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RESEARCH ARTICLE (PEER REVIEWED)

Eternal Urban Youth? Waithood and Agency in Ethiopian and South African Settlements

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Abstract

It is often reported that young people in Africa, the Middle East and North African regions are stuck in situations of 'waithood', unable to progress to full adulthood. Utilising a series of innovative research methodologies that included life history interviews, surveys, media training and qualitative interviews, the research project's aim was the co-production of data, in order to delve into the housing and work nexus in two non-central locations in Ethiopia and South Africa. The variety of mixed methods that were used yielded a depth of engagement and allowed the researchers to deepen and nuance ideas of waithood and stuckness. The rich and varied data showed how young people move through moments of stuckness and moments of movement, and that some movement is possible even when faced with difficult and sometimes overwhelming structural challenges. It also demonstrated how co-produced research can assist young people in moving forward and countering the experience of stuckness and waithood.

Keywords

Urban Youth; Waithood; Marginal Urbanism; Hawassa; Ekangala; Hustling

Introduction: Being stuck

It was a Saturday morning in May and the Wits University project team was expecting 13 young people from Ekangala, north of Pretoria (South Africa), to arrive by bus to continue their research methods training. The previous week, 15 young people aged between 18 and 35 had come to the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg and begun their training as 'youth representatives' (YRs), learning how to conduct surveys and contributing to co-producing the research instrument that they would use. However, as the project team, we were called by them, saying that they were stuck in Ekangala, held hostage by local taxi drivers who were demanding that we, as the university research team, pay R15,000 (equivalent of £750) to the Ekangala Taxi Association to release our youth representatives and the bus driver and pay for a 'permit'. The taxi drivers stated that we had not asked for permission to use a bus to transfer students and that they should have been consulted and paid a fee to transport the Yrs in *their* territory. The police were called, but could not help, and so for many hours the youth representatives were stuck on a patch of ground just outside their hometown of Ekangala, unable to move, while the university team, the taxi drivers and the owners of the bus negotiated their release and the eventual release of the driver and the bus. In the end, money was paid by the university team to the taxi drivers to take the Yrs home (even though they objected and wanted to walk home) and by the bus company to the taxi association to release the bus driver. The event was an inconvenience for the project in terms of time, money and the research program, but also a disappointment for the Yrs who had looked forward to their training and a day out in Johannesburg. More than that, however, the event was a microcosm of, and metaphor for, the many forces that shape young people's lives in this area. Stuck often at the mercy of wider forces, with other people making decisions for them, their voices remain unheard.

This form of what [Honwana (2014](#), p. 28) calls 'waithood' (as opposed to adulthood) is common across Africa as young people are unable to climb the next step in life, as they remain unemployed and so are dependent on family members, friends or the state. Honwana describes the situation in which, 'after they leave school with few skills, they are unable to obtain work and become independent, to build, buy or rent a house for themselves, support their relatives, get married, establish families and gain social recognition as adults'. Thus, despite chronological age, young people are not socially recognised, nor recognise themselves, as adults, but remain in limbo awaiting attainment of adulthood ([Dhillon & Jousef 2009](#); [Honwana 2014](#); [Salehi-Isfahani & Dhillon 2008](#); [Singerman 2007](#)).

However, this article speaks back into the literature and demonstrates that despite difficult socio-economic conditions, lack of formal jobs and often lack of access to housing, waithood is not an absolute state and young people 'hustle' ([Thieme 2018](#)), improvise ([Finn 2018](#)) and 'make do' ([Jauregui 2014](#)) in a variety of ways. Through getting married, having children, finding some kind of livelihood strategy or moving out of home, young people are not completely stuck, but nor are they able to transition to adulthood. Thus, below we demonstrate the tangible ways in which young people challenge their 'stuckness' and adds complexity and uance to the ways in which waithood is understood in the literature. Research shows that it is not all or nothing, nor are their challenges to waithood restricted to livelihood strategies, but are more varied and complex. By examining these moments of countering stuckness, young people's agency and ability can be highlighted so that they are not perceived merely as passive recipients of the status quo. They actively respond to and resist the situations in which they find themselves and fight back, and these qualities of grit and determination are importantly explored below.

Given the prevalence of this phenomenon in Africa and the Global South at large, waithood is an important dimension of young people's lives that needs to be investigated and analysed. Often researched

through qualitative interviews (cf. Finn & Oldfield, 2015; Honwana 2014a), we decided to put youth at the centre of the method, building on Cuzzocrea's (2019) emphasis on narrative and agency. Sensitive to the disempowerment that many young people face, we wanted to ensure that young people felt empowered and heard through the research, and that they became a part of the research process. As such, the team constructed a research process that was consciously intended to create a mixed-method approach with strong elements of co-production and mutual learning (Porter 2016). In many ways, this approach of life history interviews, media training, numerous online and face-to-face platforms and surveys worked even better than we had hoped for, and allowed for profound insights into the way that waiting works and gave us evidence to nuance and elaborate on the notion of 'waithood' even further. This article thus offers an account of the methods that were used and demonstrates the utility of a mixed-method approach that puts young people at the centre. We argue that such an engaged account of young people's daily lives provides important nuance and offers a finer gradation of the dynamics of waithood than has been offered in much of the literature.

