

Youth Trajectories through Work and Marriage in Rural Ethiopia

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Summary

The paper explores young people's trajectories through work and marriage in two rural communities in Ethiopia. Global policy attention and research has been dominated by the patterns found in high-income country contexts. Although there is increasing focus on 'adolescence' in low-income countries, the concept of 'transition' has been critiqued as inadequate. The paper explores the trajectories of young people who are no longer in formal schooling, through their involvement in work/livelihoods and marriage. It draws on Young Lives survey and qualitative longitudinal data. The paper suggests that 'transitions' in Ethiopia do not occur in a neat fashion and that education and early marriage are less linked to the linearity of transitions experienced by young people in Ethiopia. Thus, it is advisable to consider contexts that support the 'transitions' of young people while designing policies and programmes.

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About Young Lives

Young Lives is an international study of childhood poverty, following the lives of 12,000 children in 4 countries (Ethiopia, India, Peru and Vietnam) over 15 years. www.younglives.org.uk

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1. Introduction and overview

Research with young people in low-income countries about their livelihoods and living situations, although limited, is growing (Abebe 2013). Much of the research on youth transitions has been dominated by the patterns of disadvantage and social exclusion found in high-income countries (MacDonald et al. 2001; Ridge 2002). In such contexts, the transition to adulthood has been considered to be the straightforward movement from childhood to adulthood, which involved moving from school to work, establishing long-term relationships, and other psychosocial transformations (Young et al. 2011). Transitions to adulthood were sometimes initiated by events beyond the control of individuals; in other cases, they were sought deliberately through events such as marriage, migration and career change (Meleis 2010). The concept of 'transition' to adulthood has recently been critiqued as irrelevant in non-Western settings (Jeffrey 2010; Johnson-Hanks 2002; Morrow 2013), yet global policy attention is increasingly focused on 'adolescence' in low-income countries (Lloyd et al. 2006; UNICEF 2011), just as earlier attention focused on youth transitions (Lloyd 2005). Questions are being asked about the transition from 'what' to 'what', because few young people (anywhere in the world) appear to experience straightforward, linear pathways through life. In most cases, the timing and sequencing of traditional markers of adulthood – finishing school, leaving home, starting work, getting married and having children – are less predictable and more prolonged, diverse and disordered even in high-income countries like the USA (Furstenberg et al. 2005). This makes it difficult to indicate what might constitute a 'successful transition' to adulthood. Thus young people make various 'transitions' and some of these transition experiences are linked to risks of various sorts. For example, poverty may affect young people's capacity to continue in formal schooling, and may push them into 'early adulthood' by encouraging them to undertake paid work, or to marry young (for girls). As Roche (2014) suggests in her research on the interplay of demographic, cultural and political factors in the production of 'youth' in Tajikistan, girls may experience 'early adulthood', but boys also experience difficult transitions to adulthood. Young adulthood can therefore be a period where inequalities are reinforced and in which poor and marginalised young people have a much tougher time navigating than their better-off counterparts (Roche 2014).

In the paper, we explore the situation for young people in rural Ethiopia who have not completed a cycle of basic education,¹ even though early on they had high hopes of going to school. We see how a combination of parental expectations and family livelihoods means that these young people were not in a position to go to school because of the economic situation of their families. We illustrate life experiences of young people in two rural Ethiopian communities, and explore first their involvement in work and livelihoods, and second their experiences regarding marriage. We focus on these two categories of transition in order to contribute to the debates about non-linear trajectories for young people, especially those in the context of poverty, and because the Young Lives sample provides invaluable data on these life-course events and experiences. The paper hence contributes to research about young people's diverging trajectories in contexts of poverty, and suggests that their individual biographies do not fit with a neat 'transition' narrative.

1 Attendance at primary school is compulsory between the ages of 7 and 12, but this is not enforced. Enrolment rates have increased over the past decade, but there are concerns about the quality of schooling that children receive (Woldehanna et al. 2011).

2. Young people's trajectories in context

Within research in Western/developed countries, the concept of youth transition has often been used to explain young people's choices when they leave compulsory education (Wright et al. 2010; United Nations 2007; World Bank 2014). Traditionally, transition referred to the simple movement from education to employment (MacDonald et al. 2001; MacDonald and Marsh 2005; Colley and Hodgkinson 2001), but in reality, young people pass through social transitions of many sorts. 'Youth' is a phase of the life-course where people have many experiences for the first time (Lloyd et al. 2005). One of these experiences may be a jump to the next transition, leaving the first uncompleted. In many low-income countries, schooling has not been or is not available, and young people's transitions are non-linear. This is common among poor rural households, where the labour of children is highly valuable as a contribution to the family economy, and school learning is considered to teach them few skills that might be considered relevant. Hence children who live in poverty may benefit least from the education system (Filmer and Pritchett 1999; UNFPA 2002). In the past, traditionally, early school leaving was considered normal as children and young people often left school to contribute to the family income or to work on farms or in family businesses, and it was the norm to combine school and work. This has become a common concern for policy interventions globally.

In low-income countries, the majority of young people live in rural areas, away from public scrutiny (Bequele and Myers 1995). In Ethiopia, much research has focused on urban youth (Chuta 2007; Mains 2012; but see Abebe 2007, on rural Ethiopia). There have been studies on rural children, especially on their work (for example, Chuta 2014; Panelli et al. 2007; Bourdillon et al. 2010; Spittler and Bourdillon 2012; Tafere 2014a; Tafere 2014b). Young people's labour is crucial in rural areas in both paid and unpaid work (Panelli et al. 2007).

Migration is also seen as a possible pathway to adulthood among rural young people (Punch 2007; Crivello 2011). Punch (2007) suggests that for some rural young people, migration is an important rite of passage in their transition to adulthood and this way they also supplement the household income. For others, it may be a means to achieve high educational aspirations (Crivello 2011; Boyden 2013). On the other hand, for some rural young people, migration is a common trend and most likely it is to look for work because of poverty (Thorsen 2007; Van Blerk 2008).

