

Youth, Gender and Livelihoods in West Africa: Perspectives from Ghana and The Gambia

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ABSTRACT *In this paper we report on preliminary fieldwork conducted in Ghana and The Gambia on the interrelationships among youth, gender and livelihoods. We examine how policy in developing countries, typically characterised as related to child labour or education, needs to emphasise the linkage across processes that affect young people. We argue that policy will be improved if young people are given voice to express how work, education, social networks, and culturally-bound notions of responsibility are linked and how they perceive the opportunities and constraints on their 'life chances'.*

Introduction

This paper presents the results of a pilot study conducted in Ghana and The Gambia in 2003 in which the main objectives were to examine how young low-income women and men in urban areas negotiate livelihoods, with particular reference to work and training.¹ The paper is divided into four sections. The first sets out the rationale for the study and provides background information on the two case study countries. Section two identifies the methodology used for the study. Section three highlights the main findings, focusing in particular on the nature and extent of young people's paid and unpaid work and its gender dimensions, the effects of youth work on employment in later life, the disparities between the perceived and actual role of education in occupational mobility, and the scope and efficacy of current policy interventions regarding youth and gender in Ghana and The Gambia. The fourth and final section summarises the principal results of the pilot study, their conceptual and policy significance, and the ways in which future research might better illuminate the relationships between poverty, gender inequality and disadvantage among young people.

Rationale and Context

Two main factors underpin our interest in examining youth, gender and livelihoods in West Africa. The first is the changing positions of gender, and particularly youth, in international fora on poverty in developing societies. With regard to gender, female economic empowerment has increasingly been regarded as fundamental to strategies both to alleviate poverty and to achieve gender equality, with three of the twelve critical areas of the

Beijing Global Platform for Action being 'women and poverty', 'education and training for women', and the 'girl-child' (DFID, 2000; UNDAW, 2000). These target areas are especially important given the mounting economic responsibilities of women as daughters, as heads of their own households, or, in the context of growing male unemployment, as primary breadwinners (see Adepoju and Mbugua, 1997; Chant, 1997, 2000; Brydon, 2002; Tacoli, 2002).

While the issue of youth has traditionally been less prominent in the development literature, in the last decade or so young people have become a more frequent subject of academic enquiry (see Barker *et al.*, 2000; Harper *et al.*, 2003; McIlwaine and Datta, 2004). This interest, in turn, is both a contributory cause, and effect, of the increasing attention given to youth and youth rights in major policy debates which gained momentum following the International Year of the Child in 1979 and the formulation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) in 1989 (see Edwards, 1996; SCF, 2000a; UNICEF, 2001; WHO, 2002). This said, it remains unclear whether the profile of youth (and children) on the international policy agenda remains as high today as in the early 1990s and whether debates have lost some of their critical edge (White 1996, 2003; Marcus *et al.*, 2002; Jones, 2005). The past decade has seen considerable institutional reforms, the broadening of youth-led policy agendas to embrace previously neglected groups such as the girl-child, and imaginative initiatives to grant a political voice to young people and to improve their social conditions (Annan, 2001). Yet recent figures suggest that approximately 700 million young people depend upon less than one dollar per day (an increase of approximately 12 million per annum since 1987), that at least 670 million young people suffer from two basic deprivations, and that gender gaps in education and health remain significant (UNICEF, 2000; Gordon *et al.*, 2003).² Moreover, the United Nations Special Session on Children in 2002 is regarded as having failed to reaffirm the normative goals of a decade previous, and UNICEF has been chided for identifying just five priorities for the twenty-first century: completion of quality primary education, promotion of integrated childhood development, safeguards against disease and disability, stopping the spread of HIV-AIDS, and, enabling children to grow-up free from violence, exploitation, abuse and discrimination (UNICEF, 2000). It remains to be seen if civil society organisations such as the Child Rights Caucus can reanimate debates and maintain attention to youth on the development agenda (Global Movement for Children, 2002; Jones, 2005).

The second and related rationale for our study stems from the fact that while it is widely accepted that socio-economic and gender inequality start young, academic research on the links between youth, gender and poverty is less extensive than might be anticipated and is insufficient to sustain an association of childhood-lifecourse poverty that legitimates many policy measures (see Harper *et al.*, 2003). In part this owes to the disjointed nature of research. Most studies of gender and poverty focus on adult women (and to a lesser extent, adult men) (see, for example, Chant with Craske, 2003; McIlwaine and Datta, 2004), while research on livelihoods among young people tends to neglect gender dimensions insofar as it often concentrates on paid labour and thereby underplays the household-based work performed by girls (see Lloyd-Evans, 2002; Subrahmanian, 2002). How the working practices of young people become gendered also remains underresearched whether from viewpoints that stress socialisation through cultural practices or parental perceptions of the quality of education on the one hand, or attempts to build economic models that link decision-making, poverty and child labour on the other (see Ray, 2000; Delap, 2001; Bhalotra, 2003; Harper *et al.*, 2003).

