

# IDS

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### ‘Leave No One Behind’: The Post-2015 Universality Agenda and Youth Employment

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November 2016

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## **‘LEAVE NO ONE BEHIND’: THE POST-2015 UNIVERSALITY AGENDA AND YOUTH EMPLOYMENT**

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# 1 Introduction

This report aims to present a clear road map for implementing the new universal agenda of the UN in terms of youth employment. Composed of 17 new goals with 169 targets centred on 'sustainable development', the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are dedicated to 'eradicating extreme poverty from the face of the earth by 2030' (UN 2013) and are predicated on 'five transformative shifts': '1. Leave No One Behind; 2. Put Sustainable Development at the Core; 3. Transform Economies for Jobs and Inclusive Growth; 4. Build Peace and Effective, Open and Accountable Public Institutions; 5. Forge a new Global Partnership' (UN 2013). As the UN itself acknowledges, the implementation of these goals will require a 'new development framework' centred on a 'new global partnership' (UN 2013) that should go 'beyond the MDGs [Millennium Development Goals]', requiring a much more explicit focus on 'reaching the very poorest and most excluded people' (UN 2013) and also, unlike during the MDGs period, making the mooted global partnership a much broader, inclusive and stable platform for development practice.

The report examines what this might mean for the global youth employment agenda, specifically focusing on a cross-cultural comparison of what young people are actually doing in terms of work and employment. This analysis poses significant questions for a youth employment policy focus that is currently promoting the 'double universal' of both youth and employment as 'black box' forms of transformation. However, as social scientists have shown, the category of 'Youth' itself is frequently left undefined and unclear, more often than not focusing solely on young men and their hazardous behaviour, ignoring girls, sexual minorities, intra-group diversity and quite often the positive impact of what youth are already doing (Hilker and Fraser 2009). At the same time, despite a policy surge, ideas around 'employment' through development are also ill-defined and lacking context, with evidence emerging of the increasing gap between jobs people can do and the array of jobs available (Ferguson 2015). As this report explores, people classified as 'not working' (Ferguson 2015) are often also producing and performing multiple forms of 'value' which do not fit neatly into tightly defined development parameters.

To partly address these questions, the report begins with a brief overview of universality in policy and practice, showing how attempts to 'make' development universal in both meaning and application have formed an integral part of the theoretical advancement of the development industry. It then moves on to a discussion of these ideas in terms of the youth employment literature, exploring current debates and the question of 'universality in practice' directly. To do this, through ethnographic portraits of young men in both the global North and South, it looks at very specific, micro-level case studies from a recent research project on youth empowerment before using them to critique the wider literature. The report concludes by identifying some problems connected with the current universality agenda and suggesting ways to move them forward, particularly focusing on the danger of policymakers and power brokers acting unilaterally under the benevolent guise of universality.

## 2 Universality in policy and practice

At first glance the new universality agenda contains some highly admirable principles, particularly the idea of leaving no one behind and putting an end to ‘poverty and hunger for all’ (UNEP 2015). At the same time, there is a real danger of recreating unilateral policy moves from the past which have led to increased marginalisation and disenfranchisement of the very people targeted by development interventions. For example, as Knoll, Grosse-Puppendahl and Mackie (2015) have noted, the new universality agenda will draw on existing ‘universal’ frameworks such as Human Rights, especially for complex implementation protocol: ‘By drawing on human rights norms and mechanisms the new development framework could strengthen the three dimensions of accountability: responsibility, answerability and enforceability’ (UNHCR 2013; cited in Knoll *et al.* 2015: 16). However, parallel models of universality such as human rights have been strongly criticised in the past precisely for being ‘overly universal’; that is, blithely conflating seemingly timeless universal values, morals and principles with universal legal, governance or policy frameworks, erasing the cultural distinctiveness of different locales and crafting unilateral or univocal development interventions which fail to suit anybody (O’Byrne 2015).

Problematising universal values, morals and frameworks then opens up spaces for a proper consideration of universally applicable action. Indeed, the moral undertone of the global human rights agenda draws our attention to the potential gaps between universal values and a universal structure for both enforcing them and embedding them in national policy, raising the question of whether resistance to the SDGs is ‘a rejection of universality, or instead a rejection of what is being universalized’ (Long 2015: 205). In fact, as Long (2015) has recently observed, the rights content of the new SDGs may actually sabotage their good intentions, since ‘the language of rights – and ideas of entitlements, claims, and duties – is almost wholly absent from the body of the current SDG proposal’; the latter instead favours a loose ‘monitoring framework’ which explicitly eschews the very ‘language of responsibility and accountability’ needed to effect real transformation (*ibid.*: 204).