The research took place in two sites: Hawassa in Ethiopia and Ekangala in South Africa, both of which experience high youth unemployment but offer useful and fascinating contrasts. In 2016, Ethiopia invested in Africa's largest state-sponsored industrial complex, in Hawassa, creating new employment for youth, often female migrants. Yet low wages and scarce housing prohibit sustainable futures. In South Africa, wavering historic investment in greater Bronkhorstspruit, a former industrial decentralisation site under apartheid, has contributed to the high youth unemployment. Successful provision of state housing means some youth are housed through beneficiary family members, yet often households, and youth particularly, cannot afford living costs. However, youth faced with this wicked conundrum often respond creatively, managing these near-impossible conditions, with differing outcomes.

Following is a short examination of existing literature on 'waiting' and the nexus between youth and the worlds of work and income generation. The focus then moves to the methodology that was used in the study and describes some of the findings, arguing that our intense multi-method approach led to our being able to draw deeper conclusions about waiting. The method also allowed the researchers to gain insights from the two studies, and to demonstrate that, although the youth are often 'trapped' or stuck, being trapped is not a binary, but rather a spectrum, as moments of waiting are interspersed with moments of moving forward. This is largely because young people do not lack agency and often find small ways to push towards adulthood, hustling, forging ahead and making inroads so that their status and their categorisation as youth is complexified and blurred.

Dissecting 'waithood'

Much of the literature around African youth refers to the idea of *waithood*, '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 seen as a liminal state in which young people are unable to fully become adults, but neither are they children. The term has been used to describe 'a generation in waiting', or a situation of 'involuntary waithood' or 'wait adulthood' (Dhillon 2008; Dhillon & Jousef 2009; Honwana 2014; Salehi-Isfahani 2008; Singerman 2007). Sommers (2012) refers to it as being stuck and a situation in which young people are trapped in 'a state of permanent ambiguity', largely unable to attain 'the cultural prerequisites for adulthood'. These might include owning a house, getting married or being able to support oneself financially (Sommers 2012, p. 3). Unfortunately for many people, it is not just a passing phase but can last for decades, and Honwana (2014) argues that, in some parts of the world, it is replacing adulthood entirely.

There is some sense that the main components of adulthood are constituted by economic independence, family formation and political citizenship, as well as overall wellbeing (Kurtenbach 2012a, p. 6). Here, wellbeing is seen as encompassing protection from poverty, violence, exploitation and conflict (Larsen 2009,

p. 10). In the World Bank's conceptualisation, regarding the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) regions, housing replaces political citizenship (Barakat et al. 2010, p. 39), largely because owning a house is the precursor to other 'adult' milestones, such as getting married and having children. Given the importance of home ownership as a signifier of adulthood, this is an important revision when considering young people's journeys in many African cities. However, these factors do not operate in isolation and '[t]he 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' (Strachan 2015, p. 2).

Waithood is, however, not conceptualised as passive, but often as an active 'making do' and 'getting by' (Jeffrey 2010), containing moments of experimentation, innovation and improvisation to cope with daily life. It highlights young people's agency and their ability to traverse the difficulties and challenges of daily life. Waithood is more than a tired acceptance of social and economic marginalisation. Finn and Oldfield (2015, p. 38) note that waithood is not 'empty time', but an opportunity to build social networks, learn new business strategies, and imagine and plan a different future'. It pushes what Vigh (2009) sees as a 'tenacious struggle', filled with action and challenging the status quo. Thieme (2013) views this as part of the 'hustle economy' using Mathare, Kenya, where young people are in a state of 'protracted liminality', pushing young men to engage in activities in the informal waste economy. It is in these margins that young people shape niches to provide livelihoods. Finn and Oldfield (2015) note the political significance of hustling and point out that Thieme (2013, p. 390) sees 'The hustle [as] an implicit critique of the state's failings, while ceasing to expect anything from or even "see it".' In this conceptualisation, young people effectively carve out lives that are far removed from the state, unless this is in moments of conflict and contestation. Finn and Oldfield (2015) add to the active notion of 'getting by' or hustling, with the idea of 'straining'. 'Straining … captures the difficulty of the improvisational work that these men undertake in order to eke out a living to support themselves and their families. In other words, straining refers to a type of work that is innovative and opportunistic, but also takes a toll on the people performing it' (Finn & Oldfield 2015, p. 39).

Thus, although it is difficult to say what constitutes adulthood, it does become clear that young people are often trapped in situations of 'not adulthood, unable to move from the positionality of child, dependent on parents or older figures, and unable to start or having to delay their own families or households, or progress professionally'. It may also limit the positions that they can take up within their communities. As a consequence, young people's dreams, hopes and aspirations are often deferred until some unknowable point in the future. But this does not mean that there are no steps towards adulthood, or that it is a blanket form of waiting; some progress may be made in one dimension but not in another. It is thus important to acknowledge where there is growth and dynamism and where people are 'stuck', so that 'waithood' isn't presented as a uniformly blanketing weight that does not allow any movement. Furthermore, much of the literature exploring the dimensions of adulthood are quite northern-centric. Within the Global South, children and young people, of whatever age, often remain firmly ensconced in financial and caring relationships with their families throughout their lives. There is, as Cuervo and Miranda (2019, p. 192) write, a '… blurring [of] boundaries of childhood-youth-adulthood embedded in these labouring and caring practices in the Global South …'. This has also been an observation by the South African project team as many of the YRs live in a context characterised by informality and precarity.