Failure to appreciate the links across youth, gender and poverty may exaggerate claims to induce lifecourse change. To consider one example, while many studies show that

poverty and child labour are highly correlated, that working children either attend school less or do less well at school, and that education is a key determinant of the overall strength of an economy, it may not follow that banning child labour or promoting compulsory schooling will reduce poverty for individuals (see Grootaert and Patrinos, 1999; Ansell, 2002; Bhalotra, 2003; OECD, 2003). Great care needs to be taken, therefore, when considering the merits of interventions such as the International Labour Office's International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour (IPEC) which urge a tighter prohibition of child labour or regard education as an alternative to work (ILO, 2002, p. 1). Indeed, studies show inconsistent relationships between work and school attendance and problems assessing the cost-benefits of education against other potentially pro-poor interventions (Akabayashi and Psacharopoulos, 1999; Delap, 2001; OECD, 2003). Moreover, the general case for an education-economic growth link may mean little to an individual; hence some evidence that children offered access to education in place of work do not take up the opportunity or sustain their involvement, and that young people express concerns about long hours for little remuneration, the lack of social connectedness gained through leisure, and the inadequate quality of education as components of lifecourse poverty (White, 1996; Boyden *et al.*, 1998; Woodhead, 2001). Our research sought to explore paid and unpaid work among youth in poverty, and the interrelationships with their acquisition of human, financial and social capital, to shed light on factors that give rise to, and sustain, poverty and gender gaps among the poor on an inter-generational basis. Asking young people about how they 'make do' through finding work, accessing education, meeting family commitments and developing social contacts seemed a useful approach.

Our choice of Ghana and The Gambia as case study countries was underpinned primarily by the fact that both provide interesting contexts for evaluating the role of policy in addressing disadvantage along lines of youth and gender. Although, as indicated in Table 1, the two countries differ, *inter alia*, in size, population, GDP per capita, nature of economic development, and religious composition, they possess a markedly youthful age structure and have high levels of child labour. In Ghana, for example, the pressures on children to contribute to household income are such that an estimated 28% of 7–14-year-olds are involved in remunerated work (DFID, 1998, p. 2), with some estimates pushing this figure up to 44% for boys and 39% for girls (Ray 2000; Edudzie, 2002). In The Gambia, the 1993 census suggests that 16.4% of 10–14-year-olds are engaged in the labour force.³ In addition, prevailing gender disparities have attracted a wide range of programmes oriented to youth and/or gender on the part of national, international and non-governmental organisations (see, for example, Fyvie and Ager, 1999; Barker *et al.*, 2000; Botchway, 2001; Jobarteh, 2002). This is partly because of the persistence, if not intensification of, high rates of school drop-out, gender inequality in literacy and educational attainment, and gender divisions in employment and earnings in the wake of neoliberal economic reform (see, for example, Brydon and Legge, 1996; de la Gorgendière, 1999; SCF, 2000b; Brydon, 2002). The fact over 40% of the population of Ghana and The Gambia are aged 15 or under, and that women are around 17% of household heads in The Gambia, and as many as 30% in Ghana, means that issues of youth vulnerability and gender inequality cannot be ignored.

Both The Gambia and Ghana have expressed commitment to educating their population and are among the 18 countries selected for the 'Education for All (EFA)-Fast Track Initiative (FTI).⁴ In The Gambia, only just over one-third of people aged 15 years or over are literate. Women represent around two-thirds of the illiterate population (GOTG, 2000, p. 4), although there is some evidence of declining gender gaps in literacy and schooling over time: 25% of Gambian women were literate by 1998 compared with

Table 1. Ghana and The Gambia: selected population, human development and poverty characteristics

	Ghana	The Gambia
Population (millions) 2001	20.0	1.4
Annual population growth rate (%) 1975–2001	2.7	3.4
Total fertility rate (per woman) 1970–1975	6.9	6.5
2000–2005	4.1	4.7
Life expectancy at birth (years) 2001	57.7	53.7
Urban population (as % of total population)		
1975	30.1	17.0
2001	36.4	31.2
Human development index (HDI) value, 2001 ^{a,b}	0.567	0.463
HDI rank, 2001 ^c	129	151
Human poverty index (HPI-1) value (%) ^d	26.4	45.8
Human poverty index (HPI-1) rank ^e	46	79
Population below income poverty line (US\$1 a day), (%) 1990–2001 ^f	44.8	59.3

Source: UNDP (2003: Tables 1, 3, 5 and 8).

