

Youth economic agency and exclusion in fragile settings: Field evidence from South Sudan and Burundi

Research Report

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This report reflects the findings of the research project: **Youth economic exclusion and violence in Burundi and South Sudan: Improving economic opportunity interventions for young people in fragile settings**, a joint project of Wageningen University and five Dutch NGOs: CARE, Save the Children, ZOA, OxfamNovib, and SPARK, funded through the Applied Research Fund of the Knowledge Network Security and Rule of Law, and carried out between May- December 2016.

Check out our online tool at <http://work4youthinfragilestates.com/>

Acknowledgements & Disclaimer

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The ideas expressed in this report represent the views of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of the participating organisations. We have attempted to accurately represent the views of all who participated in the project but claim responsibility for any errors of interpretation.

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Highlighted findings

- Young people suffer from the lack of economic opportunities. They struggle to 'get by' on a daily basis, while on the lookout for possibilities to 'get ahead'.
- Many young people do not see formal employment as a feasible possibility: the public sector can not meet the demand for jobs and patronage networks and/or political favouritism limit the access to the scarce positions available.
- Young people lack alternative perspectives beyond white collar jobs. They have very few role models of people who made it in agriculture or private business.
- Some young people consider self-employment a good option to develop a viable business. For many others it is a choice out of necessity. Self-employment often results in a patchwork of multiple occupations with very low margins.
- Young people wanting to set up a small business with real potential, find skills and financial means are critical bottlenecks
- For NGOs, creating better economic opportunities for young people is a way to break the vicious circle of violence and the lack of prospects.
- Young people appreciate the work of NGOs for opening prospects (through providing capital, skills or social capital) and giving them some dignity. What NGOs offer rarely is enough to make them 'get ahead'.
- Young people experience stigmatisation as another mechanism that reinforces their social and economic exclusion. By engaging in NGO programmes, they hope to escape such stigmatization.
- Interviewees saw a connection between the frustration over lack of opportunities and the option for violence, but they did not find this connection straightforward. Instead, they constructed a more complex narrative of youth in locally specific scenarios of conflict and violence, in which they may be actors as well as victims.
- The high sounding policy rhetoric of 'employment for stability' suggests employment impacts that we do not see reflected in practice.
- The impact of economic opportunity programmes on reducing violence is not easily demonstrated.
- Young people's problems need to be taken seriously, not because they represent a security risk, but because they deserve real possibilities to develop secure livelihoods.

1. Introduction

Young men and women in fragile settings want to get ahead in their lives and build a future, but they experience numerous obstacles, related to poverty, instability and various forms of exclusion. How do they deal with this situation? What are their needs and ambitions and what opportunities and limitations do they experience? How do NGOs working on economic opportunities for young people help meet (some of) their needs? And how does this impact young people's engagement with violence? This research project aimed to answer these questions on the basis of field research in South Sudan and Burundi and interviews with NGO staff in local offices and national head quarters in the Netherlands.

This research started at the initiative of five Netherlands-based NGOs interested to optimize their work in relation to young people's economic opportunities and stability in fragile settings. In close collaboration with the NGO partners, the academic partners worked this into a collaborative research set up. The results of this project are presented in this report.

The research took place to the background of the concern with 'employment for stability' that motivated many organisations – including those in this research consortium, but not limited to them- to (further) invest in the topic of economic opportunities for young people. But how much "employment" is actually created in economic interventions targeting young people? And how do these interventions contribute to "stability"? Recent other studies indicated that outcomes so far call for modesty and that work in this field suffers from untested assumptions.¹ This research was designed to give organisations a better grip on what they may and may not achieve, taking young people's needs and concerns as a starting point.

The research centred on young people's *economic agency* and how, in fragile settings, this agency might be strengthened. We moved away from the prime concern with '*securitising*' youth – meaning that youth are labelled as a security problem and programs seek to contain the risks associated with them- to thinking about how young men and women could become more *economically secure*. Our starting point was that young people in fragile settings are not the problem, they have a problem, and often more than one. How do they address these? And how can NGOs help?

This report summarises the findings and conclusions from field research in South-Sudan and Burundi. In addition, other outputs have been published: an online tool (to be found at <http://work4youthinfragilestates.com/>) and a policy brief (Van der Haar & Van Bruggen 2017).

¹ At the time of conducting this research, key references were Brück et al 2015; Holmes et al. 2013; Mercy Corps 2015; Izzi 2013)

Backgrounds to the research

This report reflects the findings of the applied research project *Youth economic exclusion and violence in Burundi and South Sudan: Improving economic opportunity interventions for young people in fragile settings*. The consortium defined the shared aim of exploring how young people in fragile settings could be supported in becoming *more effective economic actors*. The research wanted to understand the needs, ambitions and experiences of young men and women in fragile settings and how NGO interventions tie in with these. It zoomed in on specific sites in South Sudan and Burundi.

The research was a joint project of Wageningen University and five Dutch NGOs, CARE, Save the Children, ZOA, OxfamNovib, and SPARK. It was funded through the Applied Research Fund of the Knowledge Network Security and Rule of Law, and ran from May to December 2016. The idea for the research derived from earlier collaborations within a working group on reconstruction that operated under the Knowledge Platform Security and Rule of Law, and all interventions studied in this report were funded under the so-called ‘reconstruction tender’ of the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

The project had two main aims and outputs:

- *Collaborative research* to generate insights on youth socio-economic exclusion and violence in fragile settings, and how NGO interventions connect to these dynamics. The results of fieldwork in Burundi and South Sudan, and internal discussions on programming, are summarised in the current report.
- *Collaborative tool development* to develop a wider set of recommendations for programme development concerning economic opportunity interventions for young people. This resulted in an online tool that is available at <http://work4youthinfragilestates.com/>.

The lack of economic opportunities for youth and the relation to violence have become important topics in NGO programming. This trend is informed by a powerful discourse of ‘employment for stability’ which sees unemployed young men as sources of violence and instability. This notion has received considerable criticism. In addition, we found that this approach did not fully satisfy the concerns and ambitions of the NGOs in the consortium. Where ‘employment for stability’ calls for “jobs for young men”, the organisations in the consortium look beyond “jobs” and beyond “men”. The organisations in the consortium connect the idea of employment creation to a broader range of interventions to support fragile livelihoods and see economic interventions in relation to inclusive development and peace-building, social cohesion and social justice. Their interventions range from stimulating young people’s entrepreneurship, to conflict transformation and social inclusion, aiming to enhance young people’s citizenship through economic projects. In addition, some of them work with notions of child rights and gender equity.

The project took social and economic exclusion of young people as a starting point. In so doing, it deliberately bracketed the idea of ‘opportunity costs of violence’ that is central in the Employment for stability discourse. The notion of “opportunity costs of violence” holds that a person engage in violence more easily when attractive economic alternatives are lacking.² This research looked beyond individual cost-benefit rationality, recognising youth as socially situated actors who confront interconnected social and economic challenges. The research also recognised that violent behaviour is only one amongst a range of responses to exclusion and deprivation that young people may develop, next to, constructively looking for opportunities and political activism or, alternatively, self-destructive behaviour and resignation. Seeing young people as socially embedded, and understanding social agency and economic agency as closely connected, this research hopes to contribute to a better understanding of why what types of interventions might work in fragile settings. It hopes to do justice to both the complexities of the challenges young people face and to the efforts undertaken to assist them.³

BOX 1: Definitions used

Young people or youth - In this study this term is not used to refer to a specific age range, but rather to people who are transitioning into adulthood. Such transitions are typically associated with events such as marriage, owning land or financial independence. We follow the definition of Mercy Corps, which defines “youth” as *“a period of progression toward independent responsibility. The timetable for transition to adulthood varies. Particularly in transitional environments, formal or informal processes of initiation may be interrupted or delayed”* (Mercy Corps 2015).

Employment for stability - Employment for stability is a policy idea that suggests that the creation of employment in fragile states will contribute to stability. Employment is expected to lower the risk that young men opt for violence. Though debated, the idea has been influential in fragile states policy (Brück, T., et al., 2015)

Fragile states - For this research, we adhere to the list of countries categorized as fragile by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) (<http://www.dggf.nl/landenlijst>). The MFA defines fragile states as follows: *“Fragile states are characterized by poorly functioning state structures and institutions, a lack of trust in the government, a lack of social cohesion and national unity, structural human rights violations, and a weak economic and material infrastructure. Fragile states lag strongly behind in achieving Millennium development goals.”* (Dutch MFA: IOB, 2013).

² The term opportunity costs refers to “the loss of potential gain from other alternatives when one alternative is chosen” (New Oxford American Dictionary). For example, a person opting for violence would have to forfeit current or future job opportunities. A lack of income or of economic prospects implies that the opportunity costs of violence are low, hence the risk of engaging in violence is high (Collier, P., Hoeffler, A., & Rohner, D., 2009).

³ See for example the work of Marjoke Oosterom on youth agency and youth programming in a range of fragile settings in Africa, Oosterom 2018).

Research approach and set-up

The research involved six weeks of fieldwork in South Sudan and Burundi each, at sites selected by the research consortium. For each country, sites were selected in such a way that all organisations were represented with one or more programmes. Two local researchers were recruited to interview a range of young men and women, inside and outside of NGO programmes, next to NGO staff members, local authorities and other duty bearers. In total, approximately a hundred individuals were interviewed in individual or small-group interviews. This was complemented with focus group discussions. The fieldwork covered a wide range of economic opportunity interventions, reflecting the diversity of the consortium (see Map 2.1, below).

The project as a whole had a duration of seven months. Gathering field data mostly took place in the summer of 2016, on the basis of a research protocol elaborated by the consortium coordinators and adapted to the local circumstances by the researchers. Arrangements for fieldwork were done in direct consultation with the field offices of the consortium partners.

In addition to fieldwork, the research process included a series of meetings and internal workshops with the consortium members. These meetings served, first, to define the scope and approach of the project, and second, to discuss the main findings and implications.

Set-up of the report

The next chapters present the research methodology and an overview of the research consortium partners. This is followed by three chapters based on interview data, that discuss, first, the economic opportunities that young people identify; second, the economic exclusion they experience; and third, how this connects to violence and fragility. The concluding chapter sums up the main findings and concerns.

2. Methodology

Field research was carried out in both South Sudan (Sam Ejibua) and Burundi (Joseph Nindorera) by researchers from the region, selected for their experience with qualitative methodology, expertise on the topic and familiarity with the research locations. The research was coordinated by the Dutch researcher (Wouter van Bruggen) and the project leader (Gemma van der Haar) based at Wageningen University.