Following a methodological discussion, the subsequent sections unpack the questions of 'waiting' and 'stuckness', and demonstrate how they are not uniformly experienced; that they are uneven, with moments of waiting and moments of moving forward. The empirical work reveals that young people find themselves being highly dependent on friends and family members, unable to attain financial independence, but that does not mean that they are idle. Many of the respondents 'hustled' and had a number of different streams of income, and were constantly on the look out for opportunities. These small steps towards independence

and self-reliance demonstrate that 'waithood' is not absolute, and that, despite significant structural and economic challenges, young people do not wait passively for the moment of adulthood to arrive.

Collaborating and co-producing in Hawassa and Ekangala

The work that this article is based on comes from two case study sites, one in Hawassa, Ethiopia (Figure 1), and the other in Ekangala, South Africa (Figure 2). To offer some background: Hawassa is a rapidly growing city, 270 kilometres south of Addis Ababa. It is home to over half a million people living in the centre and the surrounding semi-rural *kebeles*. In contrast, Ekangala, in South Africa, is part of what were called *Bantustans*, or old homeland areas. It is close to the town of Bronkhorstspruit and just over a hundred kilometres from the capital city of Pretoria/Tshwane. Ekangala has a small population of under 50,000 people, who reside in a series of townships scattered throughout the area. An industrial park was established in the mid-1980s, but was not successful and most of the businesses have deserted the area. There have, however, been large-scale state infrastructure investments, mostly in the form of state-subsidised housing. Working across these sites was intentional. Hawassa offered a site of state intervention in the economy with the intention of creating jobs and opportunities for young people. Ekangala offered a counter point whereby the state intervened significantly in the housing market but left the economy largely alone. As such, these two cases offered a contrast with each other, and allowed the researchers to use different points of focus when looking at the same nexus of youth, housing and employment.
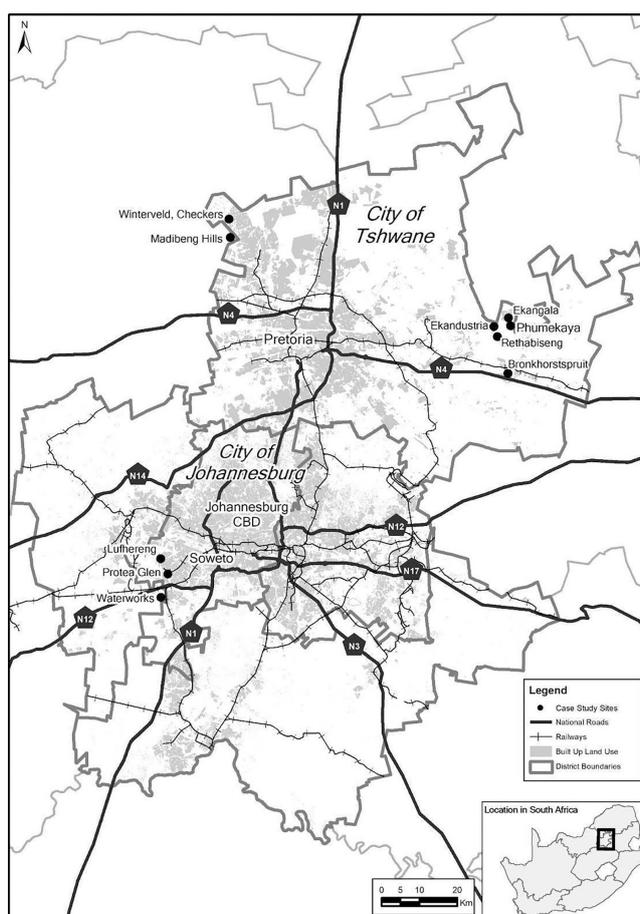