^aThe HDI is an aggregate index comprising information on life expectancy at birth, adult literacy among the population aged 15 years or more, the combined primary, secondary and tertiary gross enrolment ratio, and GDP per capita (expressed in US\$ Purchasing Power Parity [PPP]). Information pertaining to education and literacy is provided in Table 2.

^bThe highest value of the HDI in 2001 was 0.944 (Norway) and the lowest, 0.275 (Sierra Leone).

^cRank out of 175 countries.

^dThe Human Poverty Index comprises 4 indicators: probability at birth of not surviving to the age of 40 years; adult illiteracy rate; population without sustainable access to an improved water source, and children under weight for age. The lower the value, the lower the incidence of poverty (e.g., Barbados, with the lowest HPI-1 out of 94 developing countries has a value of 2.5%, whereas the highest HPI-1 is for Niger, with a value of 61.8%—UNDP, 2003:245–7).

^eRank out of 94 developing countries.

^fEquivalent to US\$1.08 a day.

21.3% in 1991, against a decline of literacy among men from 53.5 to 48.5% (*ibid.*, p. 116, Table 9.4.1.4). The dip in men's literacy is somewhat surprising given that access to education among younger people in general led to youth literacy being 58.6% in 2001, compared with an adult literacy level of 37.8% (Table 2). This aside, the female literacy rate (as a proportion of the male rate) in the same year was 76% among young women and 69% among their older counterparts (Table 3). This positive trend in female literacy undoubtedly reflects the fact that during the 1990s, girls' enrolment in primary ('lower basic') education in The Gambia grew at an average of 6% p.a. compared with 2% among boys.⁵ Although boys retained their higher rate of enrolment overall in primary education, by 2000, when the male Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) stood at 77%, for girls it had climbed to 71%. By the academic year 2002–2003, by which time scholarships for girls had begun to bear fruit (see later), the GER for girls had reached 90% (DOSE, 2003, cited in Martin, 2003, Chapter 2). This said, further up the education hierarchy, gender gaps continue to be notable. Data pertaining to 1996 reveal that the GER for girls in senior secondary education was 14% compared with 22% among boys (RTG, 2002, pp. 50–51; see also Table 3), and, in extremely poor households, just under 14% of girls aged 16–18 years are in school, compared with 39% of boys (*ibid.*, p. 51).

Data for Ghana reveal that for children aged 7–17, 68.1% of boys and 59% of girls are at school, showing no significant improvement during the 1990s (UNICEF, 2001). At primary level, Table 2 indicates net enrolment of 58% falling to 31% for secondary level, while using different data UNICEF (2001) illustrates a gender gap at primary level of about 1% but as

Table 2. Ghana and The Gambia: features of literacy and education

	Ghana	The Gambia
Adult literacy rate (% age 15 and above) 2001	72.7	37.8
Youth literacy rate (% age 15–24 years) 2001	91.6	58.6
Combined primary, secondary & tertiary gross enrolment ratio (%) 2001	46	47
Net primary enrolment ratio (%) 2000–2001	58	69
Net secondary enrolment ratio (%) 2000–2001	31	35
Children reaching grade 5 (%) 1999–2000	66	69
Public expenditure on education as % of GDP		
1990	3.2	3.8
1998–2000	4.1	2.7
Public expenditure on education as % of total government expenditure		
1990	24.3	14.6
1998–2000	–	14.2

Source: UNDP (2003: Tables 1, 9 and 10).

–, No data.

much as 16% at secondary level. The adult literacy rate is high for the region at almost 73%, although only 64.5% of women are literate compared with 81% of men (Table 2). Furthermore, these figures are more generous than those produced by UNICEF (2001) and may not include literacy in both English and a Ghanaian language which Edudzie (2002) estimates accounts for only 32% of the population. This would seem a low return for the levels of government expenditure reported in Table 2, and figures produced by Addae-Mensah (2000) which indicate that average annual spending on education in Ghana in general is US\$73 (versus US\$56 in The Gambia), although at secondary school level the corresponding amount is only US\$66 compared with US\$125 in The Gambia.