In the SDGs, these potential frictions are directly addressed through a theoretically clear, but pragmatically vague, language of ‘differentiation’ which sets apart implicit universal values from explicitly defined nationally tailored plans of implementation. Differentiation is seen as the ‘programming end’ of the universality agenda and is therefore integral to making the universality of the SDGs function as per the UN definition that ‘the SDGs should be global in nature and universally applicable to all countries, while taking into account different national realities, capacities and levels of development’ (Assembly U.G. 2015: 13). In practice, a degree of criticism is directed at this aspect of the SDGs, with fears that wealthy countries will simply ‘pick and choose’ the targets they adhere to (Knoll *et al.* 2015), prioritise attainable goals they are already working towards, such as environmental sustainability (Osborne, Cutter and Ullah 2015) or simply adhere to goals in line with their economic or political interests. The question remains then of how to operationalise the idea of universality without compromising the vision of the UN, and in the next section, the report addresses this question in the light of the youth employment literature, tracing how both youth and employment as development objects are in danger of being divorced from the complex realities of young lives.

### **3 What can the universality agenda tell us about youth employment?**

Youth and youth employment have increasingly become a policy focus for international donors and the global development community working in the global South, and thus an integral part of long-term strategies for social inclusion and sustainable economic programmes. This greater interest in youth and youth employment in has been directly wedded to a stronger emphasis on securitisation stemming from the alarm generated by the numbers of young people involved in violence, political mobilisation and terrorism that, in a number of contexts, has seen the anticipated 'demographic dividend' turn sour (Checkoway 2011). This dual development discourse reflects ongoing, and historically figured, polarised narratives around youth which see them as 'makers or breakers', vandals or vanguard, wasters or producers and so on (Abbink and Van Kessel 2005; Honwana and De Boeck and 2005; Oosterom *et al.* 2016).

As Bersaglio, Enns and Kepe (2015) have noted in a recent analysis of World Bank policy, the 'global shift toward youth' contains three dominant representations of youth which could be considered universally desirable as part of the SDGs agenda: 'youth as asset; youth as risk; and youth as good citizens in the making'. The first aspect entails a shift of responsibility onto the shoulders of young people that aligns with a neoliberalisation of development where 'youth and their role within global development is framed in a way that maintains and builds support for a global development agenda rooted in the dominant political-economic ideology of the twenty-first century' (*ibid.*: 58). From this perspective 'access to employment and decent work for young people should be one of the "central macro-economic objectives" of the post-2015 development agenda' (UNDG 2013) as youth are both 'assets' to be cultivated and 'human capital' to be harnessed as well as being recognised 'first and foremost as (future) workers and as family and community members second' (*ibid.*: 63–64). As they observe, the added onus placed upon youth is almost entirely bound to the universal transformations engendered by employment and education, rather than taking in the broad scope of youth experience and transition (*ibid.*: 61).

#### **3.1 Youth employment programmes and entrepreneurialism**

Running parallel to the policy discourse on youth itself has been a similar standardisation of 'employment' as a development panacea (Dolan and Rajak 2016). This reflects both a pressing 'youth bulge' anxiety (see Lin 2012) and the simple fact that a disproportionate number of the unemployed are young people. Particularly in the global South, young people are acutely vulnerable to market shifts and political exclusion, resulting in huge numbers of un-, under- or precariously employed young people (Gough, Langevang and Owusu 2013; *cf.* ILO 2016). In Africa, for example, where economic growth is not translating into parallel job prospects, in 2012 there were 'an estimated almost 200 million people aged between 15 and 24 on the African continent which it is expected will double by 2045' (African Economic Outlook 2012, cited in Gough *et al.* 2013: 4).

Moreover, the statistics on employment/ unemployment can be highly misleading, particularly in the global South where 'delineating the exact boundaries of unemployment/employment can be extremely difficult in economies where much work is irregular, casual and precarious' (Gough *et al.* 2013: 3). Indeed, in many parts of Africa, even the terminology of employment and work has become unstable, referencing a colonial dream long vanished, as Gough *et al.* (2016: 5) put it:

Using the terms 'employment' and 'work' in a sub-Saharan African context, is problematic since they are often used only in relation to paid formal employment despite the fact that only a minority of the working population is employed in formal sector jobs.

This situation can be contrasted with the global North where employment figures are under question for being out of touch with the increasingly common forms of precarious work and underemployment. As Andy Furlong (2014) has discussed, young people in the UK especially have been caught up in various forms of precarious, unpaid and illicit work; as he puts it, they are 'churned between poorly paid and insecure positions, sometimes without ever experiencing significant periods of worklessness' (2014: 94). As he observes, one important by-product of this trend has been the proliferation of, for the most part, ineffective workfare, youth participation and empowerment programmes which help to 'window-dress' employment statistics and gloss persistent forms of inequality and marginalisation (*ibid.*: 95).

