

Youth Shifting Identities, Moving Aspirations, Changing Social Norms, and Positive Uncertainty in Ethiopia and Nepal

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journals.sagepub.com/home/sro**Vicky Johnson**

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Abstract

This article explores uncertainty and aspiration in the everyday lives of marginalised youth in fragile and conflict-affected areas of Ethiopia and Nepal. The concept referred to as ‘positive uncertainty’ was developed through analysis of 300 qualitative case-study interviews with marginalised young people (15–25 years) across rural and urban research sites as part of the Youth Uncertainty Rights (YOUR) World Research (2016–2019). Six exemplary cases illustrate youth creativity in the face of uncertainty. Drawing on Bauman’s theories of community, insecurity, and liquid modernity, the research investigated how youth lived with uncertainty in domains of their everyday lives: how youth felt about their relationships with peers and families and how these relationships were influenced by highly gendered social norms and intersecting aspects of marginalisation in communities. Analysis revealed that youth demonstrate creativity as they navigate uncertainty, negotiate intergenerational power dynamics, and shift their aspirations as they strive to meet adult expectations in contexts of growing unemployment, environmental fragility, and political change across both countries. The analysis of marginalised youth responses to uncertainty, relationships, and norms in fragile environments presented goes beyond the application of Bauman’s theories to identify ‘positive uncertainty’ and further extends understandings of the role of uncertainty in navigating intergenerational relationships.

Keywords

aspirations, insecurity, marginalisation, poverty, uncertainty, youth

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Introduction

Drawing on Bauman's theories of insecurity and community (2001), this article first explores the concept of uncertainty. Youth Uncertainty Rights (YOUR) World Research, conducted in 2016–2019, conceptualised through partnerships between Ethiopian, Nepalese, and UK universities and non-government agencies. A youth-centred methodology and a process of co-construction with youth provided a basis from which to explore the concept of uncertainty and 300 qualitative case-study interviews were conducted with marginalised youth (15–25 years). A selection of exemplary cases is presented which illustrate youth navigation of uncertainty. These demonstrate the aspects of uncertainty in young people's experiences and the development of creative strategies used to fulfil aspirations while also satisfying adult expectations. Through exploration of these data, the conclusions drawn include the potential for uncertainty to be positive, that youth respond to uncertainties in their circumstances and environments in their developing identities while also negotiating social norms and intergenerational and peer relationships, and that research must include the perspectives of the most marginalised, not only to listen to their voices, but to act on their ideas.

The concept of uncertainty

YOUR World Research co-constructed notions of uncertainty with national research teams and youth during 2016 and 2017. This follows Cindy Katz (2004) in recognising young people's resilience, resistance, and recovery in the face of uncertainty. Katz suggests that, in uncertain contexts in both Howa, a village in Sudan, and Harlem in the US, children have creative responses to degradation of society due to capitalism, where adults in their communities no longer have solutions. Similarly, Calkins' (2016) work on Sudan, presents uncertainty, not just as a debilitating problem, but also as an opportunity to create other futures. How youth see their futures as uncertain has also been linked to perceptions and experiences of education in southern Africa (Dungey and Ansell, 2020) and there are parallels to Di Nunzio's (2019) ethnographic account of young men embracing uncertainty in Addis Ababa. Particularly in contexts of uncertainty, Huijsmans and colleagues (2020) suggest that aspiration, as orientations towards the future, needs to be viewed through young people's narratives about their own complex lives and their situated agency.

Through applying Bauman's theories of insecurity and community (2001) as an underlying theoretical framework for the project, uncertainty was explored as not necessarily only negative. Bauman's theories, despite being largely formulated for Western developed country contexts, were thought to be interesting to translate into fragile contexts. He suggested that uncertainty may potentially be experienced as moments of creativity, and that young people break with more traditional bonds in families and communities and seek new social bonds as they grow up and navigate liquid modernity. Yet, as is explored further in this article, Bauman failed to recognise the extent to which even in 'fluid modernity', young people seek to meet the expectations of older generations, and that their embrace of positive uncertainty is in part a way of navigating these intergenerational expectations and social norms. Despite Bauman's theories being

a useful starting point for the research, there are aspects of intergenerational decision making, including the way in which youth negotiate family and community bonds and power dynamics, that are complex and temporally contingent and his theories in these respects are not so readily translated into the fragile environments and volatile political contexts in the global South.