Sites for research were selected to represent interventions from all of the participating NGOs. In Burundi research was planned for Bujumbura Mairie, Bujumbura Rural and Cibitoke. In South Sudan for Yei and surroundings, and Rumbek and surroundings (Map 2.1 indicates the sites selected for data collection; Table 3.1 present an overview of the interventions). A research protocol detailed arrangements about the number and type of interviews and the main topics to be discussed. Interview guides were fine-tuned to the local situation. Kick-off workshops were envisaged for each of the countries, to map problems around youth economic opportunities and local dynamics of instability. In practice, multiple adjustments were necessary to the field work plan, especially in the case of South Sudan, as detailed below.

Fieldwork included, in the first place, interviews with young men and women, beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries of NGO programmes, individual or in small groups depending on what the situation allowed. Another important element were focus group discussions with key stakeholders, local NGO staff of partner organizations and duty bearers (predominantly local authorities). Both (male) researchers involved female research assistants so as to be better able to connect to female respondents. Interpreters were locally recruited when needed. The researchers recorded their interviews when respondents permitted and processed these into (condensed) transcripts. Fieldwork data of both countries were processed in the Netherlands, where transcripts were coded and analysed (with Atlas.ti) and synthesized for this report.

Burundi

In Burundi, fieldwork covered Bujumbura Mairie, Bujumbura Rural, and Cibitoke, as planned. Individual interviews in Burundi comprised a total of 40 youth, five NGO staff members and four local authorities. Focus group discussions furthermore involved approximately 50 young people. The kick-off workshop in Bujumbura included eleven staff members of NGOs or their local partners, as well as twelve young people and seven duty bearers.⁴

⁴ Some young people as well as staff members were included both in individual interviews as well as in focus groups discussions or the kick off workshop.

3. Research partners

This research was a joint project of Wageningen University and five Dutch NGOs working on economic opportunities for young people. This chapter introduces the NGOs that participated in the consortium and outlines the programmes that were examined during fieldwork, represented in Table 3.1. The description is based on internal documents and discussions on the theories of change of the organisations and relies on an initial document drafted in preparation of the research proposal (Peters 2015). The organizations are discussed here in alphabetical order.

Table 3.1: Overview of interventions examined, by organisation

Organization/Country	South Sudan	Burundi
CARE		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Peace clubs -Early warning systems -Village Savings and Loans Associations (VSLAs) -Support to income generating activities -Skills and entrepreneurship training
Oxfam		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Cross-border peace building -Peace and solidarity groups -Saving groups
Save the Children	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET) -Entrepreneurial skills training -Child-friendly justice 	
Spark	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Value chains horticulture and cereals -Entrepreneurship training -Multi Stakeholder Platforms 	
ZOA		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Village Savings and Loans Associations (VSLAs) -Community projects -(Collective) income generating activities -Cross-border value chains

Note: This table only lists the interventions that were discussed during fieldwork. It does not represent the full extent of programmes and activities of the organisations in the regions mentioned. For each organisation, interventions in one of the two countries were selected.

CARE

CARE embeds economic opportunity interventions in a broader focus on peace building and inclusive governance. For them, economic interventions are an entry point for peace building at the community level. Their strategies include Village Savings and Loans Associations (VSLAs), (collective) income generating activities and Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET). With these economic interventions they also pursue non-economic outcomes, such as increasing beneficiaries' self-esteem, and they combine economic interventions with a range of other activities related to leadership, citizenship, non-violent communication, negotiation and gender and diversity. CARE aims to enhance young people's contribution to decision-making and foster a constructive, politically active youth. Also, in line with their interest in inclusive governance, they explicitly seek to involve authorities (mostly at the local level) in their activities.

Our research included activities of CARE's **Peace under Construction** programme in Bujumbura Mairie and Bujumbura Rural (at the time of field research, implementation of this programme had concluded). Through their partners OAP and Mi Parec, CARE has developed activities such as peace clubs, VSLA's and (collective) income generating activities (e.g. making soap). These activities predominantly targeted 'youth at risk', notably ex-combatants, who otherwise might become spoilers to peace. As CARE staff explained, in Burundi they wanted to contribute to beneficiaries' economic prospects, but also to social cohesion and acceptance of diversity.

Oxfam Novib

Oxfam Novib works from a rights-based approach: their aim is to ensure that young people know their socioeconomic rights and can claim them, ensuring sustainable and transformational change and challenging economic inequality. Core to their approach is the promotion of active citizenship. Oxfam Novib aims to achieve young people's social and economic empowerment in fragile contexts. Their work includes programmes centred on the economic empowerment of young people as a strategy to contribute to conflict transformation, as well as programmes that aim to empower young people to participate in peace making processes and awareness around forms of (political) manipulation. Their programmes aim to increase economic opportunities for young women and men by developing their skills and capacities and ensuring an enabling environment.

Our research included the Burundi chapter of the Peace Beyond Borders (PBB) programme of Oxfam Novib, implemented in different sites in the Great Lakes Region. The PBB programme aimed to address the causes and consequences of conflict related to land and governance, and to build trust among communities and the various actors and stakeholders in the region. During the latter phase, the programme in Burundi supported economic opportunities for young women and men, with a view to improving their economic and socio-political perspectives. With improved livelihood and income generation opportunities for conflict-affected young people it was hoped to generate peace dividend. This should, for the short term, reduce the risks of youth being recruited into armed groups and, for the longer term, contribute to conflict transformation.

Save the Children

Save the Children is first and foremost a children's rights organization. Starting point is that young people suffer in situations of fragility and conflict: they do not only experience the immediate effects of conflict and violence, but also suffer from the limited economic opportunities under conditions of fragility. The work of Save the Children targets for example the lack of skills amongst young people that limits their access to the labour market. Economic opportunities are also taken as a relatively neutral entry point into communities that allows the organisation to address youth or women's rights.

Our research included the work of Save the Children in Rumbek in South Sudan, where they mainly focussed on vocational training for young people. The programme aimed to empower young men and women economically as well as socially, as a way to build a strong civil society and contribute to peace and stability in South Sudan. Though there was a high demand for labour in South Sudan to (re-) build the country, skilled labour was often imported from abroad, leading to frustration among young people. Save the Children hoped to reduce this by increasing their employability so that they could better seize the opportunities on offer. There is also a focus on gender equity and youth rights advocacy, including child-friendly justice.

SPARK

Spark's mission is to develop higher education and entrepreneurship to empower young, ambitious people in fragile states. The organisation aims to promote peace and stability through inclusive economic development. They state: "Inclusive economic growth and poverty eradication, through the creation of decent work for youth, women and marginalised groups, make a major contribution to promoting sustainable peace in fragile states." Supporting entrepreneurship is the backbone of their programmes. When successful businesses are created or helped to grow, this benefits the owners but also leads to job creation that benefits a wider range of people. Their entrepreneurship promotion programmes typically involve a mix of entrepreneurial skills training and support for promising business ideas, for example through business plan competitions. SPARK works through local partner organisations, including local business support centers, CSOs, financial institutions etc. They work with marginalised or vulnerable youth, selecting those who demonstrate the ambition and commitment necessary to develop a business. SPARK also supports food value chains, trying to make these work for peace, development and food security.

The research looked at SPARK's projects in Yei in South Sudan. These involved support to farmers, such as providing them with micro-credit in the form of treadle pumps. Such technology would allow the farmers to be more productive and generate more income. Furthermore, they facilitated access to seedlings and seeds for better crops and train farmers in improved farming methods. They also trained beneficiaries in cash generating activities such as honey production.

ZOA

For ZOA, a starting point is that structural development and political stability are closely connected. They work to make a difference in people's everyday lives while complementing the macro-level efforts (of other intervening agencies) aimed at stability. For ZOA, economic activities are a less sensitive entry point to bring different groups of people together in conflict-affected settings. Seen as relatively neutral, these activities may offer an alternative in contexts where direct peace building is not possible. Core instruments they work with are collective income generating activities and VSLAs. These offer additional income to members while also building mutual trust.

Our research included the ZOA project Human Security in Ruzizi Valley, in Cibitoke, Burundi. With their local partners (Mi Parec and Prefed), ZOA engaged youth from different political backgrounds, underemployed youth and ex-combatants in collective economic activities. In this way. It was hoped to disengage these young people from the violent political activities that might threaten peace. ZOA's projects involved VSLA's, community projects, income generating activities (e.g. brick making, barbershop) and cross border value chains. Through their income generating activities, they also tried to help youth gain respect and status in the communities, and mutual understanding between youth from different (political) backgrounds.

4. Young people's economic ambitions: Getting by or getting ahead?



Young people in fragile settings, like young people elsewhere, have dreams and ambitions. Amongst these is the wish to become economically independent. Young men and women, however, encounter enormous limitations to realise such economic independence, related to conditions of widespread poverty, instability and inequality. This complicates their transition to adulthood. This chapter discusses how young people see their own situation: What are their needs and ambitions? And what do they experience as the main opportunities and obstacles in trying to reach these? This chapter draws on interviews conducted with young men and women in the different research locations. In this part of the report, the voice of the young people themselves is privileged. We look at what *they* think NGO programmes have to offer. Which of the critical bottlenecks young people encounter are addressed by NGOs? Is that enough to help them make the transition to economic independence?

We found that young people are realistic in their ambitions, though they may dream of more. Many of them do not see formal employment as a feasible possibility and are prepared to settle for less. Many of them struggle to 'get by' on a daily basis, but they are on the lookout for possibilities to 'get ahead'. We also found that much of what NGOs offer, helps young people 'get by', but rarely is enough to make them 'get ahead'. There is a discrepancy between what young people ultimately aspire and what NGO programmes have to offer. This does not mean that NGO programmes are not appreciated by beneficiaries, but it does help to have a more realistic understanding of how much of a difference these programmes make in young people's lives.

A hierarchy of economic ambitions

In the interviews, young people put forward their ambitions and the challenges they encounter. They identified ultimate ambitions and, in the face of context and constraints, also more immediate goals. Perhaps not surprisingly, ambitions varied from one person to the next due to differences in interests, skills, education level, rural/urban environment, gender etc. Despite these differences, we could identify a certain ranking of economic opportunities in terms of how attractive these are to the young people interviewed.