Another by-product of this climate has been the widespread adoption of entrepreneurialism as a 'panacea' for *both* employment and youth issues, rendering the formal/ informal debate less important (see Fox and Thomas 2016). Entrepreneurship is thus offered as the answer to the 'youth unemployment' question, as the reality that 'young people are adept at finding economic niches within uncertain economic landscapes' becomes a new development rationale that recasts risk-taking, competition and commercial acumen in a distinctly positive light (Dyson and Jeffrey 2013: R1). Nevertheless, as Dyson and Jeffrey (2013) have pointed out, entrepreneurialism offers an invaluable source of *ad hoc*, but regular, income generation, and they urge social scientists to direct their attention towards augmenting development and enterprise activities young people are already engaged in by combining 'a focus on entrepreneurship with attention to addressing social inequalities and improving the institutional environment, for example through bolstering people's access to cheap credit, reducing corruption, and enhancing the standard of school and post-school education' (*ibid.*: R2). As the next section explores, these models of youth agency require careful analysis, and only through taking the long view in the form of in-depth, repeat or engaged comparative work can an understanding of the structural forms of inequality be more clearly integrated into an understanding of youth agency, enterprise and livelihoods (Jeffrey and McDowell 2004).

## 4 Universality in focus: a cross-cultural case study of youth employment

In order to illustrate these issues, this section presents a series of parallel portraits drawn from the author's own fieldwork with a youth NGO in The Gambia and the UK using the comparative framework to 'transcend the debilitating dichotomy between empirical and theoretical research' (Phillips 2014: 1,369) that currently encumbers the study of youth as a discipline. For the purposes of comparison, this section focuses on a Young Men's Christian Association<sup>1</sup> (YMCA) engagement programme (Sports Leadership) targeting young people having difficulty in school in the UK and having difficulty finding employment in The Gambia. Located on the south coast of Great Britain, the city of Brighton and Hove (population c. 300,000) is an important transport, tourist, commuter and administrative hub in the county of East Sussex. Founded in 1919, Sussex Central YMCA struggled through much of the twentieth century as a local community centre before developing during the last 20 years into a leading organisation in the areas of homelessness and youth development. The Gambia's history has been shaped by the country's position within global interconnections and by global inequality, its colonial history transitioning into a reliance on aid and tourism (Wright 2004). Founded in 1979 as an educational and training institute, Gambia YMCA gained support from English missionaries and other YMCAs, growing with the Gambian economy. Today the YMCA plays a leading role in the region, advising the government directly on development issues and cementing its position of power within local and regional politics.

The different research contexts offer a range of potential comparisons: between societies that are dominantly secular (Brighton and Hove) and Islamic (Banjul); that are ranked on the Human Development Index as 'high' (Brighton and Hove) and 'low' (Banjul); and have had different political histories, from the metropolitan (Brighton and Hove) to the post-colonial (Banjul). Consequently, in both contexts tracing these links and the ways YMCA students interpret their own experiences can shed light on how practical skills and livelihoods are recast in a moral light through the powerful overarching discourse of youth and youth employment, where certain types of work, and person, are prioritised over others.

### 4.1 The importance of social relations to working relations

The current economic climate is widely acknowledged to have produced a situation in which the workforce is obliged to accept greater flexibility, in terms of shorter contracts, less job security and a skills-based workforce less attached to particular roles, careers or workplace identities. For many commentators this situation is harmful and stressful for both worker and workplace, the main beneficiaries being the wealthy capitalists and company owners. However, while acknowledging this as a reality for many workers, it is important to add another dimension to this analysis by showing how the two stories above reflect how young men especially are primed, in both contexts, to exploit the breakdown of formal institutions and transitional pathways. In fact, for both Alasana and Joe (see Boxes 4.1 and 4.2), the 'inflexible' body offered relief from the outside pressures of their 'flexible' disordered everyday lives. While Joe sold his body on the seas, Alasana tried to sell his on the football field. As both 'social entrepreneurs' (Chigunta, Gough and Langevang 2016: 67) and 'entrepreneurs of self' (Esson 2013) they used their bodily capital to reconfigure the available possibilities in their lives.

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<sup>1</sup> Operating in 128 countries and widely recognised as the largest youth non-governmental organisation (NGO) in the world, the YMCA plays an important role in driving global youth policy and operationalising a 'universal' notion of youth.