In regard to education, rural children and young people are particularly disadvantaged. In low-income countries, schools tend to be scarce or farther away from target population (United Nations 2007). Besides, for those who have attended school, leaving school is likely to be the most common first transition (Lloyd et al. 2005), while marriage rarely happens when young people (girls) are still at school. In developed countries, it is widely understood that young people are more likely to leave school because of a combination of poor academic performance and material circumstances (Furlong and Cartmel 2007). However, for many rural young people in low-income countries, leaving school early is the first and most visible form of transition to work, and is related to poverty, not due to poor academic performance, as we demonstrate below.

3. The notion of transition and policy contexts in Ethiopia

During the latter half of the twentieth century, youth emerged as a salient category in Ethiopia (Mains 2012: 113). This was mainly with the expansion of education and growth of cities. In the context of unemployment in urban Ethiopia, young people, especially young men, are frequently perceived as social threats and idlers (Mains 2012). The apparent lack of social agency of young people is encapsulated in the fact that they are often considered *adegenya bozene*, an Amharic phrase which translates literally as ‘dangerous individuals without work’. Yet, this seems to conflict with the fact that migration to cities or other towns for work is also seen as part of young people’s transition to adulthood (Crivello 2011). Migration for employment can thus be seen as a survival strategy (Zewdu 2009). Hence, the notion of youth as a period of linear change from childhood to adulthood (Bonilla Gracia and Gruat 2003; Mains 2012) does not make sense in many Ethiopian contexts, because of migration for work, early marriage, or early school leaving.

Because of the economic changes associated with neoliberal capitalism, taking on the normative responsibilities of adulthood has become impossible in much of Africa (Cole 2004; Hansen 2005; Masquelier 2005). Similarly this normative approach of defining transition to adulthood is almost absent in Ethiopia (Chuta and Crivello 2013). Generally, the trend of the transition seems to depend on gender, on location and on the interaction between the two (Guarcello et al. 2008). In rural areas, young men and women assume adult responsibilities. Hence it is after this stage is reached that they transition to marriage. And transition in rural areas starts earlier than in towns and cities (Garcia and Fares 2008).

In Ethiopia, not all young people transition through school, and age-graded institutions such as school and formal labour markets are at an early stage of development. From a human development perspective, early school-leaving is likely to be associated with lower human capital accumulation, intermittent school attendance, grade repetition and poor school quality and curriculum relevance (Garcia and Fares 2008). Furthermore, frequent economic and social disruptions springing from a variety of factors are believed to have affected children and young people over the past two decades (see Admassu 2010).

In an analysis of data gathered in the early 2000s, Guarcello et al. (2008) suggested that the majority of 15–24 year-old Ethiopians had never entered school, while still others had started work without completing school. Education has been highly politicised over the last three regimes in Ethiopia, with schools promoting government ideology and objectives more than purely educational ones (Teshome 2008). In the past, Ethiopia was oriented towards religious learning until after World War II, when the Government began to emphasise secular learning as a means to achieve social mobility and national development (Tasissa 2009). Similarly the current government education policy reflects the ethnically-based federal government arrangement. Further, inadequate policies meant that very few children received formal schooling and hence Ethiopia was not able to meet the educational standards of other African countries. Rural children were at a disadvantage because schools were limited to towns. Soon after the Ethiopian Federal Democratic Republic Constitution (1995) (see Federal Negarit Gazeta 1995) declared that education was one of the fundamental human rights, schooling expanded across rural and urban areas, and now greater attention is being given in the educational sector to the tasks of policy design, planning and implementation.

There has been dramatic growth in enrolment throughout the education system in recent years (MOE 2012). However, the general belief by different sectors that the increase in school participation and high school enrolment seems to postpone marriage and entry to labour markets is not applicable in rural parts of the country. Regardless of government policy on marriage under the age of 18 as 'harmful traditional practice', proscribed by the law, young women, especially in rural areas, are often married before they are 18 (Boyden et al. 2012). This is mainly due to economic and other social factors. The economic problems of young women, and being married at an early age, are likely to lower the chance of their being enrolled in school. In other cases, if enrolled, there is a high probability of young people leaving school either for paid employment, because of the economic inability of the family to support schooling. In rural areas, young people in farming households who mostly enrol in school in September leave school because their labour is needed during the harvesting (mostly during the months of October to January) and planting seasons. Thus there is incompatibility of school and work (see also Abebe 2007). Likewise, children in urban poor households work in the informal sector, either leaving school or struggling to combine school and work (Orkin 2012). Ethiopia has one of the largest youth populations in sub-Saharan Africa, and the lack of employment opportunities is the greatest challenge to the country's development endeavours.

Thus, in spite of well-established education and marriage laws that encourage the participation of children and young people in education, many young people do not opt to complete formal education. This is partly due to economic reasons.

4. Research context

The paper draws on Young Lives² longitudinal qualitative data gathered in 2007, 2008, and 2011 in two rural Ethiopian communities, Zeytuni in the Tigray region and Leki in the Oromia region, exploring the experiences of young people over time.³ So far there have been four rounds of the quantitative survey (2002, 2006, 2009 and 2013) focused on 2,000 Younger Cohort children born in 2000/1 and 1,000 Older Cohort children born in 1994/5. The majority of the children live in poor households and the sample is pro-poor.

The qualitative data used in this paper are from two communities that have high numbers of children who experienced very little schooling. Various qualitative research methods such as individual interviews, group discussions and creative activities were used with children, caregivers, community representatives and service providers. Interviews are conducted at different premises within the communities and later the recorded voices are transcribed and translated. Data are coded thematically, using Atlas.ti qualitative data analysis software. Young Lives also considers some ethical approaches in its research: informed consent of the participants; anonymity of names of people, places or communities; compensation to

2 Young Lives is an international study investigating childhood poverty in four low and middle-income countries – Ethiopia, Peru, India (Andhra Pradesh) and Vietnam – over 15 years. The study involves 12,000 children in the four countries and aims to improve understanding of the causes and consequences of childhood poverty and the role of policies in improving children's life chances. Young Lives has been undertaking research in Ethiopia since 2001. It has been tracking some 3,000 children growing up in poverty in 20 sites distributed over five major regions in the country (Addis Ababa, Amhara, Oromia, SNNP and Tigray). See www.younglives.org.uk for more information.