Consistently ranked highest are the **white-collar jobs in the public sector**. These come closest to the idea young people generally had of formal employment. **Working for an NGO** is also valued highly, but not mentioned as often, possibly because opportunities in this field are more limited and transitory. Somewhat to our surprise, the ambition of working for a company in the **private sector** was hardly mentioned. This might possibly be attributed to the absence of such companies in the regions studied and, with that, from the interviewees' frame of reference.

What interviewees mentioned next, after white collar jobs, was a very broad category of **self-employment** options. In the absence of significant formal or secure employment in the private sector, self-employment is what remains for many. This includes businesses of various sizes, but also farming. **Casual manual labour** finally was considered the least attractive option. Typically, the pay is very low for very hard work and it provides little certainty or possibilities of progress. The attractiveness of employment in agriculture varied: some would rank it as a reasonably attractive self-employment option, but casual manual labour in agriculture was considered highly unattractive.



The ranking helps understand what young people see as attractive economic options and why. Below, we go into each of the categories mentioned in some more detail and explain why young people find them desirable or not. We also go into the options related to agriculture in more detail. Men and women value the different options differently. Overall, the research shows that women are even more limited in their opportunities than men due to gender norms and taboos but also insecurity.

“White collar jobs”: Out of reach for most

Many interviewees explained that they would prefer a white collar job to any other option. This is what most closely approaches the idea of formal employment that brings economic security, independence and possibilities to move ahead in life. Such aspirations were strongest among educated young men. In the absence of a significant private sector, that might also value higher education, their best hope was to be absorbed into public service. Amongst their ambitions, young men mentioned becoming a civil servant or (local) public administrator, whereas young women mentioned teaching positions a lot. In the interviews, young people also immediately underlined that such jobs in practice seemed out of reach for them and that their ambitions were likely to remain unfulfilled.

Jobs in the public sector are expected to come with status and power. Young people associate these positions with working in an office, wearing a suit and driving a car. These are privileges, however, only reserved for the highest positions, something the interviewees did not always seem aware of. As a young man from Yei explained: *“Generally, the youth are not informed about the environment they live in... they see the lifestyle on TV [...] once they watch something on TV, they want to live what they see.”*

Young people realise, however, that white collar job opportunities are scarce and require special connections. A young man from Burundi explained: *“I did the Cibitoke high school and was in the modern literature department and I did the pedagogical training. I was waiting for a job in the government to have a contract and a health insurance in addition to the regular salary. But I could not find a job in the government while other less deserving ones have. The criteria for granting employment are obscure”.* A young woman explained how in spite of having the right qualifications, she was still - more than six years after getting her diploma- waiting for her first teaching job. *“Such positions as a teacher rarely open up”,* she explained, *“and the positions that are available to the select few, concern temporary positions, usually in schools ran by associations”.*

Formal education used to provide access to public sector jobs but young people started to realise that this is less and less the case. Job openings, many interviewees explained, are often kept hidden from the general public. Instead of being open for all and granted to the best applicant, they are reserved for those that are connected to people 'in the know'. Illustrative of such practices is the following quote of a young man from Wulu, South Sudan: *"The obstacles I have seen in Wulu that have hampered access to job opportunities is the corruption which is so high. For example, if I am the one working with Save the Children [hypothetically] and there is a job opportunity for Wulu, I will just come and hide it [the vacancy] and give it to my brother to apply and no one else will know about that job until the deadline has passed, or when they have recruited the person."*

Young people stressed that the most attractive positions are only accessible to an elite and may not be obtained in a fair manner. This strengthens the perception that due to corruption white collar positions offer high rewards for little effort, making almost any other option unattractive. Young people were very critical of corruption, however. Some of them mentioned this as the reason why they would prefer working in an NGO to working for the government. NGO jobs are "more clean".

Young people see white collar jobs as a way to meet the social pressures they experience. Family members that have supported these young people in their education expect returns on their investment. Also others will come for help once they have some income. Only a job that allows considerable returns will help meet these demands. As a young man from Wulu, South Sudan, said: *"[...], the family members will expect you to give them whatever they need. People even went to the extent of wanting you to give them cash... like, whenever you get your salary, people will be lining up to wait for you to distribute money. And that is when you will be praised, that they really have a child."*

Jobs in the public sector are becoming less interesting in terms of direct economic gain. In both Burundi and South Sudan, the presumed security of a formal contract meant little in practice: both governments are so pressed for money that payment of salary is often delayed, sometimes for months. Yet, the power and status that come with such positions are still appreciated, as it gives one the ability to secure jobs for others. If the regular salary earned through such a position is not enough to meet social pressures, it is tempting to use the power that comes with it to rake in more money in order to fulfil social obligations.

What do young people do when the desired white collar jobs are not available? Some turn to other options, with less status but providing some (and sometimes more) income. Others however, seem unwilling to settle for less than the desired job. Even when it is obviously not feasible, some young people "wait" for such opportunities rather than pursuing other avenues. There is a lack of successful examples and role models. Where the only examples of people that are truly better-off are those in white collar positions, pursuing such an occupation yourself despite the odds, may seem logical. In Burundi and South Sudan, people had very few examples of people who made it in agriculture or private business and who would offer alternative perspectives beyond white collar jobs.

Young people's choices reflect personal preferences but also broader cultural norms. Educated youth are sometimes reluctant to engage in other occupations that they consider are below them because they are 'dirty' or 'hard'. Paradoxically, they might reject other options even when these offer a better pay, something we found especially for South Sudan. As explained by a youth leader from Cuiebet, South Sudan: *"Others will say being a carpenter is a dirty job, but the truth is, I can stay the whole day looking dirty, but at the end of the day, I will have more money than the person who is coming from the office."*

Cultural preferences affect the appreciation of employment in the service sector. For South Sudan it was mentioned that young men are deterred from occupations in which they serve others. They explain that they cannot be seen doing such work by their potential in-laws. In Burundi, we found a bigger acceptance of working in the service sector (such as being a hairdresser). Cultural preferences are strongly gendered. In Burundi we found that many jobs in the service sector were not considered acceptable for women. Working in a hotel, for example, was seen to lead to stigmatization or sexual violence. Furthermore insecurity, in particular the threat of sexual violence, limits their freedom of movement and thus their opportunities to engage in activities outside of their house. Cultural perceptions can and do change. Successful examples of people who get ahead outside of the public sector can contribute to such changes in perception. Deliberate policy, by governments or NGOs can help this along. The section on agriculture below illustrates this.

Our interviews suggest that the lack of opportunities within the public sector has led to a devaluation of formal education in both Burundi and South Sudan. When the returns to education are so marginal, families are unwilling to make such investments, respondents in Burundi explained. Some respondents even claimed that education puts youth in a worse position compared to those that quit school earlier. The odds of ending up with a 'real job' are so slim that time spent on education is better invested in engaging in any sort of income generating activity available. By the time those that finished school realise they will not be find a job up to their education level and start to explore other opportunities, they are so far behind in experience compared to their less-educated peers, that no one will want to hire them. Educated youth are also thought to be less willing to work hard and may be turned down when they seek manual hard labour. One educated young man from Cibitoke described such an experience as follows: *"One day I had asked a farmer for a job to help him, but he laughed at me."*

Is agriculture an option?

Is agriculture an option for young people? This issue was debated extensively in the various research locations. We found that the commonly heard assertion that agriculture is simply not an attractive option for young people in Africa, does not hold. During fieldwork we encountered young people who dismissed agriculture but also those who saw it as a viable option. Work in agriculture has its downsides: it involves hard and dirty work, is uncertain due to dependency on the weather, and involves a long wait before any profits can be reaped. Furthermore, in the eyes of young people agriculture resembles too much what their parents do and does not, in that sense, represent 'progress'. Yet, it may be a viable option for self-employment. A young man in Wulu provided the following illustration: *"The problem of most youth is, we still want white collar jobs... you find someone with a diploma in agriculture running around for a job, and yet he has the skills to employ himself. I say: go and farm and earn from it!"*

In both countries we encountered young people who saw opportunities in agriculture. In Burundi, especially in Cibitoke, people were enthusiastic about this. Interviewees stressed the suitability of the soil as well as the proximity to Rwanda where prices for agricultural products are higher, allowing opportunities for cross-border trade. They pointed to possibilities for rice cultivation, palm oil production, and higher value crops like tomatoes for which a local value chain might potentially be developed. The biggest challenge pointed out by the young people interviewed, is the capital needed to buy agricultural inputs. In addition, they mentioned the lack of access to land, soil degradation and the lack of markets (also in Cibitoke once the border to Rwanda was closed). These challenges were even more profound for women in Burundi, whose access to land is even more restricted.

Also in South Sudan, the research brought up examples of young people interested in agriculture. However, in cattle regions, agriculture lacks status. In the eyes of NGO staff and local duty bearers this was a major challenge. Another issue is that agriculture does not provide immediate cash. As one stakeholder in Rumbek explained: *"You know, in agriculture, you get the benefit after three or six months... but for the youth, they need something now, in Swahili they call it "kula yote alafu weka akili", implying, eat all you have and think about something else tomorrow... They talk like, if you are cultivating, you are wasting time."* SPARK staff blamed this on the lack of successful examples. There are hardly any role models of people who have been successful with agriculture, from which young people might draw inspiration. In addition, insecurity poses serious constraints. As a young man from Rumbek explained: *"The problem for us is the insecurity in Rumbek East... Usually, it is not safe to go and cultivate in the village, especially when there is insecurity. Sometimes, we just leave the land because of fear of being attacked in the gardens."* Similarly, SPARK was very positive about the potential for agriculture in the area around Yei: the area is very fertile and good yields should be possible. To demonstrate the potential of agriculture, however, one needs a number of successive productive seasons and insecurity made this very difficult.

Self-employment options

The lack of formal employment in either the public or the private sector, motivates many young people to develop a range of self-employment options. In our research locations, there was hardly a formal private sector to speak of, making employment in larger businesses unavailable for most. We already discussed the problems around employment in the public sector. The term self-employment covers a wide scope of more and less profitable income generating activities. It includes various forms of entrepreneurship which hold the promise of 'getting ahead', however, in reality self-employment mostly amounts to 'getting by', and sometimes even hardly that. Self-employment for some may be a positive choice and a way to develop a viable business. For many others it is a choice out of necessity and results in a patchwork of multiple occupations with very low margins.