### **Box 4.1      Alasana, 19**

A keen footballer, Alasana trains day and night to 'make it' on the football field. As he puts it, he 'steals fitness' by training in secret late at night, hoping to 'steal' a march on his competitors in the football team. Yet, he is also 'stealing' life on the streets, making money selling DVDs to tourists and expats in SUVs. This is where I recruited him for the Sports Leadership course, not realising that the flip-flops on his feet were the only pair of shoes he owned. Some days he could not make the course and as he told me later, he was 'doing business' to help his family and attending the course in secret 'for himself'. As I got to know him, I found out this ambiguity played out in many of his life-choices: he played for his father's old football team, but his father had given up football, frowning on his 'waste of time'; he lived alone so he could play sport away from the hectoring gaze of his father, but his work supported his father's and family's income; his ambition to travel to the 'West' had led him to take a dangerous migratory root through Libya where he was captured and returned to The Gambia, as he tells me he had done this for his family but they had begged him not to go; as a Muslim he practises forbearance but as a go-getter he is all action and impatience, desperate to make the best of his life in the here and now. These tensions were part of his everyday life, he was 'managing them' as best he could but, as he put it, lamenting his blocked pathway in the football field, 'I'm not a captain yet', reflecting a life of both uncertainty and frustration, but also hope, optimism and strategic 'navigation' of his multiple responsibilities.

### **Box 4.2      Joe, 17**

A self-confessed fishing addict who is in love with the sea, becoming a captain is Joe's ultimate ambition, too. Kicked out of two schools for violent behaviour, Joe has come to the Sports Leadership course as a final resort. A bright and sensible pupil for the most part, he is cursed with a very short temper and is prone to violent outbursts, which he claims he is beginning to learn how to control. The one clear thread of hope running through this narrative of self-destruction was his passion for fishing. He told me, 'It's the best job in the world', contrasting himself with his peers who play Xbox and smoke weed. It has also given him direction and a purpose, making both his school life and the Sports Leadership course increasingly irrelevant; he even confesses that he mainly uses the course for the fitness sessions to help develop his strength for hauling fishing nets. At the heart of his own journey is the camaraderie he has fostered on the boats, especially between himself and his captain; as he puts it, 'We're good mates and he's got a lot of respect for me too.' This relationship is complicated by the fact that his father was also a fisherman, though notorious for his unreliability. He told me how his father's reputation still got dragged up in the macho world of the boats, creating situations where he has literally had to fight for his own reputation. Still, Joe has worked hard to make up for the debts his father owed and one day he hopes to follow his captain by owning his own boat. For now, though, he is focusing on getting through the Sports Leadership course, and avoiding any trouble, at home, at school or on the boats.

However, each of these stories is defined by its local and global context as each young man navigates the 'immediate and imagined' opportunities arrayed before him (Vigh 2006: 54). For Alasana, his family connections cut both ways, draining his resources but providing him with a sense of honour, duty and respect as he became the main provider. As Alasana's story suggests, the phrase 'just managing' has a double connotation that plays into the dual perception of youth in The Gambia and in the wider West African context. While some youth are 'just managing' to get by, eking out a subsistence in the context of chronic scarcity, others are 'managing' an array of obligations and expectations, navigating (Vigh 2006) their way through the socio-economic limbo of young adulthood.

Chronically let down by his family and finally on the fishing boats by his father, Joe has striven to rebuild his name and in doing so has forged new relationships on the boats, including powerful new masculine identifications. Though he accepted the support offered by the YMCA he never subscribed to it, using it as one more point of coordination through which to construct his own sense of agency. As Joe consciously distanced himself from a previous

life, he was driven by the failings of his family to find a place for himself in the fishing community and to create new social bonds and networks even as he purposely dissolved others.

Their stories also point to how, for young men, employment and work are embroiled in local systems of male pride and prestige, what Utas (2012) has called 'Big Man Systems'. As Utas (2012) notes, in many African contexts young men in particular coordinate their identity in relation to a fixed, charismatic centre, striving towards an ideal masculine type through activities that accrue standing within that system. For Alasana, living alone helped him forge a sense of independence and develop away from the stifling gaze of his father, who while failing to bring in enough money, continued to occupy the role of patriarch in his family and household. For Joe, his father also dominated his reality and threatened to inhibit his ability to develop his own sense of manhood. This meant Joe had to constantly prove himself on the boats, as well as learning to fend for himself in a culture of hostility and violence. As he explained, this mode of gaining prestige couldn't be replicated in the school system. As Gillian Evans (2011) has discussed in her study of a London council estate, 'Big Man Systems' based on violence create a 'pecking order of disruption' that militates against the required expectations of teachers and parents which required them to be 'good boys' at school (*ibid.*: 296). Being 'good' on the street, meant being aggressive and physically powerful, a form of 'self-value' that created ambiguity and confusion when moved into the context of school or the YMCA (*ibid.*: 317).

