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"Waithood": Youth transitions and social change

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Response to Syed Mansoob Murshed

Abstract
This paper examines the challenges of youth transitions to adulthood in Africa as an illustration of global contemporary forms of the struggle for freedom from want and freedom from fear. It explores the lives of young people struggling with unemployment and sustainable livelihoods in the context of widespread social and economic crisis. Failed neo-liberal economic policies, bad governance and political instability have caused stable jobs to disappear - without jobs young people cannot support themselves and their families. Most young Africans are living in a period of suspension between childhood and adulthood that I call "waithood". This state of limbo is becoming pervasive and is gradually replacing conventional adulthood. While focusing on four African case studies, the paper argues that youth in Europe, North America and other parts of the world face the same crisis of joblessness and restricted futures. Thus, this youth crisis is global. The "waithood generation" possesses a tremendous transformative potential, as young people understand that the struggle to attain freedom from want requires radical social and political change. From riots and protests in the streets of Maputo, Dakar, Madrid, London, New York and Santiago, to revolutions that overthrow dictatorships in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, the "waithood generation" appears to be conquering freedom from fear and fighting for their rights.

Introduction

The majority of African youths are today grappling with a lack of jobs and deficient education. After they leave school with few skills, they are unable to obtain work and become independent - to build, buy or rent a house for themselves, support their relatives, get married, establish families and gain social recognition as adults. These attributes of adulthood are becoming increasingly unattainable by the majority of young people in Africa. I use the notion *waithood*, a portmanteau term of "wait" and "-hood", meaning 'waiting for adulthood', to refer to this period of suspension between childhood and adulthood. On the one hand, young people are no longer children in need of care, but on the other, they are still unable to become independent adults. While chronological age defines them as adults, socially they are not recognized as such. Rather than defining youth on the basis of age categories (for example 15-25 or 15-35[2]), this paper

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[2] The United Nations (2007) and the World Bank (2007) defined youth as all those between the ages of 15-25. The African Union (2006) and many African nations define youth as those aged 15-35.

understands youth as defined by social expectations and responsibilities and considers all those who, despite their age, have not yet been able to attain social adulthood as youth.

The paper draws from in-depth interviews with young people in four African countries - Mozambique, Senegal, South Africa and Tunisia - between 2008 and 2011. It examines young people's strategies for coping with waithood and carving out forms of livelihoods, which albeit precarious, keep some of them afloat even if just for one day at a time (Honwana 2012). The analysis of youth's experiences is framed around the discussions on equity in Syed Murshed's paper that focuses on two fundamental freedoms: freedom from want and freedom from fear.[3] These two freedoms constitute basic tenets of the human security approach and resonate with Amartya Sen's concept of 'development as freedom' (1999), which understands freedom as both constitutive of development and instrumental to it. Development should be understood as a process of expanding freedoms. As Sen (1999: 10) argues, "freedoms are not only the primary ends of development, they are also among its principal means". Prince Claus's own ideas of development and equity are built around notions of progress and fairness that should provide people with access to resources and fundamental freedoms.[4]

The paper argues that waithood – youth's inability to access basic resources to become independent adults – does not result from a failed transition on the part of the youth themselves but rather from a breakdown in the socio-economic system supposed to provide them with the opportunities to grow up healthy, get good education, find employment, form families and contribute to society as fully fledged citizens. What is broken is the social contract between the state and its citizens. Unsound economic policies, bad governance, corruption and absence of civil liberties are often at the origin of this problem. These socio-economic conditions prevent these young people from experiencing freedom from want. But at the same time, their daily struggles to free themselves from a state of want make them loose fear of police repression and police retaliation: they come out to the streets and directly confront the establishment. Youth social movements are today taking place around the globe as they contest socio-economic policies and governance strategies that exacerbate poverty, social inequalities, uneven development and lack of basic freedoms.

