

Afterword

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Abstract: The afterword summarises the findings of how young people in the Global South perceive their current ways of making a living, and how they see their futures when there are so few jobs available to them. It also describes the ways researchers can work in partnership with young people so that research becomes closer to being youth led. This approach encourages young people to work to bring about change. Their involvement is essential to have impact.

Keywords: young people, work, ‘getting by’, youth-led research, impact.

Note on the author: Dame Barbara Stocking is Chair of a Panel for a Global Public Health Convention. She is President Emerita of Murray Edwards College, University of Cambridge, having been in post from July 2013 to August 2021. In March 2015, she was appointed Chair of the Independent Panel of Experts to assess WHO’s response in the Ebola outbreak. The report was published in July 2015. From May 2001 to February 2013 Barbara was Chief Executive of Oxfam GB and before that, a member of the top management team of the NHS, as regional director for the South-East of England, and then as the founding Director of the NHS Modernisation Agency.

For people like myself who live in high income countries with ageing populations, it is hard to comprehend what it is like in poorer countries where the much greater part of the population are young people. Sub-Saharan countries now have the most youthful populations in the world, with 70 per cent aged under 30. South Asia is the other region with youth ‘peaking’. Asia has just reached its peak. But in sub-Saharan Africa that will not happen until the end of the century. This ought to mean countries of dynamism and innovation. But instead, sadly, for many young people, it means no jobs and no future.

The disconnect between the experiences of ageing and youthful countries is demonstrated through contrasting vocabulary. In high income countries we talk about jobs with the idea they are destined to continue, whether full or part-time. There is considerable legislation binding employers to decent work. But many young people in the global south don’t talk about that sort of permanence, nor about careers. What they say is they are ‘getting by’ with pieces of informal and formal work, paid and unpaid; and with family related responsibilities. ‘Getting by’ is just about enough to live on and what they ask for is a future where they really can ‘make a life’ (Barford & Coombe 2019; Barford & Cieslik 2019).

When young men sit on the edges of roundabouts or street corners with their motorcycles, they may be waiting for clients for their bike taxis or these groups of young people may just be ‘waiting’ for someone to offer work for a few days or weeks – perhaps in construction or perhaps ‘waiting’ to see what might happen to set them off into a new future.

Young men and women are affected differently with young women expected to help much more with caring roles in close or extended family. They may have left school much earlier and the ‘waiting’ they experience may lead them into early marriage. Why not, if there is no other vision of future opportunity? Getting by, waiting and being uncertain are the key words in young people’s vocabularies in peak youth countries.

The research funded by the British Academy and reported here describes the reality of how young people perceive their lives, what they are doing in response, and what they would wish to happen. Sharing interviews with three young people, the article by Barford *et al.* 2002 sets out in detail how young people do get by, how they cope when their work is taken away and the stamina and resilience required.

The article by Ross Wignall *et al.* (2023) is well worth reading because it sets out so clearly the difference between how young women and young men are treated. Looking at Technical and Vocational Training (TVET) in detail in Sierra Leone describes the differences starkly. In both countries, Sierra Leone and Cameroon, COVID-19 reduced women’s workforce participation but it was always low compared to young men. In Sierra Leone, this was in part because of the end of the war and the need to

integrate young men who had been soldiers. In both countries, young women were not just cut out of job opportunities, but also TVET because of their household responsibilities looking after their children, having less education and gender discrimination by elders. The article looks at the Don Bosco TVET system which has developed programmes to provide women with personal skills as well as technical ones. As the authors point out though, changing beliefs in the wider world requires more work. Even young women coming through several years of training have difficulty in obtaining work, with employers saying they would prefer a man.

One of the most surprising articles by [Franklin Glozah *et al.* \(2023\)](#) concerns gambling. Across sub-Saharan Africa, there has been a multi-billion-dollar gambling boom. For example, in Ghana high numbers of men gamble daily; almost all weekly. What do they say is their motivation? ‘Quick money’, especially if being pushed to find money immediately. They may persuade themselves that they are winning more than losing yet there is evidence that there is less money even for food. Some even regard it as a profession, studying hard the players and clubs to gamble on the football leagues. There is little if any regulation of online gambling, something that is badly needed.

Learning with and from young people

So, if ‘getting by’ is the experience of millions of young people, what would make it possible for them to ‘make a life’? It may seem obvious but starting with what they want, what might work for them and what might make something effective or ineffective would seem the right approach. As young people say: ‘Nothing about us without us’. But as many young people also say, they have often not been consulted at all about youth policies and initiatives. Or, if they have been consulted, their input has been ignored. The British Academy compilation here illustrates what can be achieved if there is enough understanding of the importance of true engagement of young people.

The article by [Kate Moles *et al.* \(2023\)](#) is a clear example of how different young people’s experience and views may be compared to what might be thought of as common knowledge. This work considers memorisation in circumstances of conflict in Uganda. It was done in the context of asking young people to develop futures for themselves. The research illustrates that the accepted memory of what happened may be different for young people. They remembered events which had intensity of violence and proximity to locality even though the scale and impact of their events may not compare with what memory there is in the wider public. This research is a reminder that we cannot assume what young people’s lived experience has been.

This lesson about engagement has had to be learned in many other areas of life. When I worked in the humanitarian sector, I often thought of an experience from

many years before, which brought the message home. A drought hit East Africa, and people were close to starvation. Food relief was being provided to them, yet the physical state of the people was not improving. On questioning, the reason was that they were using the food as fodder for the animals. For them, it was vital that the animals would live into the next year or they would have no food at all. Once that was understood fodder was provided for the animals as well as food for the people. This story illustrates clearly that if you don't listen and take into account the lived experience of people, you may well be ineffective.

Articles in this issue illustrate how much you can learn if you ask the right questions. Of course, this too is where young people come in, in what is becoming known as youth co-research. It would be a mistake to think that young people could just take on doing the research themselves. There are professional research skills and knowledge and without a partnership with people experienced in research methods, the research may not be valid. Young people can though be involved throughout any research project 'about them'. For example, this can be in co-creating the questions to be asked, in the development of the methodologies, carrying out interviews and surveys, where they might be accepted more easily than academic researchers, and in analysis. The article by [Proefke & Barford \(2023\)](#) describes the different ways young people can be engaged. It also takes up the question of what we really mean by youth co-research in practice. Partnership with young people can be a joy for researchers; not least it can be inspiring to see how hard young people are trying to 'make a life' even in difficult circumstances.

Does respectful engagement with young people make a difference?

What young people want to know is what is the outcome of the research being undertaken. Just having feedback is not enough. They want action and agency.

The article by [Grace Spencer *et al.* \(2023\)](#) describes interviews to find out what young people wanted from research. They were members of the international Youth Advisory Board for a project on migration. From these interviews and other work, we know that young people want feedback from the research to know what happened and whether it made a difference. These young people from Ghana and the UK said they hoped it would make a difference and that it would shift policy. This gives those of us engaged in research a dilemma. Many would hope that our work to expose young people's real lives will make all stakeholders more aware, but when it comes to the specific challenges the young people say they face, and what they feel would make a real difference in their lives, the changes are much harder to deliver. Of course, in recent years there has been greater requirement to have impact from research. However, working

alongside young people to bring about change requires access to the relevant decision makers and real skills in advocacy. This is why in these circumstances, partnerships, CSOs and NGOs offer greater opportunity in bringing about change.

In summary then, while it is good that more research is allowing young people to describe their lives, this research does have to be done with respect and honesty. Positively, we are seeing more examples where young people are included in the research team to help generate the research plan and the research questions. As noted above, that should not, of course, exclude experienced researchers in partnership with young people giving us greater opportunity and understanding to provide the base for effective change.

Youth voice in the wider world

Several of the articles consider the extent to which the voice of young people is recognised and responded to. Young people already feel ignored when they participate in forums or research despite the call for youth engagement. The biggest challenge of engagement in the world is for climate change activists. They are right in my view about the lack of action that takes place. It is also disconcerting that there are people who think that young people should not be speaking out at all.

The article on Vietnam ([Jones *et al.* 2023](#)) is the story of climate activism by young people. Feelings of guilt are described by these young people and having gone through shock, denial, anger and acceptance, they can come to a positive place ready to act. Of course, this is not easy to maintain if politicians and media then discredit young activists. This does not just happen in Vietnam, the same thing has happened throughout the world, even at the highest UN levels. Even locally, while some activists have family and community support, many others do not. Nor does everyone have the innate confidence to speak in public spaces. They say it is hard to remain positive and the underlying question remains about whether they are taken seriously.

[Beckwith *et al.*'s article \(2023\)](#) takes this further by considering young peoples' voice in conflict and contested environments. Ideally in all settings, young peoples' voice should be recognised: at local, national and international levels through elections, protest and volunteering. But participation does not necessarily mean having impact. It does not necessarily mean accountability to young people. The authors give a definition of accountability as 'a relationship between those responsible for something and those who have a role in passing judgement on how well the responsibility has been discharged' ([Guerin *et al.* 2018](#)).

Participation and accountability become more contentious in contested environments and they use the example of Palestine and house demolitions. Theoretically

there is a way to challenge house demolitions and seek accountability, but this is through the Israeli courts. The young Palestinians do not know how to achieve this. They may have lawyers who are not defending their position and the young people are at a disadvantage in that the language used is Hebrew. These young people have to consider how and where to focus as well as what the risks are for their own safety. Some will question whether it is useless to take action and Beckwith notes this is of course valid where there are high risks and limited resources.

This example is about extreme circumstances, but for young people more generally to have influence, an enabling environment with people committed to listening and taking action on young people's concerns is required.

Seeing the bigger picture

Decent work for young people, particularly in low-income countries is an enormous challenge. There are good initiatives and good practices which signal what might be needed but we still have the question of how to bring this about at scale, and which government policies are required to be in place.

It is noticeable that many countries that have youth policies still do not have them integrated into wider labour or economic policy. It is clear too that although there may be work on education, on the skills for transition to work and, in some countries, initiatives to provide funding for young people to set up their own businesses, there is remarkably little discussion about job creation itself. All these facets need to come together if we are to enable young people to 'make a life'. An overarching approach is needed at global and national level.

The lack of action around young people's concerns is a huge risk for the world. The lack of work can lead to a sense of having no importance, or the restrictions made by government may lead to huge frustration as seen in the Arab Spring. Lack of work undoubtedly stimulates the desire to migrate and in certain countries may well lead to conflict. For young men in particular, taking up arms is a way to have purpose and status in their community. Surely, we need to make life worth living for so many young people and use their energy and initiative to make a better world.

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To cite the article: Stocking, B. (2023), 'Afterword', *Journal of the British Academy*, 11(s3): 251–257.

<https://doi.org/10.5871/jba/011s3.249>

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