



Enhancing capacity for enterprise and innovation: An investigation of the livelihood assets and strategies of rural youth in East Africa

Natural Resources Systems Programme R8211 DFID.

Literature Review of Theoretical & Conceptual Issues Surrounding Youth, Youth Livelihoods & Sustainable Rural Development



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Abstract

This short paper aims to highlight the potential contribution of a youth perspective to broadening our understanding of key concepts that shape development discourse such as livelihoods, poverty and sustainability. It illustrates some of the factors that should be considered when seeking a theoretical and conceptual understanding of youth and youth livelihoods and highlights the potential contribution that young people can make to economy and society and the constraint on this of various social and political disadvantages facing youth. The paper was developed from a literature review for a research project investigating the livelihoods of rural youth in Uganda and their strategies in relation to natural resources management (NRM).¹

Developing an understanding of people that is based on the reality of their lives, necessarily goes beyond the boundaries of individual disciplines (Wyn & White 1997). This paper draws upon some of the critical insights of sociological and cultural studies of youth, entrepreneurship and feminist scholarship to apply a critique to the emerging discourse on youth in the mainstream of development studies (and in particular to the ‘Sustainable Livelihoods’ (SL) model utilised by the Department for International Development (DfID)).

Keywords

Youth

Sustainable Livelihoods

Development

Intergenerational

Poverty

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What does a youth perspective add to our understanding?

Taking a youth perspective on several of the key challenges to development work provides new understandings and insights to complement and inform our existing tools for tackling the nature and complex challenges of poverty and social inequality. Chisholm (1990) suggests that a framework for understanding 'youth' must necessarily include both continuity and change and thus analyses of youth and youth livelihoods provides a useful entry point from which to explore and contribute some dynamic aspects to established models of sustainable livelihoods.

Youthhood is often recognized as one of the key transitional periods in a person's life. A better understanding and appreciation of how change and development occur during this period, may also serve to extend our understanding of how change and development can also usefully be viewed as continual processes. Equally, investigating intergenerational aspects of asset and resource ownership and management such as inheritance, provides an important entry point, alongside gender, with which it is possible to go beyond the household level to explore the dynamics of intra-household relationships. As DfID acknowledges, some issues such as power relations may be underemphasized by SL approaches (DfID 1999) and a youth perspective offers a vital angle from which such relations can be recognized and explored.

In many developing countries, where youth often constitute a large or the largest percentage of the population, many young people live and work in rural areas and are likely to be engaged in activities that in one way or another utilise local natural resource bases. Youth, as current users and future inheritors of local rural resources, are major stakeholders in natural resource management and as 'the youth of today possess far more entrepreneurial potential than previous generations' (Lewis & Massey 2003, 206), young people can contribute handsomely to economic growth and dynamism (OECD 2001). With a better understanding of the livelihoods of rural youth, it should be possible to create opportunities that stimulate their entrepreneurial skills in a manner that enhances innovation and productivity, but also the environmental sustainability of rural activities.

Finally, due only to the sheer numbers of young people (30% of the world's population, 85% of whom are living in developing countries) (Holschneider 1998) their perspective should receive significant recognition and acknowledgment in efforts to build more holistic and thus realistic analyses of poverty and its causes. Throughout the developing world, poverty forces young people to take on 'adult' responsibilities out of necessity rather than out of choice (GTZ 1997). But at a household level, it is difficult to discern the impact

of poverty on different household members (RYL 2003b). Only in the most extreme cases (for example, HIV/AIDS ravaged areas of sub-Saharan Africa) where children or youths suddenly appear as heads of households are they recognised as amongst the poorest and most vulnerable. Better understandings of such a large part of the world's population would inevitably create new opportunities for development activities, but more importantly, focussed entry points and clear indicators as to their likely impacts.