Examples of people (barely) getting by abound in our research. Examples from Burundi include young people selling basic necessities in the streets; young people, mostly women, selling food stuffs; people running small kiosks where customers buy airtime or charge their phones; and young people operating a hairdressing saloon. Others, having skills in masonry, (occasionally) work in construction. Women in both countries often work in specific sectors such as hairdressing or selling food products, next to agriculture. Examples from South Sudan

include boda-boda driving or unloading lorries at the market place (so called *Blokers*). In the case of boda-boda driving, the young boys often do not own the motorbike (they rent it by the day), but they certainly consider their occupation as self-employment. Many of these youth struggle to make ends meet. They spend large portions of the day waiting for a fare and often these barely cover their costs. The 'jobs' people organise often offer very little in terms of economic security and they are susceptible to shocks. Interestingly enough, those who have received more formal education are not necessarily seen to be better off. A stakeholder from Rumbek explained this as follows: *"The only challenge is that when the economy is down like is the case now, in times of recession, you find that someone with skills cannot earn. When there is so much inflation, the money they earn does not have weight and whatever money they are getting, is not helping because the prices are so high and the expenditures are too high and this can place a burden on the youth. You can see that somebody who is earning little money is the same like somebody who is not earning anything at all."*

Unskilled, casual labour, organised on an ad hoc, day-to-day basis is the least attractive option. Young people in South Sudan explain that with such activities you hardly make enough to 'get by'. As illustrated by a young man from Cuiebet: *"There are also many who end up doing odd jobs to earn money, they push wheelbarrows and sell water to try and make ends meet. But the money they get from this activity is very minimal, and it is very frustrating for someone who has tried to go to school... you cannot even afford a piece of soap or eat something in a day."* Another example of casual labour is weeding in some else's plot of land. Such labour is really a last resort. It often involves hard work, such as heavy lifting for example, and is generally considered unsuitable for women.

Setting up a small business might be potentially promising. In the interviews, young people were keen to discuss their ideas on what would make a viable business. In Burundi, a small group of young people for example, talked about their plan to fill a local niche by establishing a bakery together in Bujumbura Rural. Another group had the idea of starting a small factory to produce soap. In both cases, these groups argued that despite these being everyday products for which there is ample demand, these items were not being produced locally. Projects like these, provided that the necessary capital and skills are accessible, might allow people to 'get ahead'. But not all small businesses hold that promise. Young people indicated that for businesses that only require a limited investment there is a stiff competition of peers offering the exact same services (how many air time vendors does one street need?). Another problem is the lack of clientele with sufficient acquisition power. As illustrated by a young woman from Kinama: *"Often we lack the clientele, when we want to engage in small businesses, we wait for the customers, but they never come, they are poor"*.

Skills and financial means are critical bottlenecks to set up a small business with real potential. In the interviews, people stated that getting support in these cases is enormously important as it is often the lack of funds that holds them back, either from starting as an entrepreneur or from becoming more successful. Such support might be found with relatives or with NGO programmes. Also young women were interested to develop a small business, but they stressed that it was important that their family supports them, also morally.

Interviewees in both Burundi and South Sudan, explained that they organise in small groups in order to attract funding. Sometimes such self-organization occurs independently, but often such groups were supported by

NGOs or churches. Interviewees indicated they can be strategic about this: they talked about forming groups that include different ethnicities, knowing that this increases attractiveness to potential donors. However, young people also found that self-organization may be risky. There is a fine line between 'virtuous' groups and those that are seen as a threat to society. Interviewees reported that, in contexts where authorities are afraid of being challenged they may be quick to label such groups as 'rebellious'. Gatherings of young people were sometimes seen by the rest of the community as a threat to security, as we found concerning the 'ligalas' (informal regular gathering of young people in public spaces) in Burundi. Young people found they were not trusted and the misbehaviour of some tended to be extrapolated to the group as a whole.

Insecurity limits business opportunities. A clear example was found in South Sudan, around honey production. SPARK supported honey production in Yei as it may offer a viable source of income. Honey production offers the promise of significant cash rewards for relatively little effort and it can be done as a side activity. Due to high demand in the wider region, and not only locally, traders are willing to pay a good price for it. When honey is refined and value is added by improving the production process, even higher returns are to be expected. However, the honey value chain can be easily disrupted by insecurity. Regional traders may be unwilling to come to collect honey when travelling is dangerous. Also around Rumbek, where honey production has traditionally been practiced, insecurity affects the opportunities. Young men and women explained that venturing out to their hives was sometimes too dangerous.

Do NGO programmes help young people get ahead?

The NGOs included in this research seek to contribute to creating economic opportunities for young people through a variety of activities and tailored to the different needs in different settings. The nature of their ambitions on the economic outputs varies, as does their interest in non-economic outcomes of their programmes. Do these programmes help young people not only get by, but also get ahead? Do they manage to solve some of the critical bottlenecks young people experience in their efforts to achieve economic independence?

Some programmes have an explicit ambition to boost people's prospects through business development. Of the five NGOs involved in this research, especially SPARK stood out for that. Their aim is to develop viable businesses that offer good prospects for the owners but also have a spin-off to the local economy. They mostly focus on young people with potential and help them develop their business plans. Beneficiaries, who are selected based on the viability of their business ideas, are supported with training and credit. If a business is successful, it will employ the entrepreneur and eventually, create jobs for others.

The business development approach clearly holds potential to help young people get ahead and seems to connect well with the ambitions expressed by young people. Experience also shows, however, that the threshold for this approach to work may be (too) high, especially in settings of extreme fragility. In Yei, SPARK decided to adjust their strategy and to open up their programmes to somewhat older people than they normally would, as these seemed better equipped to succeed in the programmes on offer. They also developed a training for so called blockers in Yei market to help them build better relations with their customers. These young men offload trucks in the market and are often perceived negatively due to their aggressiveness and unreliability. The training hoped to strengthen their position through the building of trust, while contributing to improve value chains.

Some of the other NGO programmes set more modest goals in terms of the economic outputs. They are geared primarily to helping people 'get by', and – as remarked by a participant in one of the workshops- in contexts of severe poverty and insecurity this is already a considerable achievement. Activities like savings groups and income generating activities can help increase people's resilience to social and economic shocks, giving them a larger buffer to cope with hardships. Vocational training comes in to increase the scope of income generating activities people might develop. This type of strategy typically focusses on the most vulnerable, including young people and women. It tackles bottlenecks derived from a lack of capital, lack of knowledge and lacking skills. In some cases, the programmes propose specific organisational arrangements to strengthen collective action at the local level.

Young people are rather realistic about what NGO programmes can offer them. They do not expect NGOs to create new jobs or increase their prospects dramatically, aware of the many limitations that are present in settings of overriding poverty and insecurity. They still appreciate NGO programmes enormously. They explain how interventions help them pay for an extra year of school, or allow them to invest in some extra productive means such as agricultural inputs, or to start a small kiosk.

However, people experience that the programmes do not always meet their needs. As a young man from Cibitoke, Burundi explained: *"We did not appreciate that the projects we presented for funding were not funded by the organization, it was these projects which were to help us maintain our cohesion by working together. If not, the young people risk to join their camps [political sides], there is no longer any activity that unites us"*. Or, in the case of vocational training, skills alone will not be enough for youth to start practicing their trade. A duty bearer in Wulu, South Sudan, remarked: *"What I would advise is, when these youth graduate, they should be supported with start-up kits and capital, so that they can go and start their own business and enterprises."* Beneficiaries are concerned that the programmes stop before lasting impacts are achieved.

Where economic improvements are sometimes marginal, young people appreciate the programmes also for other reasons. These give them a sense of purpose and a sense of belonging. Young people mentioned they suffer enormously from being stigmatized as being lazy, as a burden to their families or even a threat. By engaging in NGO programmes, they are able to escape such stigmatization since they are seen to put in an effort.

NGOs know about these considerations. During the course of the research programme, in meetings in the Netherlands and in the region, we had many discussions about what NGO programmes might realistically achieve. The different NGOs were mostly hesitant to claim that they generate outright ‘employment’, yet they certainly do see themselves as strengthening opportunities and capacities for *self*-employment. Some were more comfortable with using the language of ‘employment’ than others. More important than the terminology, however, is the question how successful the programmes are in strengthening young people’s economic agency and bringing the goal of eventual economic independence closer.

NGO staff, beneficiaries and duty bearers alike stressed that the potential impact of NGOs should not be overestimated. NGOs are largely unable to influence broader processes such as insecurity, (local) economies and (lack of) markets, cultural norms (for example in relation to acceptable economic activities for women) or youth exclusion (discussed in the next chapter). All of these factors significantly impact overall economic development and young people’s economic prospects.

Furthermore, NGOs are bound by the rules of the game of their donors. This means that programme cycles are typically (too) short and that they cannot always decide to focus on what they know is really important to generate meaningful change. An example from our research is that regional approaches, which target the border regions of neighbouring countries and which have proven successful according to, amongst others, Oxfam and ZOA, have suddenly gone out of fashion with donors. The result is that programmes can no longer be continued in their current form, results are likely to dissipate, and it has become harder to address cross border concerns.



Concluding

The young people interviewed for this research are clearly looking for ways to get ahead. Getting by is not enough as they want to build up economic independence and experience progress. Many of them see white collar jobs in the public sector as the most attractive option, but know they will have to settle for less. The public sector in both South Sudan and Burundi is unable to absorb all the young people entering the labour market. Increasingly, young people find that formal education is not enough to guarantee a job. Faced with considerable constraints, young people look for other opportunities. Most engage in some form of self-employment, setting up a small business, trying to make it work. As the research suggests, they often end up merely getting by.

Many economic initiatives and small businesses operate with very small margins and failure is common. Young people's response, we found, is to try again and try harder. The lack of economic prospects, however, leads to disappointment, frustration and sometimes destructive behaviour (negative coping). Sometimes young people simply do not see how to move forward and resign, they lose the drive to make an effort in anything. They either literally become idle, or they cope by remaining dependent on their families while contributing marginally.

Current NGO programmes do not manage to provide young people with full-fledged jobs. Interviewees express great appreciation of these programmes, but their accounts are sobering. While NGO programmes help them to improve their situation - sometimes structurally, often only temporarily- they mostly do not boost their economic situation enough to truly get ahead. Though the programmes make a difference and do help people tackle bottlenecks related to skills, access to capital and, sometimes, connections, they are only partially successful in helping young people 'get ahead'. They do, however, strengthen people's economic agency. They help them develop income generating opportunities and help them be more successful in different forms of self-employment. They also contribute to a sense of purpose and reduce stigma.

The high sounding rhetoric of 'employment for stability' suggests employment impacts that we did not see reflected in practice. We suggest NGOs might want to define in more realistic terms what they are able to achieve and how this adds to what young people themselves are doing. What economic outcomes are needed, and what are effective strategies to achieve these?

