also claims to independence and post-colonial freedoms. The contemporary legacies and ties to movements that started in the 1960s frame the ways these young people make sense of their histories and their places within broader narratives of Uganda. The practices are geographically and historically situated.

Remembering and forgetting

The data collected revealed that young people remembered certain conflicts and periods of violence while forgetting others. At first glance, this is unsurprising. Heritage experts, such as Rodney Harrison, have discussed at length the way national memory formation is a bounded entity; to avoid a '"crisis" of accumulation of the past'

(Harrison 2013: 580), certain memories are held onto while others are discarded. This is not simply an exercise in managing volume. It is a political act, usually choreographed at state level. It is well understood that the writing of 'accepted' ordered histories is crucial to the formation of national identities in the modern era (Smith 1999). As historian Ernest Renan stated in 1882, 'the essence of a nation is that all individuals have many things in common, and also that they have forgotten many things' (Renan & Giglioli 1882 [2018]: 251). If commemoration of past events can serve an integrative function in society, it can equally fuel conflict and contestation. Awkward, uncomfortable and divisive experiences may destabilise attempts to use historical memories to promote political and social cohesion. Certain memories are pruned and cut, while others are allowed to grow and flourish (Augé 2004 cited in Harrison 2013: 588). Again, we must stress this is not a neutral action, but one bound up with issues of power, representation and identity.

> I: What role do you think young people can play to construct a better future a brighter future, what role do you think you can play as a young girl and as young people?
> P: I can help them with some advice if they are going wrong.
> I: Okay.
> P: I will advise them not to remember what happen in the past because if you have to remember those have to remember the past, you will be scared every time I can advise them not to remember the past and they should start new generation like this time here. Mmh. (Kitgum interview with young participant)

Why were some conflicts and periods of violence forgotten and not others? How did young people act with agency in the practice of forgetting, or were the frameworks and accounts simply not available to them? The data pointed to two common denominators that came to the foreground in relation to the events that were remembered, which were intensity of violence and proximity to locality. The lower the intensity of the violence (i.e. 'minor' conflict with minimal interruption of day-to-day life), the higher the propensity was to forget it. The greater the proximity of the violence to where the young Ugandans lived (either now or growing up, or both), the more likely it was that memory had been retained.

This points to the embeddedness of informal, local and community-level memorialisation and narrativisation that has the power to undercut 'national' and state-level practices or amnesia. It highlights the complexity of memorialisation and narrativisation; what may be presented to young Ugandans as 'the past' via formal settings such as classrooms or national-level commemorative events is not necessarily the understanding that takes root. This raises questions about the role played by everyday vernacular and local communities in memory formation about the violent past. Clearly households, families and interactions with other young people on the streets and in

hangouts, such as bars and cafes, are as important as (if not more important than) national vehicles of memory communication and formation. Homes, households and local settings are sites of intense memory production. It is in these spaces that that state's peace and conflict curriculum is discussed, challenged and deconstructed. Homes and local communities are sites of not only 'education' but also 're-education'. This suggests an atmosphere where local memories and narratives are pitted against official state and 'national' ones.

These everyday processes of forgetting and remembering as active practices requiring agency and negotiation contribute to the larger literature on social memory (Fentress & Wickham 1992) in two important and connected ways. Firstly, placing young people at the centre of these investigations forces scholars to rethink the concept of 'community'. These explorations across northern Uganda, Luwero and the Rwenzori Region expose the multiple layers of 'communities' that overlie boundaries of age and seniority. Any commitment to developing greater co-existence and a sense of mutual respect between local and national understandings of past violence cannot be restricted to adult-only forums. Secondly, it is clear from these creative activities that young people have an important part to play in processes of 'rememoration'. It is they who are digesting the formal, state-led education they receive and placing it alongside the memories of the past that they have been exposed to within their local connections and affiliations. If 'rememoration' is seen as an essential part of peacebuilding – particularly in terms of its role in recovery, resistance, and the rebalancing of power for communities who feel excluded and marginalised – then these data highlight the significance of including young people in such inquiries in order to explore further where the similarities and differences lie in the transmission and silencing of social memories across communities who face the hegemony of those in power (Tallentire 2001). As Sandford (2019: 77) describes:

> To frame the stories that the present wants to tell, only certain elements of the past are needed: when heritage 'celebrates victory (success, conquest, supremacy) and consecrates loss (defeat, misery, degradation)', it requires the kind of 'principled forgetting' that Nandy describes (Nandy 1995, p. 47). The subjects through whose interests these pasts are mediated have different purposes and projects that they attempt to sustain through this use of heritage.