However, although their recognition, representation and participation are vital in the development discourse, simply including young people on current terms is not enough. Nominal 'inclusion' of a disempowered group does not constitute representation (Pretty 1995) for they must also have influence in decision-making (Paul 1987, Bujis 1982, World Bank 1994). Participation, in its fullest sense, refers to the process by which people take an active part in a programme or process, not just as beneficiaries, but as key contributors to its direction and implementation (White 2001) 'Youth want to be considered as full and equal citizens, as serious and reliable partners in the conception, planning and implementation of policies and programmes in their community and their society.' (UNESCO 1999). The final report of a development conference on youth, Information & Communication Technologies (ICTs) concludes by stating that 'Youth are both willing and capable of formulating pointed criticism and action strategies; and therefore should be involved in all of the pressing sustainable development struggles facing the global community.' (YBKS 2000).

Indeed, in the words of Kofi Annan: 'A society that cuts itself off from its youth severs its lifeline; it is condemned to bleed to death.' (Address to the World Conference of Ministers Responsible for Youth, Lisbon, 8 August 1998). However, as is illustrated later, various negative perceptions about youth are commonplace in both policy and practice. Through analysis of the livelihood opportunities available to youth and the factors that shape and influence these opportunities is it possible to seek more realistic and reliable explanations for the behaviour of young people.

Youth, Entrepreneurship & Sustainability

'Sustainability' and 'Livelihood' are terms that are now commonly used in the development discourse. In 1998 the UK Department for International Development began exploring the meaning and practical application of sustainable livelihoods approaches to development and poverty eradication. In doing so, it produced the following definitions for this compound term:

‘A livelihood comprises the capabilities, assets (including both material and social resources) and activities required for a means of living.’

‘A livelihood is sustainable when it can cope with and recover from stresses and shocks and maintain or enhance its capabilities and assets both now and in the future, while not undermining the natural resource base.’

(DfID 1999)

DfID clearly state that the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework is not intended to provide an exact representation of reality but rather to stimulate debate and reflection on the way in which the livelihoods of the poor are analysed and understood.

New perspectives therefore have a valuable contribution to make to this model. For example, from the definition above we may have a good idea of what a livelihood may look like but we also need to understand the process by which that point is reached. A focus on youth is of particular relevance in providing a key entry point into the analysis of the ways in which new livelihoods are established (RYL 2002). Recognising some of the many different ways by which livelihoods are formed is crucial to understanding the mechanisms that enable some people to lift themselves out of poverty and the structural factors that may instead reproduce poverty. Equally, in post conflict or disaster situations, vulnerable people may lose some or all of their capabilities and assets. In such situations, targeted interventions would be far more effective if they stemmed not only from an awareness of the local livelihoods, but also from an understanding of how and why local capabilities, assets and activities formed particular livelihoods and thus what extra capacity was needed to bridge any gaps in these.

Measuring the sustainability of a livelihood remains a challenging task for development practitioners (DfID 1999) as it requires the selection of suitable indicators and this can only be achieved with great skill and awareness of all the relevant factors. An analysis of youth livelihoods can support the necessary broadening of the concept of sustainability to allow it to capture the dynamic of intergenerational factors and their influence on the sustainability of new livelihoods. Moreover, such analyses offer a more dynamic and long-term perspective on sustainable livelihoods through exploring the intergenerational aspects of livelihood inheritance and the relationship between opportunities and sustainability.

The concept of sustainability can be equally strengthened by recognising that sustainability may form an end goal of a livelihood strategy that cannot or does not choose itself to be sustainable. The livelihoods approach seeks to build upon people's strengths rather than their needs and interestingly, analysis of the livelihood strategies of rural youth reveals an interesting interdependency between sustainable and less sustainable activities. One of the strengths of many youth is their opportunism and willingness to take risks and experiment with new and high-return but high-risk income generating activities (RYL 2003a). Youth may feel that they are able to absorb these risks and that short term non-sustainable activities actually constitute a vital means of generating the resources necessary to build a more sustainable livelihood.