These comparisons indicate how powerfully imbricated young men are in local cultures of masculinity and 'bignarity', and they underline the limitations of a morality-based mode of transformation when it is transferred out of the YMCA, particularly as YMCA values prove incompatible with real-world dilemmas, anxieties and bodies. Alasana's echoing of the common refrain heard in The Gambia, especially from young men, that 'I'm just managing,' could have been easily echoed also by Joe, as he struggled to find a place for himself on the Sussex coast. Not only was the YMCA model insufficient to completely satisfy the immediate social and cultural needs of these two young men, it was peripheral to their ongoing projects of self-actualisation. Here, the 'inflexible' morality of the YMCA failed to match the 'flexible' negotiations of life in both The Gambia and the UK, reflecting a new reality on the ground for young men negotiating their way in precarious times.

## 4.2 The changing meaning and value of work

### Box 4.3 Sainey, 22

What initially struck me about Sainey was the way his entrepreneurial spirit was woven into his civic-mindedness, with his everyday grafting for his family naturally extending into care for his community. Living in a compound with 13 mouths to feed and only two workers, as he said, '...the living condition is also very difficult here, it's all about, what we say, manage it from hand to mouth, just push it... it's a big load on to us.' Nevertheless, while 'doing business', as he termed it, and working as a security guard, he was also involved in sports coaching, youth work and arts programmes as well as finding time to pursue his own dream as a musician. As an 'older' youth, Sainey saw it as his responsibility to help those 'coming up' behind him, giving younger youth better chances than those available to his own generation: 'We work with the young ones, at any ages, because we try to render services for the community that will help create opportunities, and foster relationships among the youths in the community here.' Sainey claimed that he was inspired by the Gambian president and was trying to achieve development at home, with his attendance on the Sports Leadership course part of a wider strategy rooted in tying his individual aspirations to both his community and his nation: 'I'm trying to improve the living condition of the society. There are lots of changes [I want to make], financial changes, education changes, that's what I work on.'

#### **Box 4.4 Jonny, 19**

For Jonny, the experience of the Sports Leadership course has changed the way he thinks about his own life, and helped him identify possible paths that were seemingly closed to him. As he was given encouragement at the YMCA, Jonny's passion for sport began to develop into something more, a viable career option, and the opportunity to do what he enjoys: 'If I got paid to do sport, even if it was just minimum wage, I'd be happy.' He continues this idea by showing how the Sports Leadership course has led him on a journey of reinvention, starting with re-narrating his past in terms of conversion and transformation: 'I didn't have something to look forward to, just a... dull future. It gave me more options and made me look, more open-eyed... and it's nice when you're just teaching kids, playing things, it's just nice to do something, you're working to make them better.' Re-visioning his past through his present has also given him new ways of seeing his future. Jonny's 'dull future' was going to mean him becoming a plumber, a job many families encourage as good, solid work but which leaves Jonny cold: 'I wanna do something with sport, a job, a career in sport... that's my dream... I don't want to spend my life under a toilet seat.' Jonny's dream has been realised at the YMCA, where he has been volunteering as a sports worker since the course finished, pulling himself, with a little help, out from under the toilet seat – a good metaphor for the alternative future he had envisioned for himself originally.

For many young people in the global South the value and meaning of 'work' has radically altered, giving rise to new forms of livelihood which are unconnected to income levels. As James Ferguson (2016) has recently discussed, in the so-called 'jobless city' young people involved in economic activity are classified as 'not working' even while they are producing multiple forms of 'value' that may have added weight in the local moral economy, even if not on the global market or in the eyes of donors. As he argues, the phrase 'not working' also refers to the host of ineffective development interventions aimed at youth which fail to see social and economic value as inextricably linked. Ferguson suggests there is a need to investigate new ways of seeing 'value' that moves away from a purely economic reckoning, and to accommodate the myriad ways young people 'produce' value that circulates locally and creates the layers of socio-economic production and reproduction which ultimately constitute broader economic growth (*cf.* Jeffrey 2010).

It is useful to extend his argument by looking at how a 'not working' framework can also be applied to the global North, where the value of work has also altered inexorably. For example, in the above two stories, we can see two young people who are 'not working', because their primary occupation is not 'working' in the traditional sense of having a steady, stable job. At the same time, they are both engaged in multiple activities, some of which are income-generating, some are not, and some hold the promise of future reward. However, each context is very different. In Sainey's case he does work as a security guard but he is known and respected for his other work, which is generally unpaid. For him, the YMCA was one more 'access point' on a road he was already travelling. It allowed him to expand his skillset and network of contacts while deepening his local reputation.