5. How do young people experience economic exclusion?

Our research wanted to explore what forms of exclusion young people experience and how that limits their possibilities to develop economically. By focussing on exclusion we were able to look beyond young people's individual capacities and understand some of the more structural obstacles they experience. The idea of exclusion clearly resonated with the interviewees. Young people identified different ways in which exclusion in one form or another challenged their prospects for economic success. They pointed to *generic* forms of exclusion -deriving from living in a conflict-affected region where poverty is pervasive and there is a great distance to global markets- next to more *specific* forms of exclusion affecting the young generation in particular, or particular categories of youth. It is these more specific types of exclusion that many of our interviewees experienced as most unfair. Young people (especially educated urban youth) indicated they are particularly frustrated about the political exclusion they experience which limits their access to jobs in the public sector.

All youth indicated they experience stigmatisation. We were struck by the extent of this problem. Many young people mentioned how they are burdened by the criticisms they get when they do not manage to find a job or organise some other employment for themselves. Not only their families, but also local duty bearers criticize unemployed youth for being "idle", "lazy" and even "dangerous". In our research, such criticism was voiced by a range of interviewees: duty bearers, but also NGO staff and young people themselves. On one level, this kind of statements recognises the problems deriving from the (self-) destructive or criminal behaviour of young people without a meaningful occupation and without economic prospects. On another level, however, it shifts the blame to the victims and risks discharging others from their responsibilities. Young people experience stigmatisation as another mechanism that reinforces their social and economic exclusion.

Living in a fragile, conflict-affected setting

The young people interviewed in this research understand exclusion as those issues and practices that they feel "unfairly" block them from realising their potential. Many of them stressed that they see that their lack of economic prospects in part derives from the fact that they live in regions where markets are not well developed, where local purchasing power is limited due to pervasive poverty, and where insecurity and instability limit economic development. Living in a conflict-affected, economically fragile environment produces a certain sense of deprivation. Due to social media young people are aware of the opportunities that exist elsewhere but they know these are out of reach for them.

Young people resent the limitations derived from living in a fragile setting but they do not see them as the consequence of deliberate exclusion and do not hold any particular actor accountable for this situation. These structural limitations affect all generations, not just the younger ones. As young people see it, individual actors, whether local authorities or NGOs, could help ease the burden but could not, ultimately, change these structural conditions.

Exclusion on political or ethnic grounds

Next to limitations derived from the fragile context, young people also experience more immediate forms of exclusion, where their lack of possibilities can be attributed to somebody's actions. It is this form of exclusion they find particularly frustrating. In the interviews in both South Sudan and Burundi, young people blamed governments and politicians in particular for exclusionary practices.

In Burundi, young people consistently highlighted the issue of exclusion from access to jobs. In the public sector in particular, they found employment opportunities are reserved to those of the right political colour (and who have the necessary connections). They felt that local duty bearers should do something about this. During a workshop in Burundi, local authorities acknowledged that exclusion along party lines occurs, but they downplayed the issue. They pointed to the fact that such exclusion is mitigated as a certain percentage of positions in the public sector must go to non-party members. A young man from Cibitoke explained: *"At least 90% of the jobs are reserved for the young members of the CDD / FDD in power and 10% can be granted to the members of other parties who support the ruling party."* This type of exclusion on political grounds seems typical for the public sector. For Burundi, interviewees suggested that it played less of a role in the private sector, as it is in companies' interest to hire the most skilled people. Also for the private sector, however, one needs to have the right connections or to buy one's way in.

Local authorities in Burundi in their turn indicated that they were most concerned about exclusion on *ethnic* grounds, given the country's history with ethnic tension and conflict, though they were quick to add that this is something of the past. Young people hardly mentioned such ethnic exclusion. This might perhaps be explained by the sensitivity of the issue. In informal talks it was suggested that the political divide to some degree might be interpreted along ethnic fault lines, though few people were willing to be explicit about this.

In South Sudan, exclusion on the basis of kinship or ethnicity on the contrary was consistently highlighted. Even in Yei, where Equatorians (a term referring to people living there from a variety of different tribal backgrounds) represent a majority, it was suggested that Dinka youth were in a better position than Equatorian youth regarding job access. *"I applied with the bank of South Sudan. They wanted sixty messengers so we applied, [...]they called us for interviews and they interviewed us and said we should go and check our names on a Monday. We went there and our names never appeared. We were told that there are some Dinka women doing the work. They don't select [other] people anyhow, most of those who work there are Dinkas"* (young woman from Yei). Many similar stories came up as young people discussed their efforts of getting a formal job.

Generational issues

Young people in both South Sudan and Burundi point to the exclusion of young people as a group, hence, of their generation. One of the reasons mentioned is the lack of trust between generations: *“Another challenge is lack of trust, you know the youth think that the old men are too old to do their work and yet the elderly persons think the youth cannot be trusted. This kind of relationship makes it difficult for the youth to excel in life”* (NGO staff member around Yei, South Sudan). Young people are held to lack experience and the right capacities, as explained by a young man from Yei: *“The other challenge is, even the qualified youth are not entrusted to take up responsibilities, especially in government. They always argue that they are not experienced enough... youth are finding it difficult to get employment. You find educated youth with the required qualification engaging in drinking... so there is frustration among them... after spending years in school and you cannot find a job.”*

In South Sudan, people in power tend to hold on to the positions they feel entitled to, excluding youth. A young man in Wulu explained this as follows: *“The other issue here is the politics in South Sudan. For a young man to get a job, [older] people have the mentality that they fought for this country and they should enjoy the freedom we fought for until they die. If you are a youth and applying for a job in which there is an old man, and especially in public service, they will argue that you are still young and have not done anything for this country, why should you be given a job in government. It is better we employ those who contributed to the liberation struggle, not knowing that your parents also made a lot of sacrifices for the liberation of this country and even died in the struggle. So these things are what is holding our youth behind and without jobs.”* An NGO staff member adds that this may be more a matter of ‘need’ than ‘greed’: *“The old men, in most cases, will die when they have not done anything for themselves [so that they can cope when they relinquishing their position], so retiring is a problem. The decision to say I am going home is a difficult one, they want to die in office.”* Interviewees indicate that these practices of exclusion are not easily changed.

Gender-based exclusion

Both in Burundi and South Sudan exclusionary practices on the basis of gender are an enormous issue. It was highlighted alike by young people, NGO staff and local duty bearers. Across the different research settings, young women experienced additional limitations to develop economically if compared to young men.

Women’s position to access (scarce) jobs is precarious. Women in the study reported being asked for sexual favours in return for a job: *“One day I went to ask for a job in a public company. The manager, on seeing me, told the secretary that I am not among the people they hire in society. Some days later he called me and asked me to sleep with him so that he would turn a blind eye. I refused and did not get the position.”* (young woman from Kanyosha).

This happens to the backdrop of gender norms that limit the room for manoeuvre for women, limiting their social as well as their economic agency. For Rumbek, informants highlighted the importance of the “bride price”,⁶ to be paid in cattle when daughters marry. This substantial bride price is often one of the few future sources of wealth for the family in that context. Due to marriage being so dependent on the ability to pay a bride price, sons in the family depend on their sisters’ bride price, too. This has led to the exclusion of young women from education and income generating activities, especially when these are not available in the direct vicinity of the home. Letting girls out of family oversight is risky in view of the future bride price: *“The challenge in our community is that, once a girl gets pregnant before she is officially married, she cannot attract the number of cows expected of the family, she is looked at as a disgrace to the family marrying her and therefore they pay very few cows for her dowry... this is because cows control everything and we all attach a lot of value to the cows.”* (young man from Cuiebet, South Sudan).

In Burundi, exclusion of women is linked to traditional gender roles and the importance attributed to marriage and high numbers of children. Young girls are commonly excluded from education in favour of their male siblings. Even when girls receive education, they find that many economic opportunities are reserved for men. Women typically do not inherit land from their parents, which limits them in practicing agriculture. The situation is summed up by an NGO staff member in Cibitoke: *“The parents don’t give importance to girls, they stop their education so that they get married, a kind of exclusion from education. Girls furthermore do not inherit land like they are equal to their brothers, this is linked to culture. And some activities are reserved for young boys only such as motorcycle taxi driver or working in construction.”*

In both Burundi and South Sudan, respondents explain how the limited opportunities make young women look for someone that can support them. Marriage presents such an option, but where this is not possible, young women might engage in forms of “sex work” for favours or goods. Girls that engage in these activities are stigmatized and risk being cut-off or even expelled by their families, especially when they become pregnant. During a focus group discussion in Wulu, South Sudan, this was explained as follows: *“These girls are searching for better life in the boyfriends, because they cannot get the support from their parents and relatives. It is in these relationships that they eventually get pregnant... and according to our culture, if your daughter gets pregnant with somebody, they must marry them, otherwise, she is a disgrace to the family because no one will marry a girl carrying someone else child.”*

⁶ Stakeholders in this context consistently refer to dowry as the wealth or goods the families of the bride receive. Although the more correct term would be ‘bride price’ or ‘bride wealth’, we follow this local vocabulary.

Stigmatisation of young people

In both Burundi and South Sudan interviewees reported that young people are criticised and stigmatized. Young people without a job or occupation get labelled as 'lazy', as a burden to their family or even as a threat. It is not only local authorities or 'adults' who criticize young people, but also, to some degree, NGO staff members and young people themselves. Such stigmatization contributes to exclusion. It suggests that, to some degree, young people themselves are to blame for their lack of prospects. Furthermore, "idle" youth, those who do not have a meaningful occupation, are seen as potential criminals.

In South Sudan, narratives about youth idleness were persistent, also among NGO staff. The lack of economic opportunities is attributed to young people being "lazy" and unwilling to make the effort to improve their situation. It was said that they refuse to engage in hard, low paid work and are only interested in quick or easy money. The fact that some young people turn to theft or armed robbery is seen as a confirmation of that. It was mentioned that young people may turn violent to their families, especially when they drink. Many interviewees stressed how the accessibility of small arms in South Sudan aggravates the situation. Though using fire arms is considered socially legitimate when used to protect their families and their livestock, the problem is that young people also employ these weapons to commit robbery. The stigma of 'violent young men' also affects those young people who are not engaged in violence or crime.