Over the past decades, there has been recognition of a growing sense of radical social uncertainty seen as connected to the consequences of increasing globalisation, including links to ethnic violence, around the world (Appadurai, 1998). Research in Nepal has demonstrated that children and families migrate due to poverty, the fragility of rural mountainous environments, and in search of education and employment opportunities. They have historically migrated to India and Middle-Eastern countries, young men in search of labour and young women travelling for domestic work or in informal sectors including sex work (Johnson et al., 1995). There have been increasing movements from resource-based traditional livelihoods in rural Asia (Punch and Sugden, 2013). In Ethiopia, youth transitions have also historically included considering migration options both seasonally and as part of family strategies for survival. There is evidence of the persistence of highly gendered social norms such as early marriage in rural sites across Ethiopia, including some young women leaving their communities to escape from family expectations (Getu et al., 2018). The migration of youth to urban Ethiopia has also been historically linked to youth transitions as they escape from rural poverty and gendered social norms (Pankhurst, 2017). Over the past decades, research in Ethiopia associated with youth migration due to changes in political economy, education, and the labour market has included a particular focus on the street connected lives of young men, including their attitudes to uncertainty (Di Nunzio, 2019; Mains, 2013).

YOUR World Research focused on the experiences of marginalisation and uncertainty in urban and rural youth. There is a high level of agreement between the findings presented in in this research (Johnson et al., 2019a) with research with youth in Addis Ababa (Di Nunzio, 2019). Both included the analysis of power dynamics and relationships with peers, families, and adults in communities of origin as well as in the urban destinations, as being critical to understanding young lives with useful parallel conclusions drawn about youth embracing uncertainty. Di Nunzio has also placed emphasis on the role uncertainty plays in young people's decisions to leave home and how they become involved in the informal sector, sometimes leading to illegal work. The research presented here depicts how marginalised youth in Nepal expressed feelings of hope as they migrate and are often accepted back into communities on their return. In contrast, many youth in the research sites in Ethiopia expressed hopelessness, particularly when they had left education in fragile environments.

The case studies on uncertainty from YOUR World Research have been selected to offer rural and urban perspectives from Nepal and Ethiopia. The article contributes perspectives from young men, young women, and a young transgendered person. The cases presented frame the emerging theorisation and provide details of how uncertainty and aspiration play out in young lives, and are intertwined with social norms, peer, and intergenerational relationships. For youth who face a certainty of poverty and discrimination, relationships may often support their navigation of uncertainty.

Youth subjectivities and marginalisation

The change-scape methodology used in this research makes central youth as agents in landscapes of change (political, social, environmental, community, and family contexts) that influence youth perceptions about their futures and their peer and intergenerational relationships (Johnson, 2011). Such change-scapes also influence expectations held by adults about their lives. But in contexts that are fragile and rapidly changing, insecurity and precarity abound in the lives of the most marginalised young people. Such 'youth-scapes' are also captured in ethnographic descriptions about lived experiences of youth across African contexts: their fantasies, realities, and solutions to precarious situations, and how they navigate social, political, and fragile environments and processes of exclusion and marginalisation (Christiansen et al., 2006). The perspectives of marginalised youth can illuminate how their aspirations are shifting and how they can navigate uncertainty in creative and positive ways, potentially finding solutions that adults may not have previously thought about. Youth navigations of uncertainty and negotiations of intergenerational relationships and social norms could provide innovative solutions in communities. This is reminiscent of calls for more empowering and contextual participation processes that navigate social, economic, organisational, and political tensions and constraints (Shier, 2010).

