Helpdesk Research Report

Youth transitions into adulthood in protracted crises

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Question

In conflict/politically protracted crises, how are transitions into adulthood delayed or accelerated for young people? What are the implications of these delayed/accelerated transitions? What does the evidence say about the different experiences of boys and girls in relation to this question? (Young people will be defined as 10-24 year olds).

Contents

1. Overview

Protracted crises can have a significant impact on youth transitions into adulthood, both by delaying and accelerating them. Waithood is a term commonly used to describe the state in which youths find themselves when their transitions to adulthood are delayed. This term will be used in this report.

There is a significant body of literature on youth transitions into adulthood in developing countries. Much of this literature also considers countries which are experiencing protracted crises. The literature uncovered during the course of the research for this study consists of a mixture of journal articles and grey literature. The majority of these studies are empirical. There is a heavy emphasis on the Middle East and North Africa. However, there are also numerous studies looking at youth transitions to adulthood in countries in Sub-Saharan Africa.

There is consensus in the literature that economic independence and family formation are key components of youth transitions into adulthood. A number of studies also include political citizenship in this list, while

some studies add additional components, such as overall well-being. The relationship between these components of the transition from youth to adulthood is often complex. Moreover, failure to achieve one of these milestones often prevents young people from achieving any of the others.

There is also consensus on the disparity between boys and girls experiences in this context. It is generally accepted that youth for women/girls tends to be shorter than for men. This is because, in most societies, young women are considered to be adults when they enter motherhood. While protracted crises tend to delay transitions to adulthood for young men, they often accelerate transitions to adulthood for young women.

Key findings from the literature include:

- Delayed transitions to adulthood can be the **result** and the **cause** of conflict, fragility, and violence.

- **Lost years of schooling and poor quality education** in conflict-affected areas impede young people's chances of achieving economic independence.

- A number of studies find that **family formation** is often difficult for young people who are not economically independent. This is because **economic independence**, which can be hard to achieve in times of conflict, is seen as a prerequisite for marriage in many cultures.

- One study finds that young people do not always resign themselves to waithood. Faced with delayed transitions to adulthood some can create **new sub-cultures and alternative forms of livelihoods and social relationships**.

- **Accelerated transitions into adulthood are not necessarily permanent.** One study argues that many children who assume adult roles may later find themselves in waithood. An example is that of child soldiers in the aftermath of conflict. These young people may find their transitions to adulthood delayed because they have not met the milestones required for this transition (e.g. economic independence and family formation), despite having fulfilled an adult role during times of conflict.

2. Youth transitions into adulthood

A background paper for the World Bank's flagship report *Societal dynamics and fragility: Engaging societies in responding to fragile situations* notes that traditionally transitions into adulthood involved young people gradually being given adult responsibilities. They were also marked by cultural or religious rites of passage, such as the first communion for Catholics and the Jewish bar mitzvah (Kurtenbach, 2012b, p. 14). An empirical study by the same author argues that socialisation constitutes the main interface between youth and adult society. During conflict, sources of socialisation such as family, peers, schools, the media, and state and non-state institutions can be changed or destroyed (Kurtenbach, 2012a, pp. 5-6). This impacts young people's ability to make the transition from youth into adulthood, as discussed in a United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) report on young people in West and Central Africa, which indicates that conflict affects young people's chances of becoming economically and socially independent adults (Kurtenbach, 2012a, p. 6; Larsen, 2009, p. 96).

Several key components of transitions to adulthood are mentioned in much of the literature on this topic. One paper argues that regardless of geographical location, youths' transitions into adulthood can always be divided into three components: family formation, economic independence and political citizenship (Kurtenbach, 2012a, p. 6). However, the paper notes that the exact nature of these components, and the relationship between youth and adult society varies according to the cultural, temporal, and historical

context (Kurtenbach, 2012a, p. 6). One report adds an additional component to the aforementioned list. It calls this 'self-directed, overall wellbeing,' which it describes as encompassing protection from poverty, violence, exploitation and conflict (Larsen, 2009, p.10). A report on youth and conflict in the MENA region, prepared for the World Bank in 2010, replaces political citizenship with housing when discussing key components of the transition from adolescence to adulthood (Barakat et al, 2010, p. 39). Unlike the UNICEF report, it does not include overall wellbeing as a component of transitions from youth to adulthood.

In terms of gender, youth tends to be shorter for women than it is for men. This is because young women become adults when they become mothers in most societies (Kurtenbach, 2012a, p. 6). There is also a difference in transitions to adulthood between young people living in urban and rural settings. Social status and the regimes under which young people grow up also affect their transitions to adulthood (Kurtenbach, 2012a, p. 6). One paper notes that the impact of different patterns of post-conflict reconstruction on the individual components of youth to adulthood transitions remains under-researched (Kurtenbach, 2012a, pp. 18-19).

