

Youth futures under construction

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Abstract: The articles presented here engage with some of the multifaceted and intersecting challenges faced by young people today – these include conflict, insecurity, limited government support, deep-set gender discrimination, climate change, infectious disease and a widespread lack of decent jobs. While recognising the structural influences on young people’s circumstances, the articles gathered here bring young people’s perspectives, experiences and actions to the fore. With an eye on the future, and a sense of the past, this collection is situated in the present. Most of the research presented here stems from the British Academy’s Youth Futures research funding scheme. The results showcased here remind us how the present matters in and of itself, while influenced by the past and playing a key role in shaping the future. Thus there is a triple significance to understanding young people’s challenges: they matter for today and for how they impact tomorrow, and will be best understood with reference to the past.

Keywords: young people, participation, conflict, discrimination, climate change, employment

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Laying the foundations for youth futures

Over recent decades the age-bound category of ‘youth’ has gained traction across political, activist and academic spheres. This youth focus is a response to the distinct challenges faced by young people as they navigate life transitions, their heightened exposure to shocks and stresses and their sheer numerical dominance of population structures in many lower-income countries. In this context, young people are variously framed, from threats to civil stability and security, to the key-holders of future economic growth, green innovation and wider human development. The articles in this special issue depict young people working and reworking their lives, responding to challenges according to their means, while constrained and influenced by the wider contexts in which they live. The optimistic vision of young people as proactive drivers of widespread change is often compromised by insufficient rights, opportunities, resources, security and social protection.

The future is pervasive in discussions of young people’s current challenges – after all the young people of today are the older adults of the future. Yet care is needed in how and why we invoke the future. This future-focus is partially rooted in the concentration of (unevenly distributed) political and economic power among older cohorts, conveying greater importance of the middle and later life stages. We should be careful not to prioritise *young people as adults-in-the-making* to the detriment of *young people here-and-now*. Displacement of the present through focusing on more distant horizons, be they temporal or spatial, risks distracting attention from the local and contemporary where more tangible improvements could be made. Nevertheless, a future-focus also adds weight to calls for change when the benefits could be enjoyed now and in the future.

The novelist [Bernadine Evaristo \(2019\)](#) captures these temporal interconnections in writing ‘we are all part of a continuum ... the future is in the past and the past is in the present’ (p.221). The present influences our futures, while the past leads us to where we are today. The articles collected here capture this broad and interconnected time span, with research into young people’s memories of the past, activities and experiences in the present, and visions and hopes for our shared futures. Yet the message from this collection is not deterministic, as it resists reducing ‘young people’s positions to victims of enduring systems and structures’ ([Moles et al. 2023](#)). Instead, the studies presented here unify around their acknowledgement of the proactive roles young people take in navigating the past and present to build their adult lives ([Barford & Cieslik 2019](#)). The research articles presented in this issue also acknowledge how this takes place within wider circumstances which, as one interviewee from Yaoundé might say, ‘give young people a headache’ ([Wignall et al. 2023](#): 139).¹

¹ Note that this term was used specifically to discuss the lack of decent work, which is a broad multifaceted term.

The *headaches* described in this volume are many. They include trying to find a job when there are few, gambling to earn ‘easy money’ with all risks this entails, trying to build your life in a context of random house demolitions with little recourse to legal justice, and facing a climate crisis set to worsen within your own lifetime (Jones *et al.* 2023; Beckwith *et al.* 2023; Glozah *et al.* 2023). The studies in this issue do not focus specifically on the COVID-19 pandemic, as our funding applications were submitted just three days after the first known case of COVID-19 was admitted to hospital in the city of Wuhan (McMullan 2021). As the global reach and impact of COVID-19 spread, it brought many more challenges for young people, often pausing or derailing plans to complete education and training or to work. Pre-existing challenges in earning a living exacerbated, social isolation led to mental ill-health, care work increased, while the COVID-19 virus also heralded immediate physical ill-health and loss of life for many (Porter *et al.* 2021; Mueller *et al.* 2022). Thus, while COVID-19 was not the focus of the research, its impacts do feature within the articles in this collection.