Youth analysis of marginalisation in the research went beyond NGO or government definitions, extending beyond gender, caste/ethnicity, and poverty. Rather than always seeing marginalisation as referring to those at the margins of society, the youth suggest it is central to every community and persistent in every area. Marginal youth have creative solutions to what they see as certainties of poverty and processes of marginalisation that they face in their communities, so they take action to find new futures.

Youth-centred research was conducted within an analysis of rapidly changing contexts. It started from marginalised young people's feeling about their multiple and shifting identities, their perceptions of inclusion and exclusion, their relationships with others, and whether they feel valued and listened to in their everyday lives. The national teams took note of the importance of exploring youth subjectivities on marginalisation, violence, and abuse (Wells, 2014). Agency was recognised as being embedded in peer and intergenerational relationships (Abebe, 2013) and situated within relational age-based and generational constructions (Huijsmans et al., 2020).

Youth interviews sought to explain how youth made decisions, including the influences from their interactions with peers, within families, and with adults in communities, at school and at work. Kelly and colleagues, in rethinking youth marginalisation, discuss what is valued or not within society (Kelly et al., 2019). This is also reminiscent in Bauman's (2004) views on 'wasted lives' and reflects how youth can feel discarded and as if they are redundant and out of place in families and communities. In understanding who experiences marginalisation, young people were given the opportunity, as with uncertainty, to discuss their own experiences and formulate youth definitions. Marginalised youth in this research included different genders, groups, castes/ethnicities, but also those thought by other youth to be marginalised. This was based on their experiences of hard labour, exploitation, abuse, feelings of alienation and exclusion within peer groups, schools and communities, and exclusion due to their identities such as being

disabled, or genderfluid. In agreement with Kelly and colleagues (2019: 5), understandings of marginalisation were multi-dimensional: embodied, emotional, and also contextualised.

The uncertain research context

Comparative research was undertaken to generate cross-cultural learning about marginalised youth perspectives on understanding how to navigate uncertainties and find new futures in fragile and post-conflict environments. Ethiopia and Nepal were chosen as both are lower income countries and have some similarities socially and economically with high youth unemployment, internal mobility from rural to urban settings, youth outward migration to nearby countries and further afield to the Middle-East, and both having mountainous regions and lowlands, environmental fragility, and post conflict situations. Throughout the research, the context shifted making these features even more important. There has been a history of migration in both countries as an important aspect of family survival that has involved youth. In Nepal, this has been accentuated by increasing environmental fragility and disaster. In response to the 2015 earthquake and aftershocks, there has also been an emphasis on youth involvement in reconstruction that has given youth a purpose in staying in affected communities. In Ethiopia, historical migration to urban areas and then on to Middle-Eastern destinations has been exacerbated in *kebeles* or small villages suffering from drought.

There was conflict during the research period (2016–2019), due to ongoing political changes in Ethiopia and localised religious and caste tension over resources in the lowland Terai areas of Nepal. In Ethiopia, there were three states of emergency, accompanied by sometimes violent political tensions, and change. The interpretations of NGOs, including their approaches to advocacy and recognition of child and youth rights changed completely. This highlighted the importance of embedded local and national partnerships: only with these trusted relationships on the ground could this youth-centred research be carried out (Johnson et al., 2019b). In contrast, Nepal had a Maoist government with policies prioritising rights of children and young people. Political spaces for children and youth in governance, through child clubs and youth groups, were established in Nepal over the past decades. These met with different levels of success locally, but enabled some children and youth to have a say in communities (Johnson, 2010). Since the 2015 earthquake, youth and social movements gained ground and were seen as important to reconstruction.

The research sites in each country included part of the capital city, a small town, and two rural locations that had experienced conflict or extreme environmental fragility. The Ethiopia sites were: Addis Ketema, a sub-city of Addis Ababa; drought-affected Woredas of Hetosa; the small town of Woreta in Amhara, and the surrounding rural area of Fogera. In Nepal the team worked in Kathmandu slums and with street connected youth; earthquake-affected Sindhupalchowk; and urban and rural parts of Kapilvastu in the southern plains. These sites were identified with the national academic and non-governmental research partners and members of government, UN, and funding organisations that formed national reference groups. They advised on the importance of scale and of

representing different ethnic and caste groups, in order for youth perspectives to eventually feed into local and national service provision and youth policy.

