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Livelihood Trajectories of Rural Young People in Southern Africa: Stuck in Loops?

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ABSTRACT

Attempts to boost rural development in the Global South tend to focus on ways in which people can transform their lives. Interventions are often designed to help overcome specific envisioned constraints and push individuals onto a pathway out of poverty. Research has contributed to nuancing this vision by documenting the non-linearity of pathways, which often results in people being left in limbo or stuck, rather than moving forward. Based on a study in two villages in Malawi and Lesotho, this article argues that even these nuances do not fully capture the real-life experiences of the 63 young people who participated. Interviews tracing the course of their lives between 2007–08 and 2016–17 reveal trajectories that are circular rather than linear, and show the detrimental effects of being stuck in these frustrating loops of taking action without progressing. Conceptualizing rural young people's livelihood trajectories in contexts of severe poverty as loops highlights the structural issues that need to be addressed if their lives are to be transformed. Understanding development as emancipation from sources of unfreedom means focusing on the structural constraints that keep some people in poverty, and the importance of attaining agency if they are to put their needs on the agenda and demand basic rights.

INTRODUCTION

Mainstream development actors seeking to combat rural poverty and improve the livelihoods of people in the Global South tend to focus on individuals transforming their own lives, through the implementation of strategies situated within formal (global) structures such as the UN Sustainable Development Goals. They often advocate interventions that help people overcome specific constraints by building human capital, such as bursaries to improve school attendance, training to improve business skills, subsidies for agricultural inputs to boost production, or social cash transfers to overcome income shocks and smooth consumption. Such interventions place the responsibility for escaping poverty on the individual, who is

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expected to move forward once interventions have been introduced. They have been critiqued extensively for neglecting structural problems and ignoring the profound global injustices that create a social class — 'the Precariat' — that leads a marginal existence, battling even to get highly insecure, unpredictable and exploitative work (Standing, 2011). As this article shows, livelihoods are impacted by complex combinations of challenges rather than individual constraints. Indeed, the hurdles identified by development actors may have been carefully delimited so that they seem 'possible to solve' through an intended intervention (Ferguson, 1994). In reality, as soon as one hurdle is overcome, new hurdles appear. This will continue to be the case unless larger structural changes are made.

Although current conceptualizations of young people's lives in rural Global South contexts take the dynamism of livelihoods into account when describing pathways in and out of poverty, we argue that these conceptualizations may still not grasp the full extent of their struggles. This may be especially true in contexts of severe structural poverty, as in our study areas in Malawi and Lesotho. According to the International Monetary Fund, Malawi was ranked the eighth poorest country in the world in 2023, with Lesotho ranked as 28th,[1] and the rural districts we studied are among the poorest in their respective countries. Here, the trajectories of young people resemble loops, conceptualized in this article as a *repetition of the same activities without any significant forward movement*, usually caused by circumstances hindering progress along specific pathways. We base this understanding on a study in which we collected rich life history data in 2016–17 from 63 young people struggling with poverty in rural Lesotho and Malawi. With just three exceptions, these individuals had also been interviewed in an earlier project in 2007–08, when they were aged between 10 and 24. Comparing the envisioned trajectories from the first project and the actual realities the young people outlined in interviews 9–10 years later, we reveal the complexity and looping character of their trajectories.

In the next section, we discuss conceptualizations of young people's livelihood trajectories and suggest how the concept of loops could enhance these understandings. Then, after describing our methods and the village contexts, we present the imagined livelihood trajectories expressed in 2007–08 and contrast these with the real-life trajectories narrated to us in 2016–17. We illustrate the loops with flowcharts and use examples from the young people's stories to explain the processes that make moving forward so difficult. We discuss the implications of these insights, first discussing what the conceptualization of looped trajectories can add to our understanding of young people's dynamic livelihoods, and secondly focusing on the need to target structural conditions more broadly rather than focusing on single interventions.

1. See IMF World Economic Outlook database: www.imf.org/en/Publications/WEO/weo-database/2023/April

CONCEPTUALIZATIONS OF YOUNG PEOPLE'S LIVELIHOOD TRAJECTORIES IN THE RURAL GLOBAL SOUTH

Although research has pointed out that building sustainable livelihoods in the rural Global South requires capabilities (Nussbaum, 2000; Scoones, 2015; Sen, 1999) and access to resources and agency (Ribot and Peluso, 2003), and has a profound political dimension (Li, 2010; Natarajan et al., 2022), development policy tends to focus on a more simplistic understanding of the livelihoods approach (for a critique see Ansell et al., 2016) that depoliticizes contexts of structural poverty and represents problems as individualized issues that are easier to address. A concrete example is how a dominant development discourse positions the school-to-work transition as the panacea to a better future, leading to interventions that focus heavily on promoting schooling to rural young people and setting the attainment of primary education certificates as a key goal that individuals should strive for. However, such school-to-work transitions are not easily accomplished in practice in contexts of severe poverty and structural marginalization (Locke and te Lintelo, 2012; Morrow, 2013). This unidimensional approach does not prepare rural young people for the agricultural livelihoods and informal sector work that are, for many, their most likely destination (Ansell et al., 2020; van Blerk et al., 2022). When they fail to achieve a school certificate, young people tend to be cast as failures who are responsible for their own situations, which conveniently depoliticizes their problems (Ansell et al., 2020).

Conceptualizing development as expanding human freedoms entails a focus on people's agency — not just in their individual livelihoods but in their ability to demand their rights and effect change — to achieve emancipation from sources of unfreedom (Sen, 1999). Linking research to policy, the Social, Technological and Environmental Pathways to Sustainability (STEPS) Centre at the Institute of Development Studies, Brighton, has introduced a dynamic conceptualization of pathways in its 'pathways approach', stressing that pathways that support the perspectives and values of the marginalized could open up routes to social justice. Proponents of this approach argue for an emancipatory view of development and point out that this is of universal concern in a highly interconnected world (e.g. Leach et al., 2021).

In the context of policy, however, a more simplistic approach is still common, imagining that there is a positive pathway out of poverty onto which people can be 'pushed' through specific interventions, and assuming that this will lead to an accumulation of assets, networks and skills. An economic literature focusing on 'poverty traps' has investigated mechanisms that keep people in poverty but points to market failures and individual characteristics, rather than structural factors (e.g. Barrett and Carter, 2013). The idea of a 'big push' kind of intervention nudging people onto a pathway out of poverty has been present in development discourse since the 1950s,

notably revived in the 'Millennium Project' (Sachs, 2005). In research, too, the concept of 'pathways' has often been used without further definition, taken to mean some form of forward movement (upwards, downwards or winding).