3 All names of research sites and young people are pseudonyms, in order to protect respondents' anonymity.

participants for the time spent talking with researchers; provision of relevant information to respondents to maintain trust and ensure that the study is implemented with respect; as well as following a child protection code of conduct which covers wider areas. It also uses both longitudinal and cross-sectional methods of data analysis (see Crivello et al. 2013) for details of qualitative methods, approach to analysis, and research ethics).

In the next section, we briefly describe educational policy in Ethiopia in relation to young people. Following that we draw on data from Round 3 of the Young Lives survey, conducted from late 2009 to early 2010 (when the Older Cohort children were aged 14 or 15). This gives us descriptive statistics on enrolment and school completion, and also children who are no longer at school. We then present the qualitative data from two rural sites. Of the total 30 Older Cohort children in the qualitative sites, five (two girls and three boys) were no longer in school when interviewed in 2011. All of these children are selected for analysis in this paper.

5. School enrolment in Ethiopia

Ethiopia has experienced an improvement in primary school enrolment. The net enrolment rate (NER) increased from 22.5 per cent in 1992 to 85.3 per cent in 2010/11 (MOE 2012). Among the Young Lives sample, overall enrolment in school increased from 65.5 per cent to 76.9 per cent for 8-year-olds between 2002 and 2009 (see Nega 2012). However, not all children who have been able to enrol have managed to complete primary education (Orkin et al. 2012). Most rural families do not send their children to school even though schooling is free, because parents believe that while their children are in school they cannot contribute to the household chores, subsistence agriculture and income-generating activities. Exemption from primary-level school fees alone does not guarantee that parents can afford to send their children to school as parents are expected to buy exercise books, pens and other relevant educational materials.

Despite the overall high enrolment of boys and girls in school, girls' school participation decreases considerably after the age of 15 because of marriage (Admassu 2010). As in other countries in the world, entry into marriage is a major marker of young girls' transition to adulthood (Admassu 2010; Herman et al. 2011). In Ethiopia, household poverty plays a pivotal role in keeping many children out of school. In rural areas low school enrolment, high rates of school leaving and low attainment are partly attributed to lack of access to school and poor quality of schools (Admassu 2010). The scattered pattern of settlements in rural areas limits access to school. This is a concern for girls, as they also face problems of security on their way to school, especially in terms of the risk of abduction, which often leads to early marriage (Chuta and Crivello 2013).

5.1. Children who are no longer in school

According to the Young Lives longitudinal data, there was good progress in the school enrolment of the sampled children during the first three rounds of the quantitative survey.⁴ In Round 2, the enrolment of the Older Cohort had increased to 98 per cent from 89 per cent in Round 1 for the urban children. For the rural children, there was an increase in enrolment

⁴ The Round 1 survey was conducted when the Older Cohort children were age 8 in 2002, the Round 2 survey when they were age 12 in 2006 and Round 3 survey in 2009, when they were age 15.

from 51 per cent in Round 1 to 97 per cent during Round 2 (Woldehanna et al. 2011). The overall drop-out rate was 8 per cent, and this was quite small compared to the national average of 18 per cent. Regarding gender differences, during Round 3 fewer of the girls discontinued school (7 per cent) than boys (9 per cent).

Table 1 presents the percentages of enrolment, completion and dropout of Older Cohort children during Round 3 from survey data. The data are disaggregated according to location and gender.

Table 1. *School enrolment, completion and discontinuation of Older Cohort children, 2009 (%)*

	Enrolment	Completion rate (primary school)	Discontinued school between 2006 (age 11–12) and 2009 (age 14–15)
Average	90	18	8
Urban	96	29	4
Rural	85	10	12
Boys	88	19	9
Girls	92	17	7

Source: Round 3 survey (N=970).

The table shows that among urban children enrolment was high (96 per cent) and the school leaving rate was low (4 per cent) when compared to rural children, of whom 12 per cent had left school. In terms of gender, there was a high school enrolment rate of girls (92 per cent) with a relatively low school leaving rate (7 per cent).

Young Lives children have also indicated some of their reasons for not going to school. These include level of fee; cost of books and uniforms; lack of safety on the way to school; presence of ill-treatment/abuse in the school; the need to spend time on domestic and agricultural work; the need to do paid work to earn money; illness; family difficulties (disagreements, extravagance, addiction); pregnancy/fatherhood; and being excluded/expelled from school for misbehaviour or long absences.

6. Case study children

The following cases are selected for analysis because they were not at school when interviewed in 2011, aged 16 or 17. Hadush and Haymanot reside in Zeytuni, a relatively remote rural community. There are more than ten thousand people living in this area, where the majority are Tigrinya-speaking Orthodox Christians. Agriculture is the main livelihood but also the community engages in waged work related to stone-crusher plants,⁵ animal rearing, poultry, masonry, irrigated farms and trading. Children in middle childhood start assuming greater responsibilities for maintaining the family livelihood, often because of parental illness and absence. As a result many children leave school soon after having enrolled. Government schools running up to Grade 8 are available for children aged from 7 to 16/17. Although some

⁵ Work in stone-crusher plants involves transporting and carrying the excavated stones to the crusher plants.

of these schools are not easily accessible geographically. Thus, female students fear sexual harassment, which may result from travelling long distances to school.

Hadush lives with his parents, who are farmers. He is the only child in the household who has never been to formal school. He does paid work as well as working on the family farm. Haymanot lived with her aunt for three years in a different locality. Later, due to her mother's illness, she had to stop school and return to her place of birth. She became responsible for both household chores and waged work, which disappointed her a lot – she complained about the hard physical labour involved. She did public work as part of the Productive Safety Net Programme (PSNP)⁶ and worked at stone-crusher plants. Her sister had migrated to the regional town in search of waged work.

Tufa, Gemechu and Ayu live in Leki, a poor rural community in Oromia Regional State. Rain-fed agriculture is the main source of livelihood. In addition the community engages in irrigated farming, fishing and animal husbandry. As the area is drought-prone, crop failure and increases in the price of food crops have exposed many households to food crisis, meaning that the majority of families are dependent on the PSNP. Although the PSNP is regarded by the community as a positive government intervention, one of its unintended consequences is that children contribute their labour to it, substituting for adult family members, even though this is not legal, and it may affect their schooling negatively (Tafere and Woldehanna 2012). Regardless of the presence of this programme, some families complain that it is not enough and that they still prefer sending their children to do waged work in order to overcome food shortages at difficult times of the year.