Towards the end of the research, young people were seen by local communities of the research sites, and in government, as being, at least to some extent, actors who can be listened to in broader community development, despite strong social norms that prioritise adult perspectives. This shift resulted in provincial and national governments inviting the most marginalised youth who participated in the research to engage in discussions to develop future youth services and policy. There was recognition in both countries from NGO partners and government representatives that it was often the perspectives of the most marginalised that were missing from policy development and, therefore, interventions were not necessarily working for them (Johnson et al., 2019b).

The research methodology, participants, and selection of exemplary cases

This article focuses on a main strand of uncertainty in the overall rights-based and youth-centred research project, YOUR World research, following Johnson's (2011) Change-scape framework and methodology. Rather than presenting the full methodology (Johnson and West et al., forthcoming 2022), details of the early co-construction with young people, case-study interviews, analysis across those interviews, and the selection of the six exemplary case studies presented are provided.

National research teams in Ethiopia and Nepal worked in total with over 1000 marginalised youth. The research presented in this article, however, focuses on the co-construction phase in each country that involved at least 50 young people, and the in-depth case study interviews that took place with 300 marginalised youth across sites across Ethiopia and Nepal. Policy definitions of youth vary around the world, usually based on age-range, and differed between the two countries. In Ethiopia, definition of youth in policy and for services extended up to 30 years, and in Nepal up to 40 years. For the purposes of this comparative research, we worked with young people aged 15–25 years (corresponding with the UN definition). Some of these were 28 by the final stages of the project. The family status and whether young people had children of their own was also noted along with their education, employment, and housing situations.

During the co-construction in initial phases, national teams worked with youth to understand concepts of marginalisation, insecurity, and uncertainty. This research sought to go beyond government definitions of marginalisation and understand marginalised youth perceptions of their own status within families and communities. Initially, local partner organisations were asked to identify the most marginalised youth in specific research sites chosen for their environmental fragility, political and religious conflict, and/or poverty. Despite living in deprived communities, groups of youth invariably suggested they were not themselves the most marginalised; snowball sampling was used to reach more and more marginalised youth as identified by local young people. Youth definitions of marginalisation included poverty, gender and ethnicity, and/or caste, as indicated by government, but went beyond this. Youth identified issues such as language spoken, living with disability, caring for others in families including being young

parents, exposure to environmental disaster/fragility and local conflict, dropping out of formal education, engaging in exploitative work. They also included aspects of relationships such as abusive relationships, rejection by families including when they returned as unsuccessful migrants, or being forced into cultural norms that they didn't agree with such as early marriage. They saw marginalisation as not just on the social or community periphery, but as central to young lives.

The teams spoke to approximately half the young women and half the young men and followed the suggestions of youth for selecting young people seen as most-marginalised. In Nepal, 11 detailed interviews were conducted with genderfluid youth, referred to as young people of the third gender in government and NGO policy and practice and by many people across civil society in Nepal. The research set out to explore the concepts of insecurity and uncertainty alongside each other. The national teams quickly decided that the combination of these terms (insecurity and uncertainty) immediately led team members and youth to think about uncertainty in a negative way. Therefore, it was decided to explore uncertainty as a concept that lay apart from insecurity and that uncertainty could be seen as both negative and positive in the lives of marginalised young people. This was informed by youth helping to translate, describe, and draw the concepts and by Bauman's (2001) theories referred to above.

A significant amount of time was spent by the national teams to determine how to translate and ask about the term 'uncertainty', and through these initial stages, the phrases used in qualitative interviews were selected so that when asking youth, this notion of uncertainty was not automatically seen as negative. The term *Anisshitata* was used in Nepali and *Ergetegna alemehon* in Amharic. These terms literally refer to not knowing what may happen next in a sequence of time. During the early stages of the project different terminology was explored and discussed with youth and these terms were decided upon as the most open and potentially neutral way to discuss uncertainty as not necessarily negative. The initial co-construction of uncertainty and marginalisation with youth fed into the development of the large-scale in-depth case study interviews with 150 young people in each country, 30–40 youth in each site over a 16-month period.