Making an effort to define movement over time in relation to livelihoods, de Haan and Zoomers (2005) suggest using the term 'pathways' to indicate observed regularities or patterns in livelihoods among particular social groups, while using livelihood 'trajectories' to indicate the paths of individual actors. Scoones and Wolmer (2002) discuss the extent to which pathways are non-linear and non-deterministic and can differ for different people despite starting and/or ending in the same way. De Haan and Zoomers note this argument and suggest that livelihood trajectories should analyse needs, beliefs, aspirations and limitations in relation to power and institutions. They propose an understanding of livelihood trajectories as a route through 'a labyrinth of rooms, with each room having several doors giving access to new livelihood opportunities, but the doors can be opened and the room of opportunities successfully entered only with the right key qualifications [meaning that] some doors remain unopened and rooms of opportunities not accessed' (de Haan and Zoomers, 2005: 44).

De Haan and Zoomers also point out that discussions about livelihood strategies have tended to impose an ex-post label on decisions or circumstances that may be far from strategic or intentional, ascribing agency to people who may be severely limited in their choices by structural conditions, norms or individual vulnerabilities. Thinking in terms of trajectories and pathways certainly adds a temporal and spatial contextualization to a static one-off understanding of livelihoods often produced by household surveys or case studies that do not capture the dynamic aspects of people's lives. Yet the words 'trajectory' and 'pathway' cannot fully avoid the association of a forward movement and also risk becoming an ex-post construction ascribed to those whose trajectories, in hindsight, seem intelligible.

Questioning a binary framework of understanding, McCarthy (2020) points out that rural households in Indonesia often neither make clear progress through accumulation, nor totally stagnate, but manage to accumulate some key assets through forgoing other important things, such as foods with higher nutritional value and protein. Where accumulation of assets is at the expense of chronic nutritional problems and high rates of stunting, this is best described as 'progressing sideways', he argues. This comes close to our conceptualization of loops, but even such sideways movement was difficult for the young people in our study.

Based on our first interactions with the young people at the centre of this study (Ansell et al., 2011), we proposed a temporally sensitive use of the term livelihood trajectory, which recognizes that trajectories develop over time and aspirations shape plans, decisions and actions, but that intervening events and circumstances contribute to a dynamic process. Rigg and Salamanca (2015) come to similar conclusions when charting livelihood

turbulence in Thailand over 25 years. However, they see sudden shocks and negative events as key to causing downward turns in livelihoods, whereas we argue for less dramatic processes whereby livelihoods just never take off. The life histories we heard upon our return visits showed that the young people struggled to overcome multiple hurdles rather than being exposed to sudden events.

Parallel to the literature on livelihood trajectories, research has been undertaken across the Global South focusing on young people's transitions to adulthood. This indicates that rapid social change and increasingly disrupted and fragmented livelihoods have led young people to experience difficulties attaining social adulthood — that is, achieving what is socially expected in adult life (Abebe, 2020; Gough et al., 2013). This includes the ability to move away from home, take a formal job, accumulate assets and get married (Ansell et al., 2020; Morrow, 2013). We found that all these processes were disrupted for the young people in our study, as detailed in the results.

Recent literature elucidates further how livelihood trajectories as part of the transition to adulthood are disrupted, restricted or delayed for young people across the Global South (Abebe, 2020; van Blerk, 2008; Morrow, 2013; Punch, 2015). This literature has heavily criticized a linear conceptualization of trajectories, noting disruptions that are discussed in terms of sudden shocks or crises, such as parental death (Evans, 2014), or specifically vulnerable situations, such as young people being engaged in illegal or exploitative work (van Blerk, 2008). Critiquing a rigid view of people going through different life stages, the concept of 'vital conjunctures' (Johnson-Hanks, 2002) focuses on moments in which structural circumstances crystallize such that futures open up and key life events may be delayed or unattained (or accelerated). In some particularly challenging situations such as protracted crises, livelihood trajectories and youth transitions are ruptured, resulting in entirely new directions (van Blerk et al., 2022).

Ruptured transitions, where 'hope is cut' (Mains, 2011), result in young people experiencing what has been described as 'waithood' (Jeffrey, 2010; McEvoy-Levy, 2014; Stasik et al., 2020), where they are unable to find jobs and complete the desired education-to-formal work transition. Describing how young men in India ended up just doing 'timepass' — hanging out, chatting and 'doing nothing' while not being able to find salaried work suitable for their educational level, after spending significant time and resources on their education — Jeffrey (2010) reveals how these young men deal in different ways with their imagined trajectories being broken. Yet, life still happens. It carries on in these spaces and times for young people: they are still engaged in relationships and livelihood strategies, at least informally creating families and building economic strategies for survival (van Blerk et al., 2023).

The above literature is reflected in the experiences of rural youth in our research but does not fully account for them. Some of these works are not

set in the same context of severe rural poverty as our study — a context in which, as we will show, the livelihoods and transitions to adulthood often become stuck, not just at a static point in transition, but in 'loops', repeating essentially the same activities over and over. We believe this may be symptomatic for rural young people in contexts of severe poverty, a group that is among the most marginalized.

THE RESEARCH STUDY

This article is based on data collected as part of a larger study following up an earlier project in 2007–08 in two rural villages in Lesotho and Malawi. We use data from 2007–08, in which young people aged between 10 and 24 years old outlined imagined future trajectories that they aspired to, combined with interviews conducted in 2016–17 in which (mostly) the same young people (now 18–34 years old) recounted their experiences in the intervening decade. In 2018, the research team returned to both villages and held workshops with the young participants at which the findings were discussed as the first stage of national and international dissemination activities.

The research team has a long-standing relationship with the two rural villages in which the data were collected. The Lesotho village had been part of a project in 1996–97 and household profiling data from that time were available to the team. Similar detailed household data were collected from both villages in 2007–08 and 2016. In 2007–08 one member of the research team lived in each of the villages for several months, and all team members visited both villages in 2016–18.[2] In both research projects, an information pamphlet in the local language, including contact details, was provided and explained to each research participant, and informed oral consent was obtained and recorded (from guardians where applicable in 2007–08).

In 2007–08 the young people were divided into groups of similar age and gender (52 participants in Malawi and 50 in Lesotho) and performed various exercises discussing their lives, social networks and future plans. In one exercise they explained their aspirations for the future, and the assets and plans needed to realize these aspirations. Some of these young people also participated in interviews that included questions about their future aspirations. For this article we analysed all available data on this topic from 2007–08 through the lens of imagined future trajectories, which we combined into a single image (described in more detail and pictured in Figure 1, below).

In 2016 we did not manage to find all the research participants from 2007–08. Three young people of the right age who had married into the

2. The study was granted ethical approval from the Department of Clinical Sciences Research Ethics Committee, Brunel University London, reference 0104MHRMar/20162627.

village in Malawi were included in the interviews. In this round, 33 young people in Malawi and 30 in Lesotho participated in life history interviews (including the new participants). Of those who had moved out of the village, many had married into other rural villages or smaller towns in the rural district; some of these were traced and interviewed. Two individuals had died, one was in prison and the whereabouts of three people in each village were unknown. Ten of the original participants in Malawi, and seven in Lesotho, were living in larger towns outside of the local area, but not all were there permanently. A few of these were traced and interviewed in Lesotho. It is important to note that most of the participants who had left the village were not interviewed in this second round, which biases the data towards the stories of those who had not managed to leave or had come back. However, we took care to inquire about how those who had left were faring and we know that very few, if any, had managed to secure stable jobs, although one woman in Lesotho had married a man with a good job in town.