Waithood

The notion of waithood was first used by Navtej Dhillon & Tarik Yousef (2009) and Dianne Singerman (2007) in their work on youth in the Middle East and North Africa. They rightly suggested that waithood encompasses the multifaceted nature of youth transitions to adulthood, which goes beyond securing a job and extends to social life and civic participation. While their use of waithood provided a sense of "waiting" by passively lingering, my research shows that young people in waithood are not inactively "waiting" for their situation to change. Despite the challenges, youth in waithood are dynamic and use their agency and creativity to invent new forms of being and interacting with society (Honwana 2012; Honwana & de Boeck 2005). Waithood accounts for a multiplicity of young people's experiences, ranging from daily survival strategies such as street vending and cross-border trade to involvement in gangs and criminal activities.

Waithood represents the contradictions of modernity, in which young people's opportunities and expectations are simultaneously broadened and constrained. They are enlarged by the new

[3] These two freedoms are part of the four freedoms first articulated by US President Franklin D. Roosevelt in his famous "Four Freedoms" speech presented in 1941 at the State of the Union address. The other two freedoms he referred to are freedom of speech and expression and freedom of worship.

[4] See Prince Claus's acceptance speech for his Honorary Fellowship at the Institute of Social Studies, 1988. Available at: http://princeclauschair.nl/23-propositions/.

technologies of information and communication that make young people more globally integrated. Youth relate to local social structures and cultural patterns, but they are also connected to global culture via mobile telephones, cyberspace, television, and advertising. At the same time, they are also constrained by lack of access to basic resources due to unsound socio-economic policies, epidemics, political instability and repression.

In West Africa, the term *youthman* is commonly used to refer to people who have not attained social adulthood despite their biological adulthood (Abdullah 1998). Even men over forty continue to be seen as youths because of their inability to gain a stable livelihood, live independently, marry and form families. The very existence of the expression *youthman*, as Ibrahim Abdullah (1998) observes, stands as a metaphor for Africa's poverty and attests to the pervasiveness of waithood across the continent. The lyrics of a popular song from Sierra Leone lament the conditions of a *youthman*'s life.

> *I feel sorry for the youthman today*
> *The system is bad for the youthman today*
> *Every day and every night they suffer*
> *The youthman want to sleep but no place*
> *The youthman want to eat but no food*
> *The youthman want good dress but no good dress*
> *The youthman want to buy but no money*
> *The youthman want to work*
> *If no work, how do you expect him to eat?*[5]

There is no doubt that waithood stems from bad governance and from the social and economic policies espoused by international financial institutions that were imposed on Africa and other countries in the global South. Structural adjustment programmes (later known as the poverty reduction strategy programmes) deeply weakened African state's ability to determine national socio-economic policies and priorities and to uphold the social contract with their citizenry.[6] But bad governance and pervasive corruption, absence of freedom of expression and civil liberties further compounded the problem.

Nevertheless, waithood does not affect every young African man or woman in the same way. Some have become adults too soon, as child soldiers, child labourers or surrogate parents to younger siblings after their parents died. Others can never attain the socio-economic autonomy that allows them to partake on the social responsibilities of adulthood. At ten, a child soldier is an adult; at forty, an unemployed and unmarried man is still a youth. But many children who assume adult roles at a tender age are later pushed back into waithood as they grow up and try to attain their independence.

Rather than being a short interruption in their transition to adulthood, waithood may last for extended periods, well into their thirties and even forties. Some never get out of it and remain permanently in the precarious and improvised life that waithood imposes (Sommers 2012). Prolonged waithood is becoming the rule rather than the exception and waithood is gradually

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[5] A 2008 song by Sierra Leone hip-hop artist Lansana Sheriff, also known by the artistic name of Steady Bongo.

