

Policy Briefing

Are Young People in Rural Sub-Saharan Africa Caught in Waithood?

The idea that large numbers of young people in sub-Saharan Africa are stuck in waithood – trapped between childhood and adulthood – dominates international development policy discourse. The belief is that because there are no jobs, young people cannot attain social markers of adulthood. Waithood has proved itself to be a very attractive way to frame debates and promote youth employment interventions. But research challenges two aspects of the waithood story: that young people are inactive; and that work is the only route into adulthood. Caution and nuance are required to prevent waithood becoming another catchy term that does little to improve policy.

Key messages

- In recent years, the notion of waithood has been integrated into policy discourse in relation to youth in sub-Saharan Africa.
- The key propositions are that most African young people are stuck in waithood because they cannot enter the labour market, which is assumed to be necessary for them to attain social markers of adulthood.
- In policy discourse, the term waithood is often reduced to meaning ‘sitting around doing nothing’.
- Evidence challenges this overly simplistic waithood story. In rural areas of sub-Saharan Africa, sitting around is simply not an option. Also, there are multiple ways to attain social markers of adulthood, of which engagement in the labour market is only one.
- Nuancing the narrative around waithood would align policy with the realities of youth engagement in the rural economy, and young people’s transitions and pathways to adulthood.

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Waithood – a term reduced to lack of work and inactivity

Over the past decade the notion of waithood has become integral to policy discourse in relation to youth in sub-Saharan Africa. The term started to gain popularity after anthropologist Alcinda Honwana described it as:

a prolonged and uncertain stage between childhood and adulthood that is characterized by their inability to enter the labour market and attain the social markers of adulthood... Waithood is a neither-here-nor-there position in which young people are expected to be independent from their parents but are not yet recognised as social adults. No longer a brief transitional stage in the life-course, waithood is becoming a permanent condition.

The suggestion is that waithood arises because of lack of opportunities for young people to enter the labour market. In other words, labour market activity is the primary pathway to adulthood. And if young people are not able to work, they cannot gain social markers of adulthood, such as leaving home, getting married, having children and contributing to community life.

In articulating the story of waithood in sub-Saharan Africa, Honwana makes it clear that being in waithood **is not** synonymous with doing nothing. Indeed, she suggests that young people in waithood are 'creatively harnessing all the means at their disposal to manage their lives'. Despite this, the idea that many young people are inactive, with their lives on hold, has become closely associated with the discussion of waithood. For some commentators, this inactivity makes young men, in particular, vulnerable to



Young people attain social markers of adulthood without engaging in the labour market.

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engagement in antisocial behaviour and to radicalisation.

Honwana makes the bold claim that 'the majority of young Africans today live in waithood'. But does this story of generalised waithood ring true for young women and men in rural sub-Saharan Africa?

Too busy to wait

Between 2017 and 2020, a consortium led by the Institute of Development Studies (IDS), with funding from the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), undertook research on young people's engagement with the rural economy in sub-Saharan Africa. The research included analysis of nationally representative household surveys from Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Niger, Nigeria, Tanzania, Uganda and Zambia. In addition, qualitative fieldwork was conducted in Côte d'Ivoire, Ethiopia, Nigeria and Uganda. Across a total of 16 sites, the qualitative work included 64 group discussions, 416 individual interviews with young people (aged 15–33) and 92 interviews with adults.

Our research in 16 rural sites in four countries challenges the waithood story in two important ways. The first is that any suggestion that large numbers of rural youth are simply waiting or inactive is clearly misplaced. We found young people in all sites to be engaged in a wide variety of farm and non-farm economic activities – paid and unpaid – as well as studying, working in the home, caring for children and elders, and undertaking religious and community activities.

Most young people work hard doing a variety of productive and caring activities. However, it is certainly true that in most rural areas there is a dearth of formal jobs, and most of the opportunities for self-employment and informal wage work are a long way from anything approaching decent work. Many young people do not feel respected for the work they undertake to support themselves and their families.

The second challenge arises from the fact that young people attain social markers of

adulthood without engaging in the labour market. For example, many young women and men profess a strong commitment to fulfilling society's expectations of what it means to be a good daughter or son. And in following through on this commitment they gain respect in the community by caring for younger siblings, parents or elders.

Marriage is an important marker of adulthood and it is clear that a lack of resources stops some young people from marrying. However, even outside of formal marriage, young women bear children and move out of the natal home, which are also important markers of adulthood that some attain independent of their engagement with the labour market.

While being an active citizen and playing a role in the community are other dimensions of adulthood, few of our respondents were actively engaged in formal politics. Most young people see older generations dominating the existing channels to influence what matters in their lives.

Rural, more marginalised populations are generally far removed from decision-making and poorly represented. But an additional hurdle for young people is that their age further limits their opportunities to make their voices heard. This challenge is more profound for young women due to patriarchal norms. Besides the few who aspire to become 'politicians', the feeling is that rural people overall do not enjoy full and substantive citizenship, independent of whether or how they engage with the labour market.

Rethinking the rush to waithood

It is well known that catchy terms and simple but compelling narratives can crystallise debates and drive policy in particular directions. There is a strong argument that this is exactly what is happening as the notion of waithood is increasingly integrated into policy discourse around youth in rural Africa. The popularity of the term has led to its reduction to 'waiting for jobs', and work as the only avenue to adulthood.



Improve policy coherence by prioritising youth participation as much as youth employment.

This is far too simplistic. It has led to policy responses that prioritise youth employment over youth participation in decision-making, overlooking other aspirations young people may have, such as gaining technical skills and qualifications. Especially for rural areas, the question of what 'decent' work is and how it can be promoted, is largely absent from policy debates around rural youth.

The problem is that a large gap exists between much of what is asserted about waithood on the one hand, and the lives and livelihoods of many young women and men in rural sub-Saharan Africa on the other. This gap means that waithood-inspired policy and interventions are unlikely to be either effective or efficient in benefitting young people.

Waithood is not about waiting, but active negotiation and claim-making. Young people are constantly negotiating different aspects of their lives, from educational and work opportunities to marriage and other social relationships, social norms and expectations. Indeed, they are all looking for (better) work opportunities and economic activities that can increase their earnings. Yet they are also looking for more social recognition and respect for whatever it is they are doing, while seeking to enhance their social standing in other ways than through work. If waithood is understood as claim-making, then this opens up the debate about supporting youth to fulfil their aspirations to the promotion of active citizenship, and social and political participation.

Policy recommendations

The focus on rural youth in sub-Saharan Africa is likely to remain strong over the coming years. In the light of important tensions between elements of the waithood narrative and the lives of many rural young people, policymakers, youth advocates and development practitioners should:

- Stop repeating the idea young people are ‘waiting’ and recognise the many economic and other activities they are involved in.
 - Recognise that there are multiple ways young people can attain the social markers of adulthood, and that engagement in the labour market, while clearly important, is only one of them.
- Improve policy coherence by prioritising youth participation as much as youth employment.
 - Acknowledge that, as well as the significant influence of location and social factors such as gender, age and ethnicity on who can access economic and other opportunities, local and national politics play important roles.
 - Explore alternative ways of framing problems, which highlight the lack of formal and decent employment opportunities in rural areas (as opposed to a general lack of labour market engagement); the hard work that many young people invest in building livelihoods; and the hazards they face in doing so. ■

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Further reading

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