The life history interviews from 2016–17 explored the participants' lives over the previous 9–10 years, charting good and bad events, what triggered them, their consequences and how the young people experienced developments in their lives. Interviews were conducted individually and took about an hour. Non-local members of the research team were helped by translators recruited from local universities and trained by the team. Notes were taken and life history timelines compiled collaboratively with research participants. Recorded interviews were transcribed by local transcribers, who re-translated the recorded answers to double-check the translations.

The interviews (with 12 men and 21 women in Malawi, and 16 men and 14 women in Lesotho) were read, coded and analysed using NVivo. The real-life trajectories were represented by arrows in a visualization using Microsoft Visio, in which every discrete event and connecting route was recorded and compiled for women and men from each context in a single image (see Figures 2 and 3, below).

The two villages form the context to the challenges the young people faced. The villages differ in terms of livelihood opportunities, general poverty level, kinship and marriage systems and inheritance practices. Comparing their experiences across these two contexts, combined with the longitudinal quality of the data, enhances the robustness and nuance of the findings by demonstrating that similar processes are operating, albeit manifesting in somewhat different ways related to contextual circumstances. Our first study of these villages led to several publications which compare them further in different ways, for example in relation to the effects of differing marriage practices (Ansell et al., 2018), access to livelihood assets (Ansell et al., 2016) and employment and entrepreneurship opportunities (Hajdu et al., 2013).

The Malawi village (which comprised 72 households in 2016) is located in the densely populated Thyolo district. Farmland is fragmented, grazing

land unavailable and rain-fed farming is practised using hoes. *Dimbas* — fields close to streams, which can be irrigated using watering cans — represent key assets that can produce high-value crops such as tomatoes all year round (with significant input of labour). Local opportunities for small-scale income-generating activities (IGAs) are comparatively good due to population density and lack of access to cheap manufactured goods. Those who manage to raise the resources and learn skills aim to be carpenters, tailors, repairers of bicycles or radios, or to trade goods in nearby markets. Women often sell agricultural produce or make bread or snacks to sell at markets. In southern Malawi, men are expected to support their families, but the matrilineal, matrilocal tradition means that fields are given to daughters and men move to their wife's village where they build a house for their nuclear family. Women thus remain close to their matrilineal kin.

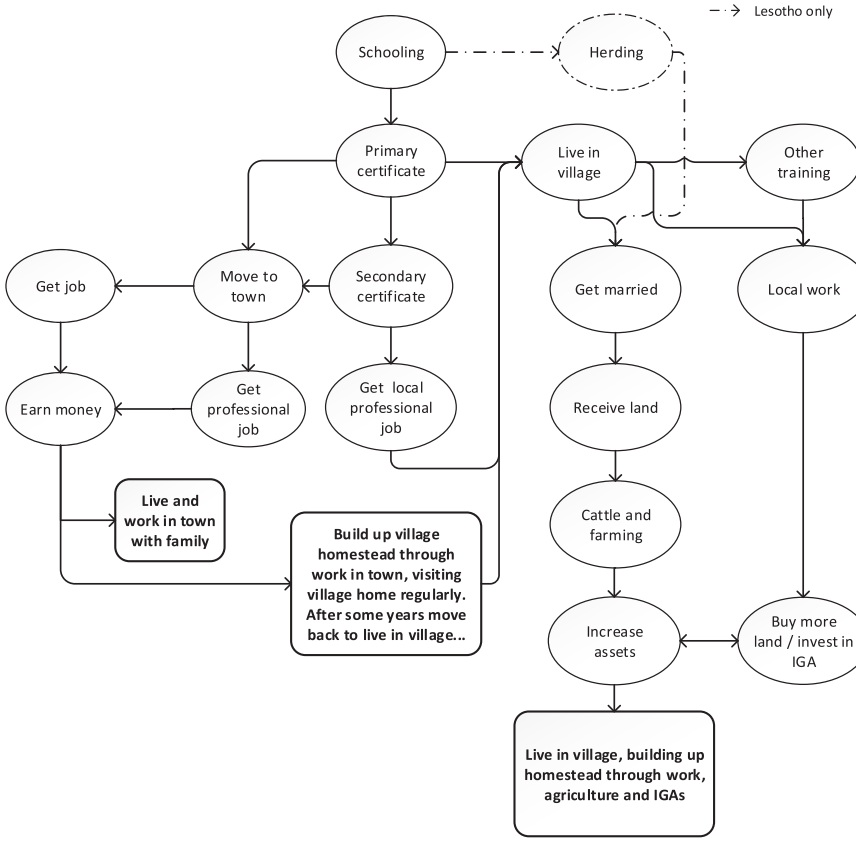
The village in Lesotho (comprising 44 households in 2016) is located in the sparsely populated Maluti Mountains, between one and two hours' walk from the nearest school and rural service centre. The community used to depend heavily on labour migration to South Africa, but this has declined in recent decades and employment opportunities are diminishing. However, the general standard of living is higher than in Malawi and people have more assets. Livestock are an important asset and require herding in mountain pastures during the summer. Small-scale agriculture is practised on suitable land in river valleys, but otherwise the community has few opportunities for livelihoods locally, apart from occasional road-building community works or small IGAs such as running a village shop or maize mill. Rural Lesotho's households are often multi-generational, following a patrilineal structure, whereby the oldest son inherits the fields and livestock. His wife is expected to move into his parents' household after marriage and help out with chores, while he himself may move away to seek work.

IMAGINED TRAJECTORIES: SCHOOLING, WORK AND MARRIAGE

The imagined livelihood trajectories in Malawi and Lesotho that were expressed by the young people are illustrated in Figure 1. They are similar, although herding is absent in Malawi. The imagined ideal in both contexts consisted of a few different trajectories depending on gender and personal aspirations, but for most young people it started with schooling and acquiring a primary education certificate.[3] The visions then diverged between living in the village, moving to town to look for work or going to secondary school.[4] While some young people already felt that school was hard and

3. Lesotho has since abolished the end of primary school examinations, with the expectation now being that all children complete 10 years of schooling.
4. Punch (2015) describes strikingly similar choices for young people in rural Bolivia, although migration is more prominent in her sites than in ours.

Figure 1. Imagined Trajectories for Young Men and Women (Combined) in Malawi and Lesotho, 2007–08.



Source: Authors' illustration developed from data analysis

that they were unlikely to be able to finish, most still aspired to continue with education. A better education, they believed, would help them find jobs when moving to town or enable them to pursue professional training or further education to become, for example, a nurse or teacher. However, their aspirations tended to become more realistic with age, with few in the older groups talking about wanting to be nurses or teachers.