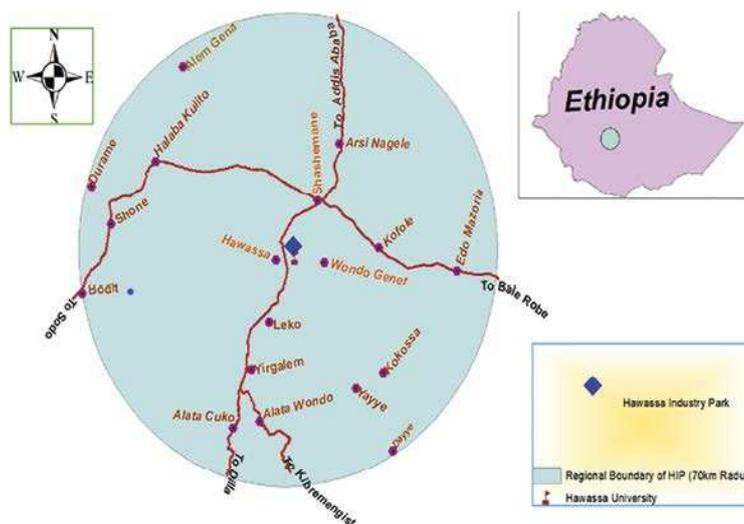Figure 1.   Location map of Ekangala

Figure 2.   Location map of Hawassa

As already mentioned, the project used a mixed methods approach – outlined below – to examine the youth work/housing nexus and the everyday experiences of youth in both cities. The project trained 28 youth representatives to undertake surveys with their peers and matched this with intensive life history interviews (LHIs) around the youth representatives' own experiences. The principle of collaboration underpinned the study from its conception, with the research team recognising the limitations of research which privileged the researchers' agenda. This was particularly important given the stated focus on youth experiences of the work/housing nexus, and the team were adamant that young people needed to articulate what the key research agenda should be. We don't claim to have followed an orthodox 'co-production approach' in our project (see Bell & Pahl 2018), although many of our tactics do fall under this label. Our project wasn't 'fully co-produced', for example primary research aims and objectives were not established in collaboration with our youth participants, but rather through project proposal writing long in advance of their recruitment. We emphasise below the collaborative principles of our methodology and, where relevant, we tease out co-produced elements.

Selecting Youth Representatives (YRs)

Inspired by the work and reflections of Porter (2016) on the benefits of collaborative peerresearch, the project placed meaningful collaboration at the heart of its approach and specifically limited the number of research participants in order to facilitate a deeper engagement. Rather than obtain extensive data from numerous young people, we opted instead for a smaller scale intensive study with fewer participants, more suited to collaboration at key moments in the project cycle. The youth participants were involved in the development and evolution of the research instruments (detailed below) as well as in engagement and interpretation of the findings. This meant that there was a long-term engagement with the youth in both contexts that persisted beyond the conventional boundaries of research.

To facilitate meaningful collaboration, in both contexts, a suitable Research Manager was hired to engage directly with the youth. They were supported by Research Assistants, all of whom were responsible for identifying and helping to select the Youth Representatives (YRs). The YRs were selected based on fitting into the age parameters (18–35) as well as living within the confines of Ekangala and Hawassa, and living in different types of accommodation. Attention was paid to ensuring that there was a geographical spread within these settlements and a gender balance, a spread of different household and family configurations

(married versus not married; with and without children), encapsulating the experiences of employed and unemployed youth. Not all of the YRs that started the project in South Africa completed the full course. Some had to drop out as they had work commitments that they could not afford to risk, or take time off from to work on the project.

There were some important differences between the youth that were selected for the project in the two countries. In Hawassa, all 15 youth representatives who worked on the project and were respondents were in their 20s and all had finished high school. Most had some form of tertiary qualification. Several of the respondents had migrated to Hawassa for study or seeking work, or family migration when younger. There were, however, stark disconnections between the educational levels achieved and their ability to find employment, with very few employed in their particular fields. Interestingly, many of the respondents noted that they had little choice in what they studied and were often directed by older family members or by the state. In the latter case, the Ethiopian government allocates people to specific courses and degrees and they have little say in the choice. In addition, many people have multiple degrees or qualifications in numerous disciplines in the hope of becoming more marketable. In Ekangala, the 13 people selected as YRs were a bit older, many in their late 20s and 30s. A number of them had not finished high school and none had any form of post high school qualifications. Most of the respondents had grown up in Ekangala or had spent a significant amount of time there in their childhood and adolescence. A number of the respondents had children and many were unmarried or had long-term partnerships.

All of the YRs were included in our hybrid subject/researcher approach. Following Porter (2016), the project aimed to extend and overcome the usual relegation of participants as mere subjects, and to offer training, skills development and payment as an explicit outcome of the study. It sought to utilise young people's knowledge of their own neighbourhoods and peers to determine the research focus, and to use their communication skills to advance an understanding of the wider youth housing/work nexus. The extent of engagement and the 'repeat' nature of interaction with our youth representatives (through the hybrid approach) facilitated a more meaningful and deeper understanding of their individual lives. Youth were thus the 'subject' of the research in the sense that they were to be interviewed, and their life histories would form a core component of the project's data pool and shape media outputs developed by youth later in the project. They were also active researchers, surveying up to 15 other youths and delivering the surveys to the team for analysis.

Capacitating, Centering and Training YRs

To support this hybrid approach and to facilitate co-production, after the youth were selected, they were invited to training sessions where they were introduced to the projects, sensitised to interview techniques and then given the draft survey instrument to workshop. Together, the YRs went through the draft survey, and tested the questions for comprehensibility, translatability, and to see if they just made sense and what may have been left out. After this, the inputs from each group were integrated into the questionnaire. At the second session (delayed quite substantially in the South African case due to the issues described in the opening section), the re-jigged questionnaire was once again tested in small groups and the YRs had an opportunity to work through the research instrument and make any final changes. The instrument was then finalised (this was done by testing the instrument on 25 respondents in Hawassa, and some of the questions were rewritten to avoid observed ambiguity in meanings) and the YRs were trained in how to conduct research. The YRs were also given mobile phone data for the period June 2021–June 2022, to assist with communication and to allow them to conduct interviews. The research managers in both contexts also set up whatsapp and telegram groups for the teams, on which official and social communication took place (see Figure 3). The whatsapp and telegram groups were important not only for communicating key pieces of information on the project, but also because they became sites of virtual friendships, camaraderie and

Figure 3.   Social interaction on the whatsapp and telegram platforms

mutual support. It was largely through having these small intimate groups online and offline that established the social relationships and coherence so important for the project. It also allowed the Research Managers to build a high degree of intimacy with the YRs and, in doing so, gain deeper insight into their lives.