[6] As various scholars observed, structural adjustment policies were against state investments in health, education, transport and telecommunications. They favoured the removal of trade barriers that protected local producers, the relaxation of tax regimes as well as the privatization of agriculture, land and food production and distribution (Manji 1998). The result was the increase of socio-economic disparities and the gradual transformation of citizens into consumers. Power and influence over social policy were increasingly determined by wealth and those who had no means to participate in consumer society were disenfranchised (Manji 2011).

replacing conventional adulthood. For many, being young in Africa today is synonymous with living in waithood.

Waithood is not just an African phenomenon. In the United States and the UK terms such as *kidults, adultolescents*[7] and *thresholders* (Apter 2001) have been used to describe youths who are in limbo between childhood and adulthood, struck in what some scholars called "emerging adulthood" (Arnett 2004; Molgat 2007). Expressions like the "boomerang" or "yo-yo" generation have been used to describe college graduates who return home and continue to depend on their parents. In Japan *freeters* (furītā)[8] and *parasaito shinguru* (parasite singles) refer to the growing number of young people who are having difficulties joining the labour force and forming their own families (Miyamoto 2004; Kosugi 2006). In Italy, *bamboccioni* (big dummy boys) is a sarcastic term that indicates the growing number of young men in their mid-twenties and thirties who are still unmarried and living with their parents.[9] Thus, waithood is a global phenomenon.

Experiencing and coping with waithood

Liggey, which means work in *wolof*, the national language of Senegal, is one of the most notable virtues in Senegalese culture. *Liggey* is celebrated as an important marker of adulthood because the ability to work and provide defines a person's self-worth and position in the family. This idea prevails in all four countries I studied. Yet, the majority of young men and women are unable to find work and attain a socially valued status as independent and responsible men and women, as well as the sense of dignity embedded in the notion of *liggey*.

Joel, a 28-year-old Mozambican man, explained that "[A]t the age of eighteen our fathers would go to South Africa as labour migrants to work in the mines ... [and] come home with enough money to pay *lobolo* (bride wealth) for a girl. They would then go back for another contract and return with more money to build a house and pay for the wedding and other family expenses." Becoming a labour migrant was a rite of passage into adulthood, as work in the mines provided the resources the young men from southern Mozambique needed to become workers, husbands, fathers and providers for their families, as well as taxpayers and contributors to the wider society.

Today, African societies no longer endow young men and women with the social, economic, cultural and moral resources they need to follow robust pathways to adulthood. African societies are struggling with economic decline, strained educational systems, high unemployment rates, and insecure livelihoods, all of which seriously weaken the social fabric. So extreme is the situation – particularly with the current global economic crisis – that most governments are unable to provide their citizens with basic social and economic resources. The decline of opportunities in rural areas has led young men and women to migrate to the cities, where their chances of finding employment remain very slim. Young people are increasingly forced to survive in an oversaturated informal economy or as informal labour in the formal sector (Chen

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[7] See Grossman's article in *Time* magazine, 16 January 2005; and also Tyre's article in *Newsweek*, 25 March 2002.

[8] Freeter (*furītā*) is a Japanese expression for people between the ages of fifteen and thirty-four who lack full-time employment or are unemployed.

[9] In October 2007 Tommaso Padoa-Schioppa, then minister of economy and finance, spoke to a parliamentary committee about the government's plan for tax relief (approximately 500€/year) to people twenty to thirty years old, especially males, who are still living with their family, saying it would help them move out on their own. He used the ironic or sarcastic term *bamboccioni*. Many Italians found the term offensive because in their opinion the problem is not the youth themselves but rather the system. A substantial number of young Italians live on approximately 1000€ per month and cannot afford to leave their parents' house.

2006). Bad governance, corruption, nepotism and political repression often compound the already dire economic situation.

Young men and women experience waithood in very different ways. For men, waithood entails facing the pressures of finding a steady job, thus securing the resources to purchase, build or rent a home and covering the costs of marriage and family formation. Although women are increasingly being educated and have always engaged in productive labour alongside household chores, marriage and motherhood are still the most important markers of adulthood. Yet their ability to attain this adult social status often depends on men's moving beyond waithood (Singerman 2007; Calvès *et al*. 2007).