In Lesotho young women envisaged breaking free from the traditional expectations of marrying and moving into their husband's family home to be subservient to a mother-in-law and undertake tedious chores. Moving away from rural areas seemed to them to be the easiest way of escaping that pathway. Some explicitly stated that they did not wish to marry but wanted an education and to work for themselves. Those who were already married in 2007–08 imagined a future with more asset accumulation, and some of

them also hoped eventually to work in town or move to town with their husbands. Women in Malawi had much more positive expectations of marriage and hoped to share work in the fields with their husbands and perhaps be able to complement household income with a small IGA of their own, such as selling fried buffalo beans, fried fish or baked goods. The differing expectations and outlooks on marriage are largely associated with the different marriage practices between the two contexts (as discussed in detail by Ansell et al., 2018).

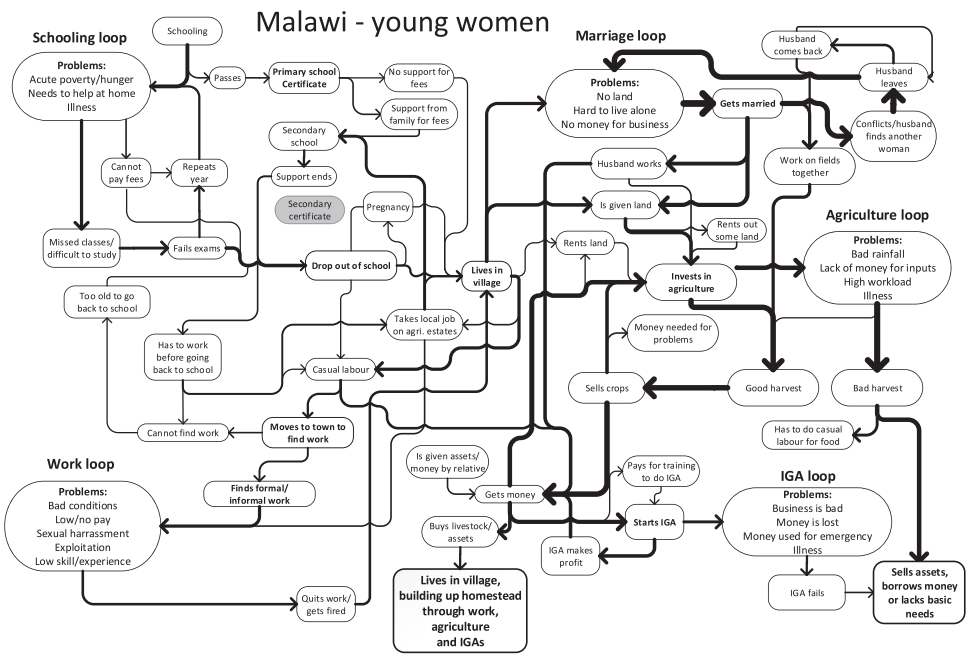
In Lesotho in 2008, many boys in the village had already dropped out of school at a young age to herd cattle for their own or other families. These young men's imagined trajectories involved accumulating cattle, securing a large herd, using it to pay bridewealth but still retaining cattle as assets and for ploughing. Agriculture and livestock were the primary future livelihoods imagined in the herding group, who explicitly aspired to remain rural and often expressed their liking for life as herders. Although agricultural activities featured in some imagined futures, this was rarely a positive aspiration as it was seen in terms of failure to accomplish something 'better', namely, salaried employment. Income-earning activities that featured among their aspirations were those that could be undertaken while mainly remaining in the village, such as running small businesses or working on local road-building projects.

The imagined end point in both countries was a situation in which the young people would have a family, live either in town or in the village, and be able to build up assets, construct better houses and diversify livelihoods to live a more comfortable life. Sometimes the visions included working in town for some years to accumulate assets and cash and then returning to the village to invest in key assets to use for future livelihoods. In reality, however, their trajectories were diverted along several different lines and often they got stuck in loops that proved hard to escape.

THE REALITY OF LOOPS

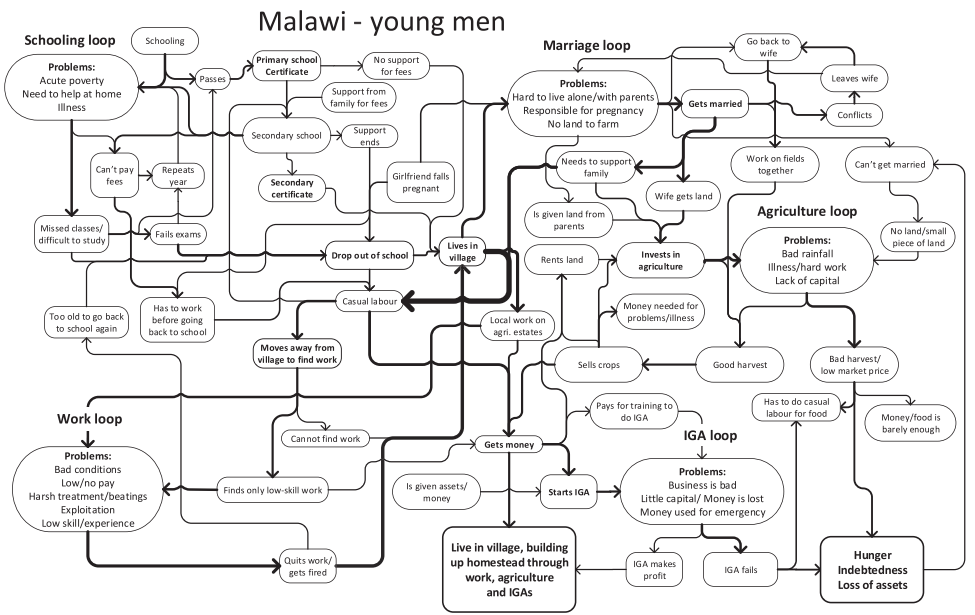
Many of the young people's life histories, collected in the later round of research, show that they often found themselves stuck in loops, repeating the same attempts at moving forward (struggling to finish school, getting a job, marrying) but failing. This was described by them in various ways — as failure, repetition or moving backwards again. We have chosen to name these circular trajectories 'loops' from the way they look when visualized in our analytical flowcharts. The Malawian trajectories have been combined in the flowcharts in Figure 2 (illustrating the 21 women) and Figure 3 (the 12 men). We chose to show the Malawian flowcharts here as the loops are more prominent, but they are also present in Lesotho in ways that we explain in the sections below. The Figures illustrate each pathway mentioned in the interviews, showing the actual complexities in the flowcharts rather than

Figure 2. Real-life Trajectories of 21 Interviewed Women in the Malawi Village, 2016.



Source: Authors' illustration developed from data analysis

Figure 3. Real-life Trajectories of 12 Interviewed Men in the Malawi Village, 2016.