In April and May 2022, two further processes were undertaken: the first was the development of a series of media outputs with the YRs; and the second was when the YRs, the research teams, and selected key informants and key figures, such as local government officials and community leaders, were invited to a feedback session to test the findings and to think through the way forward. The media outputs were workshopped with the YRs, and in the case of Hawassa mostly consisted of YRs developing podcasts to talk about their life histories and researchers using local radio stations to discuss the project's findings. In Ekangala, a media consultancy was contracted to work with the YRs to develop their media outputs. These included a song, spoken word poetry, a podcast, and written and illustrated life histories. At the time of writing they had not been made public, but some of the material was presented at the final workshops, discussed below.

In Hawassa, the final workshop took place over two days: on the first day the YRs, field workers and co-Investigators were presented with and reviewed the project's preliminary findings (including the preliminary results from SA), and generated recommendations to the policy makers. The policy recommendations of the YRs were systematically structured and organised so that they could be presented to the stakeholders by the next day. On the second day, key stakeholders joined the workshop. They included officials from the mayor's office and regional bureaus, elders, kebele/local administrators, and delegates from NGOs and CBOs. The stakeholders were presented with the same materials as those offered on the previous day. Some of the media outputs and the recommendations of the YRs by their representative, who was described by the Research Manager as 'bold and energetic', were followed by reflections and deliberations by all attendees. The workshop in Ekangala followed a similar format, but also included a presentation from a local youth accelerator, Harambee, and featured more of the YRs media outputs. Although the YRs were enthusiastic and well-prepared, none of the invited officials from local government turned up, and only community workers from Ekangala arrived.

While the Ethiopian YRs were able to engage with more senior officials and express their dissatisfaction with the role of the government and their current conditions (something that the SA group could not do as the officials did not arrive), what became clear was how little was in their control, and although the YRs could make small changes, and there was energy and excitement and a sense of agency, making the YRs feel that they were moving forward, larger changes were beyond their control. Thus, although in these ways the project reflected their 'stuckness', in other ways the project served to facilitate connections and build relationships, making modest inroads into some of the isolation and disconnect typically experienced by youth in the area.

Researching side-by-side in Ethiopia and South Africa

Research across two very different contexts brings with it a host of challenges and exciting prospects. As there were some important similarities in the two contexts, the YRs and the team became very committed to the project and personal relationships developed between the YRs and the research manager and the research assistants/fieldworkers (who were slightly older, but still quite young black men and women). The South African project team had faced moments of sharing young people's struggles and some of the YRs had needed more 'support' than others. This had been offered through an extended engagement with the YR in need. The SA context was difficult in this regard as, at times, the team had to monitor a YR who was not coping and help them through their daily struggles with sensitivity and kindness. The Ekangala YRs operated as a team (see Box 1) and it was their enthusiasm and willingness to get the job done that contributed to the overall success of the project. There was also a great deal of reciprocation from the

Research Manager and research assistants, who also used the whatsapp platform (see Figure 4) to share information about prospective jobs and training that the youth could access.

Despite the very similar approach taken by the two teams in the two countries, local context and academic traditions mattered and differed quite substantially, as did approaches and networks. In both contexts, researchers built on their existing network. In Hawassa this meant engaging with graduates for the most part, since many of the YRs were known to the researchers through their studies at the University of Hawassa. It also meant that the sample was slightly skewed in favour of graduates rather than low income workers, for example at the Hawassa Industrial Park, who had been the subjects of other studies in Hawassa (Mains & Mulat 2021). The use of graduates also meant that there were fewer issues around literacy and capturing data than in the Ekangala case. Ekangala's respondents were chosen based on previous work that two of the team members had undertaken for a research project on urban peripheries and so used previous networks to gain access to youth for the current project. The Hawassa Co-Is had a stronger policy focus as they worked mostly in the policy arena. In addition, there is a strong tradition of positivist and quantitative research in Ethiopia, which was the training and background of many of the researchers from the Hawassa team. The South African team comprised social scientists (planners and geographers) whose emphasis was on qualitative work. Thus, the surveys undertaken in the two contexts had a different 'flavour'despite the teams using the same base document. This was due to the backgrounds of both the research teams as well as the YRs, and the specificities of language, history and context. As such, the research, although comparable and steps being taken to ensure similar methods were used in both contexts, it was not exactly the same process and should be viewed more as research that took place side-by-side rather than replicating exactly the same steps in both countries.

Box 1.   Field notes from Research Manager

Survey material was delivered to site on 13 October 2021. We decided that the drop off point would be Barcelos [a local restaurant]in Bronkhorstspruit as this is the workplace of YR-T, one of the YRs. A delivery of this nature required some technical planning on our part as a project team because we had to ensure that the right number of surveys was dropped off on site and we realised that the delivery could not be done overnight as it was a pretty big one.

The YR really exceeded my expectations when they worked as a team as YR-I volunteered to collect the material on his way home from work for the other YR because they had complained about transport costs being an issue- if they were to collect from YR-T's workplace. YR-T also lives far from the other YR as she is the only participant from Zithobeni which requires a taxi ride out from the other areas.

YR-I lives in Rethabiseng so he was able to drop the documents off for the YR from Ekangala in that area and leave the Dark City documents with YR-V's sister who lives in Rethabiseng. This type of team work has been beautiful to observe because this group, despite not everyone initially knowing each other, has grown very close since the start of the project.