Analysis of in-depth cases started from exploring how young people saw both their own lives and solutions to poverty and processes of marginalisation. It then combined team-themed analysis, cross-checked with coding across an NVivo database. All the research was conducted in local languages and translated by national research teams, using idioms, phrasing, and constructions fitting with the original. Analysis by research location produced key findings and themes for marginalised young people living and moving in and out of each place. Ongoing analysis indicates aspects of uncertainty comparable across places and distinct to particular locations and relationships.

Six exemplary in-depth case studies, below, illustrate how uncertainty plays out in young lives in different contexts across sites, three from Nepal and three from Ethiopia. The case studies show how youth talked about uncertainty in different aspects of their lives, including in the spaces and places they inhabit, their mobility and migration, and in their transitions and relationships growing up. The case studies were selected in order to highlight the ways in which marginalised youth perceive and respond to uncertainty, and how these attitudes to uncertainty interplay with their shifting aspirations and their desire to meet the expectations of families and adults in communities. Cases are also

selected as exemplars across the different urban and rural sites in both countries, to show variations associated with gender, sexuality, ethnicity/caste, and family situation. Quotes are translated from local languages by national researchers and pseudonyms used to maintain confidentiality.

Youth explaining positive and negative uncertainty in their lives

The following six case studies show different dimensions of uncertainty in young lives and demonstrate the concept of *positive uncertainty* and are presented with reference to Bauman's theories. They show different ways in which youth creatively navigate and negotiate uncertainty in their lives and that rather than uncertainty necessarily being negative, youth can embrace it in creative and positive ways to change their situations, break with more traditional expectations and social bonds, and seek different peer and intergenerational relationships that can support them in achieving their aspirations. The first three cases draw out uncertainties in youth transitions and their personal lives, including their developing identities, relationships with family and friends, and the spaces and places that they inhabit. The last three discuss uncertainty in context including changing political situations and increasingly fragile environments which lead to youth feeling that they need to find new futures, meeting adult expectations but breaking intergenerational cycles of poverty.

Rameshwor: relationships helping to navigate uncertainty

The first case study from Nepal shows some differences between the way in which uncertainty can be viewed by youth as negative and positive, and how these feelings are affected by family circumstances and behaviour. A young man, Rameshwor, aged 17 years, from urban Kapilvastu in Nepal, explained his changing aspirations as he grew up and how he was expected to work to help support his family. His mother died when he was 8 so he lived with his father, step-mother, and siblings. Learning dancing and singing skills alongside his education was supported by family members, especially his aunt. This helped him see a future and pursue his dreams, being positive about the uncertainty he faced:

I enrolled in school at the age of 5. I went school regularly. I was good in school. I won prizes in grade 5 as I was in first position. I grew up and slowly my parents asked me to do work at home and sometimes in agricultural farming. I also started going for labour, paid work from the age of 12 . . . At that time, I used my singing and dancing skills to earn money. I belong to Tharu caste. People in other communities invited us for singing, dancing, catering and other work during different festivals including marriages. I also joined a group and went to perform my singing and dancing . . . I earned money on seasonal basis. Slowly, my skills also improved. I learnt many things from elders in the community . . . my education and study became poor . . . I was irregular in school . . . But I wanted to complete my school education . . . My aunt supported my education from grade 8 to 10. I went to develop skills and knowledge on singing and dancing. It created my hope, dreams in my life. In my future, I wish to be a professional artisan. I was uncertain whether I could continue my study or not.

He spoke more about uncertainty in his life:

I experienced uncertainty many times in my life from my childhood. Sometimes I went to school, sometimes I missed tuition classes. I sometimes went for labouring work. And sometimes I went to learn singing and dancing. I also made some mistakes and learnt from that. I earned money and spent for myself many times. Sometimes I gave my earned money for my elders/ parents too.