Like Sainey, Jonny had used 'not working' as a route to overcome specific issues and problems and forge a new identity for himself that could connect him into circuits of livelihood and income. At the same time, he had reconnected himself into a local moral economy at the YMCA, gradually refashioning and reversing the negative associations with which he had long been branded. However, unlike Sainey, Jonny had yet to build a community standing and, with state support, was able to 'not work' in the real sense while he 'produced' socio-moral value at the YMCA. On the other hand, in more precarious conditions Sainey was reliant on his actual income to feed his family, while he pursued his dream of activism and community transformation. Nonetheless, both examples show that young people may engage in multiple pathways to local prestige, operating as 'social entrepreneurs' to build careful reputations, on the one hand for the future promise of paid work, and on the other to erase a destructive past.

In a final irony, here, the only things ‘not working’ in their lives are the actual paid jobs themselves. For Sainey, security guarding is a mundane means to an end, a form of precarious casual labour increasingly prevalent across Africa. As a number of scholars have noted, the increasing presence of security guards across Africa reflects both a securitisation of space amid the fear of actual and imaginary crime and, simultaneously, a landscape marked and marked out by increasing inequality. In Jonny’s case, his ‘dull future’ as part of the cadre of tradesmen could have led to either a comfortable income or quite as easily to a lifetime of casual, precarious labour. Yet, while Jonny’s new career at the YMCA can be seen on the one hand as a rejection of the thriving modern service culture and struggling manual labour models of precarious work, it also blends in an added revalorisation of the very purpose of work, service and labour itself. Here ‘learning to serve’ means ‘learning to help’ and ‘learning to labour’ means ‘learning to combine pleasure with work’.

Indeed, Jonny’s story has more in common with affluent middle class than traditional working class labour pathways, where links between non-paid work and projects of self-transformation are increasingly the norm, integral to state-sponsored attempts to weave individuals more tightly into communities and even the nation. In Africa, NGO work can also be seen as part of the growing network of middle classes, offering a ‘global hub’ through which to perform civic duty and demonstrate valuable, internationally recognised technical skills. As the next section points out, these types of ‘global hubs’ also need to be understood as imaginary intersections for the confluence of multiple forms of aspiration, but also as foci for the more negative associations of disaffection and frustration fomented by growing inequality and class division.

### **4.3 Connecting local and global ideas of work, employment and aspiration**

#### **Box 4.5 Lamin, 16**

Still at school, Lamin is the youngest Sports Leader I trained in The Gambia and is a prodigy in many different ways. A good footballer and member of the Gambian rugby team, he is also the youngest member of the Gambian cricket team and the youngest player being whisked away for their international debut in Ghana. Comparing himself with other youths who are ‘going nowhere’, he has a desire for travel that is born of an awareness of both the problems faced by his peers and the fact that he faces them too: ‘Some of them they think about Europe too much. Even me too, I love to go to Europe or America, but, you see... I stay here.’ Repeating the youth refrain ‘it’s not easy’, referencing the struggle to find money, success and security, Lamin sees cricket as his way out, and his way of differentiating himself from his peer group. As he tells me, when he dies people will look back and judge him for his actions and words: ‘We came here for mission, not competition. When your mission ends... your friends will... say, ‘Ah! Lamin was a good boy.’ Asking me what my ‘mission’ in The Gambia was, he used the example of my mobility to structure a theory of ‘moral’ mobility: ‘If you just sit one place and say God will help you... You come to Gambia. Why you come out just to help yourself? And God helps you. It’s life.’ In me, the YMCA and the Sports Leadership course, Lamin saw God’s hand, but also an image of his own future, a moral rendering of mobility that sat alongside his sedentary peers dreaming of ‘Babylon’. Yet, like his peers, he was also making moves and dreaming of travelling abroad, the very idea of travel locked into his quest for status at home.

### **Box 4.6 Dan, 16**

Dan, 16, joined the Sports Leadership course after a difficult time at school, where his behaviour had upset teachers, parents and fellow students. Now, with a renewed allegiance to the YMCA his life has gained new direction, marked by a growing sense of reflective self-awareness fostered in the YMCA atmosphere: 'I won't get in trouble because I don't want to get kicked out of the YMCA – if I did I reckon I'd start getting into trouble again.' This sense of provisionality is in contrast with his desire to follow two seemingly contradictory career paths united by their altruistic underpinning: joining the army to be a medic and doing voluntary work at the YMCA. His love of the latter was inspired by the YMCA's Gambia trip, where he had witnessed poverty for the first time, in his words it was: 'sad and fun – it was a mixture of everything... I think I've changed, going to The Gambia has changed me.' When we discuss this, he frames it in terms of his alternative life choice, still wanting to join the army to get his 'anger out' but framed in a desire to simultaneously help people: 'I like helping people. So being a medic so I can save people rather than kill them... It was like [in] The Gambia I couldn't face it [going to the hospital] but then we were sitting in the hospital next to them and I was fine with it.' For Dan, experiencing distant poverty had opened his eyes to the possibilities of helping people as a career goal either at home or abroad, a moral awakening that had altered his life choices and wedded him more closely to the development goals of the YMCA.

A third aspect of navigating young lives and livelihoods is the ability, or lack of ability, to move geographically, which acts as a metaphor for feelings of immobility and inertia in the lives of young people (Jeffrey 2008). As Craig Jeffrey (2008) has discussed, increased levels of education and global awareness in the global South have led to heightened levels of both frustration and creativity as young people reconfigure their lives along global and local lines. As he writes, we should situate 'an analysis of "Generation Nowhere" with reference to the issues of social inequality, political transformation, and local environmental change that continue to loom large in the social imaginations of many young people in the global South' (2008: 16). As we saw in the previous narratives, for young Gambians like Sainey, mobility was included in a portfolio of livelihood strategies where traversing the treacherous 'backway' through Libya has become an important option for frustrated Gambians desperate to gain the financial spurs of adulthood (Gaibazzi 2014). At the same time, The YMCA attempts to destabilise the bubble of privilege in the global North by transporting troubled young men to The Gambia, aiming to further entrench the moral messages they have begun instilling through the Sports Leadership course. As Dan's story illustrates, the ability to be mobile, 'to move', becomes part of 'being moved' emotionally at the YMCA through a direct experience with deprivation and poverty.

By presenting these two stories side by side, I aim for a similar juxtaposition that begins to connect some of the dots between mobility and immobility in the global South and mobility in the global North (see Gaibazzi 2014). As the YMCA circulated its students it also circulated a form of privilege predicated on the ability to move to which young Gambians like Lamin aspired, pushing and stretching his notion of what Graw and Schielki (2012) have called his 'global horizon'. In doing so, they also recreated and rehearsed the North–South hierarchy even as they attempted to break it down. In the Gambian context, this ambiguity has gained added intensity as official migratory routes, hung over from the colonial relationships, have closed down, making the scramble for escape even more desperate (Gaibazzi 2014).

These studies urge analysts of migration and mobility to turn their attention to the returning gaze of the potential immigrants as they seek new lives in the global North, posing a simple conundrum: why do people who migrate do so to build big houses in their homeland? (*cf.* Graw and Schielki 2012: 1). With remittances and diaspora increasingly powerful political and economic forces, the material and imagined circulation of people, ideas and aspirations has to be reimagined as manifestly global. Moreover, as Lamin's story indicates, these interconnections operate along multiple vectors which themselves overlap, bringing in forms of global desire and aspiration stemming from many different domains. In his narrative, sport,

development, religion and social networks intermingled to create a complex cocktail of desire which becomes hard to translate into a crude development language based on outcomes and impacts. Young Gambians are also constantly repositioning themselves within the global order, constantly adjusting their viewpoints in line with continually changing aspirations and circumstances. Even as their relationships with their friends and families around them threaten to destabilise, they are finding new vocabularies and modalities through which they can express their frustrations, dilemmas and feelings, and in doing so find ways forward that bring new meanings to their actions. Only through a deeper understanding of how YMCAs, and transnational NGOs like them, populate the imaginative landscape of mobility, increasingly dominated by polarised discourses of freedom and interdiction, can the intimate interconnectedness of their emergent life-worlds be understood.

## **5 Conclusion and recommendations**

The universality agenda clearly offers exciting new opportunities for development programmes targeting young people's employment. Both youth and employment are currently perceived as universal categories, which need clearer analysis. This report has argued that these overarching and all-encompassing conceptual narratives threaten to sow disharmony between 'universal values' and 'universal applications' if left unexamined. By positing 'youth employment' as a considerable development object, policymakers may simply be recreating the reductive and ineffective mistakes of past interventions. As the report has shown, young people are already building futures for themselves, managing complex arrays of obligations, responsibilities and burdens in order to create security for themselves and their families. These deeply embedded portraits militate against narrow forms of transformation which compel young people to move from point A to point B, and as such, are doomed to partial or, quite often, complete failure. As discussed below, in order to more fully operationalise universality into the realm of youth employment, some changes could easily be incorporated into development policy and planning. This report therefore offers five key recommendations for moving forward with youth policy, or rather for starting a dialogue which will help policymakers and programmers craft more effective development interventions.

### **5.1 Interventions targeting employment need to be more fully cognisant of social relations, networks and complex youth identities**

As 'adaptive' entrepreneurs, young people are creating complex social, moral and political economies which need to be understood as complex, ambiguous and challenging. Mooting 'market inclusion' as a solution for these problems will offer limited relief, as young people weave, spatially and temporally, in and out of different markets, social domains and local and global settings. Using a comparative approach highlights the lack of content in many deployments of the youth category as a development object, and some of the dangerous implications of placing large groups of youth under one all-encompassing umbrella. This has a particular impact on young men who are burdened with the transformation of their nations, but who are simultaneously subject to an array of prejudicial labels which helps feed the 'transforming' development industry. Whether this is 'unproductive', 'disruptive' or 'dangerous', the commonality between both contexts is clear: the polarising categorisation of young people is so heavily freighted with cultural meaning and significance, it becomes a form of violence itself and helps reinforce and reproduce inequality and division rather than ameliorating them.