Working, waiting and income generating in the two sites

The following section investigates the intricate dynamics of waiting from different vantage points of what conventionally constitutes adulthood, including economic independence, family formation and well-being, all seen as encompassing protection from poverty, violence, exploitation and conflict. It demonstrates two
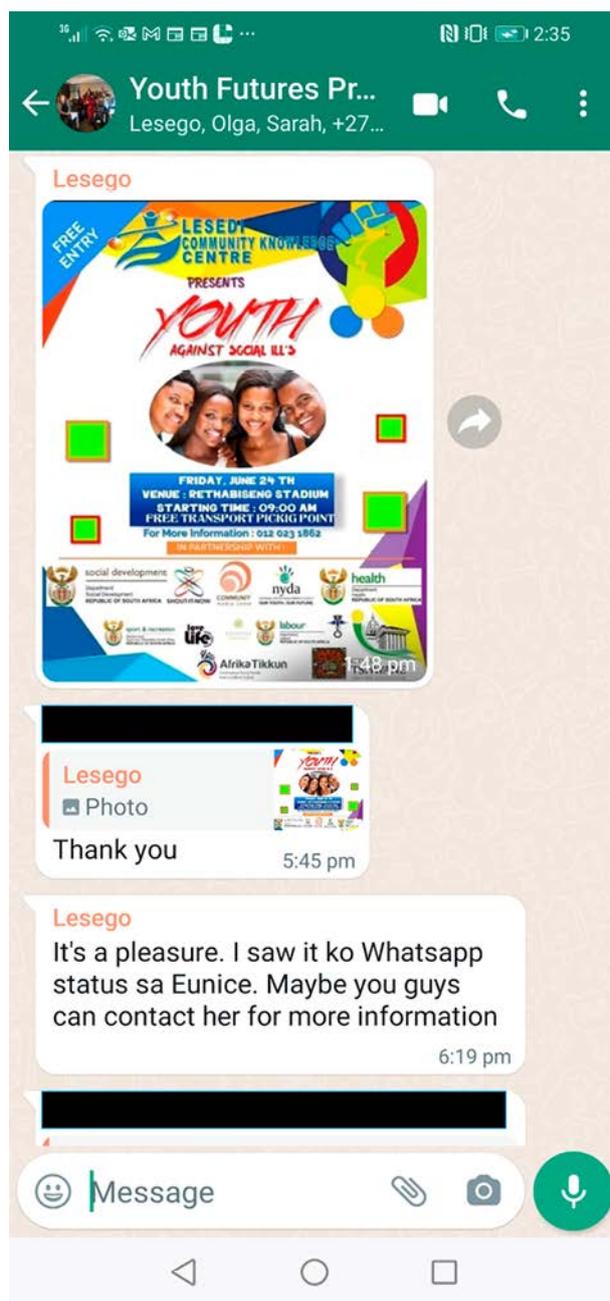
Figure 4.   Sharing info on the whatsapp platform

things. First, from a methodological angle, the utility of our mixed-methods approach shows how constant engagement develops relationships of intimacy that allows confidences to be shared. In addition, the mixed methods approach and media training were important in gaining a range of insights into the lives of youth in the two sites. Second, on an empirical level, it revealed the unevenness of being stuck and how youth can experience some aspects of waithood and not others, but it can mean that their dreams and aspirations have to wait for many years. It also shows the difference that context, cultural settings and structural issues can make in young people's ability to move out of 'waithood' or be forced back into situations of stuckness?

Poverty, dependence and well-being

As mentioned previously, the team utilised a mixed-method approach that included consistent engagement over a long period of time, and generated in-depth responses to the questions that the researchers asked, as well as responses to specific prompts over whatsapp and telegram. These provided photographs, messages and voicenotes, which helped the research team to gain some insights into the daily experiences of the YRs. This, combined with the surveys that the YRs conducted, provided some statistical sampling of the wider communities in which the YRs lived, which was used as a baseline for the wider project research. The life-history interviews and the consistent engagement with the YRs meant that the research team was able to see that many of the young people who were interviewed experienced high levels of poverty and deprivation as a consequence of not being employed and having to generate their own income. The life history interviews (hereafter: LHIs) and the findings from the surveys that the YRs conducted in South Africa were able to show that the local conditions echoed the national situation where over 40 percent of adults were unemployed. Whilst the Hawassa YRs were better qualified, they too suffered from low employment rates, and many of them were still dependent on parents and other family members. The methods also showed the unevenness of waithood, with young people finding ways to push forward by getting married, having children, leaving home and 'hustling' (Thieme 2018) or straining to find income (Finn & Oldfield 2015). However, this happened in bits and pieces and frequently was not accompanied by other forms of independence, often keeping young people in situations of limbo as neither full adults nor children (Honwana 2014).

Through the LHIs, respondents described how family members provided 'what I need at home including food' (E1, Hawassa) and that even in cases where young people were married and living with their partners they were still dependent, as was the case for one young woman living in Hawassa, who said, 'For my expense, my mother also gives me some amount of money when she comes to Hawassa. If she does not come regularly she sends me via family members' (M1, Hawassa). Getting married or moving in with partners or moving out of home goes some way to moving young people forward and ensuring that they are not stuck in 'waithood'; however, when that is combined with parental or kinship support, it means a compromised sense of adulthood.