Methods

Our fieldwork in The Gambia and Ghana took place during an overall period of 8 weeks in 2003. Given the relative dearth of statistical or bibliographic material on the

Table 3. Ghana and The Gambia: gender inequalities in literacy and education

	Ghana	The Gambia
Adult literacy rate (% aged 15 and above) 2001		
Female	64.5	30.9
Male	81.1	45.0
Adult female literacy rate as % of male rate, 2001	80	69
Youth female literacy rate as % of male rate, 2001	95	76
Net primary enrolment—ratio of females to males, 2000–2001	0.95	0.93
Net secondary enrolment—ratio of females to males, 2000–2001	0.86	0.70
Gross tertiary enrolment—ratio of females to males, 2000–2001	0.40	–
Combined primary, secondary and tertiary enrolment ratio (%) 2000–2001		
Female	42	43
Male	49	51

Source: UNDP (2003: Tables 22 and 24).

–, No data.

interrelationships between youth, gender and livelihoods in both countries, the methodology mainly entailed the generation of primary data. The principal component comprised individual interviews and focus discussions with 60 young low-income women and men (in roughly equal proportions) living in or around the major urban areas (30 in the vicinity of Greater Banjul in the Gambia, and 30 in Accra, Ghana). To obtain a deeper understanding of context, additional consultations were held with representatives from 20 government departments and NGOs (local and international), which have instigated programmes for youth and/or gender in the two countries.

In respect of our interviews with young people, approximately 40 were drawn from the 10–19-year age group. The majority of this cohort were still studying, even if many had part-time employment. The remaining 20 were aged between 20 and 29 years, most had left ‘full-time’ education, and were engaged in waged work or self employment. Our principal reason for including a ‘younger’ and ‘older’ group of youth was to gain an idea of the prospective and actual role of education in shaping occupational trajectories. Thus, among 10–19-year-olds, our concern was to find out about employment aspirations, and the anticipated role of education in their realisation. By contrast, talking with 20–29-year-olds about their occupational strategies and experiences yielded insights into how educational attainment, in relation to other forms of human, financial and social capital, had facilitated entry into different jobs.

Our sample of 10–19-year-olds was derived through contact with schools, youth projects or NGOs, while 20–29-year-olds were selected on the basis of involvement in work in the lower to middling range of the occupational spectrum (i.e. from manual to low-level white collar employment). Respondents in this latter group included workers in informal commercial establishments and street vending, taxi-driving, tertiary services such as restaurant work, internet café attendants and office/reception staff. Selection of informants was non-random given the limited time available for our pilot surveys. Criteria for ‘hand-picking’ included personal acquaintance, ease of access to informants (through contacts or because of the public nature of their work [e.g., in the street]), and our pre-determined umbrella of employment types. All interviews and focus group discussions were taped and transcribed. In recognition of the fact that respondents were often forfeiting valuable work or study time to participate in our survey, a modest stipendiary ‘gift’ was given for their attendance.

Main Findings

Young People, Work and Education

Young low-income people in Ghana and The Gambia become involved in a variety of work activities from a relatively early age, and almost invariably while they are still studying at primary school or have just entered secondary education. Virtually all children start participating in unpaid work such as domestic labour, helping out on peri-urban horticultural plots farmed by parents or guardians⁶ at about 7 or 8 years old. Around half our sample reported having taken on part-time remunerated work as well by the age of 11–12 years.

The income-generating activities undertaken by young people are commonly unskilled and poorly remunerated, mainly comprising assistance to relatives on market stalls and in small family businesses, or engagement in own-account informal services and commerce such as running errands or street-vending. Hours and times of remunerated work vary, but frequently involve 1–2 hours of activity before and/or after the school day, as well as at weekends. As discussed in greater detail below, girls not only play a greater role in unpaid

household labour, but, in The Gambia, at least, are also more likely to engage in paid work too. They are also more likely than boys to hand over their earnings directly to parents.

While participation in work conceivably takes time away from study, one major reason why young people take on remunerated activities is to pay for, as well as to establish a legitimate claim to, schooling. Many young people from poor households recognise that being in school prevents them from contributing as much as they might to household expenses, and also that the costs of education can be a significant drain on already exiguous resources. Although in The Gambia, for instance, fees for state primary education have now been waived, and for girls, fees for 'upper basic' (junior secondary) as well (see later), there are many other costs—for example for uniforms, exercise books, pens, pencils, schoolbags, lunches and so on—which hit poor families especially hard. Indeed, school-related costs are estimated by official sources to consume 2.4% of the average per capita income of the poorest quintile of Gambian households (GOTG, 2000, p. 110; see also Addae-Mensah, 2000; Brydon and Legge, 1996 on Ghana). In light of the fact that poverty stands out as a major factor in school non-attendance and drop-out, funding their own education is deemed critical by many young people. In turn, possibly because work is often a *sine qua non* for accessing education, employment is not perceived to have negative affects on academic progress. This said, in Ghana the costs of contributing to school fees sometimes makes it necessary to suspend education in order to engage in remunerative work. Suspension not only affects school performance (Heady, 2003) but also pushes individuals into extending education and training well into adulthood. Prolonged education is also a function of qualitative inadequacy in the Ghanaian educational system with many young people turning to private sector tuition at evenings and weekends not only in such areas as Information Technology and English, but for basic numeracy and literacy as well. Paying for vocational courses to supplement school qualifications usually incurs considerable personal cost.