Similarly in Burundi, young people were described as trouble makers, drunks, junkies and easy targets for entrepreneurs of violence. The following quote of a focus group discussion in Mutimuzi illustrates this: "[..]They engage in criminal gangs, they rob the houses of their neighbours, they engage in violence and sometimes even commit murder". Young people are easily associated with gang behaviour: alcohol and drug abuse, crime. In some parts of Bujumbura, youth gather in the street in informal groups, so called 'ligalas' (term used in Burundi to describe an informal regular gathering of young people in public spaces). Though these may afford peer support, such ligalas are often equated with criminal gangs. For young women, to be associated with such groups results in stigmatization as prostitutes and all the possible consequences that come from that, such as punishment or even being expelled from their own families.

Criminal and politically motivated violence get conflated. Young people were quite visible in the recent political protests in Bujumbura but this has backfired on them. There have been arbitrary arrests of and violence against young people, some of them falsely associated with the protests. As a result, young people expressed that they tried to avoid being labelled negatively. Those who could afford it stayed inside the house, but for poorer youth this was not an option. In some neighbourhoods in Bujumbura, young people were essentially excluded from participating in life on the streets.

Working around exclusion?

As young people pinpoint the mechanisms of exclusion, they also reflect on the strategies to deal with it. Several examples came up in our interviews. As mentioned, interviewees highlighted the role of exclusion on the basis of political and/or ethnic favouritism and generational exclusion, both of which are particularly strong in the public sector. In Burundi, some young people try and escape such exclusion by joining the dominant political party, not on ideological grounds, but to increase their opportunities. This of course perpetuates the mechanism of exclusion.

For Burundi, where the issue of political favouritism was brought to the fore most strongly, some respondents suggested that migration is one of the ways out that young people see. They look for opportunities in the larger towns at first and, if not successful, turn to neighbouring countries. This was motivated as follows: young people believe that they will have a better chance of finding work outside of Burundi where getting a position does not depend so heavily on who you know.

As young people suggest, developing options for self-employment would make one much less susceptible to deliberate practices of exclusion. It would make one less dependent on the preferences of the people in power. However, as shown in the previous chapter, successful self-employment, especially of disadvantaged youth with little access to resources, requires support which is not easily available without the right connections. Also when joining forces, young people face constraints to access funding. Turning to NGOs may be one of the few opportunities for support open to youth. The government is generally seen as incapable of addressing the needs or unwilling to pursue the interests of young people.

Paradoxically, when young people collectively organise to increase their economic opportunities, this puts them at risk. It was explained to us that authorities may consider organised groups of young people a threat and label them as gangs or political opponents, especially in highly politicised environments like Burundi. Young people that engage in such groups may face harassment or persecution. Fear of further stigmatization deters young people from pro-actively organising in visible, vocal groups.

How do NGOs address young people's exclusion?

The NGOs in this research acknowledge that exclusion poses considerable challenges to young people. Some of them seek to tackle structural exclusion through advocacy, such as national level lobbying for more equitable legal frameworks or economic policies. However, this study brought out mostly strategies at the local level. Here, organisations tackled exclusion in two ways: working on the capacities of young people, to help them overcome exclusion, and working on what is called the 'enabling environment', to overcome some of the structural exclusionary mechanisms that limit young people's economic participation. The work on capacities, knowledge and skills to make young people more attractive candidates on the job market or more successful in business –treated in the previous chapter- is obviously at the core of NGO work on youth economic opportunities. In addition, how do NGOs address those factors beyond young people's control, the limitations in their environment? We found that organisations struggle in particular with how to deal with political exclusion, the issue highlighted by young people as one of the most unfair and most frustrating.

To realise their programmes on young people's economic opportunities, the NGOs in this study themselves have to navigate the politicised landscapes that young people find themselves in and confront some of the exclusionary practices at play. The organizations commit to conflict-sensitive ways of working and at the very least try to make sure that their own work does not contribute to exclusion. This is reflected in all aspects of their work, including recruitment procedures and beneficiary selection. They generally aim to hire both men and women from a variety of ethnic, geographical and political backgrounds. However, as shown in the following example from South Sudan, these efforts might be crosscut by local political interests: *"It happened to one of my brothers when ORGX [organisation not partner in this research] advertised for a food monitor. He was shortlisted and actually passed the interview, but when it came to announcing the name of who got the position, the local authorities came to demand that he should not be employed because he is not good and other reasons. Being an NGO, ORGX refused to be pushed into the internal conflicts and almost pulled out of Wulu County. In the end however, they took someone who they had not intended and that is why programmes are struggling [because this person was not as capable]"* (young man in Wulu).

Also in beneficiary selection NGOs try to avoid exclusion. Including people from different political backgrounds in, for example, income generating activities in Burundi can be a way to foster local social cohesion. In Burundi, ZOA and their local partners deliberately include those that belong to opposition parties, in an effort to counteract their exclusion. By not respecting vested interests and local political conventions NGOs take risks, however. As explained during the workshop in Bujumbura, the partner organisations try to make the selection of beneficiaries less sensitive (and to reduce the room for manipulation), by being as transparent as possible. This includes setting selection criteria based on vulnerability or programme effectiveness at the very beginning of the programme and have the community help identify those that should be targeted on the basis of these transparent criteria.

Through their projects, the organisations aim to enhance the *economic* inclusion of young people also as a means to increase their *social* inclusion, or as some call it, to foster young people's citizenship. Both ZOA and CARE use economic opportunities as 'a way in' to address social cohesion and youth inclusion. OxfamNovib works on youth inclusion from the perspective of citizenship. Bringing people together around such activities may provide opportunities to build bridges between groups and, possibly discuss exclusion and ways to turn it around. The issue of the lack of trust between the generations and the stigmatisation of young people might be tackled in this way.

Many of the organisations in this study are particularly concerned with gender-based exclusion. Some successes have been registered in this field. Young people in all research locations stated that NGO activities increased the opportunities for girls and young women. ZOA for example has created the opportunity for young girls to engage in occupations that were previously taboo, such as masonry. MIPAREC, a partner of both CARE and ZOA, engages in support for young women who want to start small businesses. Some of these young women successfully engaged in, for example, palm oil or rice cultivation. SPARK staff explains that their focus on agriculture benefits young women more than young men, since men are less interested in agriculture. It is hoped that through such activities, the position of women is improved and may help them claim access to for example education, and further, to influence the existing gender norms. We saw in the interviews that

examples of successful women were an inspiration for other women. We also found duty bearers to acknowledge the specific difficulties of women and this seems in part a result of the efforts of NGOs to address this issue.

Most of the NGOs in this study consider that local duty bearers play a key role in local practices of in- and exclusion. . NGO local staff indicated that local authorities frequently try to influence programming to their own benefit. When they feel left out they may, in some cases, deliberately frustrate the programme. Local authorities interviewed for this project mostly stated that they expect NGOs to support economic opportunities for young people and stay far away from 'anything political'. During a workshop in Burundi, local authorities stressed that NGOs should coordinate their programmes with the authorities. They explained that this would guarantee that 'the right people' are supported and that projects would continue after NGOs leave.

Some of the organisations work with local authorities directly. They hope that, by giving them a share in the programmes, some room for dialogue and negotiation is opened that will benefit the opportunities of the youth. Other organisations reject working with local authorities directly, for fear of legitimating the very practices of 'bad governance' that they seek to address. As they point out, some donors are reluctant to fund activities with local authorities for that reason. However, according to the organisations, it may be difficult to get things done without involving the authorities. If they are not engaged, an organisation risks antagonising them. Their programmes might then be actively resisted.

CARE, one of the NGOs involved in this research project, worked its way around this problem by engaging authorities at the lowest possible level. At this level, personal relations can be forged and local authorities can be approached in a personal rather than their official capacity. In this way, duty bearers may be brought on board while possible donor constraints towards working with authorities are circumvented.

Exclusion from jobs on political grounds is, as we discussed, one of the most frustrating experiences for young people, especially for those who received formal education. Young people do not expect NGOs to be able to take the structural challenges of exclusion away. The conditions of pervasive poverty and insecurity are beyond the ability of NGOs to remedy. Rather, interviewees blame the domestic elites for the persistence of exclusion. As they see it, a real change can only come from a change in elite practices. The local duty bearers we spoke to, however, generally did not see a big role for themselves in creating better opportunities for young people.

Our interviewees did not think that NGO programmes can do much to stop exclusionary practices. They understood the relevance of NGOs work in another way. NGO programmes make exclusionary practices less relevant as they offer other opportunities. As our interviewees see it, exclusion is particularly frustrating and harmful when no other opportunities exist. Those that can benefit from NGO programmes are less susceptible to such exclusion.

Concluding

Young people in Burundi and South Sudan experience exclusion in its different forms as a significant challenge to getting ahead. Structural exclusion and exclusionary practices are not easy to address, neither by young people themselves nor by NGOs. Though young people resent these limitations, they also accept them. They do get particularly frustrated, however, about the more immediate and deliberate forms of exclusion, where ethnic or political favouritism plays a role. They blame this on elite behaviour, but they also see how social norms that dictate favouritism towards the own group make it difficult to do things differently.

The NGOs in this research acknowledge that exclusion poses considerable challenges to young people, but only have partial answers to it. It is beyond the scope of NGOs to fundamentally change the structural limitations derived from the state of the economy, geographical remoteness and the overall political situation found in fragile settings. Most of them are hesitant to address the role of local power holders and politicians for fear of jeopardising their access and/or because of donor restrictions. Some, however, deliberately look for constructive engagement with local duty bearers.

Young people have different responses to practices of exclusion, both constructive and destructive. Where NGOs may find it difficult to address and influence exclusionary processes at large, they do support youth towards developing positive responses. Young people in turn, do not expect NGOs to solve all of their challenges and largely blame elites. They find that NGOs contribute to easing the burden of exclusion. The approaches developed around gender exclusion provide promising avenues.



6. How do young people's limited economic opportunities connect to violence?

The discourse on Employment for Stability attributes violence and instability in fragile settings essentially to unemployed young people, more particularly to unemployed young men, who can easily be recruited into violent behaviour due to their lack of alternatives. Critiques to this view have been growing. The theoretical basis for the idea is narrow (resting essentially on the economic notion of 'opportunity costs of violence') and the empirical evidence is lacking.⁷ Notwithstanding these critiques (which we may expect to become stronger as new research is coming out), NGOs have felt strong pressures to align with this kind of framing and to claim that their economic opportunity and youth employment programmes in fragile settings will have an impact on stability.