Here we can see a young participant in Amuria talk about the things they need to forget in order to move on to a place where new forms of interaction and engagement can happen:

> Yeah, the message that I want to pass to everybody is let's forget the mistake that we also know how to cope with the situation thinking of the effect of the conflict but get to know how to handle what has come with conflict and aim also requesting the

> entire youth now should wake up and start doing things seriously, yes I want them to get engaged and have the world changed to be a peaceful world not again the world of conflict. I want them to learn how to make friendship, be united and also have peace, Yeah thank you so much that is the message that I wanted to pass. (Amuria young participant)

Young people's visions of peace

A key aspect of data collection involved documenting young people's visions of peaceful futures. The theme of peace is explored through visual representations (drawings) and interviews with young people themselves. Figure 4 represents a young person's vision of what a peaceful future looks like.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, their vision focuses on a secure home and family environment where threats of external violence are absent. Across the data, it can be seen that while most of the young people were optimistic about creating conflict-free futures, this was often mixed with doubt about what the future held. As one interviewee remarked:

> Sometimes I feel like the future is bright but again sometime there is another believe in me that makes me feel the future is dark.

Figure 4. Representations of a peaceful future.

At each of our research sites, young people expressed concern about the development of new and ongoing conflicts, the absence of opportunities and resources, and the ongoing challenges associated with engaging with the past.

If we focus on the more positive dimensions to young people's visions of peace, we can see from the interview data that more specific solutions and models for the future emerge. Across multiple interviews, several of the young people focused on the importance of creating positive inter- and intra-group relations. The wider literature on peacebuilding recognises this as a core part of reducing the likelihood of future conflicts. For example, one participant, describing her vision of a peaceful future, remarked, 'I want them to learn how to make friendship, be united and also have peace'. Perhaps unsurprisingly given the age of the interviewees, several identified the power of sport in bringing people together when they articulated their visions of a peaceful future. A male participant remarked that:

> … a young person can promote peace, maybe organizing football for young people then they play during their free time …

Another young person said:

> Sport, I am not only speaking of particular sport but as in doing this all while we are holding together in the crowd, this brings joy, this brings in as in passion or love for something … if people are in sports they forget about their bad things when they are idle leading to a better performance of peace and unity.

What these data extracts draw attention to is how the young people's visions of peace and peaceful co-existence involve sharing in positive and fun activities, friendship and group interactions. Many of the young people in the project strongly tied visions of peace and a just future to ideas of community and groups coming together to achieve shared goals.

An interesting aspect of the data is how young people's imagined and hoped-for futures had an educational and communicative dimension to them. For several of the young people, a necessary condition of building a peaceful future was to share information about the past and communicate it to other young people and the population more broadly. This was then reflected in the occupations they hoped to pursue. A female participant stated that she wanted to 'be a journalist, if I become a journalist in future I know if there is anything wrong, I can help the community and my country I can speak it out'. Another young person wanted to become a teacher because they would be able to explain to children the 'danger of conflict in society because it brings a lot of harms in the society'. For these young people dialogue and communication about past conflicts was central to building more peaceful futures.