Source: Authors' illustration developed from data analysis

more stylized loops, since this is truer to the data, while the text explains in more detail the loops that we discerned.[5] Since the interviews in 2016–17 focused on the past 10 years in the young people's lives, the events earlier in their lives are not illustrated. This is most notable in the case of schooling. We know from our previous project, when the respondents were 10–24 years old, that repeating years and eventually dropping out was one of the main things happening in their lives. However, many of them had already dropped out at that point, and once they were re-interviewed at the ages of 18–34 the events mentioned most often were struggling to find work and getting married.

Five distinct livelihood-related loops were identified in Malawi and six in Lesotho; in the subsections below we discuss loops associated with schooling, work, marriage, agriculture and IGAs, as well as breaking out of loops and moving forward. Each subsection corresponds to an area in the diagram marked with the particular loop (for example, upper left corner is 'schooling loop'). While the flowcharts are based on data from Malawi, both study areas are included in the discussion.

Schooling Loop

As illustrated in the flowcharts, for both men and women the trajectory was diverted within a few years of starting school due to various problems such as illness or acute poverty. Several young people also had to help out at home, work in the fields, herd family cattle (in Lesotho) or take care of sick household members instead of going to school, which often reduced their ability to focus on schoolwork, leading to failing exams and repeating years over and over. Acute poverty could lead to children going hungry and being unable to focus on schoolwork. Blessings[6] said: 'we did not have food most of the time. I could go to school without breakfast, even after sleeping on an empty stomach the previous night'.[7] Sometimes parents could not afford soap to wash clothes and looking/smelling too bad led to some children being sent home by teachers or mocked by other children to the point where they felt too ashamed to go to school. A lack of money to pay fees for 'school development' (for example, for constructing new buildings), which schools tended to demand just before exams, was another cause of years being repeated: if the fees were not paid then the children would not be

5. The arrows are 0.25 pts thicker each time a person mentions in the interview that s/he experienced a certain event. The thinnest line, 1.0 pts, means that only one person mentioned this event explicitly — for example, in Figure 2, only one woman told us about dropping out of school due to pregnancy. As a contrast, the line from 'conflicts/husband finds another woman' to 'husband leaves' is 4.75 pts thick, meaning this event was mentioned in interviews 16 times by the Malawian women, in reference to 16 discrete events.
6. Pseudonyms are used throughout.
7. Interview 'Blessings', Malawi, 2016.

allowed to sit the exams. Yamikani explained that the accumulated cost of uniforms, notebooks and school development fees was too much for his parents:

> First, our parents were very poor and so they could not afford to buy school uniforms for us or pay the small sum towards the school infrastructure development. As a result, we were often sent back home. Sometimes they could manage to get the uniform for us, but before long there was something else that they needed to provide as well, which they failed to do, which would force us back home. We also had trouble finding writing materials.[8]

As a result of these different poverty-related struggles, in combination with a school system that does not aim to solve these issues, most young people ended up repeating a year several times before progressing one year, then repeating that year again. The final act of dropping out was almost a relief for some.[9] In the Malawian village, none of the women managed to finish secondary school, which is why the box for secondary certificate in Figure 2 has no arrows leading to it: we chose to include the box in the chart nevertheless, in order to illustrate this. Of the 12 men represented in Figure 3, two had achieved a secondary certificate.

The village in Lesotho did not suffer from the same level of acute poverty as Malawi, but here too young people cited a lack of school uniforms as one factor for difficulties in schooling. An even greater problem was the walk to school, which took an hour or more and included crossing a mountain pass and a river without a bridge. During cold snowy winter weather, in particular, this required much better shoes and clothes than they could afford. These problems led to school being missed on particularly challenging days. Homework was also difficult to complete when children arrived home at nightfall, leading them to fall behind in schoolwork. Repeating years was also common in Lesotho, and most young people ended up dropping out before obtaining primary education certificates.

A few of the young people in Lesotho managed to get into secondary school, but then struggled to raise money for fees, boarding and uniform, with every year repeated at this level adding heavily to the monetary burden. Sophia, who was doing well in 2008, subsequently told us that she had failed Form C partly because she could not get to school on one of the exam days due to the river flooding after heavy rains. She was refused permission to sit the exam on another day. She enrolled in a boarding school the next year, intent on repeating and passing Form C. However, this school insisted that she first repeat Form B, for reasons which were not clear to her. Sophia repeated the year and passed, but by the time she reached Form C, the inheritance from her late father had run out, and she had to drop out, leaving her heartbroken. In 2017 she was working very hard for low pay as a domestic

8. Interview 'Yamikani', Malawi, 2016.
9. As noted above, dropping out had often happened before the period covered by the interviews and is therefore not shown in the charts, but was nevertheless a prominent feature in the participants' lives.

worker in Maseru: 'I didn't accomplish my aspirations, because I wasn't able to complete school and find work … not as a domestic worker … had I gone to school I could be a teacher. There are many things I could do, had I gone to school'.[10]

Having to drop out after managing to progress to secondary school was very painful for the young people, and ultimately just prolonged the time they were stuck in the schooling loop before moving on (that is, dropping out). It rarely led to better life prospects. Joseph in Lesotho tells of struggling to get to secondary school but eventually still failing: 'I had aspired to attend school and complete it, but due to finance I wasn't able to go through'.[11] He ended up herding cattle, much like the boys who had dropped out earlier — the difference being that those other boys had a head start at building up their herds and getting used to the herding life. Joseph felt unhappy with that life and his family had spent a lot of money on his unsuccessful schooling.

In Malawi two notable stories were those of Mary and Lucius, who were among the very few that had managed to progress to secondary school back in 2007. Both had spent most of the subsequent 10 years trying to go back to school after dropping out due to inability to pay fees. Enjoying school and not wanting to give up on the imagined future that the certificate would facilitate meant that they both got stuck in a loop in which they invested much time, money and energy in trying to complete secondary school — without success. They borrowed money from relatives, applied for bursaries and took precarious jobs to save up to go back, but never succeeded in staying in school for long enough to pass the exams. Mary, who was 30 in 2016, had put her life on hold, resisting marriage and having children, in attempts to finish her final year of secondary school. Lucius (22 in 2016) had also put off marriage, not wanting to have that distraction and commitment when he was struggling to raise money and complete his schooling. He was volunteering as a teacher in the local nursery just to be close to a school environment. Both their stories are full of frustration over being stuck in this loop and not being able to move on with their lives. In general, the schooling loop was a prominent feature in most young people's lives.

Work Loop

After dropping out of school, many young people — especially men — tried to find formal or (often) informal work in the area or in town. It was usually very hard to find. Lucius wrote applications for a whole year in Blantyre city, staying with distant relatives, without success. Those who did secure work usually lost their job or left after a short period of time, due to

10. Interview 'Sophia', Lesotho, 2017.
11. Interview 'Joseph', Lesotho, 2016.

various problems. Blessings had difficulties understanding and planning for the complicated urban transport system when staying with his aunt, with the result that he was late several days in a row for his job on the other side of town. He was fired and returned to the village empty-handed.