In understanding these headaches, the articles in this volume collectively consider some causes, implications and responses. Starting in the past, the articles identify how constellations of conflict, politics and policies shape the present. In the Occupied Palestinian Territories, multiple and overlapping authorities, paired with flawed legal accountability, push young people to seek accountability beyond the state when faced with devastating illegal house demolitions (Beckwith *et al.* 2023). In Uganda decades of conflict and violence, traced in part to colonial times, involved the mass displacement of millions of people, with tens of thousands of children being forced to become soldiers or sex slaves (some of whom are the young people of today) (Moles *et al.* 2023). Turning to the online gambling boom in sub-Saharan Africa, this is enabled by the rise of ‘neoliberal ideologies of market deregulation and economic competition’ fuelled by the industry seeking new markets as European and North American countries tighten their own regulations (Glozah *et al.* 2023: 154). Looking to the past to explain young people’s headaches invites a broader perspective, with greater potential to find solutions which extend beyond young people fixing things for themselves.

Disruptions can have notable scarring effects on young people (O’Higgins *et al.* 2023; Verick 2023). For example, gambling at a young age can disrupt education and training, strain relationships and lead to debt (Glozah *et al.* 2023). Extreme weather events linked to climate change – be these slow onset droughts or rapid onset flooding or landslides – can damage shopkeepers’ stock, cause crops to fail and livestock to die and ruin farmland and dwellings, causing psychological stress and financial loss with possible longer-term consequences (Barford *et al.* 2021, 2023). On the impacts of COVID-19 on young people, scholars remind us that scarring is not wholly attributable to that one event, but instead to the wider set of circumstances that heightened risk

exposure and constrained the social safety nets which could have otherwise buffered shocks or even pre-empted these crises (Verick *et al.* 2022; MacDonald *et al.* 2023). Confronted with challenges, the research articles presented here detail young people's proactive responses, for instance, judging political situations to decide how and when to act (Beckwith *et al.* 2023), or imagining their futures with hope while processing the violent past (Moles *et al.* 2023).

The emphasis on engaging young people in the research process was a key feature of the British Academy's *Youth Futures* scheme.² This research, which demonstrates young people's agency, is the result of projects that built youth engagement into design and implementation (Spencer *et al.* 2023; Jones *et al.* 2023; Proefke & Barford 2023). These projects engage young people's insights, recognise their proactive solutions, yet also acknowledge how young people struggle to solve headaches of such magnitude alone. Also relevant here is that some so-called 'solutions' might result in longer-term problems, the inherent risks of gambling being a case in point. With reference to such tensions, Tatiana Thieme sets the challenge of working with youth agency while also recognising persistent structural challenges:

Without displacing, romanticizing, or appropriating the hustle, we need to work with its progressive and generative dimensions, without condoning or collaborating with the structures that render young people's lives precarious and vulnerable, as they face an attachment to yet dispossession by volatile and uncertain futures. (Thieme 2018: 543)

Before proceeding any further, it is necessary to first define and complicate the term young people. Then, three broad themes from the collected articles are addressed: young people's research, economic and civic lives. These themes are reflected in the structure of this special issue, yet the articles often speak to more than one theme. The challenges raised relate to persistent policy issues which could benefit from the experiences and perspectives of young people detailed here. These perspectives offer geographically and thematically diverse insights helping to make sense of the broader context in which we struggle towards meeting the global Sustainable Development Goals. At present, despite numerous youth targeted policies, we are yet to make a substantial step towards resolving young people's headaches.

² All but one of the papers in this special issue were funded at least in part by the *Youth Futures* scheme of the British Academy, supported by the UK Government's Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, as part of Official Development Assistance.