3. Waithood: Delayed transitions into adulthood

'Waithood' is a term used to describe the state in which young people find themselves when they are stuck in their transitions to adulthood (McEvoy-Levy, 2014, p. 312). It is most commonly used when discussing young people in the Middle East and Africa. In these contexts, economic exclusion and violent conflict make it difficult for young people to become adults in traditional terms (McEvoy-Levy, 2014, p. 312). Waithood is not just a brief phase, it can be prolonged lasting into a person's thirties or forties. For some, waithood can even become permanent (Honwana, 2014, p. 21). One paper argues that waithood may even be replacing conventional adulthood (Honwana, 2014, p. 26).

One report argues that the linkages between the different components of the transition from youth to adulthood mean that the overall transition to adulthood may be delayed if any of the components of the transition are delayed (Barakat et al, 2010, p. 56). These often complex linkages are discussed below.

Waithood: Cause or consequence of conflict and fragility

Based on fieldwork in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories, one empirical study finds that 'waithood is both a symptom and a driver of armed conflict' (McEvoy-Levy, 2014, p. 316). It adds that 'the waithood experience is also nuanced by local context' (McEvoy-Levy, 2014, p. 316). In the context of the Middle Eastern and North African countries which are in a state of crisis following the so-called Arab Spring, much of the literature suggests that 'waithood' was a cause of unrest and conflict (See for example, Singerman, 2013).

The legacy of war and violence can persist long after conflict has come to an end (Kurtenbach, 2012a, p. 8). Using post-war Cambodia and Guatemala as case studies, one study finds that difficult transitions to economic independence in post-war settings appear to lead to youth participation in crime (Kurtenbach, 2012a, p. 9).

Showing that violence can be both a cause and a result of waithood, the same study notes that for children who are victims of, witnesses to, or perpetrators of violence, their transitions to adulthood will be affected (Kurtenbach, 2012a, p. 8). This is because formal and informal institutions of secondary socialisation may have been destroyed. At the same time new rites of passage may not yet have been established in the post-war period. This can lead to further violence in transitions (Kurtenbach, 2012a, p. 8). Another study finds

that youth participation in violence in urban areas in Guatemala and Timor-Leste is closely linked to blocked transitions to adulthood (Kurtenbach & Pawelz, 2015, p. 13).

Economic independence and family formation

Conflict often results in lost years of schooling, making the school to work transition difficult for many young people and resulting in high levels of unemployment (Kurtenbach, 2012a, pp. 9-10). Moreover, education systems in many conflict-affected countries are not providing young people with the skills that they require to obtain employment and to participate in social, economic, and political life (UNESCO, 2011, p. 9). However, one paper suggests that even when young people have access to education they may still find it difficult to find employment. It argues that, generally, the risk of unemployment among youths in the MENA region does not decrease with increased qualification level. Unemployment is highest among those with medium and high level qualifications (Barakat et al, p. 45). Therefore, education does not necessarily reduce frustration among youth, rather it raises expectations which are not met by the labour market. These increased levels of frustration are perceived by some to constitute a risk to stability and security (Barakat et al, 2010, p. 45).

In most societies economic independence tends to serve as a prerequisite for family formation (Kurtenbach, 2012a, p. 9). This point is echoed by a number of studies (e.g. Barakat et al, 2010). A UN report states that in the MENA region, marriage is the 'gateway' to adulthood and independence from parents, as it is the only socially acceptable way to live alone. Marriage is also the only socially accepted means for young people to have a sexual and reproductive life (Roudi, 2011, p. 10). One study notes that in the MENA region young males must normally be employed in order to be considered to be an eligible marriage partner. Employment is also a prerequisite for housing, and housing is generally required in order to be able to get married (Barakat et al, 2010, pp. 55-56). Family formation is therefore very difficult for an unemployed young man, which in turn prevents full social inclusion (Roudi, 2011, p. 10). Even employed young men often struggle to become economically self-sufficient due to low wages and the high cost of marriage (Roudi, 2011, p. 10).

One paper highlights the difference between youth employment levels between urban and rural settings in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). It finds that the unemployment rate is five times higher in urban areas than in rural areas (Larsen, 2009, p. 30). However, it also notes that many of the young people working in rural areas may be underemployed due to day-to-day and seasonal variance in the agricultural sector (Larsen, 2009, p. 30). One study argues that insecure and unstable work environments can also hinder young people's transition into adulthood, as it means that young people's ability to get married will be impaired (Kurtenbach, 2012b, p. 17). This is principally a problem faced by young men.