Waithood involves a long process of negotiating personal identity and financial independence in circumstances of deep socio-economic crisis. Narratives from various young women and men I met during my fieldwork point to the impact of structural conditions on their lives and highlight their inescapable socio-economic vulnerability. From having to resort to improvised forms of livelihood in the informal economy to involvement in illegal and sometimes criminal endeavours, young people in waithood struggle to make a living. Young Mozambicans used the Portuguese term *desenrascar a vida* ('eke out a living'); young Senegalese and Tunisians employed the French term *débrouillage* ('making do'); and young South Africans spoke about "just getting by". All these expressions vividly convey the extemporaneous nature of their lives.

The notions of *desenrascar a vida* and *débrouillage* situate the waithood experience in the realm of ad-lib, or "making it up as you go along". Vigh (2009) found a similar notion – *dubriagem* – among young people in Guinea Bissau. *Dubriagem* like *desenrascar a vida*, *débrouillage* and 'getting by' elucidate simultaneously a way of examining possibilities and of actualizing those possibilities in praxis (*Ibid*.: 150). In this sense, *desenrascar a vida* implies a conscious effort on the part of young people to assess the challenges and possibilities of their position and to plot scenarios by which they might achieve their goals. Theoretically, these notions can be understood through Lévi-Strauss's (1962/1966) concept of *bricollage*: he sees the *bricoleur* as someone who undertakes odd jobs and is a 'Jack-of-all-trades' taking advantage of situations presented to her/him. Similarly, Michel de Certeau (1984) sees these kinds of practices as tactical actions to respond to immediate needs as opposed to strategic ones aimed at long-term goals. As de Certeau asserts, tactics are the only weapons available to the poor and the dispossessed. Young people in waithood are pushed out of the system and forced to survive on the margins of society. Rejected by the state and the formal sector of the economy, they create new spaces and mechanisms for survival and operate in subcultures outside hegemonic structures. They live in a state of 'want', of desire for basic socio-economic freedoms, and every day is a struggle to attain freedom from want.

The young people I interviewed recognize the external factors that limit their actions and their ability to thrive and succeed. Education systems have been unable to provide young people with the skills they need to compete in, or even enter, the labour market. There is a mismatch between the education system and the needs of the labour market. But at the heart of the problem is the unavailability of jobs. Rates of unemployment and underemployment in the continent are extremely high among youth. In Tunisia, for example, unemployment rates are higher among university graduates (Honwana forthcoming 2013). Nevertheless, they are not just sitting and waiting for their elders or the government to do something. Instead, they are using their creativity to find solutions for everyday-life challenges. They are creating innovative spaces for action, or "youthscapes" (Maira & Soep 2005) with their own *modus vivendi* and *modus operandi*. Within these "youthscapes" they try to subvert authority, bypass the encumbrances created by the formal system and fashion new ways of functioning and

manoeuvring on their own. These youth spaces foster opportunities and possibilities for *desenrascar a vida*, *débrouillage* and for "getting by" through improvisation.

In this sense, waithood should not be understood as failed transition, a form of deviance, or a pathology from which young people suffer (Jones 2009). Waithood, with all its challenges, constitutes also a period of experimentation, of improvisation and of great creativity as young Africans adopt a range of survival strategies to cope with the daily challenges in their lives. They identify, explore and try to maximize whatever opportunities arise in a constant effort to improve their situation. Their responses to their predicament vary considerably and are linked to their particular structural positions, which affect the resources they can leverage in efforts to lift themselves out of the unstable situations they inhabit. By improvising diverse income-generating activities, some young people manage to sustain themselves and even improve their living conditions, while others continue to flounder as they pursue one *biscato* (odd job) after another and/or resort to criminal activities.