Heterogeneous young people

In 2019, the United Nations estimated that people aged 15–25 numbered 1.21 billion and constituted 15.5 per cent of the world population. This number is expected to rise to 1.29 billion by 2030 (United Nations 2019). Beneath these global figures is substantial regional variation, with Africa expecting further growth of the youth populations throughout this century, Asia’s youth population peaking around now, and Europe thoroughly contracting in the wake of its peak in the early 1980s (*ibid.*). There are also national and subnational variations, which together with intersecting forms of discrimination, influence the divergent experiences and trajectories of young people today. Recent international research shows that amongst young people, being female, disabled or living in a rural area increases the chance of being outside education, employment and training (ILO 2023). Racial and sexual identities and poverty are linked to discrimination. Thus, while young people face some shared challenges, there are distinct patterns of disadvantage and privilege.

Youth has been defined in terms of activities as well as by age. However, the activities of ‘youth’ can be problematic because of the variety of experiences (and their timing). For instance, typical ‘youth’ transitions are school to work, parental home to own home and into marriage and parenthood. Yet for some these occur at a very early age – a child taken out of school to work; for others this is taking place much later – at times a lack of income postpones marriage and the move into one’s own home. Others skip certain transitions altogether, for example due to child marriage or early motherhood. Further, reducing childhood and youth to transitions overlooks these as times of being as well as becoming (Uprichard 2008; Barford *et al.* 2021). The point is that youth matters for the moment and the future that is under construction.

Neatly sidestepping these complexities, and most likely due to a preference of national statistical agencies for a standard, measurable and comparable definition, age is most often used to demarcate ‘youth’. In 1985, an international definition of youth was agreed, as persons aged 15–24 years (UN 2001). Yet the stated ages of ‘youth’ varies between countries, and some official definitions extend up to the age of 35 years (ILO 2012). The practical application of the term youth can be broader still, as seen in the Youth Futures project led by Ben Jones. During his research in the Teso region of Uganda, Ben was asked to stand with the ‘young people’ in church where the cut-off age for youth was 50 years. Even with a cut-off age of 30, Uganda ranks as having one of the world’s youngest populations. This youthful population, combined with the colonial legacy linking Uganda and the UK, may in part explain why Uganda features prominently within the articles presented here (i.e. Moles *et al.* 2023; Barford *et al.* 2023; and Proefke & Barford 2023).

Many activists and scholars, including myself, have called for greater youth

representation and participation in research and decision making. Given the inequalities between young people, there is a need to ensure youth representatives are selected from diverse groups, including from less privileged backgrounds. This can ensure that the wide-ranging experiences and needs of young people can come to the fore – highlighting the many roles young people assume including as parents, carers, breadwinners, job seekers and volunteers (Baillie Smith *et al.* 2022). The articles in this special issue pay attention to groups who are often overlooked. The many roles played by young people remind how they are far from being a separate and sealed off group, disconnected from the rest of society. Instead, young people are often deeply embedded in intergenerational learning, support, politics and here also research. Youth engagement doesn't need to be to the exclusion of other groups, but can recognise how young people co-exist and interact intergenerationally. This collection presents the fruits of intergenerational and international collaborations – the resulting articles demonstrate the ethical and empirical value of this approach.

Young people's research lives

Most of the articles in this collection sought to equitably engage young people in the research process. The three articles in this section share a focus on youth engagement in research, with two focused on youth advisory boards (an approach also used by other articles in this collection). Youth engagement in research can improve understandings while empowering young people. Including young people's perspectives and insights can result in research that is more attuned to lived realities – both conceptually and practically. Further, in the Afterword Barbara Stocking emphasises how young people's vocabularies and phraseologies proffer intergenerational and international insight. Meanwhile, young researchers gain new skills, connections and knowledge through research. These projects took place in 2020–2 during the COVID-19 pandemic, so like for many researchers, considerable work occurred over great distances (Mueller *et al.* 2023). This may have shifted power and responsibility towards young researchers, while others were excluded by the heightened reliance on digital technologies which they could not access.