Political citizenship

One paper argues that economic opportunities and the legal frameworks for family formation depend on political citizenship (Kurtenbach, 2012a, p. 9). However, another study suggests that political citizenship among young people is hampered by unemployment. This is because governments often do not see youth as an important civic group in society, as they do not contribute much to the formal economy (Larsen, 2009, p. 73). However, accelerated transitions to adulthood such as teenage pregnancy and early marriage can also impede political participation (Larsen, 2009, p. 73).

Identity politics can also impact youth transitions into adulthood. In many West and Central African countries political participation is linked to ethnic identity. Moreover, there are few employment

opportunities outside of the civil service. This means that young people from ethnic minorities may struggle to find employment (Larsen, 2009, p. 74). This in turn hampers their transition into adulthood.

A study on youth and political citizenship in post-war societies finds that the generation that fought the wars in Guatemala and Timor-Leste dominates politics and prevents young people from making the transition to active citizenship (Kurtenbach, 2015, p. 15).

Refugees

A Mercy Corps report looking at young Syrian refugees states 'most Syrian adolescents are caught in limbo somewhere between the pasts they left behind in Syria, the futures they were planning, and their current reality' (Mercy Corps, 2014, p. 13). The report goes on to describe these adolescents as 'emotionally and developmentally paralyzed' (Mercy Corps, 2014, p. 13). The report finds that adolescent refugees are not alone in being affected by their experiences. Host-community adolescents also have difficulties describing long-term goals, and concrete steps for how to achieve them (Mercy Corps, 2014, p. 13).

Overcoming waithood

One study argues that young people have not resigned themselves to 'waithood.' Rather, they have created new sub-cultures with alternative forms of livelihood and social relationships (Honwana, 2014, p. 26). Moreover, waithood can be transformative. According to Honwana 'young people's struggle to attain freedom from want often allows them to achieve freedom from fear' (2014, p. 26). Written in their immediate aftermath, the examples cited in the study include the revolutions in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya in 2011 (Honwana, 2014, p. 26).

4. Accelerated transitions into adulthood

Accelerated transitions to adulthood are also common in protracted crises. Examples of children[1] becoming adults too soon include child soldiers, child labourers, or children who become surrogate parents to their siblings after their parents died (Honwana, 2014, p. 21). However, accelerated transitions into adulthood are not always permanent. Many children who assume adult roles later find themselves in 'waithood' (Honwana, 2014, p. 21). For example, child soldiers or caregivers who have taken on adult roles during conflict, may find themselves viewed as youths again when conflict ends. This is due to their failure to achieve the milestones discussed in *Section 2*, such as economic independence or family formation (Kurtenbach and Pawelz, 2015, p. 2).

Different forms of accelerated transitions into adulthood are discussed below.

Child labour

An ILO background paper for the 2011 *Education for All Global Monitoring Report* states that violent conflict generates the worst forms of child labour.[2] Examples of this include children joining the armed forces or

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[1] There is an overlap between the child and youth categories. Anyone under the age of 18 can be defined as a child, while youths are defined as anyone aged 10-24 for the purposes of this report.

[2] ILO Convention No. 182 defines the worst forms of child labour as:

> (a) all forms of slavery or practices similar to slavery, such as the sale and trafficking of children, debt bondage and serfdom and forced or compulsory labour, including forced or compulsory recruitment of children for use in armed conflict;
> (b) the use, procuring or offering of a child for prostitution, for the production of pornography or for

armed groups and forced child labour in mining or agriculture (ILO, 2011, p. 5). Drivers of child labour during conflict include:

- Movements of population i.e. IDPs and refugees.
- Separation of families.
- Loss of parents.
- Increased poverty.

Moreover, a lack of opportunities in the formal labour market during conflict can also push children into the worst forms of child labour (ILO, 2011, p. 6).

In the Syrian context, a Mercy Corps report notes that some Syrian adolescents have become the breadwinners in their family as their parents have died or are unable to find work (Mercy Corps, 2014, p. 12). Among Syrian refugees, more boys than girls tend to work, apart from in Turkey where they work in equal numbers. The main reason for the aforementioned disparity is concern for girls' safety (Mercy Corps, 2014, p. 12).

A UNICEF report summarises the negative consequences of child labour. These are:

- Working can undermine an adolescent's education.
- Negative impact on health.
- Negative impact on earning potential (UNICEF, 2012, p. 17).