Formal institutions and authorities often view their ways of operating as distasteful, dangerous and criminal. It is not surprising that their relationship with the state and the formal sector is marked by tension and mutual distrust. The state enforces laws that delimit and control the spaces of legitimate activity and mark them as outsiders. Police and municipal officers harass and chase vendors off the streets. Employers often refuse to sign contracts, making many young people informal workers in the formal sector, subjected to their superiors' whims and in permanent fear of instant dismissal. People in society often fear and recoil from the young men and women making a living in garbage dumps, condemn the behaviour of *chapa*[10] drivers and pushy street vendors, reproach the smugglers and illegal immigrants (Honwana 2012). Amidst this marginalization, and in many cases repression, young people in waithood are sometimes able to develop a sense of shared identity and group consciousness that leads them to challenge the establishment and fight for their rights.

Waithood, citizenship and social change

Young people I interviewed showed strong awareness of the broader socio-economic and political environments that affect their lives. They are acutely conscious of their marginal structural position and they despise and rebel against the abuse and corruption that they observe as the elites in power get richer and they become poorer (Honwana 2012). These youths are not a 'lost generation' nor are they completely apathetic from what is going on in their societies (Diouf 2003). Young people in Mozambique, Senegal, South Africa and Tunisia feel deeply disconnected from those who control power and national politics. They are critical of unsound economic policies that focus on growth but do not enlarge the productive base by creating more jobs. They also condemn bad governance and widespread corruption practices that hinder their ability to progress in life and free themselves from a state of want. Young people are dismayed by the growing lack of fairness and equity in the distribution of resources. They are coming out to the streets to express their anger and discontent and are challenging government authorities and political parties to pay attention to their socio-economic needs (Honwana 2012).

In September 2010, I was in Maputo when thousands of Mozambican youths staged riots against the government to protest against the rise in prices of basic staples such as bread, water and fuel. Angry youths blocked the streets of the capital, burned tires, and confronted the police who tried to disperse the crowds. The police used batons and tear gas and fired bullets at the young protesters, causing more than ten deaths and numerous injuries. In June 2011, shortly after I visited Senegal, hundreds of young people, rallying alongside the *Y'en a Marre!*

[10] Popular name given to privately-owned minibuses used for public transportation in Maputo.

('Enough is enough!') movement,[11] clashed with police. They were denouncing eighty-five-year-old president Abdoulaye Wade's attempt to change the constitution to enable him to win a third term and create the post of vice-president, supposedly for his son. Thousands of protesters gathered outside the National Assembly, where law-makers were debating the proposed constitutional amendment, protesting government corruption, high unemployment and other social ills. Clouds of tear gas enveloped the square as police fought the demonstrators with tear gas, rubber bullets and water cannons. The demonstrations quickly spread from central Dakar into the suburbs and three major towns in the interior (Honwana 2012).

In North Africa, a twenty-nine-day youth uprising in Tunisia led to the ouster of President Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali on January 14, 2011. The uprising was triggered by the death of a young man: the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi, a twenty-six-year-old unemployed street vendor. Bouazizi's death symbolized the despair of an entire generation of young men and women grappling with unemployment and bleak future prospects. Thousands of youths came out into the streets and cyberspace to demand jobs, better living conditions and respect for their dignity. The brutal and disproportionate use of force by the authorities radicalized the protests. Youths chanting "*Ben Ali Degagé*!" ('Ben Ali Go!') demanded the president's departure (Honwana forthcoming 2013). The Tunisian revolution quickly spread across the Arab world and a few weeks later young Egyptians took control of Tahrir (Liberation) Square for days of protests that toppled the forty-year reign of Hosni Mubarak in February 2011. Conflicts between youth and the state also erupted in Bahrain, Yemen and Syria. The youth-led armed rebellion in Libya that began in February overthrew Muammar Gaddafi and culminated in his death in October 2011.