Early marriage through voluntary abduction is also widespread in the community.⁷ Because of this, many girls get married and leave school early. Others also migrate to the nearby town in search of work in a flower farm company, and leave school. Tufa lives with his parents and seven siblings. His father has spent a year in prison. Tufa makes money by herding cattle for other families and fishing. His involvement in work increased during his father's imprisonment. Gemechu is the youngest of seven siblings and does household chores and waged work (as a guard on a corn plantation). Ayu moved house after her marriage and is currently living in the nearby town, some distance away from her place of birth. When she was at her parents' house she used to engage in waged work and fulfil her personal needs with the money she earned. As a result she repeated a school year (grade) several times.

6 The PSNP started in 2005 as the biggest social protection programme in Ethiopia. It has two components: public work (PW) and direct support (DS).

7 In some parts of rural Ethiopia marriages quite often take place as a result of abduction. According to this practice, the girl is abducted and then the parents are asked to consent to the marriage. They will often do so because it means the bride wealth they receive is higher. If a girl wants to get married to a particular boy, 'voluntary abduction' may take place, meaning that she has consented to the abduction.

7. 'Transition' to working life

For these young people, there was no clear transition from school to work because they had hardly attended school at all. This period of transition is not linear, or well-defined with a distinct end point. Rather, it was a process whereby young people worked temporarily doing household chores, family farm work and/or paid work (Garcia and Fares 2008). In rural communities like Leki, young people (mainly boys) are required to take the place of their fathers in the family in order to run farms when fathers are absent. When boys reach the age of 12 they begin to work with their fathers in the fields, making yokes and ploughing (although they undertake all kinds of other farming-related responsibilities at an early age, including herding goats and cattle). Thus in order to supplement their fathers' labour, boys usually stop school and assist the family since attending school and working is difficult.

In this section, we discuss young people's schooling experiences, and what factors caused them to leave school and to work.

Older children are less likely to attain more years of schooling than their younger siblings (Woldehanna et al. 2005). Due to financial problems and the preference for older children's labour in the household to attend to household chores, looking after siblings and farm work, older children are most likely to discontinue school or not to enrol in school at all. Hadush, 17, is an example of the latter. He has never been to a formal school although he said he had enrolled in school in 2008 but had withdrawn immediately to herd cattle. His father says that Hadush regrets not going to school. He gave an example of a time when Hadush was invited to take part in a group discussion as part of Young Lives research with his peers. The boy refused to participate because he was shy and feared that he might be asked to write something and he does not know how to write in Tigrigna.

Because many rural families require the labour of their boys for farm and other agricultural activities, fewer boys than girls are enrolled in school in rural areas. As Table 1 shows, 88 per cent of the Older Cohort boys were enrolled in school, and this was slightly less than girls (92 per cent) during the 2009 survey.

Ownership of livestock in Ethiopia is negatively associated with enrolment in school since children's (especially boys') labour is usually used for herding cattle. When Hadush's father explained, he said, "I did not send him to school as he is the only boy in the family to look after the cattle. Hadush himself also prefers herding to studying." Hadush said he wanted to pursue his religious education⁸ and become a priest. Church or religious education used to be very common in the past. His father also wanted Hadush to become a priest and conduct religious rituals such as baptism and prayers at church. When the father was asked why he was only sending Hadush to a religious school, he replied, "People cannot live without a priest. If you die or something happened to you, it is only the priests who bless and pray for

8 The church school system has preserved traditional learning in Ethiopia. It is one of the oldest in Christendom, having originated in the Aksumite Empire with the introduction of Christianity. The objective was basically religious and content ranged from reading, writing or calligraphy (*kum tshfet*), liturgy (*kidasis*), church music (*zema*), poetry (*kine*), commentaries (*mesahft*), and astrology (*bahrehasab*, *abushakir*). Religious education is usually given in Ge'ez language which is only typical to church schools. In Ge'ez, the learning process consists of reading and writing as well as reciting a few biblical texts. This education is normally given in churches at any time and day of the week, and in some cases even at night. The main objective of attending religious education is to become a priest.

you. If you have saints' days or other memorial celebrations, you need a priest to conduct the ceremony. So that is why I wanted him to be a priest."

As Hadush got older, he described doing other paid work (loading sand onto a truck) and said he made his family feel happy by giving them what he earned. In the future, Hadush also wants to work hard at farm activities. This is what he aspires to, unlike other Young Lives children who are in school and would like to enter professions or get good jobs (Tafere 2014). Later on, he maintained his farming aspiration, but at times also wanted to expand the types of work he engaged in. He said he hoped to do cobblestone work, which involves cutting and selling stones. He also hoped to go to school when the electricity supply was extended in his village so that he could attend in the evening (which might be possible if electricity was available). His father also wanted him to proceed with working in stone-carving and farming activities and study probably up to Grade 8. He was also rearing and fattening sheep for himself to sell. The skills children get from working are considered very important for their later life.

Family-related economic shocks, which include parental illness, death and absence, also make it less likely that children will attend school. For rural households, the more shocks a household faces, the lower the probability that the household will send the children to school (Woldehanna et al. 2005). For those children who are attending school, economic shocks can cause them to discontinue schooling. Haymanot, following her mother's heart attack, had to return to her mother's home from her aunt's house in the local town, where she was going to school. Upon her return to her mother's place, Haymanot had to shoulder the responsibility of undertaking all the household chores on her own. She also undertook paid work in stone-crusher plants. A similar story came from Tufa, in Leki. When interviewed in 2011, Tufa explained that he had left school more than twice, primarily for family-related reasons. When his father was imprisoned, Tufa was the one running the household, substituting for his father. Being the second of seven children meant he bore a lot of responsibility. This is similar to being the oldest girl in the household, which increases the volume of the work and also the amount of time required to accomplish it. Tufa contributed a great deal to his family's livelihood through fishing, undertaking household chores and doing waged work. In relation to this, his father described Tufa's stamina:

"He has been working hard day and night on the farms. His effort is even greater than mine and he never gets tired. He spends most of his time on the farming, taking his younger sisters with him. When you see him, his physical height may seem short. But, in his mind, he is very mature. For example, he goes with the other children to glean vegetables and sell them. But he does not spend the money immediately like the other children, but saves it to give to his parents and to buy clothes for himself. Sometimes he even buys a chicken."

(Tufa's father, interviewed in 2011, Leki)

Thus family-related shocks mean that some young people leave school. Although Tufa and his father had always wanted Tufa to complete his education at Grade 12, the family situation did not enable him to pursue his education. Children of Tufa's age were in Grades 6, 7 and 8 in 2011, while Tufa was only in Grade 2 when he left school. The fact that Tufa was unable to complete his schooling seems to affect his current life. Regardless of the income he earns from waged work and fishing, and the happiness that comes from the blessings he gets from his parents for augmenting his family's livelihood, Tufa still thinks perfect happiness and reward come from education.

Interviewer: What things make you feel happy in school?

Tufa: I feel happy if I could complete school.

Interviewer: What things do you hate?

Tufa: I hate if I quit school.

Interviewer: Do you think that you have a good life?

Tufa: No.

Interviewer: Why is that?

Tufa: It is because I am not going to school.

Interviewer: How do you feel about that?

Tufa: I feel that I am left behind my friends.

Initially, when he joined school and when he was learning, Tufa had great enthusiasm for completing school. Later, after he had left school, his view had shifted and he considered himself as not living well because he was lagging behind his friends.

Although children in Leki and Zeytuni leave school mainly for family-related reasons, there is also another trajectory that some young people follow, namely migration. For Gemechu, it was the search for employment in a different locality that made him leave school. He migrated to herd cattle for a woman who lived some distance away. Gemechu, like Tufa, has stopped and started school repeatedly. Initially he left school in Grade 1 at the age of 13 to work as a herder in a different place. Later following his return to his parental home, he re-joined school and attended up to Grade 2, then stopped for the second time. Gemechu is 16, but was enrolled in Grade 1 very late, when he was 12, because of his parents' other priorities. He recounts this incident as a 'bad' event he experienced in life.

"My parents prevented me from joining school and forced me to herd cattle; they give [higher] priority to their cattle than to my education. Sometimes I am forced to go to the field with cattle early in the morning and had to stay there up to dusk. During my stay, I come across wild animals and this frightens me a lot."

(Gemechu, interviewed in 2008, Leki)

The reasons why Gemechu was made to leave school early were similar to those for which he joined late. His role in decision-making was minimal, and he had to abide by what his parents decided. Gemechu first stopped school to contribute to the family's livelihood and to save some money in order to finance his schooling. Thus he would be able to cover the costs of clothing and school materials. He was also made to move to a different place.

In Ethiopia, children from rural areas are often sent to live with relatives in urban areas in order to be cared for, to attend school, to help or care for a sick relative, or to help with household chores, as well as to search for employment. Thus, it is clear that children contribute their labour through this form of transition. In some cases children and young people are also hired to work as domestic workers (Chuta 2007; Erulkar and Mekbib 2007) and in other cases girls of 15/16 come to urban areas to seek work in the sex industry (Van Blerk 2008). Similarly children like Gemechu also migrate between rural areas in order to work for pay because their parents live in abject poverty and cannot afford to send them to school. Hence the economic poverty of households and their requirement for children's labour in farming and other related activities deter parents from sending their children to school. Gemechu was very distressed, and said he cried a lot every time his parents told him

to leave school. But as he had to respect them, he accepted their decision even though he felt it was not the right one. His father also described how Gemechu provided a lot of support for the family and said that the family was benefiting from the work he did.

Young people's decision-making capacity and social worth increase as they grow older (Chuta and Crivello 2013). However, this does not mean that all personal life decisions are made by the young people, and their agency is sometimes constrained (Chuta 2014; Panelli et al. 2007). Hadush, regardless of becoming a young man who can differentiate between right and wrong, still obeys his parents' orders and decisions. Earlier when his father made him herd cattle, he obeyed and even in 2011, when he was old enough to make his own decisions, his parents' needs and orders came first. "I bought a goat and slaughtered it for my family; I also bought clothes and shoes with the rest." There are strong family ties and interdependence in Ethiopia, whether within the extended family or between members within the household. It seems that some young men like Hadush do not oppose their parents' wishes regarding their earnings, as they value highly the parental blessings they receive in return. Hadush's obedience extends to saying that he will accept his parents' plans for his marriage, whenever those plans are made.

Parents in poor households in general do not see the benefits of education; they want the labour of their children at home. In Ethiopia, children's labour is in greater demand in rural areas for farm work, off-farm work (i.e. farm-related but not on family-owned land), livestock herding and household chores, especially in harvesting seasons. According to Tafere and Woldehanna (2012), these are the most common reasons for children discontinuing school. Parents perceive that the returns from schooling are low (especially for girls), partly because opportunities for employment are in short supply, and therefore there appear to be few benefits. Besides, socio-cultural attitudes reduce the probability of girls enrolling in school. According to Ethiopian culture, as a woman's place is considered to be at home, girls would normally stay close to their mothers and learn household skills and behaviours that prepare them for their future lives.

Seasonal demands for child labour also have an impact on school attendance. In Leki, harvesting and fasting periods are times when there is a high incidence of children missing, or leaving school. Compared to what can be gained from farmland during a good harvest, the long-term benefits of education do not seem apparent to parents. Even if Hadush makes it to a formal school, his father only wants to make sure that he can read and write.

In general, most parents in Leki and Zeytuni express the desire that their children have more education than they themselves had attained. However, in most cases family poverty and other conditions constrain them from fulfilling what they aspire to for their children. Thus as rural incomes are often more seasonal, rural families may have to sacrifice their children's schooling for the family's subsistence (United Nations 2007: 18). More importantly, as families have high expectations of their children, these children, upon becoming young adults, are expected to contribute more than when they were small. Hence, children grow up bearing complex responsibilities and maintaining reciprocal relationships within the family (Abebe 2013).

8. 'Transition' from school to marriage

Like the 'transition' from school to work, young people in both research sites also pass through another important stage in the life-course: marriage. In this section, we present the cases of two girls who married and stopped attending school. Their decision to marry was made through a gradual process that later led them to abandoning school completely. One of the girls, Ayu, had repeated school grades several times prior to getting married.

Haymanot and Ayu both married when they were 16. Haymanot's marriage was arranged by her mother, according to the culture of the wider community.⁹ Unlike some other Older Cohort children, who attained a maximum grade of Grade 2, Haymanot pursued her education up to Grade 5. She was attending a school in town while living with her aunt for three years and was made to return to her place of birth when her mother became seriously ill. Haymanot was disappointed when she left school and thought that she would not get a job in the future. She explained loving her first cycle of education, as she was one of the outstanding students, doing well at school.

Haymanot undertook all the household chores in addition to doing paid work and public work as part of the PSNP. Because of this, she was very busy. Her mother also preferred her to do these things instead of going to school. In 2008 she said, "There are a lot of expenses associated with schooling for pens, pencils, exercise books and books. As you know, I cannot afford all these. By prohibiting her from school, I know I am disrupting her future opportunities."

Haymanot's family had been abandoned by her father and did not know his whereabouts. She also stopped school because she had to care for her ailing mother through working hard. As Tafere (2014a) notes, the absence of food in the family caused by the drought in her village, the ill health of her mother and the lack of support from her father shaped her trajectory and culminated in her early marriage. Haymanot's mother felt obliged to marry off her daughter because of the family's poverty and their fear of risks associated with young girls in the community. Her mother was worried about Haymanot being sexually assaulted or raped when she was working in the stone-crusher plant. "I believe it is better in the community to marry off a daughter as early as possible". Her mother further indicated, "This is a great chance for Haymanot and not all girls her age get this kind of opportunity, because she is from a poor family." So, this was more important than sending Haymanot back to school.

Ayu left school long before her marriage, for she was unable to pursue schooling alongside her long-term neck problem, which occurs regularly, and her engagement in paid work such as weeding and planting. Because of her health problems and her need to earn money, she had been in Grade 2 for five years, during which time she repeated the year several times and attended sporadically. Besides, her mother described Ayu's carelessness towards her schoolwork when compared to other children her age.

⁹ In rural parts of Ethiopia, marriages are arranged by parents, and a boy may not propose to a girl directly. Even if a boy has proposed to a girl himself, the actual process that leads to marriage has to pass through elders. Prior to marriage, the boy's family will send elders to the girl's family and the elders will act on behalf of the boy's family, asking the girl's family give their daughter to the boy in marriage. People in urban areas also arrange marriages in this way sometimes.

Interviewer: Does she want to discontinue school because she's more interested in working?

Ayu's mother: Yes, she likes to go to farm by stopping her education, but her brothers and I advise here to give priority to her education rather than to this temporary work.

When Ayu's mother was asked in 2008 what she wished for her daughter in the future she said:

"I wish that she will continue and complete her education and get good work. I do not want her to marry and suffer living here. Education is the important thing she needs in her life; it is the best alternative for girls at the present; this is my wish but I do not know the intention of her father."

However, Ayu's mother also seemed to be ambivalent about Ayu's education – on the one hand, she said she wanted Ayu to be educated, on the other she said that girls these days must be married early to avoid 'dangers'.

"The condition of the place is not good. The time is corrupt; it is better that she gets married early. Many children have already gone into bad ways. For instance, there is a little girl I know. She is a child. She delivered a baby recently. She suffered a lot. She was admitted to hospital. Her body was swollen. Her father is not alive and her mother suffered a lot alone with her daughter. When you see this, it is better that a girl marries on time [at 16 or 17]."

(Ayu's mother, 2011, Leki)

Although Ayu's mother repeatedly indicated that she wanted her daughter to go to school, invariably she had no intention of sending Ayu back to school. The majority of parents in rural Ethiopia prefer sending their sons to school rather than their daughters. This is mainly because of the view that education of boys is a long-term investment, girls' education is generally a waste of money and boys should be sent in preference to girls when parents cannot afford to send all their children to school (Population Council 2010). Besides as girls normally get married early and leave the household, most benefits from education are assumed to accrue to the family into which they marry (World Bank 1998). Apart from this, because of women's low social status and traditional role in the home, many parents do not see the value of sending girls to school. Given that some parents in Ethiopia doubt that investment in education can yield good returns even for boys, the chances that they will believe there are advantages in educating girls are slim (Joshi and Vespoor 2013).

Ayu also described, when interviewed in 2008, the pressure her parents might exert on her to get married early.

Interviewer: At what age do you think that you get married?

Ayu: I don't want to get married, but my parents may force me to get married.

Whatever value a community gives to marriage, or in rural contexts to 'early marriage', poverty is one of the major factors underpinning early marriage. It is a critical factor contributing to child marriage and a common reason why parents may encourage a girl to marry. Where poverty is acute, a girl may be regarded as an economic burden and her marriage to a much older – sometimes even elderly – man is believed to benefit the girl and her family both financially and socially (Tiwari 2004; Herz and Sperling 2004). This is a very common form of marriage for girls in poor contexts. Haymanot's experience partially reflects this. Although she was made to get married through an arranged marriage, getting married

benefited her economically. Now that she is married, she no longer worries about having to do paid work and bring money home. Since her husband is bringing in money for now, she does not need to work as a day labourer. From Haymanot's mother's point of view, one of convincing reason for consenting to the marriage proposal was that dowry (*gezmi*) was not required by her daughter's suitor. According to the local custom, Haymanot's parents would be expected to give money or assets to her husband eventually to be used by the new couple upon her marriage. But because the family was poor, the elders who brought the marriage proposal told the mother to use this opportunity. They were told she was lucky that her daughter was getting a husband who was not asking for *gezmi*, unlike other girls in the community. In Leki, on the other hand, a system of bride wealth operates.¹⁰ The need for bride wealth from their daughters' husbands may encourage parents to marry off their daughters early. When interviewed in 2007, Ayu's mother reflected on the high expectation of her husband for the bride wealth from his daughters. She said, "Ayu's father has a strong interest in marrying his daughters to somebody to get the bride wealth from the family of the husband. Their father wishes to give them to somebody in the form of abduction." Thus, parents play a clandestine role in arranging these types of marriage. Even if daughters are forcibly abducted, parents often want to consent to the marriage, as they want the bride wealth that comes after reconciliation. When the elders facilitate the reconciliation process there is an additional payment of 2,200 birr made by the groom's family as compensation for violating cultural norms.¹¹

Apart from this, girls are made to marry early to preserve family honour associated with female chastity. Marriage before or at puberty is said to protect girls from infidelity (Boyden et al. 2013). In communities such as Leki, early marriage is seen as a way of protecting girls from unsanctioned pre-marital sex. Since girls are often susceptible to sexual assault/rape and abduction, parents prefer to have their daughters stop school early and get married in order to protect family honour (Chuta and Crivello 2013). Haymanot's case is illustrative of this when her mother wanted to marry her early.