David cleaned the house for a married couple, but was often asked to stay late to open the gates as the husband was out drinking, or even to bring him home from the bars. Despite doubling as a guard, he received no salary for several months. He made up a story about his mother being sick so that his employers would at least give him some money for his travel home. Later he returned to Blantyre and managed to start a business with his brother-in-law selling potatoes in the street. He painstakingly worked his way from buying a few potatoes and selling to households in a residential area, to buying a whole bag. However, the city patrol[12] apprehended him for selling outside the marketplace and confiscated his bag, effectively sending him back to square one where he had to start borrowing money and buying a few potatoes to sell. He again spent several months building up the business to the point where he bought two large bags of potatoes to sell, now at a market stall. He narrates:

> Just after I had offloaded [the bags] from the vehicle and was about to take it to the place where I used to keep it, the city patrol appeared. So they took the bags away from me and the problem is you cannot even negotiate with them …. They placed the bags in their car and I lost K 7,000[13] on the spot.[14]

David decided it was useless to keep struggling with this business and returned to the village, having spent more than a year in town with nothing to show for it. When a car came to the village allegedly fetching labourers to go to the capital Lilongwe he got in, but this turned out to be a scam. The men were taken instead to an unknown location and told to dig 2-metre-deep trenches with spades, under extremely exploitative conditions. The workers eventually joined forces and demanded that their captors pay for their transport back home.

In several of these stories it is evident that young people from deep rural areas, who are among the most marginalized, struggle to cope with life in town and the street smartness it requires. They are easily taken advantage of by unscrupulous employers or even the city patrol in the absence of stricter regulations or laws (or lack of implementation where laws existed). The work-in-town vision that included coming home with money to invest in business or agriculture thus turned out to be a dead-end that looped right back to the village and left most of the youth with nothing to show for their efforts. In addition, several of the women complained of sexual harassment from their employer while working as domestic helpers. This

12. Police officers and security personnel from the city council.
13. K 7,000 (Malawian kwacha) ~ € 13 in 2014, or more than a week's worth of hard physical labour.
14. Interview 'David', Malawi, 2016.

often led to them 'running away' or 'being chased by the wife of the home', again without receiving a salary. The 33 young women and men in Malawi together had 13 experiences of leaving for work in town and returning to the village with no more money than when they left.

In Lesotho there was a similar pattern, but some of the young people eventually managed to find work that they kept for several years. Exploitation and low/unpaid salaries were prominent features in Lesotho stories too. Sophia narrates how, after being forced to drop out of school (described above), she found a job as a domestic worker, but was expected to work unreasonably hard, with exhaustion leading her to quit the job after a year. She found another similar job where the workload was more reasonable but here the salary was extremely low, barely leaving her with any money to take to her family. She quit that job too and eventually found a third where the work was bearable and the salary allowed her to fulfil some basic needs of the family, but she still lacked money to invest in any assets. While she did find work in town, this did not move her closer to her aspirations.

Local work was scarce in both the villages, apart from occasional community work projects or road construction. The only exception was work on local tea or macadamia plantations in Malawi. However, this work was astoundingly poorly paid. Mussa commented that the money was at least something 'compared to nothing'.[15] Community members would pay a neighbour more to work on their fields than the plantation wages. Furthermore, there were frequent reports that bribes had to be paid to get a job on the estates; the bribe was worth at least two days' casual labour (about K 2,000–3,000 or € 3–4 in 2017). Despite having paid bribes, people could be dismissed at any time without reason from the plantations. Mary, who was desperate to save money for Form 4 exams, as described above, got a job as a clerk on an estate, but eventually left: 'The salaries were *so low* … but when we asked for an increase, they said no — if you don't want it, just leave the job'.[16] Thus, these local work opportunities did not contribute to anyone building up assets, getting married or moving forward.

Marriage Loop

'I have plans to build my own house and be independent. It's just that I have been thinking that as a young woman I need to find a man with whom I can live in the house … because there is so little that I can accomplish on my own'.[17] Both women and men in Malawi stressed, like Bertha, that life is easier if you can share the workload in the fields with a spouse and help each other diversify incomes. However, marriage is not necessarily seen as

15. Interview 'Mussa', Malawi, 2016.
16. Interview 'Mary', Malawi, 2016.
17. Interview 'Bertha', Malawi, 2016.

a long-term commitment in southern Malawi in the same way that it is in Lesotho. A husband is less strongly connected to his wife and children due to the matrilineal heritage system that means his children do not belong to his lineage. It is fairly common for young couples to marry (without much ceremony) and then divorce a few years later after struggling to build a better life together. The husband then leaves the homestead and the agricultural land, which continues to belong to his wife.

Several of the young women in Malawi told stories about husbands leaving them when the agricultural labour in the fields was too hard, with some even attempting to reunite when it was time for harvest — and eating. The women became stuck in a 'marriage loop' as shown in the upper right corner of the charts. Janet explained that her husband left her for another woman when she was pregnant and frequently too sick to work on weeding the fields, which caused a lot of suffering as she did not get a good harvest. Fanny had similar experiences: her first husband left her for another woman when she was pregnant; she married another man, only for him to abandon her in the same way. She had married and divorced three times in 10 years. For some couples, a successful marriage provided the grounds upon which they built a better life together, but others experienced loops of unsuccessful marriages leading to little progress in building a stable livelihood.

In Lesotho, several young women had been adamant in 2008 that they did not wish to marry, but eight years later most of them had ended up married anyway, as their dreams of progressing in school or getting work had been thwarted. Lesotho marriages involve both families in a process of negotiations (and, at least in theory, payments of bridewealth), which makes them more difficult to end. Hence a 'marriage–divorce loop' was not present in Lesotho, but instead a loop could be discerned in relation to men not being able to marry in the first place. Young men complained about the difficulties of raising money for bridewealth, but also said that not having a stable job or any real assets made them insecure about marrying — thus the school and work loops created an 'unable-to-marry loop'. As Lehlohonolo commented:

> One reason I ended up not marrying is that I found that having a wife will increase struggles. … I would have nothing to clothe her with as well as the child, because we would have one, and there would be nothing for the child to go to school with. I then saw that I would be burdening myself with something I cannot overcome. … If I look at things and find that I am actually succeeding and life is improving, I will marry.[18]

We heard similar statements in Malawi. Blessings got married but could offer his wife nothing except a sleeping mat in his grandmother's house where he was staying. After a few months he found his wife had a cell phone: it turned out that another man had given it to her and, when confronted, she left him for that man. Thus, in both Malawi and Lesotho, marriage loops could be discerned, albeit of a different nature due to the divergent marriage

18. Interview 'Lehlohonolo', Lesotho, 2016.

and inheritance practices. These loops were less pronounced than the school and work loops, but were to an extent connected to them.