The first article in this methods section, 'Creating spaces for co-research', focuses on models of youth engagement in research, arguing for the creation of heterotopic spaces where alternative, fairer power relationships between young people and technical researchers can play out. The article proposes a spectrum of youth participation, ranging from youth-focused research to youth-led participatory action research. Building on the theme of intergenerational collaboration, also implicit in the other articles presented in this section, Rachel Proefke and I advocate for a middle ground

of co-research. In this, we aim to acknowledge the value of bringing together the complementary skills and insights of young researchers and technical researchers (Proefke & Barford 2023). We present a matrix to assess the type of involvement of youth and technical researchers, which considers the levels of authority and inclusion of both groups of researchers at six key stages of the research process. The article shares examples of international youth co-research in action, namely a study of youth people's responses to climate change in Uganda, a diary study of youth livelihoods in Nepal and Indonesia during the Delta wave of COVID-19, and a Youth Think Tank on economic opportunities in Sub-Saharan Africa.

The second and third articles in this section are both concerned with youth advisory boards. In 'Young people's involvement in migration research – opportunities for (re)shaping research priorities and practices', Grace Spencer and colleagues (2023) set up the Young Person Advisory Group of five young Ghanaians overseeing a research project on migration. The young people, aged 20–32 and based in both Ghana and the UK, were recruited for their experiences of migration, knowledge of Ghana and advocacy roles. The group's purpose was to ensure the research was guided by young people's perspectives. As such the advisory group oversaw many aspects of the research including recruitment, data collection, website design, analysis and dissemination. The article focuses on the advisory group's experiences of, and vision for, youth involved research. The group called for youth engagement to go beyond tokenistic consultations and instead drive policy change. As the meaningful participation of young people in research, and other arenas, is increasingly seen as a hallmark of good practice, this article offers an important youth perspective on its benefits, opportunities, as well as pitfalls. A lasting message is that:

The best way to address [the] power imbalance between senior researchers and the young people could be done through mutual respect for one another, and also encourage young people to share their personal experiences and opinions without any fear of being wrong. (Young Advisor, in Spencer *et al.* 2023: 60)

'Conversations on grief and hope: a collaborative autoethnographic account exploring the lifeworlds of international youth engaged with climate action', which is the last article in this section, also takes youth advisory boards as its starting point. The research team and international youth advisory board together conducted a collaborative autoethnography of the life worlds of young people involved with climate action (Jones *et al.* 2023). The overall rationale for having a youth advisory board for the research project was two-fold, firstly to ensure a youth lens for the work, and secondly to offer peer-to-peer learning to the young research participants based in Vietnam. This article focuses on the youth advisory board members, as young people who are concerned about climate change and taking some action. The ensuing collaborative

autoethnography involved sharing life stories and experiences, through self-reflection and dialogue. Notably, the youth advisory board members, guided by the research team, proposed which questions they should be asked. This strong youth collaboration extended to the writing of this article, of which nine of the 15 youth advisory board members are authors. This is a progressive demonstration of how young people can be more fully involving young people in academic publications.

Young people's economic lives

Many articles in this special issue focus on young people's quest for current and future security in some form. Broadly, this often involved making a life for themselves, in a context of economic, environmental, historical, political or legal difficulties. This section focuses on how young people are striving to get by, despite the odds. Here the odds involve deep-set gender discrimination, low labour market demand, a predatory and unregulated gambling industry, worsening climate change and very little in the way of a social safety net. In this context, all three articles describe young people making the most of the opportunities available to them. These articles reach similar conclusions about the need for broader structural change to support young people – structural change which will likely be best informed by an intergenerational dialogue.