While household poverty is undoubtedly one of the primary factors motivating young people's self-funding of education, it should also be noted that even better-off individuals may do so, given strong expectations in both Ghanaian and Gambian family systems that children should start 'giving back' to their parents as soon as they are able (usually by their early teens). In The Gambia, for example, young Muslims commonly articulate the belief that the more one does for one's parents, the more 'blessings' one accrues.⁷ Children are raised with such an important sense of obligation to their natal kin that parents seldom have to tell them to go out to work and few object when their children do so. Indeed, respondents in Ghana mentioned that they felt a need to work in order not to present an image of idleness that they, and their parents, equated with deviance from social norms. In both countries the pattern of working out of duty and obligation appears to be most marked among elder siblings, among girls, and among migrants raised in rural areas (see also Punch, 2001, 2002 on Bolivia).

Gender Dimensions of Young People's Work

While the vast majority of children participate in unpaid household labour, the workload of girls within the home tends to be greater insofar as they perform a wider range of chores and dedicate more time overall to their multiple tasks. Thus, whereas boys may only be expected (or asked) to sweep the compound, to run errands and/or to accompany younger brothers and sisters (especially the latter) to school, girls regularly perform a wide range of activities including cooking, cleaning, washing, sewing, minding younger siblings and so on. This gender disparity stems mainly from the fact that domestic labour is deemed fundamentally to be 'women's work' in accordance with the normative

ideal that in adulthood women should be the principal ‘homemakers’ in the household (see VP/SSA, 1999, p. 8).

Yet despite the fact that unpaid household labour is assigned primarily to women, most low-income mothers or female guardians have some form of income-generating activity as well. Indeed, research in Ghana suggests that contributing to household income is regarded as a vital part of maternal identity (see Clark, 2000). This dual load of responsibilities among adult women seems to have two major impacts upon their younger counterparts. First, it means that mothers have less capacity to assume full responsibility for housework and childcare and so pass on the ‘excess’ burden to daughters (or foster daughters). Second, it establishes the notion that young women should also contribute economically.

The Gambian survey reveals that paid work is slightly more common among girls than boys, which, in line with the adult generation, suggests that their disproportionate involvement in domestic labour does not preclude remunerative work. The net result is that many young girls spend up to four hours a day in a combination of paid and unpaid work, which, objectively at least, takes significant time away from homework, after-school private study, rest and play. Indeed, notwithstanding the frequent under-enumeration of child labour in official statistics (Robson, 1996), data from the 1993 Gambian Census reveal higher levels of economic activity among girls than boys in both the 10–14- and 15–19-year age cohorts (the female economic activity rate in the former being 7.8% compared with 4.5% among boys, and in the latter 13.1 versus 7.9%) (RTG, 1993, p. 9). This is corroborated by more recent national data from The Gambia, which shows in extremely poor households, where levels of child labour tend to be highest in general, girls are particularly likely to be economically active (GOTG, 2000, p. 3). In Ghana, ‘duty of work’ among daughters was claimed to have become more intense with the shift from extended to nuclear households, since domestic chores cannot be shared among other adult women in the compound and vulnerability to income shocks from the loss of a mother’s earnings, without compensation from another family member, is that much more immediate. Moreover, while boys tend to combine work and education, for girls work is more often at the expense of schooling (Edudzie, 2002).

Although not explored within our pilot project, one factor over and above existing divisions of labour between men and women in explaining uneven workloads between boys and girls is that parents place more emphasis on educating sons. The Gambian government, for example, reports that in addition to girls being disadvantaged by their domestic chores, in households with limited financial resources, the education of female children is sacrificed (GOTG, 1998, p. 34). This is echoed by UNICEF The Gambia (1999) who note that: ‘Cultural practices of gender discrimination and the high cost to families of formal basic education limit school enrolment and retention, especially of girls’. Important contributory factors here are four-fold. First, there is a pervasive normative ideal that men should be the chief breadwinners for their households. Second, unemployment is higher among women than men (19 versus 14% in The Gambia—VP/SSA, 1999, p. 7). Third, women are much less likely to ascend to the upper tiers of the employment hierarchy (only 4.9% of the skilled workforce in The Gambia is female, for example—GOTG, 2000, p. 138). Fourth, the average earnings of men are consistently higher than those of women, regardless of poverty status and type of occupation (GOTG, 2001; also Table 4).