Future questions

In this article we have set out the context and framing of the project and situated our methodological approach in relation to existing work in Uganda and on future imaginaries. In this project, we invited young people to engage in future imaginary arts-based practices that are in dialogue across multiple geographical regions and with each other. Through collaboration and support, this futures work not only offers the potential for young people to consider the ways their futures can be peaceful, but also supports presents that are more 'resilient and adaptable' by offering our young participants the chance 'to articulate futures that are meaningful and worth bringing about' (Sandford 2019: 79). We have opened up creative spaces that allow for what Chahine (2022: 14) describes as 'future memory work', which 'is conducive to understanding what matters to individuals, the way they position themselves in the world, and their multitemporal entanglements. The future gets mobilised in different ways: it functions as a catalyst for eliciting these positionalities; it offers a place to reimagine the present and the past; it makes their temporal interdependencies apparent.' By focusing on three ways that work gets done in practice by young people – through materiality, with situated practices of remembering and forgetting, and with their descriptions of visions of peace – in this article we have reconsidered the situated, contextual practices that are part of future memory work in a tentatively post-conflict, post-colonial society.

Imoh and colleagues (2022) call for people to move beyond the stereotypes of African childhoods and avoid the damaging consequences of the single story about Africa and African childhood. Instead, they have called for, and we have sought to foreground, the space for these young people to describe, explore and represent the mundane, everyday, lived experiences of the past in the present and the futures imagined. As part of this, the COVID-19 pandemic introduced additional challenges for this work, distancing the young people from each other, the young researchers from the participants and the research team from the research sites (researchers both from the United Kingdom and within Uganda were unable to travel for long periods during the project). However, through creative methodologies, and being methodologically creative, we overcame these challenges and offered young people a space to think hopefully about their shared futures in a time when we all really needed to do so.

Imagining the future is a challenge, and one that young people are often burdened with. This requires considerable work: as Ravn (2022) describes, 'cultivating a sense of hope and remaining hopeful under current conditions, especially when already positioned on the margins, requires significant efforts', and this is reinforced within societies where the legacies and material realities of conflict shape one's everyday life. Elsewhere (Moles *et al.* 2023) we have explored the ways these young Ugandan

participants have worked within available frameworks and expectations, of being hopeful, peace-orientated, conscientious subjects, and how the practices we have described in this article constitute a significant part of the resources they have to draw on to achieve this.

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PART FIVE

Afterword

The British Academy

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Afterword

Barbara Stocking

Abstract: The afterword summarises the findings of how young people in the Global South perceive their current ways of making a living, and how they see their futures when there are so few jobs available to them. It also describes the ways researchers can work in partnership with young people so that research becomes closer to being youth led. This approach encourages young people to work to bring about change. Their involvement is essential to have impact.

Keywords: young people, work ,'getting by', youth-led research, impact.

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For people like myself who live in high income countries with ageing populations, it is hard to comprehend what it is like in poorer countries where the much greater part of the population are young people. Sub-Saharan countries now have the most youthful populations in the world, with 70 per cent aged under 30. South Asia is the other region with youth 'peaking'. Asia has just reached its peak. But in sub-Saharan Africa that will not happen until the end of the century. This ought to mean countries of dynamism and innovation. But instead, sadly, for many young people, it means no jobs and no future.

The disconnect between the experiences of ageing and youthful countries is demonstrated through contrasting vocabulary. In high income countries we talk about jobs with the idea they are destined to continue, whether full or part-time. There is considerable legislation binding employers to decent work. But many young people in the global south don't talk about that sort of permanence, nor about careers. What they say is they are 'getting by' with pieces of informal and formal work, paid and unpaid; and with family related responsibilities. 'Getting by' is just about enough to live on and what they ask for is a future where they really can 'make a life' (Barford & Coombe 2019; Barford & Cieslik 2019).

When young men sit on the edges of roundabouts or street corners with their motorcycles, they may be waiting for clients for their bike taxis or these groups of young people may just be 'waiting' for someone to offer work for a few days or weeks – perhaps in construction or perhaps 'waiting' to see what might happen to set them off into a new future.

Young men and women are affected differently with young women expected to help much more with caring roles in close or extended family. They may have left school much earlier and the 'waiting' they experience may lead them into early marriage. Why not, if there is no other vision of future opportunity? Getting by, waiting and being uncertain are the key words in young people's vocabularies in peak youth countries.