The first article in this section, 'Imagining the future through skills: TVET, gender and transitions towards decent employability for young women in Cameroon and Sierra Leone', focuses on skills development in preparation for work. Ross Wignall and colleagues research the possibility of gender mentoring in Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) addressing gender inequality in work and beyond. The article highlights how in Cameroon and Sierra Leone, as in many other countries, young women are disadvantaged compared to young men in the labour market and this worsened during the COVID-19 pandemic. The research team studied the Don Bosco TVET centres, which cater for girls who are neglected, orphaned or in extreme poverty. They found that by mentoring individual women, rather than seeking community or societal change, young women still encountered discrimination. At times potential employers were vocal about their preference for hiring young men over young women, saying 'if you can send me a boy, a man, it would be better' (Wignall *et al.* 2023: 137). This was largely due to the expectation that young women would soon become mothers, and that this would reduce their availability to work. The authors conclude that targeting TVET for women should be accompanied by measures to address wider stereotypes and create real opportunities. This article adds skills-related evidence to the contention that training without stimulating labour market demand and addressing discrimination is often insufficient (Isaacs *et al.* 2023).

Another youth response to low labour market demand is gambling. In ‘Young people and gambling in sub-Saharan Africa: towards a critical research agenda’, [Franklin Glozah and colleagues’ \(2023\)](#) literature review depicts the emergence of gambling as a form of work in Sub-Saharan Africa. This is a time-consuming activity, as gamblers must inform themselves, as well as doing the actual betting. The authors use a ‘gambling harms’ lens, which explains the harm caused by gambling in terms of the wider economic and regulatory system which has allowed damaging gambling options to proliferate. This stands in contrast to more popular narratives which blame individual gamblers for the problems they may experience. In a wider context of underemployment and scarce opportunities, the authors describe how young people turn to gambling for material security. However, the negative consequences of gambling – losing money, missing opportunities, compromising relationships – can lead to damage which is especially enduring for young people. The article challenges us to understand gambling as a form of ‘neoliberal neo-colonialism’, highlighting the injustice of blaming individual bettors for the negative impacts they experience.

The last article of this economic lives section, ‘Young people “making it work” in a changing climate’, considers how young people’s livelihoods are impacted by climate disruptions. We address how young people in the Karamoja and Busoga regions of Uganda are experiencing and responding to climate disruptions in their daily lives ([Barford et al. 2023](#)). The wider context is one of widespread youth underemployment, low wages, and structural disadvantage. In this context, one interviewee explained, ‘young people don’t have a choice, they have to make it work.’ The article shares the livelihoods of three young people, who use various strategies to manage the intersecting risks that they face. This involves sustaining several income streams to boost and smooth their income, while also working with other young people to seek support from local politicians. In addition to young people’s responses as details in these three articles, complementary interventions are needed which learn from, underwrite and reinforce young people’s efforts. In this way the ingenuity of young people could blossom in more favourable circumstances, with lower costs associated with misfortune or failure.

Young people’s civic lives

Young people are often thought of as an age group more inclined towards political and social action than those who are older and more settled, or younger and less able to engage. The articles in this section show how ‘making a life’ requires young people to navigate conflict, violence and insecurity. Here researchers work with young people to identify how young people respond to past and present violence in reasonable,

careful and at times hopeful ways. In Uganda, young people make sense of the past and imagine a more hopeful future. In Palestine, some seek to defend their homes from demolition, while others bide their time until they are more empowered to act. Thus, the civic lives of young people can play a key role in building a life for themselves and others.

The first article in this section, ‘Imagining futures/future imaginings: creative heritage work with young people in Uganda’, focuses on post-conflict Uganda, a country with decades of violence within recent memory. In this research, [Kate Moles and colleagues \(2023\)](#) connect memory work to the future, thinking through the past to imagine the future. Working with young people, the researchers developed a touring exhibition, to collect and share the many voices, experiences and values surrounding past conflict, and to imagine a more hopeful future. The arts-based participatory approach opened spaces for dialogue – with artwork and material objects, including weapons as objects of both war and resistance, curated for this exhibition. While concern about conflict reigniting were present in all research sites, young people also identified pathways towards more peaceful co-existence. For example, building positive relationships within and between groups, or the potential for sport to bridge differences. Overall, many young people considered dialogue and communication to be at the heart of a more peaceful future.