Calculated risk-taking (Knight 1921), opportunism (Kirzner 1973) and co-ordinating scarce resources (Casson 1982) are key values associated with entrepreneurial endeavour and the establishment and development of small-scale non farm enterprises which are central to pro-poor growth (Mellor 1999). However, it is often more commonplace in the context of concerns for the future (which typically characterise views about youth), to frame such risk taking as reckless and rejection of traditional activities as laziness, when instead they could equally be recognised as resourceful and innovative.

An overarching concern in the discourse on sustainability is, of course, that of environmental sustainability, and activities that permanently undermine or damage the natural resource base should not be encouraged. However, where youth, or any other people are engaged in livelihood activities that are damaging to the environment, it is important to remain aware that such practices may well have been adopted due to a lack of viable alternatives and may even be potential environmentally sustainable enterprises that simply lack the resources necessary to support both of these outcomes simultaneously. In such cases, young people should not be demonised without a full understanding of the context and opportunities that they face.

Youth, Poverty & Inequality

There are various definitions and manifestations of poverty and its impact is often complex. A useful additional perspective to general economic household measures of poverty is to add a youth perspective and to consider intergenerational change. This provides a more dynamic indicator of persistent poverty and can, with consideration for social and political

influences included, provide vital insights into some of the structural factors that actually perpetuate or reduce poverty.

The impact of poverty on youth in East Africa is not particularly well documented or understood in either academic or policy circles. Children and youth are often invisible or simply 'burdens' in household analyses of poverty. They are considered poor if their parents are poor yet poverty at the household level will impact on different household members in different ways. With regard to the offspring, they may receive different levels of schooling or have differing health due to a lack of resources. Within households in developing countries, the most numerically significant disparity is between male and female offspring where female offspring typically receive less education and training, do not inherit land and are confined to unpaid family work (Allen & Truman 1999, Grijns et al 1992). Social and political factors are often tied to economic ones and thus all three act together to shape how and where poverty is reproduced through the second generation of household members (Gottschalk et al 1994, Sewell et al 1969, MacLeod 1987).

Recognition of young people within parent headed households thus allows us to identify more clearly some of the factors that reproduce poverty. The sociological studies mentioned above indicate that opportunities for some young people with poor parents can be so constrained that no amount of hard work or application on their part will allow them to raise their standard of living beyond that of their parents. It is therefore useful to extend analyses of poverty to examine its formative stages/reproduction within poor households.

Youthhood is commonly seen as the period in which people begin to develop their own livelihoods and focussing on youth and livelihoods formation can reveal where opportunities to escape from poverty do and do not exist. Such insights should allow us to construct a model that indicates some of the conditions critical to allowing people to lift themselves out of poverty. It would thus also assist the identification of situations in which structural poverty exists, i.e. where the critical conditions necessary to escape from poverty do not exist and intervention is therefore necessary. Understanding what may be the critical conditions for poverty reduction (and there may be many) in certain areas could then allow interventions to be targeted as effectively as possible at the critical constraints.

Finally, as mentioned earlier, in the livelihood strategies of many rural youth, a preference for less traditional, high-risk, and high-return activities is visible. These risks necessarily bring with them failures. However, these are failures that young people may feel that they can absorb more easily than older people with less physical strength or, for instance,

with dependents to support. This calculated strategy will inevitably bring with it various failures and successes in the search for a more sustainable livelihood. Where these successes and failures indicate falling and rising poverty levels for individuals, we may learn more about the transitory aspect and implications of poverty as it affects young people and livelihood formation

The conceptualisation of 'Youth'

By examining how youth are conceptualised by society, it is possible to recognise several institutionalised and powerful characterisations of youth and young people that dominate both the policy and practice that relate to them. These are problematic not only for the way that they establish misleading stereotypes and expectations of and amongst young people, but for the way that they become embodied in institutions that actually enforce and reproduce the prejudices contained in these stereotypes (Lesko 2001, Cohen 1997, Coté & Allahar 1996). Much of the study that has been done on youth benefits from or extends from feminist theory as youth face many of the same problems of powerful institutionalised oppressive roles and expectations (Hooks 1994, Wolf 1990).