More specifically, being associated with the armed forces or armed groups means that children lose their educational and economic opportunities. One report states that in this context 'the development from childhood to adolescence to adulthood is non-existent and missing integral elements, including education' (ILO, 2011, p. 7). This in turn prevents the child from becoming a functioning member of society, due to their lack of education, and practical and social skills (ILO, 2011, p. 7).

The same report cites the example of Angola, to illustrate the extent of the connection between child labour and conflict. The report finds that while the conflict in Angola ended in 2002, the legacy of war has had an impact on children's economic activity. More children are working in provinces that were affected by the conflict, than in those that enjoyed relative security. On the basis of this finding, the report suggested that children's participation in the labour force could be related to conflict intensity (ILO, 2011, p. 9).

The report also finds that in Senegal, the conflict in the Casamance region has had an economic impact both on those displaced by the conflict, and those hosting those displaced (ILO, 2011, p. 9). As host families may have insufficient resources to take care of incoming children, these children may be exposed to the worst forms of child labour in order to meet the needs of the host family. Examples include children engaging in domestic labour in return for accommodation or forced labour to pay off their parents' debt with the host family (ILO, 2011, p. 9).

However, adolescent participation in work can also be viewed as positive if it does not harm their health, personal development or interfere with their schooling (Larsen, 2009, p. 27). This is because these kinds of

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pornographic performances;
(c) the use, procuring or offering of a child for illicit activities, in particular for the production and trafficking of drugs as defined in the relevant international treaties;
(d) work which, by its nature or the circumstances in which it is carried out, is likely to harm the health, safety or morals of children.

activities can provide young people with important skills and experiences and contribute to their family's welfare (Larsen, 2009, p. 27).

Child marriage

Many of the countries with the highest rates of child marriage are fragile and conflict-affected states. Examples include Chad, Niger, and the Central African Republic (Lemmon, 2014, p. 5). This is because the poverty ensuing from conflict can make families think that child marriage is a way of securing their daughters' futures (Lemmon, 2014, p. 6). Child marriage can also be seen as a means of alleviating the economic burden of having a daughter, during times of instability (Lemmon, 2014, p. 6). Child marriage is also seen as a way of protecting girls from violence during times of conflict (Spencer, 2015, p. 13).

One report states that the journey to and from school becomes more dangerous for girls during violent conflict. As a result, they are kept home from school, and then married in order to protect them from violent attacks (Lemmon, 2014, p. 6). Other examples cited include girls being married off in Afghanistan in order to protect them from rape or kidnapping, and girls being married off during the conflict in Sri Lanka, in order to prevent their recruitment or abduction by terrorist groups (Lemmon, 2014, pp. 7-8). In Syria, the number of child marriages has reportedly increased since the onset of the ongoing conflict. This increase is attributed to the ensuing lack of employment opportunities and financial resources (Lemmon, 2014, pp. 8-9). Child marriage has also increased among Syrian refugees in camps in Jordan and in Lebanon, Egypt, and Turkey, where girls are married to much older men in the belief that these men will provide financial protection and stability (Lemmon, 2014, p. 9; El Masri et al, 2013, p. 19; Spencer, 2015, pp.7-8).

A UNICEF report outlines the negative consequences of child marriage. These include:

- Children may be cut off from their families after marriage.
- End of formal education.
- Children's development may be affected.
- Risks associated with adolescent child birth.
- Domestic violence (UNICEF, 2012, p. 10).

One report highlights the need for more data in order to be able to establish an accurate picture of the scope and drivers of child marriage in fragile and conflict-affected states (Lemmon, 2014, p. 8).

Child/youth-headed households

There is very little literature on child-headed households. Much of the literature that does exist focuses on child-headed households resulting from HIV/AIDS related deaths. A 2011 doctoral thesis on child-headed households in sub-Saharan Africa discusses the consequences of child-headed households. It defines child headed households as being households 'in which the (usually) oldest child has assumed most of the responsibilities of a parent' (Phillips, 2011, p. 10). It notes that around 80 per cent of child-headed households are in sub-Saharan Africa (Phillips, 2011, p. 10). A report on IDPs in Somalia states that family separation during displacement leaves many children in child-headed households (IDMC, 2013, p. 6)

The consequences of child-headed households include:

- Lack of capacity to provide for the other children forming part of the household.
- Vulnerability to abuse and economic and sexual exploitation (Phillips, 2011, p. 10; IDMC, 2013, p. 6).

- Poverty.
- Poor housing.
- Inadequate medical care.
- Psychological problems.
- Discrimination.
- Early marriage.
- Failure at school (Phillips, 2011, p. 140).

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