The second article, ‘Young Palestinians’ struggles for accountability and participation: beyond formal systems and public resistance’, concerns how young people in Palestine are seeking accountability in the context of illegal house demolitions. In the context of fragile governance, Laura Beckwith and colleagues research how young people contribute to decision making and seek (rather illusive) accountability. Research kits, co-designed with young people, were used to prompt discussions about future dreams, preparation for house demolitions and resistance. Similar to the work of [Moles *et al.* \(2023\)](#), there was also an option to collect objects which were meaningful to them. Youth responses included protests against Israeli authorities which were sometimes suppressed using violence. Documenting oppression through photography and film was another approach, used to recount events via online platforms to build international support. Alongside this, quieter and longer-term strategies were used, such as studying to strengthen personal influence. One young woman was training to be a lawyer in order to defend people in the future. The authors acknowledge inaction as a valid response in the face of extreme imbalances of power. The young Palestinians in this article carefully navigate a tricky terrain, doing what they can despite their disempowerment in the face of illegal yet hard-to-contest home demolitions.

Conclusion

A common message has organically emerged from this collection, regarding how young people approach the substantial challenges they face. The articles presented here identify multifaceted and intersecting challenges for young people – including conflict, insecurity, limited government support, deep set gender discrimination, climate change, infectious disease and a widespread lack of decent jobs. While recognising the enormous influence of the circumstances in which young people find themselves on outcomes, the articles gathered here also ensure young people’s perspectives, experiences and actions come to the fore. These articles, with an eye on the future, and a sense of the past, situate themselves in the present. The present matters in and of itself, while also shaping the future. Temporally speaking, there is a triple significance to understanding young people’s challenges: they are shaped by the past, matter for today and impact tomorrow.

While decent work is rare, labour market demand is low, incomes are often at poverty-levels and gender-discrimination is rife; governments are not yet fully responding and new stresses continue to emerge. For most young people it is unlikely that strong motivation and high ambitions will be enough to solve the magnitude of this challenge. The resounding message that comes from this collection is that this is a challenge that needs to be met with structural change. And this requires determination from many actors including governments, businesses and foundations. [Laura Beckwith and colleagues \(2023\)](#) emphasise that young people cannot be left without allies. As young people seek to *actively* build their lives, intergenerational solidarity involving those with decision making power could support young people by improving the foundations upon which they build. At present, young people – who are integral members of society – have been short changed.

Acknowledgements

Firstly, I would like to thank the young people involved in this broad remit of the many projects conducted under the *Youth Futures* banner. Young people have been involved in many roles, including as researchers, co-authors, offering oversight and guidance and also as research participants. I hope that this work will contribute to improving outcomes for you and your contemporaries. Thank you especially to the Georgie Fitzgibbon, Flora Langley and Pippa Milligan at the British Academy for all their work in managing both the *Youth Futures* programme as well as preparing this Special Issue, to Jill Lally for her expert copyediting of the articles included here, and to Elizabeth Stone for handling the final corrections. Thanks also to Ash Amin,

former Foreign Secretary, Simon Goldhill the current Foreign Secretary, and Philip Lewis and the International Team at the British Academy, for creating and delivering this programme. I am grateful to Kate Brockie for her constructive comments on this introduction, Dame Barbara Stocking for her ongoing support and encouragement, and Clive Oppenheimer for truly sharing our childcare responsibilities. As always, sincere thanks to the anonymous reviewers who have made substantial contributions to this collection.

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To cite the article: Barford, A. (2023), 'Youth futures under construction', *Journal of the British Academy*, 11(s3): 3–16.

<https://doi.org/10.5871/jba/011s3.003>

Journal of the British Academy (ISSN 2052–7217) is published by
The British Academy, 10–11 Carlton House Terrace, London, SW1Y 5AH
www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk