‘Waithood’: Youth Transitions and Social Change

Response to Syed Mansoob Murshed

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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—and 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 15–24 or 14–35), this paper understands youth as defined by social expectations and responsibilities and considers all those who have not yet been able to attain social adulthood, despite their age, 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, which focus on two fundamental freedoms: freedom from want and freedom from fear. 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.

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 a good education, find employment, form families and contribute

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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 the 1941 State of the Union address. The other two freedoms he referred to are freedom of speech and expression and freedom of worship.