Through spending time with the YRs and forming relationships of trust, they were willing to describe how, no matter what, parents still took care of their children even if they could not physically be with them. In Ekangala, many YRs described how parents still assisted them, with a young woman noting that her father recognised her lack of income and so 'He [my father] takes out the money [from his savings], he doesn't want us to pay for anything because he says we don't make money'(P1, Ekangala). Through the interviews, conversations and survey it became clear that extended family and dependence on social grants were also very much in evidence for young people in Ekangala, with one young woman describing that 'the kids get a grant' and that 'electricity and food, my aunt buys that' (B1, Ekangala). The survey in Hawassa revealed that large numbers of young people are dependent on their friends for support when they are not earning an income.

The sense of dependence and poverty was felt acutely by the young people, who saw it as fundamentally dehumanising and as something that compromised their experience of life, their relationships and their sense of self. It is difficult to attain a sense of autonomy when dependent on the state or other people, even close family. During the media training exercise, one young woman eloquently described her sense of powerlessness and poverty by saying:

> We hate poverty so much because it is the worst enemy one can face. Poverty can make you someone you are not and can turn people into animals. Poverty can make one envy the life of another. It can build hatred, jealousy and selfishness in a person's heart. Poverty can make you a beggar. When you

are poor, you always have to compromise. You make friends because there is something to gain from them, you laugh even when your heart and stomach are empty [sic] (P1, Ekangala).

Other work elsewhere (Parker & Rubin 2018; Rubin and Parker, 2022) also demonstrates the connection between the idea of what it means to be a good parent, integral to which is the ability to provide for one's children. When chatting to the YRs and through the LHIs, it became clear that young people who cannot provide for their children do not feel like full adults, as the notion of parenting and adulthood are integrally linked. Young people thus take some steps forward in having children and becoming parents, but since they cannot always provide for their children on their own, it is a compromised move. It became clear during the various discussions that poverty affects not only young people's physical well-being (their lack of material things), but also their mental well-being as they feel compromised, disempowered and less than.

Figure 5.   Shared accommodation in Hawassa

Employment, unemployment and dreams deferred

Through discussions with young people at the various events, the LHIs and the surveys, it became clear that the financial and work situation in both contexts demonstrated some strong similarities, with chronic lack of jobs for well-educated people in Hawassa and for all residents in Ekangala. Most available jobs were labour intensive or unskilled. While there were far more jobs in Hawassa than in Ekangala, in both cases the jobs were hard to come by and respondents in both sites mentioned that social and political networks, along with the exchange of sexual favours in the case of Ekangala, were the only ways to secure employment.

In the LHIs and during the workshops, this situation elicited a great deal of anger and discontent. When work is secured, it is generally not very satisfying, and the pay is low and conditions poor, despite significant effort and hard work. This included work at the HIP. A few had managed to secure work in line with their qualifications, but they were the minority. In both contexts, youth struggled to find suitable jobs, but in the SA case there was less chance of any formal employment (though a few of the SA respondents did have jobs in the formal sector), and the statistics indicate that their possibility of ever being employed is quite low. As mentioned earlier, due to the sense of familiarity and confidence that the relationships had managed to generate, the YRs revealed their various strategies for gaining an income and the 'hustling' and making do that they undertake on a daily basis. In SA, while there are no grants to support youth directly, social grants such as pensions and child support are crucial for young people as indirect beneficiaries. The SA government introduced the Social Relief of Distress Grant during the Covid-19 pandemic, of which most of the youth in the country are recipients. However, it is a relatively small amount and it is unclear how long it will continue. These sources of income are not available to young people in Hawassa as Ethiopia does not have a social welfare system. Interestingly, in the Ekangala case, there are indications of a generational decline in employment (some older generation [parents] had employment but lost it) and very little formal employment for younger people.

As such, a degree of 'hustling' (various, often informal activities or short-term jobs to bring in income) was evident in both contexts, but more frequently in the SA situation. Many people have multiple streams of income, such as grants, piece work, short contracts and small businesses that help to bring in some money. The hustling and multiple strategies should be read as important agenic moments, as moments in which youth showed agency, in which young people are not simply waiting but are actively taking steps to move their lives forward. Trying to earn an income, and not just passively waiting, is a moment of significant autonomy and a push towards individuation and achieving the milestone of adulthood.

The consequences of poor employment scenarios are that many of the youth simply do not have sufficient money to be able to derive a sense of independence and fulfilment. When discussing these issues with young people, it became clear that a lack of employment didn't just mean that people were unable to purchase the items that they would have liked. It also meant that they were dependent on family members, grants or friends in order to meet their needs, and meant that, despite their ages, they were not able to contribute to household expenses. In some cases, young people had to compromise in order to move forward in some way. For example, this could mean that they had to live at home and depend on family members whilet they reskilled and tried to ensure that they had some kind of income and future, or whilst they started businesses.

The LHIs and workshops revealed that this made young people feel despondent and that they were not living up to the expectations of their families. Even young people with jobs, or some form of income, no longer living at home found that their incomes were being supplemented by family members, including for basic items such as rental, bills and food. Many of the young people experienced judgement and judged themselves for not being able to bring in sufficient income, and this affected their sense of self-esteem and social value. They felt a great deal of social pressure about not being able to contribute to their households, or to survive without their family's help.