Like Africa and the Middle East, the rest of the world has recently experienced a wave of youth uprisings: in Portugal, in March 2011, more than 30,000 young people filled the streets to vent their frustrations about unemployment and the absence of career prospects. In May 2011, young people in Spain who call themselves the *indignados* (indignant) protested against soaring unemployment rates. The demonstrations in Spain have been more explicitly political than the riots that occurred in the UK in August 2011 in which underprivileged British youths attacked and burnt police cars and looted luxury stores.[12] In Chile, an estimated 100,000 young people took to the streets of the capital to demand free, quality public education in August 2011. And in the United States, many young Americans struggling to find work and pay for their college education joined the Occupy Wall Street movement to protest against corporate greed and corporations' undue influence over government.

These events illustrate the ways in which young people are rising up against unemployment, socio-economic marginalization, unsound economic policies, corrupt governments and political exclusion. These are cries for freedom by a generation yearning to make a place for itself in the world. In the cities of Mozambique, Senegal, Tunisia, South Africa, Portugal, Spain, UK, Chile and the USA, frustrated young people strive to get a good education, find decent jobs, attain adult status, partake in the fruits of modernity and have a say about their future. The assumption that the state will uphold the social contract with its citizenry and put in place effective

[11] The *Y'en a Marre* movement was created in 2011 by a group of young Senegalese hip-hop artists along with some students and journalists to protest economic hardship and massive unemployment and to demand that their voices be heard.

[12] During the riots, the looting of fancy stores – Nike sneakers, Hugo Boss clothing, television sets, Apple mobile phones, computers and iPods – can be seen as an expression of exclusion. These are all desirable symbols of a consumer culture from which many young people, especially the unemployed and disadvantaged feel excluded. As Ken Livingstone, former mayor of London, observed, this is the first generation of British youth who expect to be worse off than their parents. British youths (white, black and Asian) from poor neighbourhoods feel they have no stake in society and so they are prepared to do anything because they have nothing to loose.

institutions and welfare systems is beginning to erode and young people are losing fear and taking their destinies in their own hands.

There is no doubt that young people are a critical indicator of the state of a nation, of its politics, economy and social and cultural life. Although national and regional contexts differ and grievances are diverse, young people's anger derives from deepening social inequalities; they are affected by the same ills created by globalization and failed neo-liberal policies that broke the social contract. As globalized communications raise their expectations, local conditions and public policies push those aspirations out of reach. These developments suggest a broader crisis in the pursuit for freedom from want and a growing drive to achieve freedom from fear on the part of youths experiencing waithood.

Conclusion

In this paper, I argued that the majority of young Africans are in waithood. Because of its pervasiveness and prolonged duration, waithood is becoming a more permanent state and, arguably, gradually replacing conventional adulthood. I also emphasized that waithood is not about geography but essentially about lack of equity and freedom from want. While the specific reasons for delayed adulthood differ from one context to another, this phenomenon is not just African but affects an increasingly large number of youths across the globe.

Waithood is creative; young people have not resigned themselves to the hardships of their situation but are using their agency and creativity to fashion new "youthscapes" (Maira & Soep 2005) or sub-cultures with alternative forms of livelihood and social relationships in the margins of mainstream society. Through improvised and precarious strategies for *desenrascar a vida*, *débrouillage* and 'getting by' young people in waithood use their energies to try and overcome their state of 'want' and lead decent and dignified lives. While a few may succeed, the vast majority remain in this twilight zone for most of their lives.

Last but not least, waithood is transformative. Young people's struggle to attain freedom from want often allows them to achieve freedom from fear. From more or less spontaneous street riots and protests in Mozambique, Senegal, Spain, Chile, Greece, UK and the USA to the revolutions in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, this generation in waithood appears to be losing fear and openly defying dictatorships, autocratic governments and political repression. These current youth social movements are still unfolding and it is anyone's guess where they will lead. But there is no doubt that this generation is fighting for freedom from want and freedom from fear and is taking upon itself to redress the wrongs of contemporary society.

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