The research funded by the British Academy and reported here describes the reality of how young people perceive their lives, what they are doing in response, and what they would wish to happen. Sharing interviews with three young people, the article by Barford *et al*. 2002 sets out in detail how young people do get by, how they cope when their work is taken away and the stamina and resilience required.

The article by Ross Wignall *et al.* (2023) is well worth reading because it sets out so clearly the difference between how young women and young men are treated. Looking at Technical and Vocational Training (TVET) in detail in Sierra Leone describes the differences starkly. In both countries, Sierra Leone and Cameroon, COVID-19 reduced women's workforce participation but it was always low compared to young men. In Sierra Leone, this was in part because of the end of the war and the need to

integrate young men who had been soldiers. In both countries, young women were not just cut out of job opportunities, but also TVET because of their household responsibilities looking after their children, having less education and gender discrimination by elders. The article looks at the Don Bosco TVET system which has developed programmes to provide women with personal skills as well as technical ones. As the authors point out though, changing beliefs in the wider world requires more work. Even young women coming through several years of training have difficulty in obtaining work, with employers saying they would prefer a man.

One of the most surprising articles by Franklin Glozah *et al.* (2023) concerns gambling. Across sub-Saharan Africa, there has been a multi-billion-dollar gambling boom. For example, in Ghana high numbers of men gamble daily; almost all weekly. What do they say is their motivation? 'Quick money', especially if being pushed to find money immediately. They may persuade themselves that they are winning more than losing yet there is evidence that there is less money even for food. Some even regard it as a profession, studying hard the players and clubs to gamble on the football leagues. There is little if any regulation of online gambling, something that is badly needed.

Learning with and from young people

So, if 'getting by' is the experience of millions of young people, what would make it possible for them to 'make a life'? It may seem obvious but starting with what they want, what might work for them and what might make something effective or ineffective would seem the right approach. As young people say: 'Nothing about us without us'. But as many young people also say, they have often not been consulted at all about youth policies and initiatives. Or, if they have been consulted, their input has been ignored. The British Academy compilation here illustrates what can be achieved if there is enough understanding of the importance of true engagement of young people.

The article by Kate Moles *et al.* (2023) is a clear example of how different young people's experience and views may be compared to what might be thought of as common knowledge. This work considers memorisation in circumstances of conflict in Uganda. It was done in the context of asking young people to develop futures for themselves. The research illustrates that the accepted memory of what happened may be different for young people. They remembered events which had intensity of violence and proximity to locality even though the scale and impact of their events may not compare with what memory there is in the wider public. This research is a reminder that we cannot assume what young people's lived experience has been.

This lesson about engagement has had to be learned in many other areas of life. When I worked in the humanitarian sector, I often thought of an experience from

many years before, which brought the message home. A drought hit East Africa, and people were close to starvation. Food relief was being provided to them, yet the physical state of the people was not improving. On questioning, the reason was that they were using the food as fodder for the animals. For them, it was vital that the animals would live into the next year or they would have no food at all. Once that was understood fodder was provided for the animals as well as food for the people. This story illustrates clearly that if you don't listen and take into account the lived experience of people, you may well be ineffective.

Articles in this issue illustrate how much you can learn if you ask the right questions. Of course, this too is where young people come in, in what is becoming known as youth co-research. It would be a mistake to think that young people could just take on doing the research themselves. There are professional research skills and knowledge and without a partnership with people experienced in research methods, the research may not be valid. Young people can though be involved throughout any research project 'about them'. For example, this can be in co-creating the questions to be asked, in the development of the methodologies, carrying out interviews and surveys, where they might be accepted more easily than academic researchers, and in analysis. The article by Proefke & Barford (2023) describes the different ways young people can be engaged. It also takes up the question of what we really mean by youth co-research in practice. Partnership with young people can be a joy for researchers; not least it can be inspiring to see how hard young people are trying to 'make a life' even in difficult circumstances.

Does respectful engagement with young people make a difference?

What young people want to know is what is the outcome of the research being undertaken. Just having feedback is not enough. They want action and agency.