The lack of jobs, coupled with parental and social expectations, also meant that many young people had to put their dreams aside either completely or for extended and uncertain periods of time. One YR from Hawassa recounted:

> wow, my dream was to be an Author/writer. It was my wish and ambition. As I mentioned before, as a teenager I used to write stories, you know; but my Dad stopped me from pursuing to be a writer and I drop it. – Z1, Hawassa

Another YR took the disappointment philosophically:

> I wanted to become a doctor. I don't feel bad that I did not become one because life has other plans for us. Growing up I realised that not everything will transpire as planned. – M1, Ekangala

Others found it more difficult to give up on their dreams:

> Interviewee: Okay when I grew up I wanted to be a cop. A police cop. .. So now I'm no longer a police cop I'm a junior technician.
> Interviewer: Okay, and how do you feel about that? That you didn't fulfill your dream of wanting to be a policeman?
> Interviewee: It's very hard, sisters.
> Interviewer: Why?
> Interviewee: Because I still want to be a police. – F1, Ekangala

Concluding thoughts

The literature on waithood sees young people trapped in a state of advanced youth, not quite adults but not quite children either (Honwana, 2014a; Honwana, 2014b). Young people cannot easily achieve the milestones that mark the transition into adulthood, but do not accept this situation passively and constantly innovate and take the initiative to counter these forms of stasis, hustling and straining (Finn & Oldfield 2015; Thieme 2013, 2018). These accounts emphasise the agency that young people have and their ability to resist situations of precarity and difficulty by finding ways to earn some form of income. Our research builds on this foundation, but demonstrates the numerous acts of agency and resistance that young people undertake in countering waithood. These are not just economic and income generating, but include aspects of their personal lives, such as getting married, having long-term partners and having children, and moving out of home. This research demonstrates these counter moments and highlights how the approach of collaboration, with elements of co-production, was able to nuance and make tangible the everyday ways that young people adopt to ensure that they do not just wait and that they find small, but significant ways to move forward in their lives.

Those working on the project undertook an ambitious array of research methods over an 18 month period: workshops, co-production of research instruments, training, online engagement through social media, as well as LHIs, and media training, which meant that the project generated a substantial amount of material. It also meant that the team was able to establish profound relationships of trust and intimacy with the respondents, blurring the lines of subject and researcher and becoming part of the research 'team'. In so doing, the project was able to gain deeper insights into the daily lives, experiences and emotions of the respondents in a way that was intentionally reciprocal and attempted to avoid elements of extraction and exploitation. It was also intended that the project empower and capacitate the YRs so that they walked away from the project with some employment and new skills. Unintentionally, the project thus became a way for young people to push forward and to, in some small ways, counter their experiences of waithood.

The method allowed the researchers to see that the lack of employment meant that young people have extended periods of dependence on their parents and family members or on social grants, without having the ability to find financial independence or progress in their chosen fields due to lack of training or job opportunities (Honwana 2014a). Many of the young people aspired to marry and have children, but said that they would have to wait until they could support a family or access better accommodation that would be more appropriate to being married and raising a family (Sommers 2012). The research revealed that many young people will never have the prospect of a formal job and will live their lives on the economic margins, with very little possibility of saving and so achieving better quality housing, and will be forced to live at

home even when they have children of their own. Thus young people effectively remain 'young', unable to achieve the signifiers of adulthood and trapped in a form of eternal youth that is neither desirable nor appreciated, but which is the daily reality for hundreds of thousands of young people across the continent.

Through the extensive engagement, however, it was uncovered that waiting is not an all or nothing sum game, rather it is a situation of nuance and increment, with young people able to move forward in some ways but not in others. Relying on the confidences shared by young people, it was shown that the movement is also contingent on context and culture: in South Africa, young people may not be able to marry as the bride price is often difficult to obtain and people are simply not earning enough. However, due to the social acceptability of having children outside of marriage and people living together, many are still finding ways to achieve a certain level of familial autonomy and thus some form of adulthood. They sometimes get married, find partners, have children, move out of home and 'hustle' innovatively and creatively. In Hawassa, the more conservative Ethiopian approach to family life means that young people remain unpartnered and do not often become parents outside the confines of formal marriage, largely due to social stigma. The ability to live informally in Ekangala as a family unit or to move out into a backyard room also provides more space for independence than the more formal situations in Hawassa, where young people do not generally move into shacks and instead remain in their familial homes. However, the young people interviewed in Hawassa were far more qualified and had moved further in their studies than their SA counterparts. Although both groups showed signs of 'hustling' (Thieme 2018) and 'straining' (Finn & Oldfield 2015), the prospects of formal jobs and the attainment of a professional career path largely elude both groups.

The research both helped to move people forward in moments, but also reflected and surfaced their moments of stuckness. The excitement and enthusiasm that the youth experienced during the workshops and the camaraderie and collegiality that they experienced, as well as the skills that they attained during the research, helped them to push forward in moments, and assisted in allowing for small moments of progress. However, young people face systemic issues in not being able to find significant forms of employment and remaining in situations of dependency, which is difficult for them to combat. The wide array of methods revealed that the net result is that there are small, incremental moves towards adulthood, but to a large extent young people remain firmly stuck geographically and socially in these marginalised spaces.

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