### **5.2 Understand local aspirations and livelihoods as part of both global markets and global processes of inclusion and exclusion**

It is also essential to take into account the rapidly evolving and pluralised meanings placed on work and employment in different contexts, creating further discrepancies between policies and practice. As young people reinvent the value of work they are also reinventing their communities and the local moral economy in which employment programmes intervene. Coupled to this is the wholesale disregard by donors and global development agencies for the complex intersections of gender, class, ethnicity and caste in the everyday lives of young people as well as more clearly linked forms of economic navigation with social, cultural and political navigations (Oosterom *et al.* 2016). As this report has demonstrated, comparing individual case studies rooted in local contexts can help track these 'navigations' within and through modes of universality such as global morality, global economy, global citizenship and global rights discourse; such an examination can, in turn, build a picture of how the 'global' is

pieced together through the local. Only through an analysis that connects the circulation of employment with the provision of jobs into local lives and markets as they make and remake the global economy can new types of theoretical analysis asking what it means to be a 'global' worker and 'global' citizen.

### **5.3 Embed employment programmes in wider and fairer schemes of inclusion and participation**

In terms of employment more broadly, the global North is also learning from its Southern counterparts, with a creeping and more visibly accepted informalisation of the workplace that mirrors the normative 'informalisation' of employment and state established across the global South (Meagher 2010). While this creates many opportunities for young people to aspire to, it also creates further opportunities for exploitation and exclusion (Dolan and Rajak 2016). In their analysis of youth transitions in sub-Saharan Africa, Fox and Thomas (2016) have traced how governments are so focused on delivering youth employment programmes they are failing to help young people already engaged in income-generating activities, warning: 'Because they have not given youth a voice, they have not heard youth's call for progressive change in values, norms and mindsets as well as for better economic opportunities' (2016: 13). However, the rapid political mobilisation of youth across the globe has demonstrated a renewed potential for transnational forms of solidarity, community and activism that can genuinely empower young people to overturn injustice and inequality on a global scale. Development interventions should build on this new sentiment, offering a platform for a new articulation of workers' rights that contravenes the growing economic reality of deprivation and disenchantment.

### **5.4 Work towards the co-production of development programming and knowledge between North and South on the basis of equal participation and mutual learning**

Embedded in this deeper understanding of youth is a deeper understanding of the circulation of ideas of youth through employment and development programming. This connects with a broader trend in the development literature which calls for the radical possibility of 'reversing', which goes beyond mere 'policy transfer' to create spaces and opportunities for genuine mutual transformative action (see Chambers 1988; Gaventa 2002). As David Lewis (2014) has discussed, international development workers in the South and third-sector workers in the global North have always remained as discrete communities, only occasionally sharing practices and experiences. However, as a result of the changing global hierarchy and more established lines of communication, this situation is rapidly changing, with groups of workers looking towards successful development models in both North and South (2014: 1,148). As these interconnections and crossovers grow more profound, both practitioners and researchers need to break through the invisible walls of knowledge and experience to create moments of 'shared learning' and 'co-production' (Lewis 2012: 1,149; cf. Gaventa 2002).

### **5.5 Involve young people in cross-cultural exchanges of knowledge, personnel and ideas to generate new forms of knowledge and understanding**

Finally, youth are at the forefront of social change yet rarely recognised as social, community and political leaders (Checkoway 2011). Therefore the acceleration of youth inclusion needs to involve greater capacity for 'mutual learning' directly built into the habitually impenetrable bureaucratic mechanisms of development programming, especially when working with young people acutely aware of their positioning in the global world order. As Constantine, Bloom and Shankland (2016) have recently shown, learning from South–South initiatives can show



how innovative 'mutual learning frameworks' can be adapted for other development contexts. They conclude that 'It is important to respect the diversity in experiences of development that may be relevant in different contexts, avoiding the imposition of hierarchies of knowledge by ensuring that appropriate methodologies are used to overcome barriers to learning and to build intercultural communication' (2016: 13). This type of operationalised reversal can point towards ways of understanding universality as negotiable and processual, part of an ongoing dialogue within the development industry itself. It can also shed light on exactly how universality might be effected in practice, through systems and roadmaps that destabilise the taken-for-granted assumptions that dominate development discourse, truly ensuring that no one gets left behind by the UN's bold new vision.

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