The Effects of Youth Work on Employment in Later Life and Disparities in the Perceived and Actual Role of Education in Occupational Mobility

Recognising that child labour and education are not necessarily ‘polarised choices for poor households’ (Subrahmanian, 2002, p. 403), the extent to which paid (and unpaid) work

Table 4. Ghana and The Gambia: gender-related development index and inequalities in political and economic activity

	Ghana	The Gambia
Gender-related Development Index (GDI) Value ^a	0.564	0.457
Gender-related Development Index (GDI) Rank ^b	104	123
Female economic activity rate (age 15 and above) (%)	80.0	98
Female economic activity rate as % of male rate	69.7	78
Estimated earned income (PPP US\$) 2001		
Female	1,924	1,530
Male	2,579	2,581
Seats in parliament held by women (as % of total)	9.0	13.2

Source: UNDP (2003: Tables 22, 23 and 25).

^aThe GDI comprises four gender-differentiated indicators: life expectancy at birth; adult literacy; combined primary, secondary and tertiary gross enrolment ratio, and estimated earned income. The highest value of the GDI in 2001 was 0.941 (Norway), and the lowest Niger (0.279).

^bRank out of 144 countries.

affects the employment prospects of young people in later life is difficult to determine. At first sight the intrinsic value of work undertaken by young people, beyond helping to instill arguably generic qualities such as a sense of ‘discipline’ and ‘responsibility’, does not seem significant since most jobs are of a menial nature and do not provide specific skills which would necessarily be employed in an adult career, or at least one of choice. This is especially pertinent given the pronounced aspirations most youth have to eschew manual or informal sector work (common occupations among their parents) in favour of white-collar jobs or setting up a formal sector business (equated variously with being registered, having employees and/or occupying its own premises). Indeed, many 10–19-year-olds expressed over-idealised and/or improbable career aspirations given the nature and level of their educational and skill profiles and prospects.

Education is deemed by the vast majority of poor 10–19-year-olds as the single most important factor in progressing to a ‘good career’. In respect of the way in which education interplays with other resources (‘human’, ‘social’, ‘financial’ capital) which young people use to advance their work prospects, there is little doubt that distinctive advantages accrue from improved literacy and, more specifically, an ability to read and write English, the official language of both The Gambia and Ghana. With a strong association between literacy and English on the part of youth and employers alike, many emphasise the relevance of this skill given the increasing amount of ‘paperwork’ involved in ‘modern’ employment (office work, tourism services and so on). In contrast, while several young people are able to speak four or five indigenous languages in addition to English, multi-lingualism tends to be disregarded as a ‘skill’ *per se*, even if it helps in forging social ties, which, as we shall see later, can be extremely important in increasing access to jobs. Similarly, other skills which young people acquire in the course of their upbringing, including farming or horticultural knowledge, domestic skills such as sewing and cooking, and practical expertise in areas such as carpentry, mechanical and electrical repair are rarely interpreted as vocationally relevant.

Yet the emphasis placed upon education by young people, as well as by the state and NGOs, as a means to prepare young people for work appears somewhat at odds with reality. This is amply demonstrated by our interviews with 20–29-year-olds which suggest that academic qualifications beyond basic literacy in English had actually done little to advance their employment or earning opportunities. In The Gambia, for example, respondents discussed how occupations such as taxi-driving, which are

commonly entered into through apprenticeships, and where the basic eligibility criteria are the ability to converse in English, to handle a car, and to simply 'know the area', often lead to greater remuneration than posts in which secondary education, full literacy and/or specialist training are, on the surface at least, more critical. From interviews in Ghana, it was clear that the extensive network of public and private vocational technical institutes which provide electrical, carpentry, IT and financial qualifications do not necessarily meet labour market needs insofar as they are often out of reach of the poorest individuals.