The article by Grace Spencer *et al.* (2023) describes interviews to find out what young people wanted from research. They were members of the international Youth Advisory Board for a project on migration. From these interviews and other work, we know that young people want feedback from the research to know what happened and whether it made a difference. These young people from Ghana and the UK said they hoped it would make a difference and that it would shift policy. This gives those of us engaged in research a dilemma. Many would hope that our work to expose young people's real lives will make all stakeholders more aware, but when it comes to the specific challenges the young people say they face, and what they feel would make a real difference in their lives, the changes are much harder to deliver. Of course, in recent years there has been greater requirement to have impact from research. However, working

alongside young people to bring about change requires access to the relevant decision makers and real skills in advocacy. This is why in these circumstances, partnerships, CSOs and NGOs offer greater opportunity in bringing about change.

In summary then, while it is good that more research is allowing young people to describe their lives, this research does have to be done with respect and honesty. Positively, we are seeing more examples where young people are included in the research team to help generate the research plan and the research questions. As noted above, that should not, of course, exclude experienced researchers in partnership with young people giving us greater opportunity and understanding to provide the base for effective change.

Youth voice in the wider world

Several of the articles consider the extent to which the voice of young people is recognised and responded to. Young people already feel ignored when they participate in forums or research despite the call for youth engagement. The biggest challenge of engagement in the world is for climate change activists. They are right in my view about the lack of action that takes place. It is also disconcerting that there are people who think that young people should not be speaking out at all.

The article on Vietnam (Jones *et al.* 2023) is the story of climate activism by young people. Feelings of guilt are described by these young people and having gone through shock, denial, anger and acceptance, they can come to a positive place ready to act. Of course, this is not easy to maintain if politicians and media then discredit young activists. This does not just happen in Vietnam, the same thing has happened throughout the world, even at the highest UN levels. Even locally, while some activists have family and community support, many others do not. Nor does everyone have the innate confidence to speak in public spaces. They say it is hard to remain positive and the underlying question remains about whether they are taken seriously.

Beckwith *et al.*'s article (2023) takes this further by considering young peoples' voice in conflict and contested environments. Ideally in all settings, young peoples' voice should be recognised: at local, national and international levels through elections, protest and volunteering. But participation does not necessarily mean having impact. It does not necessarily mean accountability to young people. The authors give a definition of accountability as 'a relationship between those responsible for something and those who have a role in passing judgement on how well the responsibility has been discharged' (Guerin *et al.* 2018).

Participation and accountability become more contentious in contested environments and they use the example of Palestine and house demolitions. Theoretically

there is a way to challenge house demolitions and seek accountability, but this is through the Israeli courts. The young Palestinians do not know how to achieve this. They may have lawyers who are not defending their position and the young people are at a disadvantage in that the language used is Hebrew. These young people have to consider how and where to focus as well as what the risks are for their own safety. Some will question whether it is useless to take action and Beckwith notes this is of course valid where there are high risks and limited resources.

This example is about extreme circumstances, but for young people more generally to have influence, an enabling environment with people committed to listening and taking action on young people's concerns is required.

Seeing the bigger picture

Decent work for young people, particularly in low-income countries is an enormous challenge. There are good initiatives and good practices which signal what might be needed but we still have the question of how to bring this about at scale, and which government policies are required to be in place.

It is noticeable that many countries that have youth policies still do not have them integrated into wider labour or economic policy. It is clear too that although there may be work on education, on the skills for transition to work and, in some countries, initiatives to provide funding for young people to set up their own businesses, there is remarkably little discussion about job creation itself. All these facets need to come together if we are to enable young people to 'make a life'. An overarching approach is needed at global and national level.

The lack of action around young people's concerns is a huge risk for the world. The lack of work can lead to a sense of having no importance, or the restrictions made by government may lead to huge frustration as seen in the Arab Spring. Lack of work undoubtedly stimulates the desire to migrate and in certain countries may well lead to conflict. For young men in particular, taking up arms is a way to have purpose and status in their community. Surely, we need to make life worth living for so many young people and use their energy and initiative to make a better world.

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