"In the rural areas, if a girl is asked for in marriage but if she or her family rejects it, she will be in trouble. It becomes worse for such girls as Haymanot who usually spend the day outside their house and work with men and women. Some people may create problems which may collapse her remaining life time. Thus, it is safer for a girl in this community to get married as soon as possible. Because I always worry about what if my daughter is raped and brings me a child from unknown person or that she might be beaten by a man whose marriage proposal is rejected?"

(Haymanot's mother, 2011, Zeytuni)

Although not for the same reason, boys' parents also want their boys to get married 'early'. In the future, Hadush's father wants Hadush to become a businessman or a farmer yet he underlines the importance of marriage. For Hadush's father, marriage is the basis for a boy's success, so he has said that Hadush should get married at 20, and have two or three children. In Leki, Gemechu and Tufa's fathers have said they would like to see their sons married but suggested that the age for the first marriage of their boys should be between 25 and 30.

¹⁰ Bride wealth is money and goods (for example, cattle and other assets) given by a bride's family to her husband's family when she marries. There are differences in the ways marriage endowments are made in different regions of Ethiopia (see Chuta and Crivello 2014; Boyden et al. 2013).

¹¹ This is how marriage initiated through voluntary abduction is formalised.

The preparation time for entry into marriage involves important processes young people need to undergo before the wedding in both sites. In Zeytuni, when a girl is engaged, she spends about one year moving between her parents' house and that of her in-laws. She stays for about two weeks to a month with her in-laws, then goes back to her parents for a similar period of time. She does this up until the wedding day, a year after the engagement. This is done mainly to allow the man time to secure a living before establishing an independent life with his wife. This time also allows the girl to grow strong physically and learn the basic facts of married life (this includes being trained in how to prepare food for the husband and care for him, how to live with new family members, the community and her in-laws). Besides, the prospective husband and wife will have time to get to know each other and plan for their future together. The husband also gets time to work and save money for the marriage celebration and the future family expenses.

Female circumcision (FGM) also defines adulthood among young girls in Leki.¹² According to caregivers and elders in Leki, it is an important rite of passage that young girls have to go through in preparation for their marriage. Although the girls do not talk openly about the arrangements for their circumcision, for fear that their family and themselves may get punished (because it is illegal), it is seen as protective for girls and a process through which they need to pass if they are to get married (Boyden et al. 2013). According to the community elder and discussions with the caregivers in Leki, girls get circumcised when they are about to get married and this practice is still widespread in the area. Girls undergo circumcision in seclusion when they are about 14 or 15. Ayu's mother told the researchers that Ayu was circumcised in 2008. And it was two years after her circumcision that she was married through voluntary abduction.¹³ Circumcision is understood by the community as a phase of preparation in transitioning to marriage.

In Ethiopia, as noted, the median age at first marriage in 2011 was 16.5 years for women and 23.2 years for men (CSA 2012). Although not the case with any Young Lives children in the qualitative sample, one potential contributing factor to the rising age of first marriage could be the move from arranged marriage to a system where young people select their own marriage partners, which is also assumed to reduce early marriage. The other factor is the educational attainment of young people, primarily that of young women. It is well known that the more years of schooling a girl has, the less likely it is that she will marry early. The presence of assets (such as land) and the family situation also contribute to young people's transition to marriage in the rural households, and poverty affects all this.

Although the age at which girls marry has increased, early marriage of girls is still common practice in rural areas of Ethiopia (Boyden et al. 2012). It is one of several factors contributing to the withdrawal of girls from school. In communities where the 'kidnapping' of girls for marriage is common, older girls are less likely to attend school. In Leki, girls fear that they may get abducted on their way to school and have to marry early (Chuta and Crivello 2013). In fear of these practices, parents are also reluctant to send their girls to school. Caregivers highlighted the importance of their daughters getting married for at a young age. This is spoken of in the light of social and cultural factors. To avoid the perpetuation of non-

12 See Young Lives Policy Brief 21 (Pankhurst 2014) which explores the prevalence of FGM and early marriage in Ethiopia, some of the reasons for the persistence of these practices, and strategies to tackle them, which include ensuring education and employment opportunities for girls.

13 This form of marriage is currently becoming very common in Leki. Both the boy and the girl agree to the abduction but without the knowledge of their families.

married status, where a girl is considered as 'undesirable' if she is not married beyond a certain age, parents ensure that girls get married before the legal age.¹⁴ This is mainly to reduce the stigma it brings to the girl and the dishonour accruing to the family (EGLDAM 2008). Thus, parents encourage early marriage in the hope that the marriage will also benefit them both socially and economically (UNICEF 2005). In Haymanot's case, it did – and it also seemed to benefit her mother too. Thus, many factors interact to place a girl at risk of early marriage: poverty, danger, family honour and the need for stability.

9. Conclusion

In this paper, we have explored young people's trajectories in rural Ethiopia, using a case study approach. The analysis indicates that economic instability coupled with social and cultural factors shapes young people's trajectories in Zeytuni and Leki. Young people often find themselves caught between addressing personal and family needs. From a western individualistic point of view, the two worlds may encourage young people to prioritise what in international policy circles would be considered to be the 'wrong' choices.