Youth are more often than not the focus of attention only as perpetrators of crimes or objects of concern for society. Analyses of 'youth as a problem' extend back at least to the beginning of the 19th Century, with a resurgence in the 1950s. Stanley Cohen's 1987 study of youth cultures and moral panic stimulated much sociological and cultural debate as to the way young people and their behaviour are portrayed by governments, media etc (see Giroux & Hooks 1994). Some of the many familiar, negative contexts in which we hear about youth are to do with crime and juvenile delinquency, problem teenagers, rebelliousness, apathy, antisocial behaviour and unemployment (Skelton & Valentine 1998). They are portrayed as both threatening to 'respectable citizens' and the morality of society and yet also as 'victims of society,' 'at risk' and in need of protection and guidance (Johnson 1993, Cunneen & White 1995, Wyn & White 1997).

Youthhood is traditionally seen as a transition period from 'childhood' into 'adulthood', and associated in the minds of many with a move from a state of 'innocence' to experience with its inevitable rights and responsibilities. However, there are several problems with this approach. Youth are condemned to a legal status in which they are no longer tolerated as children yet neither are they fully recognised with the rights of 'adults' (Wyn & White 1997). As a consequence, incarceration is possible for a person who is not encouraged

or permitted the political representation of a vote. This is just an example to highlight the need to look more closely at the balance between rights and responsibilities and thus the message and incentives that these produce.

If we see 'youth' as 'a specific process in which young people engage with institutions such as schools, the family, the police...' (Wyn & White 1997, 3) then obviously if this first interaction is negative it can have profound effects. Daniel & Cornwall's study of disadvantaged young people in Australia produced an image of a group of young people who have few points of engagement with society and who feel that they do not belong (Daniel & Cornwall 1993).

However, even without legal factors inhibiting their representation, youth are often systematically underrepresented socially and politically as their voice is little heard and seldom asked for. The common phrase 'When I was a lad' is symptomatic of the problem that those with influence (who are still predominantly male) assume to be 'experts' on who youth are, what they are doing, what challenges they face and therefore what they need, by virtue simply of having had the same age in common at a past point in time! (Cohen 1997). There is for example the idea that employment will keep young people out of mischief. However, requirements of previous experience or the prospect of mundane, dissatisfying work, poor conditions and poor or non-existent career opportunities do much to explain apathy and disillusionment toward work and life amongst young people (Wilson 1992, Beasley 1991, Wyn & White 1997). Greater awareness of contextual factors such as these is necessary if we wish to understand and benefit from the potential contribution that the inclusion of young people can make to societies around the world.

When the discourse on youth does not extend beyond seeing youth as a 'problem' an easy solution is to focus on filling their time with work or, failing that, sports and leisure activities. 'There is a broad consensus that the ultimate solution to the youth sustainable livelihoods/enterprise problem (and hence, the most supportive context for addressing the problem) is within the "broader context of policies aimed at enhancing the overall labor absorption capacity of African economies" (ILO, quoted from Schnurr & Grierson 2000, 19). The policies of many of the major development organisations (such as the United Nations, The International Labour Organisation, The Organization for Economic Co-operation & Development, The World Bank etc) and some of the smaller ones, clearly seek 'to enhance the potential of young people' and highlight the economic reward of youth employment. However, the discussion of supportive environments is dominated by interest in establishing the 'right' macro-economic conditions for youth to work and not enough attention is given to

providing them with equal social and political participation. Though increasing international recognition of who youth are should be cautiously welcomed, it is quite possible that the same mistakes are being repeated that occurred in the early stages of work on gender equality for women in developing countries. Access to employment does not, by itself, disassemble social and political inequalities and the right to work (and thus contribute) without equal rights of social and political representation resembles a form of exploitation and is unlikely to reduce the marginalisation and discontent of young people.

As noted by Wyn and White (1997, 6) 'Young people will have a significant contribution to make in the institutions in which they have most at stake' and their input should not be limited only to 'youth issues' (YBKS 2000).