If education has a role in enhancing the employment prospects of young people, it could be argued that this is often of a more tangential than a direct nature, with the two most crucial factors identified in gaining access to a regular job or business opportunity being personal contacts and start-up capital. Indirectly, the potential financial capital possessed by young people interrelates with education insofar as only better-off families among the poor can afford to put their children through the complete pre-tertiary education cycle. In respect of social contacts, however, the links with education are less obvious, notwithstanding that some young people observed the scaling down of their social circles on leaving the school environment. This is especially so with young women who, despite their more extensive labour loads, are more closely guarded by parents and senior kin. None the less, exemplifying the importance of social contacts, one 24-year-old internet café attendant interviewed in The Gambia reported that despite having a complete secondary education (West African Secondary Certificate [WASC]—equivalent to A/S level), plus 15 months of specialist short-course IT training, he was only able to get his job (following 5 months of unemployment) because he knew someone who worked in the business, and in which, importantly, someone without any IT experience had been recruited previously simply on the basis of trust and close acquaintance with an existing employee. This was echoed in Ghana where it was identified that employment is frequently a matter of 'know who' not 'know how', with the 'knowing who' involving a complex array of familial, ethnic and religious contacts. In respect of the latter, and in the hope that employers equate 'Godliness' with probity, some participants mentioned how they went to more than one church or rotated family members among numerous denominations to seek out the best opportunities. Indeed, in some churches job opportunities were announced during services and one lay preacher had 'fixed' so many young people into jobs that she had set-up her own employment agency.

In turn, work itself is frequently regarded as vital to the generation of social capital and creation of life chances. Networks gained through work allow young people to develop opportunities absent from formal education. One Ghanaian trader who also trained part-time as an electrician explained how working in a shop had allowed him to acquire mobile phone covers. Selling the covers, in turn, gave him access to the phones themselves, and selling just one phone would earn him more than he received from the shop. As phone owners tend to be relatively well off and to have useful contacts, he hoped that by selling phones he could eventually interest someone with his electrical skills.

Current Policy Interventions Regarding Youth and Gender

In both The Gambia and Ghana, issues of youth and gender disadvantage are beginning to be taken on board by government departments and NGOs (see GOTG/DFID, 1998; UN, 2001; Camara *et al.*, 2003), although advances 'on the ground' are arguably more discernible in The Gambia. A major overriding goal of The Gambia's National Youth Policy 1998–2008, for example, is to enhance training and employment opportunities for young people, while the National Policy for the Advancement of Women (1999–2009) aims to reduce gender inequality and to promote greater well-being and participation

among Gambian women (NWB, 2002). With the specific purpose of correcting long-standing gender biases in educational attainment, the schooling of the girl-child has been given particular attention, such that there is now a dedicated Girls' Education Unit within the Gambian Department of State for Education, and a recent decree by President Jammeh waived 'upper basic' (junior secondary) school fees for girls. There have also been interventions such as scholarship schemes and workshops to encourage girls to go into less conventionally 'female' subjects such as science, mathematics and technology (APRC, 2001).

In order to better harmonise educational provision with the job market, various vocational training schemes have also been introduced by government and NGOs in The Gambia, along with attempts to re-orientate youth to value these and other skills. Initiatives to date have included increasing vocational instruction as part of the academic curriculum (through placing more emphasis on agricultural science, home economics, woodwork and IT), the introduction of 'career' days and occupational advisory bodies within the school environment, and the launch of vocational training alternatives for 'early school leavers', as in the case of the Gambian government's National Youth Service Scheme (NYSS), and NGO-funded 'skills centres' (GYNSS, 2001). Other important initiatives include the establishment in 2001 of the Child Protection Alliance (CPA), an interagency collaborative institution comprising over 40 organisations for the protection and rights of children in The Gambia, and the creation of a National Policy on Children (2003–2008) (Camara *et al.*, 2003).

The prospects for building capacity and empowering young women and men in The Gambia have been further enhanced by the multiple involvement of state, NGO and international agencies in participatory decision-making and agenda-setting, with recently introduced 'gender focal points' in all state sectors being followed up by youth focal points within various segments of the state and civil society machinery.

While recognising on-going shortfalls in the realisation of policy aims in The Gambia (perhaps most sharply reflected in the fact that the country has not yet set up its National Commission on Children), in Ghana, the direction of change is less certain. Despite having been the first country to ratify the CRC and to establish a National Commission on Children (GNCC), some of the momentum appears to have been lost. Whereas Ghana's Medium Term Development Plan 1997–2000 aimed to deliver functional literacy as a minimum through Free Compulsory Universal Basic Education (GOG, 1995), the Children's Act of 1998 only went part way to removing the prohibitory stance to child work of earlier legislation. A large number of short-life programmes such as 'Red Card to Child Labour' sponsored by the government, international donors, trade unions and churches have set out to combat child work in the tourism sector, street selling and trafficking ('*kayaye*'). Similarly, programmes supported by UNICEF have enhanced school enrolment, especially for the girl-child, although drop out rates rise sharply in the transition from primary to secondary when assistance is ended. The opinion of some NGOs was that these had become fragmented, sector- and region-specific, and that wider consensus on what should be done was far off. To illustrate, criticism was levelled at the placing of the GNCC in the newly formed Ministry of Women and Children's Affairs which symbolically equated children as a 'woman's issue' while youth issues fell under the Ministry of Sport and Youth.