We have shown that young people either never attend school, or leave school early, in order to maintain the livelihoods of their family. Thus, their educational aspirations are not met, and they take up paid work, and/or contribute their labour to their families' farming and off-farm activities. Boys' labour is required for agricultural tasks in farming households, and girls' labour is required for domestic work. In the case of Hadush and Gemechu, they worked because of significant need in their families. In such contexts, as Jeffrey (2010) notes, 'adulthood is imagined in terms of interdependence rather than autonomy, and people are considered to become less rather than more independent as they mature' (p. 498). Thus, we have shown, it does not make sense to talk about school-to-work transitions in the contexts of rural poverty in Ethiopia since poverty acts as a catalyst for young people's trajectories. Rather, youth is a period when young people start to assume greater responsibilities within their households. Young people begin to do various forms of work and become skilled in domestic and income-generating activities at a very early age. There are also substantial groups of young people like Hadush who never enter school and transition directly to the labour force. This suggests that policy and programmes need to take account of local contexts of poverty, lack of opportunities for work, and lack of social protection schemes that might have supported children like Haymanot, Gemechu and Tufa as they attempted to combine schooling with their responsibilities to their families. School-to-work schemes such as TVET¹⁵ explicitly focus on programmes that prepare students for employment or self-employment. As a result, they often do not consider young people not at school and already working in the informal sector. Thus, without an in-depth look across the long-term experiences of young people who leave school early, it is difficult to plan appropriate policies and interventions that support them in their future career or school completion.

14 Elders in Leki believe that a girl has to marry between the ages of 15 and 20 and this is considered to be a good age for the girl as she is already mature physically. The legal age of marriage in Ethiopia is 18.

15 Technical vocational education and training. The Ministry of Education have identified 20 broad vocational areas for the TVET programme: construction, electricity/electronics, metal manufacturing, automotive, textile technology, leather technology, agro-food processing, industrial laboratory, business and services, hotel and tourism, information-communication technology, metrology, health, culture, craft, transport, defence, water technology, agriculture and sport.

Early marriage also marks an important aspect of adulthood in rural Ethiopia. Rural girls often marry for the first time at around 14 or 15 years (Van Blerk 2008). As seen in the case studies, socio-cultural and economic factors help to explain how, in low-income countries, children may not have access to formal schooling and thus assume adult responsibilities, including family formation and productive roles within their families, from an early age. Young people's norms and actions are constrained by what their communities have accepted as 'the right thing to do'. By implication, these young people are the cultural constructs of their environments and communities. Thus, because adulthood itself is a cultural construct that varies significantly from society to society and across time, the nature of it has to be kept in mind when designing policies and programmes. Seeing young people as socially and culturally embedded actors, and not simply as human capital outcomes, will aid in the identification of their specific needs and in the determination of the most effective approaches. This can be accomplished by paying attention to the narrative accounts of young people's reasons for leaving school early, and the poverty that underpins them.

As we have explained, early marriage is considered to be protective for girls to prevent the undesired effects of premarital sexual activity, rape and pregnancy. In Leki, circumcision guarantees the girl her readiness for marital life. Legal codes governing family law usually establish the minimum age at first marriage to be 18 (Federal Negarit Gazetta 2000). In spite of the existing legal minimum age for marriage, the cultural definitions of acceptability may have much more force in the resulting outcomes than those imposed by the law. Thus, policies and programmes should also consider these factors when designing and implementing interventions.

We have also seen that the obvious 'transition' event – that of marriage – is in fact quite a long-drawn process in Ethiopia. As seen in Zeytuni, transition to marriage involves some pre-conditions girls have to consider. The preparation stage of becoming a self-reliant wife is important while transitioning to marriage. Similarly, in Leki, circumcision is considered necessary preparation for marriage. Thus, this is seemingly different from normative definitions of transition, as a change from one state to another.

It is clear that parents do want their children to be educated, and for them to attain a better level than they themselves have attained. However, economic problems and cultural beliefs/norms are important when it comes to decisions about sending girls to school or about marriage. In many cases, parents want to preserve family honour first by having their girls marry early, thus they encourage them to leave school. Early marriage is also sometimes considered as a means of economic survival. If girls are married early, then the family has one less mouth to feed and the girl herself is considered to live a better life with her husband.

Therefore, transition in Ethiopia is not neat in the context of poverty. Especially in the relationship between school and work, the case study children have repeated experiences of moves between paid jobs, domestic tasks and school attendance. For poor children, work is part of their growing up, which they learn through practice; they do not have special training to carry out such work. Hence, there is no straightforward progression through education or training to paid work or domestic work, and the transition is more fragmented. Therefore, education is arguably not yet clearly linked to a linear model of 'transition' for young people growing up in poverty. Likewise, 'transition' to marriage does not necessarily follow the usual transition notions. Young people's trajectories differ according to factors such as gender, place of residence, socio-economic background and education, changing social norms and cultural expectations. Thus it is advisable that stakeholders working on youth areas should consider the impacts of such factors in their programmes.

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Youth Trajectories through Work and Marriage in Rural Ethiopia

The paper explores young people's trajectories through work and marriage in two rural communities in Ethiopia. Global policy attention and research has been dominated by the patterns found in high-income country contexts. Although there is increasing focus on 'adolescence' in low-income countries, the concept of 'transition' has been critiqued as inadequate. The paper explores the trajectories of young people who are no longer in formal schooling, through their involvement in work/livelihoods and marriage. It draws on Young Lives survey and qualitative longitudinal data. The paper suggests that 'transitions' in Ethiopia do not occur in a neat fashion and that education and early marriage are less linked to the linearity of transitions experienced by young people in Ethiopia. Thus, it is advisable to consider contexts that support the 'transitions' of young people while designing policies and programmes.



About Young Lives

Young Lives is an international study of childhood poverty, involving 12,000 children in 4 countries over 15 years. It is led by a team in the Department of International Development at the University of Oxford in association with research and policy partners in the 4 study countries: Ethiopia, India, Peru and Vietnam.

Through researching different aspects of children's lives, we seek to improve policies and programmes for children.

Young Lives Partners

Young Lives is coordinated by a small team based at the University of Oxford, led by Professor Jo Boyden.

- *Ethiopian Development Research Institute, Ethiopia*
- *Pankhurst Development Research and Consulting plc*
- *Save the Children (Ethiopia programme)*
- *Centre for Economic and Social Sciences, Andhra Pradesh, India*
- *Save the Children India*
- *Sri Padmavathi Mahila Visvavidyalayam (Women's University), Andhra Pradesh, India*
- *Grupo de Análisis para el Desarrollo (GRADE), Peru*
- *Instituto de Investigación Nutricional, Peru*
- *Centre for Analysis and Forecasting, Vietnamese Academy of Social Sciences, Vietnam*
- *General Statistics Office, Vietnam*
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