In reality, organisations have a hard time demonstrating such impact. Most of their Theories of Change do connect their strategies in the economic field to overall 'peace' or 'stability' outcomes, but the nature of that relation is mostly argued in general terms and based on wishful thinking rather than robust theory. NGOs are better equipped, however, when it comes to the more immediate outcomes of their work with young people on the dynamics of conflict and violence in the contexts where they work. They bring in considerable experience working on local conflictive relations and forms of exclusion.

This section first briefly recounts how the organisations in this study argue for the peace and conflict impact of their work related to young people's economic opportunities. It then discusses how the young people interviewed see this link and what types of, more immediate, outcomes have been identified.

Linking youth economic opportunities and stability in NGO programmes

The NGO programmes considered in this research all aim to contribute to peacebuilding, stability and the reduction of violence. Such programmes resonate with the Employment for Stability discourse in the sense that a connection is made between the lack of economic opportunities for young people and the risk of violence. Creating better economic opportunities for young people is seen as a way to break a vicious circle of violence and lack of prospects. This is reflected most directly in the programmes where these focus on 'youth at risk'. These programmes target those categories of young people (mostly young men) who are assumed to present the highest risk of becoming engaged in violent behaviour, such as ex-combatants. The target group of NGOs is broader, however, and includes more than risk categories. Many of their efforts go into vulnerable groups, such as women, seeking to enhance their economic agency and gender equity.

⁷ See e.g. Brück et al 2015; Holmes et al. 2013; Millet and Slater 2016.

NGOs combine security discourses, such as Employment for Stability, with development and peace-building discourses. SPARK's approach provides a clear example of this. They have a rather clear-cut ToC in which the creation of economic opportunities through fostering entrepreneurship and value chains is connected to generating broader development outcomes (in the form of a vitalised economy) that will in turn feed into peace and stability. This outcome can be theoretically argued in two ways. Economic development would increase the opportunity costs of violence but would also diminish the role of grievances and frustrations derived from the lack of prospects.

Some of the other NGOs are clearly mostly on the development and peacebuilding side. They combine activities for increased economic opportunities with local conflict resolution or peace-building activities, such as peace clubs. Economic activities are then part of a broader package to construct peaceful relations at the local level. In supporting new or alternative livelihoods for young people, they hope to take away frustration over the lack of economic prospects. However, as some have argued, it is not the economic outcomes per se, but the non-economic outcomes -in terms of increased trust, linkages, inclusion- that might be most effective in contributing to peace. With these types of arguments they are clearly moving way from the Employment for Stability idea as originally coined.

Conflict sensitivity is a core concern across the organisations in this study. Any intervention supporting economic opportunities is potentially divisive when it is understood to favour some people over others. This explains why inclusiveness and transparency in recruitment procedures and beneficiary selection are key. Furthermore, organisations are careful to consider the risks that come with affecting the power balance between actors, as rights-based programmes or conflict transformation approaches tend to do.

Frustration and violence

In our interviews, we asked respondents how they see the link between the lack of economic prospects for young people and violence. Most saw a connection between the frustration over such lack of opportunities and the option for violence, but they did not find this connection straightforward.

The young people interviewed identified frustration over the lack of economic prospects as an important motivation for those who engage in violence. This frustration derives most strongly, they suggested, from the sense of 'being a burden' as young people remain dependent on their families. This situation, in which people feel stuck, can extend well beyond the age group usually understood as 'youth', as illustrated by the following quote from a young man from Ye: *"The way I see our youth, the majority of the ones who are suffering most are the fairly young ones (15 to 20 years). However, nearly all the young people regarded as youth, even up to the age of 40 years, have grown up in war times and have missed a lot of opportunities."*

Interviewees pointed out that turning to violent behaviour is a real option. They all know cases of people their age who have joined criminal gangs or got recruited into armed groups. They also note, however, that though many young people experience economic limitations, only a fraction of them turns to violence and crime. A whole range of other responses may be found. Some people, having little faith in the future, basically resign to their situation of dependence and spend their days without any meaningful occupation, at home or in the

streets. Also self-destructive behaviour occurs: people turn to drug and alcohol abuse or engage in risky livelihoods such as prostitution. Others, however, refuse to give up: they keep on trying or try harder.

Whether people turn to violent options, is never just a story of frustration over lack of opportunities. Other factors come into play. Some of these are personal, for example specific bad experiences people have had, or traumas. Other factors of importance are cultural acceptance of (male) violence and the active recruitment by 'entrepreneurs of violence'. Our interviews brought out that the levels of frustration are particularly high amongst the urban, higher educated young people in Burundi. More than other groups, they have experienced a strong mismatch between their expectations and what they can achieve.⁸ It was beyond the scope of this research to explore this in any more detail, but it would be clearly relevant to understand more about how personal characteristics interact with crisis events and the social surroundings to produce varied outcomes.

Frustrated young people are an important source of power and they can be manipulated to serve the goals of competing political factions. For Burundi this was stressed over and over by NGO staff as well as by young people. Young men, and to a lesser degree women, with few economic opportunities spend their time on the street in so called *ligalas*. There, they may engage in alcohol or drug abuse and are easily mobilized to participate in organized violence, such as intimidation, harassment and sometime even killing of political opponents. People observed politicians enlisting young men to intimidate members of the opposition, for example. This was explained as follows in one of the interviews with a young man (Ruhagirka, Burundi): "*Young people are the target of political parties who come to recruit them on the basis of their immediate needs. Often the different young people see in the opposite parties rivals who risk to bar them passage to achieve the projects promised by their parties, they make violence to the youths of the rival parties to eliminate them from the race. These abuses are often supported by party leaders who are afraid of losing positions and the benefits they get from them and design slogans provocative or inviting hatred and violence*".

Young people are not only attracted by the mere promise of economic pay-offs. Instead, by engaging in such activities, they pursue the promise of belonging to a group that matters and has influence. This is the case for those that join government militias as well as those that resist the current regime and join rebel groups.

Young people in local scenarios of conflict

Our interviewees acknowledged that (some) frustrated young people may pose a security problem, but they qualified this idea, pointing out that other types of behaviour are also found. Rather than taking young people as a source of violence per se, interviewees constructed a more complex narrative of youth as embedded in locally specific scenarios of conflict and violence, in which they may be actors as well as victims.

Concerns over security were foregrounded in South Sudan, which at the time of field research (summer 2016), was experiencing another wave of violence which –amongst other places- strongly affected Yei, one of the research sites. It implied that many people, including beneficiaries of the SPARK projects and staff, fled to Uganda. In interviews people who had come from Yei reported that in the run up to the events of July, it had been visible that people were being mobilized. From every family, sons disappeared, they went off 'into the

⁸ *On the role of relative deprivation in fostering violent behaviour, see Cramer 2015.*

bush' to join armed groups. As they saw it, this was not just their own choice, but was also a strategy to protect their families. For similar reasons, families sought to place young members with the police or armed force, hoping this would offer protection to the family at large.

Our other field site in South Sudan, Rumbek, did not see dramatic changes in the security situation in the summer of 2016, save for a lack of supplies for which the area depended on Juba. Here, young people described insecurity mostly in relation to the more localised conflicts between clans related to cattle raiding and banditry. They indicated that these conflicts, which to some degree are 'normal' to the region, have a large impact on their lives. Though conflicts over cattle have been part of life for a long period of time, raiding has become more deadly in recent decades, due to the increased presence of small arms. Interviewees suggested that young people's engagement in raids is motivated by status but is also seen as offering a form of protection.

In Burundi, the situation was rather one of low intensity conflict. For young people, insecurity mainly manifested itself in uncertainty and a lack of confidence in the future. Though there is an overriding concern with young people being recruited by political groups or local gangs –discussed above-, young people themselves mostly expressed concerns with government repression and arbitrary arrests.

What do we learn about the impacts of NGO programmes on conflict and violence?

Our interviews yielded several examples of NGO strategies that seemed to make a positive change in local conflict scenarios. Following Paul Richards, we may identify violence as only one of the options available in a given fragile or conflict-affected setting. As he has suggested, using violence is one "social project" amongst a range of competing social projects (2005). In their accounts, young people consistently identified other social options next to violence. They also identified some of the factors - personal, cultural and political- that may influence the choices of a particular individual. Though NGO programmes and ToCs do not typically refer to Paul Richards, we may understand their work as helping to create non-violent alternatives or making those non-violent alternatives that exist, more robust and attractive. The following examples illustrate this.

In Burundi, the recruitment of young people into political and/or criminal violence was a big concern for the NGOs in the study. We encountered several interesting examples of how they sought to tackle this. The first example comes from a project by MIPAREC (a local partner from ZOA) in Cibitoke. It aims to counter the local-level divisions that arose due to political violence. The project joined groups of youth from different political backgrounds in economic activities. Beneficiaries reported that this generated trust between these groups, as explained in the following quote, from a young man in Cibitoke: *"Before the ZOA / MIPAREC project for the youth of Cibitoke, there was hatred and violence between the youths from the ruling parties and the opposition. We have seen the destruction of the insignia of the political parties, like the flags, the posters and the offices by rival parties. This situation has changed with the founding of our association, all the young people live in peace."*

A similar approach was successful elsewhere in Burundi: *“OAP [a local partner of Oxfam] trained young people on trades, road maintenance and united the demobilized and young members of political parties. The project has been able to reduce the tensions between the young members of the political parties, the momentum has diminished and the tensions have submerged.”* (young man from Kutu, Burundi).

Other programmes help young people recognize the manipulation they may be subjected to, so they might be better able to resist it. One example is the following programme of CARE, through their partner JJB, described by a young man from Kanyosha, Burundi as follows: *“Young people who have been mentored by JJB have learned to respect others and manage their assets and resources well. They can support other young people to help them not to be manipulated and engaged in acts of violence.”*

In South Sudan, the examples relate to the issue of tribal conflict and cattle raids, in which young men may choose to, or be pressured to, play an active role. A stakeholder from Rumbek described a programme as follows: *“In terms of stability, people are trying, there are several workshops that are being conducted. At one time, Save the Children came up with a training on conflict resolution and conflict mitigation involving both young boys and girls... and I think that workshop made an impact and myself I have realised that, because I have been following all these workshops. The goal was to see that all these youth who are in school – girls and boys-, to see that they are enlightened, be it on the economic or cultural impact and try to address this issue among themselves. They even created a structure of discussions among themselves and their parents, where a girl and a boy have to discuss about these tribal conflicts, to see how these are affecting the youth.”*

Also in South Sudan, CARE ran a pilot in which young people reflected upon how masculinity is defined culturally in their cattle-based society and how this connects with the production of violence. It looked at the harmful practices of cattle raiding and how this is reproduced through practices around marriage.



Concluding

As this chapter shows, the lack of economic opportunities does not link in a straightforward manner to violence and similarly, the impact of economic opportunity programmes on reducing violence is not easily demonstrated. Simple narratives around the opportunity costs of violence do not, ultimately, help to understand that complexity nor do they suffice to guide NGO action. The grievances of youth are serious and violence is a real option to them. How attractive this option is, depends on a range of personal and social factors and on alternative options.

As we have shown, NGO programmes may seek to reduce the grievances of young people by increasing their economic opportunities, though it must be kept in mind that rising expectations when not met, may equally lead to frustration. Some NGOs opted for helping young people reflect on the way they are part of local conflict scenarios and map out the mechanism that reproduce violence.

NGO programmes were seen to produce intermediate outcomes on conflict, such as increasing trust, reducing inequality or giving young people the tools to mitigate conflict. Some of them work with instruments such as community peace indicators to trace such outcomes. Demonstrating a contribution to stability writ large is another story all together, as conflict at a higher level is not simply the result of conflict dynamics at the local level. How local level dynamics would add up and connect to higher level antagonisms is something that we may assume to be beyond the span of control of most NGOs.

7. Conclusions and discussion

Young people in fragile states in Africa long for an independent economic life, not unlike young people in other settings. The obstacles they encounter to develop their economic agency, however, are considerable and are deepened by structural poverty, protracted instability and everyday insecurity. The lack of viable economic opportunities for young people is a problem in many African countries and explains why many of them migrate, some venturing all the way to Europe. In fragile settings, economic prospects are further constrained by issues like (very) low acquisition power, a limited or unevenly present private sector, but also limited access to fields for cultivation due to violence. As our fieldwork indicated, this makes it difficult for young people to develop their own economic initiatives and 'get ahead' in their lives. This is why so many of them look at the public sector for job opportunities, especially when they have received secondary education. It is clear however, that the public sector can not meet that demand, and that patronage networks and/or favouritism limits the access to the scarce positions available.

The lack of economic prospects for young people in fragile, conflict-affected settings, has received a great deal of attention in the policy field, especially under the frame of 'Employment for Stability'. This means that the lack of economic prospects in fragile, conflict-affected regions has come to be viewed with a particular concern in mind, namely the risk that young people (young men in particular) would be mobilised for violent and/or criminal action feeding further instability. Zooming in on young people's perspectives in two such fragile settings, South Sudan and Burundi, we hoped to understand both what obstacles they experience in realising their ambitions to 'get ahead' and to disentangle this assumed link between unemployment and violent livelihoods. Where the Employment for Stability frame *securitises* young people (i.e. sees them primarily as a security risk), we suggest to give prime importance to the question how young people may achieve *secure livelihoods*, and how NGO interventions might support that.

The NGOs that collaborated in this study used the opportunities opened by the policy interest in 'Employment for Stability' to (further) develop their economic opportunity interventions in fragile settings. We found that they have felt both motivated and constrained by the Employment for Stability narrative. Working from a variety of perspectives and back grounds, they employ a broader range of ideas on economic opportunities in fragile, conflict-affected settings, – also reflected in their Theories of Change- related to entrepreneurship, local level economic peace-building, economic and social empowerment for young people, and social justice. Though some of their projects target youth at risk of being mobilised into violence, overall their work takes the problems experienced by young people, as a starting point. Where the essence of the Employment for Stability narrative is to provide 'young men with jobs' to prevent a relapse of conflict, the NGOs in this study look beyond jobs (to a wider range of income generating activities), they look beyond men (many work with a gender perspective) and they look for a constructive engagement of young people's capacities.

This study combined interviews with young people on their economic ambitions and experiences, with stakeholder interviews (including local NGO staff and duty bearers) and a review of NGOs' developing policy. Our interviews confirmed the extent of the problem around limited economic prospects for young people and the suffering and frustration this generates. Young people had no high hopes of easy solutions, being realistic about the absorption capacity of the local economies and some of the structural constraints. They appreciated the work of NGOs for at least opening some prospects – by providing some capital, skills or allowing them to build social capital-, keeping up hope and providing them with some dignity.

Young people responded to their situation in a variety of ways. Turning to violence and criminal life styles was one such option, recognised by young people and all stakeholders as a risk. It was certainly not the only option, however. Most young people just kept trying again and trying harder, hoping that better times would come and their efforts would be rewarded. Others resigned to apathy and still others engaged in risky, self-destructive behaviour, ranging from early marriage to drug abuse. Although it is way beyond the scope of this study to determine what (personal or contextual) factors would make young people choose one option or the other, it is important to underline that engaging in violence is nor the natural, nor only response for young people that lack opportunities. We might even say that, if it were, we would be likely to see a lot more of it. Violence is, as Paul Richards has suggested, one social project that competes with other social projects (2005). Fragile states policy, and NGO work in particular, may take this as a starting point, thinking about how to make 'peace' as a social project more attractive than competing, more destructive, projects- and recognising how young people already engage with building constructive alternatives and how this might be strengthened.

The Employment for Stability narrative sees employment as a way to raise the opportunity costs for violence. Other approaches to violent conflict allow more room for the issue of grievances. It is clear that the grievances over the lack of economic prospects were widespread and were recognised by many of the stakeholders as legitimate. Two particular issues stood out. Urban educated youth had particular grievances related to the impossibility to access jobs in the public sector. This is a clear example of relative deprivation, where expectations of rising possibilities were not met, giving rise to intense frustration. Related to this is the fact that jobs, in the public sector but sometimes also in NGOs, do not go to the best qualified people but to those with the right connections and/or right political network. This was experienced as highly unjust.

NGO economic opportunity interventions would work on young people's capacity, social capital, skills, credibility and access to finance, but would – we found- rarely tackle issues around exclusionary practices in the public sector. Most would apply conflict-sensitive approaches in their own recruitment policies to avoid reproducing similar mechanisms. To go beyond that, and to target power holders and political gatekeepers directly, was mostly not part of their strategies. Their hesitation is understandable if one takes into consideration the sensitivity of these issues and the risks for their social license to operate. Furthermore, there were fears of becoming complicit in legitimating 'bad governance'. It cannot be expected of NGOs to change the whole patronage system, however, it may be feasible to think about how to engage power holders and duty bearers in a more constructive way around youth employment, also in the public sector, in the local environments where NGOs operate.

In situations of complex, protracted (“wicked”) problems, where there seems hardly a way out, there might be a tendency to start blaming the victim. We found some of that in our fieldwork. The stigmatisation of unemployed young people was pervasive, amongst duty bearers and some NGO staff and even between young people themselves. This might reflect genuine frustration about apathy and destructive behaviour, but it is not unproblematic: blaming the lack of prospects on the lack of effort or the bad behaviour of the young people themselves in fact exonerates those with more power to influence the structural mechanisms that exclude young people from economic options. What we have tried to show on the basis of this study is that young people are not *the problem*, they *have a problem*. There problems need to be taken seriously, not because they represent a security risk, but because they deserve real possibilities to develop secure livelihoods. We end therefore with a quote that came up in one of the meetings in Burundi, where an NGO staff member said:

Why are we talking about unemployed youth as if they are the problem? Let’s not pretend as if they are to blame for the situation we find ourselves in now!”

8. Recommendations

This section contains some recommendations based on our analysis. A first set of recommendations is targeted primarily at NGOs who wish to start or further develop programming in the field of economic opportunities for young people in fragile states.

To NGOs, we recommend that:

- Programmes on economic opportunities for young people in fragile settings set appropriate levels of ambition, taking distance from the ‘Employment for Stability’ discourse (that assumes a direct link between economic opportunities for youth –young men in particular- and stability).
- Such programmes make more realistic claims about what they have to offer and how this adds to what young people themselves are doing.
- NGOs in this field revise and refine their Theories of Change on both the economic and non-economic outcomes of their programmes and how they expect these to feed into each other, building on their earlier experiences in e.g. local peacebuilding or citizenship programmes.
- NGOs make further efforts to understand what young people in fragile settings need, want and try to accomplish to tailor their programming accordingly.
- NGOs make further efforts to ensure a follow-up to their economic opportunity interventions to avoid dissipation of efforts and produce more lasting effects.
- NGOs extend or develop their intervention repertoires beyond young peoples’ *capacities* to address *institutionalised* political and economic (gendered) *exclusion* of young people.
- NGOs trace the outcomes of their efforts in local scenarios of conflict and insecurity, to build *contextualised* frames of reference for the understanding of security and stability impacts of economic opportunity interventions.
- Based on their experience, challenge the tendency to “securitise” young people in fragile settings (seeing especially young men as a security threat) and offer more constructive framings on youth needs, experiences and potential.

Drawing on what some organisations are already doing, we see specific opportunities around:

- Offering realistic perspectives on and role models in entrepreneurship, as a viable alternative to jobs in the public sector.
- Organising young people in ways that will give them more voice and leverage in their local settings.
- Engaging duty bearers to reduce stigmatisation of youth and start to address youth employment as an issue of public responsibility.
- Engage young people in reflections about the dynamics of mobilisation and cultural constructions of violence and masculinity.
- Understanding how young people experience and manage insecurity and violence in their settings, to draw lessons on supporting locally feasible non violent strategies for change.

We also formulate a recommendation towards donors.

To donors, we recommend that:

- They look beyond the Employment for Stability discourse in fragile states programming and beyond the ‘securitising youth’ perspective.
- Will be receptive to NGO proposals that make more modest (and more realistic) claims on their economic and security impacts.
- Will be receptive to NGO efforts to take young people’s agency seriously and look for constructive engagement with young people and duty bearers.
- Appreciate the insights from contextualised analyses of conflict and security dynamics even when these do not immediately result in straightforward policy implications.

To those engaged in research we recommend:

- Appreciate the role of NGOs as potential allies in developing critical and grounded perspectives on policy discourses around peace, security and development.
- Appreciate the broader set of motivations and experiences that NGOs have to offer beyond the ‘policy speak’ and grand claims reflected in their programmes, and contribute to making these visible and legitimate.
- When asked, contribute to reflections on Theories of Change as it offers a good way to engage in meaningful discussions on what may be possible and how in contributing to change in complex settings.
- Insist on the need for *researching* rather than *assuming* the needs, experiences and ambitions of people in settings affected by poverty and insecurity.
- Make further efforts to write in an accessible yet sensitive way on complex issues.

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