At the time of fieldwork in Ghana the national education strategy was being revised by the Kufuor administration. NGOs expressed concern at the lack of participation from civil society in this process and the likelihood that reforms would not be research-led. The characteristic identified by Yates (1997), that international donors in Ghana tend to have placed major emphasis on literacy and qualifications without examining their

relevance in the context of access to usable skills and other resources, seems set to continue. A focus group of youth-led organisations revealed that none had been consulted about the nature, or language, of education reform, changes to vocational training or means to extend the youth rights discourse into agenda-setting. They expressed annoyance that the Ghana Education Service continues to maintain enrolment and attendance rates as the indicator of delivery with no consideration of the quality of delivery or impact on livelihoods, or taking into account grassroots suggestions for curriculum reform.

Conclusion and Directions for Future Research

Despite vitally important shifts in international policy towards children and youth over the past two decades, these do not seem to have resulted in appreciable effects in eradicating poverty. One of our broad conclusions, and an area for possible future research, is to explore the nature of transitions which policy often summarises as a path from education to work, work to poverty alleviation, childhood to adulthood. We found that young people described a rough interface between education–work, that education often required work for financial and other reasons, and that leaving school was not a parental decision but often involved the agency of the young person.

A second conclusion relates to the observation that if labour markets in Ghana and The Gambia are not accessed through education, it is not surprising that so few of our participants thought that education was directly correlated with income. If education *per se* is not necessarily the best route to overcoming privation, if social networks are more important to work and ‘life’ trajectories of young people, and if we understand poverty as inter-generational and/or as a ‘family affair’, we need to better understand why apparently dynamic livelihood creating opportunities such as education, training, and even work in growing sectors such as IT, do not remove more from poverty. Is it because there is simply not enough work to go around, or, as many participants argued, because educational provision is not harmonised with the job market? How does basic literacy in an educational system that makes few demands on innovative and creative thinking, and presents young people with few social contacts beyond their immediate peer group and geographical location, compare with the perception of skills and opportunities to create ‘life chances’ through work? Finally, to return to our opening concern about the demise of innovative policy and to our first conclusion, how far might measures such as enhancing the availability of start-up capital for young people support measures to create greater harmony between education systems and labour markets?

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Notes

1. We work with a definition of youth of ca. 13–30 years which dovetails with most ‘official’ definitions, as well as with grassroots perceptions of ‘young people’.
2. Marcus *et al.* (2002) note that only two out of 23 supposedly ‘pro-poor’ Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs) include analysis of how economic policies could have differential impacts on different groups, none

- examine child or youth poverty, five consider child labour and only one discusses youth. For many countries, including Ghana and The Gambia, PRSPs regard education as one of the principal means of poverty alleviation for young people.
3. Paradoxical to the 'problem' of youth labour is the 'problem' of youth unemployment, which in Ghana stands at 15.9% among 15–24-year-olds, twice the rate among 25–44-year-olds, and three times that of 45–64-year-olds (Eduddie, 2002). Equivalent figures are not available for The Gambia, but official sources claim that unemployment is particularly severe among 16–25-year-olds (GOTG, 2000, p. 147).
 4. The 'EFA-FTI' 2004–15 came into being with the World Forum on Education in Dakar in 2002, which reaffirmed calls for the provision of primary education for all children and the reduction of adult illiteracy with support from multilateral and bilateral agencies.
 5. Following the return to civilian rule and the establishment of the 'Second Republic' in 1997, primary education in The Gambia became officially designated as 'lower basic' education and junior secondary as 'upper basic'. The Department of State for Education Mission Statement of 1998 declared the intention not only of achieving 9 years basic education for every Gambian child (starting at the age of 6 or 7), but at least a 50% transition rate to (senior) secondary education (DOSE, 1998). In order to smooth the transition from lower to upper basic, 'Basic Cycle' schools in which the complete 9 years of basic education is taught are presently being established (see Martin, 2003).
 6. In common with other studies of West Africa, our fieldwork revealed that children in Ghana and The Gambia are often fostered out to relatives, especially where their natal families reside in rural areas. Sometimes this occurs because of the death of a parent or because the foster families in question have no children of their own, but more often it is because parents believe that their children will have a better chance to obtain education and work in urban settings (see also GOTG, 1998, p. 26; Porter and Blaufuss, 2002).
 7. Islam is the professed faith of over 90% of the Gambian population, with around 5% being Christian, and the remainder, Animist. In Ghana, about 60% of the population claim to be Christian, 16% Muslim and 21% Animist.

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