Another misleading consequence of viewing young people as 'almost adult' is that youth are often not given credit for their condition as youth. The fact is that this transitional period is embodied in real people facing real choices and real challenges. Many youth are busy 'being' not just 'becoming' but the underlying message to a person in their crucial formative years that they are less valued in society than an older person can only be detrimental both individually and collectively. Rather than extolling the virtues of "growing up", youth deserve recognition and representation as current members of society rather than simply as future ones (Wyn & White 1997).

The category 'Youth' is most easily and readily conceptualised as an age in which certain biological and psychological developments occur in individuals (Frith 1984, Lesko 2001). However, all 'youth' are not the same, just as all 'elderly people' are not the same, just as all 'adults' or 'children' cannot realistically be categorised as homogenous groups. Youth encompasses differences in age, gender, race, ethnicity, class and so on. We may all seem to age at the same speed on a chronological and linear measure, yet this can be a very misleading yardstick as we all develop as individuals at different speeds and to different degrees in all aspects of our lives (Frith 1984, Lesko 2001, Wyn & White 1997, Richo 1991).

Age should not necessarily be given such meaning either in terms of personal development or without taking into consideration the social norms that dictate expectations of each age group (GTZ 1997). And these social norms are often so strong that one's age can be seen more as a factor that shapes and defines one's opportunities rather than as an indication of personal identity (Lesko 2001). In this sense common behavior of certain age groups may well be reactionary rather than spontaneous. As the ones faced with the prospect of building

new livelihoods in given contexts, the behavior and voices of young people should be informative inputs into understanding societies and how they can be improved.

Lifecourse and Transitions

An alternative means of viewing life that does not impose age definitions is as a lifecourse of continual transitions. The most recognised of these is probably the transition from school to work though it occurs in many different ways, different places and over different periods of time. In less economically developed countries it is generally the case that this transition is far more fluid than within countries with more defined transfers from education to employment. Outside of this formal setting, much less is known about the transitional process.

A useful alternative to age-based definitions in analysis of livelihoods and livelihood formation, is the concept of the transition from 'Dependency' to 'Interdependency.' DfID acknowledges that in addition to SL analysis, other tools/skills are needed to understand the complexity of structures and processes, and that measuring change in livelihoods is difficult (DfID, 1999). Transition signifies change, and the transition by young people away from dependency upon parents or family towards a position instead of interdependency with others provides a useful entry point into discussion of transition and change in a person's life. Livelihoods are sometimes presented simply in terms of asset accumulation rather than with considerations of how they form part of a lifecourse or their sustainability.

Acknowledging that life can be represented as a series of transitions provide opportunities to formulate more realistic indicators of individual lives than age and, by so doing, it may be possible to challenge some of the negative norms associated with strong hierarchical tendencies. Lifecourse analysis is an alternative perspective that offers grounds for more equal representation from youth and other, age stereotyped groups, and the chance to include them in the development discourse on fairer terms.

Conclusions

Young people remain a powerful force within society and major stakeholders in both present and future environmental, social, political and economic orders. However, to tap their strengths and reap the benefits of their energy and creativity it is not only fair, but also

necessary to address the structural disadvantages that they face. If young people are brought into the institutions of society rather than alienated from them, valuable new insights will appear. For all their differences, youth as a category have a unique position in society and therefore a unique perspective. At the point of engagement with society's institutions and taking steps to initiate a new livelihood, youth experience first hand the opportunities and constraints that societies impose. In seeking more sustainable approaches to poverty reduction and development, the resourcefulness of the most entrepreneurial and innovative sector of society is needed

One thing that is clear is that in order for youth to be represented more fairly, greater effort is still needed to identify and highlight their strengths and potential contribution to the development process. As part of this process, it is also necessary to identify and analyse factors that may be seen as constraining to a more desirable level of youth participation in the development process. At the individual or micro level, this requires an understanding of what factors shape and influence new livelihood formation and how, and the degree to which young people are able to negotiate and shape their own livelihoods.

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