Agricultural Loops

After negative experiences of work and living in town, many young people in Malawi reported a new-found appreciation of village life, agriculture and the relative stability of selling produce at local markets. This had not usually been part of their imagined future trajectories in 2007–08, but irrigated farming in wetlands or close to rivers (dimbas) was the most common successful strategy cited by participants. In Lesotho, some of the young men had done well through herding and investing (although less intensively) in agricultural activities, which also benefited the women they married. These successes are discussed in the section below on breaking out of loops.

Experiences with agriculture from year to year tended to alternate between positive and negative spirals depending on whether the harvest was good or bad, but for some the bad years could eat up the investments made during the good years, so that little progress was made. Agricultural opportunities could also be affected by being stuck in the earlier loops. As discussed, young people were often unable to accumulate money from work to invest in agriculture. Lack of assets due to disappointments in the work loop made it difficult to buy land, while unwillingness to marry due to being stuck in the school loop could also mean challenges in accessing land. Moreover, young people may not be able to engage fully in agriculture because they have not yet inherited all the fields that will ultimately be passed down to them. This contributes to young people initially focusing on finding work or other income streams, thinking that agriculture will be for later in life.

The gender difference in accessing land in southern Malawi is apparent when comparing how young women and men acquire land (see Figures 2 and 3). While women usually acquire land from parents, men must either marry or save money to rent land. Young unmarried men could usually only access small pieces of land and therefore struggled to generate any surplus; lacking assets led in turn to being seen as unattractive on the marriage market.

In Lesotho the tradition is that the firstborn son inherits all the land and tools (eventually) while other sons have to sharecrop. With work being a struggle, it was hard for young men with older brothers to save up enough to buy the necessary tools and inputs for farming. Some young people also described how they got stuck in an agricultural loop, often started by poor weather conditions leading to bad harvests, then not having enough money to invest in fertilizer for the next year, thus not being able to accumulate. As seen in the flowcharts, both men and women talked equally often about good harvests leading to increased assets and positive developments and poor harvests resulting in hunger, indebtedness or reliance on casual labour.

Farming could thus cause both positive and negative spirals, but seen over several years it was often a loop in which no real progress was made.

The most common agricultural practice in Lesotho is livestock keeping, and work in herding was a successful strategy for a few young men. However, herding loops were also present. The employer is supposed to pay the herder one cow per year and provide basic needs like maize meal, gum boots, a blanket and soap. Herders are not given money, and their lives are very simple — in fact, when Liau, a 22-year-old herder, was asked what he does to acquire cash, he simply answered: 'I never have any'.[19] Thus, if these young men lose a herding job and fail to get a new one quickly, they can end up having to sell the cows they have earned in order to cater for basic needs, undoing a lot of work.

Hlobola had earned three cows working for an employer before losing the job. The cows had two calves, but he was forced to sell one cow after four months to fulfil basic needs of food and clothes. Later he was forced to sell another cow, saw one die from disease and another from the drought-related shortage of grazing in 2015. He was left with just one cow in 2016 and told us he would soon be forced to sell that one too, to buy food. Effectively he would be back where he had started eight years earlier. A herder who has built up a herd over several years is vulnerable to droughts, to cattle becoming sick (a higher risk when cows are weak after increasingly common droughts), and to armed thieves who raid cattle posts at night. Herding can thus also easily become a loop that leads nowhere. Furthermore, herders depend on their employers being reasonable, leaving them in a precarious situation. We heard several stories of employers refusing to pay herders after a year of herding, accusing them of letting animals die in order to avoid paying. These stories show that the herders rarely manage to successfully challenge unreasonable employers, preferring to leave the job and sometimes losing the benefits of several years' worth of work in the process.

Income-generating Activities Loop

Many of the imagined scenarios from Malawi and a few from Lesotho included ideas about small, informal income-generating activities (IGAs) that could be undertaken while remaining in the village.[20] The fact that agriculture is not fully available as an option to young people who have not yet inherited enough land or assets most likely contributes to IGAs being seen as a good complement to agricultural activities when migration for work was not possible or desired. These activities were dependent on having at least

19. Interview 'Liau', Lesotho, 2016.
20. Some activities discussed in the work loop (such as selling potatoes in town) are more like IGAs; however, when they took place in town as part of migration for work, they have been included in the 'work' loop, like other informal work.

some small starting capital with which to buy items to trade, add value to or use to provide a service of some kind (see description of village livelihoods, above). While some IGA ventures were successful for a time (discussed below), this livelihood activity could also get stuck in a loop as illustrated in the bottom-right part of the charts (Figures 2 and 3).

Raising even small amounts of capital was hard for these young people, even when they had the 'luxury' of not yet needing to support a family. Lack of education in business basics and mathematics meant that many had difficulties setting prices and ensuring the business made a profit once the various costs had been paid. Both villages are characterized by widespread poverty with no security nets, which means that family and neighbours have claims on the young people's money in times of hunger or illness. The difficulties of doing business in these contexts are discussed at greater length based on the 2007–08 data (Hajdu et al., 2011), and the stories from 2016–17 reinforced those conclusions: most young people who tried to build up IGAs ended up not making any significant gain.

Breaking Out of Loops and Moving Forward

While most of the life histories we collected included loops and lack of progress, some trajectories had led to improvements over time. A few even looked like the imagined scenarios from 2007–08. The more successful stories included marriages that enabled the young people to work together in agriculture and pool their labour and assets to boost each other.[21] For example, joint farming and good rains meant that one couple could sell produce, and the wife added value through frying buffalo beans and selling them as snacks at the market. They used the money to buy a bicycle that could transport more things to market; the husband also transported goods and people for payment. The money earned was invested in farming. In Lesotho the more positive experiences were usually connected to getting sought-after salaried jobs. Trajectories that most closely resembled those envisioned in 2007–08 were those that involved herding. Despite the many difficulties facing herders, some of them were happy with their situation when interviewed in 2016–17.

It was, however, striking that the one thing that most young people did not really aspire to was what, in the end, helped most of those who were more successful, namely agricultural activities. In 2016, young people in

21. Another example of myopic donor/NGO focus is that in Malawi these actors work hard at preventing girls from marrying at 16–17 years, believing this is what causes school dropout and poverty. However, we posit that poverty and school inflexibility cause dropouts, usually at a much earlier age, and that a favourable marriage can be a wise choice for young women wishing to build a better life. We have reflected on this in a previous paper (Ansell et al., 2018).

the Malawi study had formed a youth group that cultivated crops in a dimba they rented together. Some had bought pigs or even a cow with the money from selling farm produce and proceeded to sell milk or calves/piglets. The interview with Chipewa ended on a positive note after he described all his accomplishments — he was one of the few who in 2008 had been aiming for a future in agriculture. 'In 2008 you told us that you want to build a house from dimba farming, buy pigs and do other desirable things. You seem to have accomplished it all'. Chipewa replied: 'Yes, I am a very happy man now'.[22]

The factors that led to young people being able to break out of the loops were seldom clear cut; rather, they depended on several positive things happening, or negative things not happening — harvests not failing just when they were ready to invest in farming, cattle reproducing at a good rate, employers actually paying herders the promised sums. Cooperation also stands out as a strength, in successful marriages as well as in the youth group example. However, structural problems were stacked against the young people and most had had a tough life, like Retselitsoe in Lesotho: 'All in the years between [2008 and 2016] life has just been full of struggles …. As for cash, it has just been a problem'.[23]

CONCEPTUALIZING LOOPS: WHAT DOES IT CONTRIBUTE?

In this article we have argued that the conceptualization of 'loops' can help us understand the realities of severely disadvantaged rural young people in contexts of structural poverty. Loops — a repetition of the same activities without any significant forward movement — appear to be caused by multiple structures and processes that hinder progress along a specific pathway. The young people in our study sometimes spent years without accumulating any assets. Most also kept repeating years in school without moving forward: both Mary and Lucius spent the whole 10 years trying to go back and finish secondary school, without success.

It is striking that despite the differences in context between the two villages, the aspect of loops was present in the lives of young people in both contexts. When life histories are full of such loops it seems misplaced to talk about finding 'pathways out of poverty'. Even the crabwise movement that McCarthy (2020) describes, when people manage to accumulate assets while sacrificing nutritious food, seems like progress in comparison to such loops. De Haan and Zoomers observe, in relation to their rooms of opportunities, that 'a person often ends up in a room that very much resembles the one from which he or she was trying to escape' (2005: 44). However, the young people in our study often didn't even make it into the

22. Interview 'Chipewa', Malawi, 2016.
23. Interview 'Retselitsoe', Lesotho, 2016.

new room, despite their hard-fought struggles to open the door — or if they did manage, they were thrown back into the first room and forced to start struggling to open the very same door again.

Nor does the literature on youth transitions fully capture these experiences. While writings on waithood (Jeffrey, 2010; Mains, 2011) describe young people who are frustrated with not being able to get the jobs that they expected to obtain after struggling to complete their education, it remains a comparatively privileged position — the choice to wait rather than resort to other livelihoods out of desperation. Notions of ruptured transitions (van Blerk et al., 2022) come closer to conceptualizing these struggles, but most of those cases involve sudden shocks, such as displacement or parental death, rather than just normal rural life in a context of structural poverty. While Johnson-Hanks's (2002) notion of vital conjunctures relates young people's trajectories to structural circumstances and points out how fluid and unstable moments such as marriage can be, it does not encompass the repetitiveness of the looping trajectories that we discuss. The conceptualization of loops thus enriches the literature by highlighting an aspect that needs to be further articulated, namely the realities of some of the most structurally disadvantaged groups.

Viewing young people's life stories through a longitudinal perspective adds an important dimension (van Blerk et al., 2023) and the concept of loops enables us to better understand the severity of their situations. This is also important in a policy context, emphasizing that the situations they find so hard to break out of consist of interconnected structural issues that need to be resolved. Focusing on single interventions or individual attributes that supposedly make certain people more vulnerable will not accomplish enough. We turn to these policy issues in our final section.

UNDOING THE LOOPS: TARGETING STRUCTURES RATHER THAN INDIVIDUALS

Of the 63 young people we interviewed in 2016–17, only a few had experienced life paths that were in line with the expectations they had held in 2007–08. The interviews focused mainly on those who were in the villages in 2016, which means that trajectories that ended up away from the village are not represented; however, field discussions suggest that there were few very positive experiences among those who had left. We believe that our message that many young people from these backgrounds get stuck in loops remains valid. The vast majority of our interviewees had experienced stagnant or negative life trajectories, which often entailed moving from one loop to another: from not managing to finish school, to not managing to find or keep a job, to not managing to get or stay married or create a positively reinforcing livelihoods base. Being stuck in a loop in one aspect of their lives could also spill over into other aspects — for example not finishing school

or finding work could delay marriage, which in turn could hinder access to land.

A common thread across many of the stories told by the young people is that these are individuals in vulnerable situations who are exploited in different ways — by unscrupulous employers in both the formal and informal sector, by police and other officials, even by teachers. Furthermore, there are no structures in place to protect them from this exploitation or to help them move forward: they have nowhere to turn to complain or demand their rights. Low-skilled and informal work is fraught with problems, including bribery, mistreatment, systematic exploitation and misuse of power (Standing, 2011). Young people from marginalized communities are especially easy to take advantage of, being 'wholly dependent on labour brokers and vulnerable to being cheated, trapped in debt, coerced, segregated, injured and imprisoned in their places of work' (Li, 2010: 78). These processes 'render some populations expendable' (Rice et al., 2022: 625) and the effects of this are clearly visible in the individual life stories of some of our informants.

These problems are not targeted at a more structural level by current development interventions, which focus instead on helping individuals who are seen as vulnerable, in the belief that they can be nudged onto positive pathways out of poverty. Several structural problems would have to be addressed simultaneously if a true improvement in life chances for young people were to be realized, and they would need the voice and power to put their problems on the development agenda. They would need to be able to demand basic rights — getting paid after working even if the employer manages to find reasons for not being happy with their performance; not having their assets arbitrarily confiscated by various officials; not having to pay bribes; having the right to sit examinations after a year in school without teachers demanding various fees, when state policy is that primary education is free.

Better policies are possible, as shown by Li (2010) in the case of Kerala, where investment in public health and education as well as enforcement of fair wages has meant that life expectancy is 10 years higher than the Indian average. However, for youth and other marginalized groups to be given real possibilities to effect change would require profound transformations of various institutions and shifts in power relations (Stirling, 2015) — and that would disadvantage other powerful actors. This is of course a difficult, highly politically sensitive project. Development policy usually lacks such emancipatory components, instead promoting depoliticized conceptualizations of rural development that ignore the multiple structural constraints facing rural marginalized groups (Ferguson, 1994).

Forces are also at work to discourage young people from demanding basic rights. Situated within a development discourse of school-to-work transitions as the route to attaining adulthood, as discussed in the beginning of this article (Locke and te Lintelo, 2012; Morrow, 2013), aspirations are created that centre on paid employment as the most important marker for

adulthood (van Blerk et al., 2022). This narrative was vibrant in both the study villages. Succeeding in school was held up as a key to positive life chances, while in fact this narrative mainly served to keep young people in the school loop, aiming for the almost unattainable secondary education and formal work transition.

Despite their presence in everyday life, these loops were not part of what young people had expected or envisioned happening to them. This is partly due to the strength of the narrative that individuals can succeed if they simply try hard enough, part of an overall neoliberal development narrative that ignores structural constraints and places the onus of action on individuals (Ansell et al., 2020). When they are unable to break free from these constraints and achieve progress they are cast as individual failures, who then feel shame — a feeling that discourages these young people from using whatever small means might exist to voice their concern and demand change. This plays into the hands of actors who stand to gain from exploiting marginalized rural youth whose sense of self-worth has been eroded. Recognizing that many young people in the rural Global South may be stuck in loops leading nowhere, rather than being close to pathways out of poverty, is a first step towards understanding what needs to change in order for them to have a better future.

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