This case shows how a young person experiences uncertainty in the everyday spaces and places that young people inhabit, and the relationships they have with others. This was typical of youth experiences across research participants. Experiences of uncertainties intersected with their poverty and the processes of marginalisation they experience depending on their gender, sexuality, or ethnicity/caste; some due to relationship breakdown, death in families, abuse, and necessity to work instead of going to school. Rameshwor reminds us that social norms affect feelings of marginalisation, but also that support from elders, family, and the skills and trades associated with different ethnic and caste groups can help to overcome adversity and navigate uncertainties.

Examples across the case study interviews show how relationships in families can enable positive uncertainty where youth can be creative and follow creative strategies in the face of insecurity. This does not only focus on insecurity of context but also includes youth experiences of poverty, violence, abuse, and alcohol-use within families creating negative uncertainty. While this fits with the idea of youth being creative and embracing uncertainty, it differs from Bauman's ideas as young people do not necessarily seek to break social or family bonds. Depending on the nature of relationships and how they are treated, they negotiate and benefit from intergenerational relationships and often want to belong.

Haimanot: negotiating gendered social norms

The second case study, Haimanot, was interviewed aged 19 in rural Fogera in Ethiopia. She explained her uncertainty and anxiety when her parents wanted her married at 13 years. Going against their decision was hard and she met difficulties such as harassment from boys, but she still has positive plans to set up a restaurant despite feeling unfocused and failing her national exams:

My parents decided that I should get married at the age of 13. I did not want to get married, but I didn't know what to do. I was anxious about the future. Because rejecting my parents' decision was not easy. I was confused and hopeless. I continued my schooling for another year and completed grade 7. Then again, the same issue of marriage resurfaced . . . With a lot of struggle, I was able to complete grade 8. Next, I had to move to Woreta Town to attend grade 9 and 10 as the school in our locality is only primary full cycle (grade 1–8). The challenges in Woreta were too many, one of which was very tough for me. A young boy wanted to be my boyfriend, but I refused the offer. He started running after me. He followed me wherever I went to. I couldn't concentrate on my studies . . . I failed, but I was not the only one who didn't make it. I came back to my parents. Now I water and take care of my parents' perennial fruit producing trees . . . Once I succeed in saving enough amount of seed money, I have a plan to establish a small restaurant of my own.

In looking back over her teenage years, Haimanot's refusal to accept a 'certain' future in early marriage had left her feeling uncertain and somewhat insecure. Although her drive to pursue education was cut short and she felt that this resulted in lost opportunities, she discussed alternative ways for her to still pursue aspirations outside marriage and to also work with her parents until she can have a successful business herself. In a similar way to other young women in Ethiopia, rejection of early marriage meant that young women had to run away before their parents would work with them to consider alternative pathways and support them to achieve their aspirations.

This story provides insight into the complexities in youth decision-making as they navigate social norms as additional to Bauman's theories. Haimanot's interview shows how she balanced aspirations for better futures with adult expectations, traditions, and gendered norms. This was seen across rural sites in both countries, where youth not only need to balance work and education, but while receiving help from relatives, also contribute to family livelihoods. Young women often faced a certainty of early marriage in more traditional communities and feel that they are expected to give up everything, have children and become carers, working for their new families. Some run away from the security of community discussed by Bauman to break bonds, taking chances to find different lives, but many attempted to change parents' decisions, maintain family links, and return.

Pappu: transitions and uncertainties in developing identities

A third case study about uncertainty and youth transitions focuses on gender and sexual identity, discrimination, and positive support gained through peer groups and alternative communities. In Nepal, the research team was able to interview genderfluid youth, known locally as 'third-gender'. (In Ethiopia homosexuality is and was illegal at the time of the research, and youth felt uncomfortable talking about sexuality, so this aspect was not explored there.) In Nepal, young people turned uncertainty about their gender and/or sexual identity into a positive by finding peers and third-gender adults to support them and live together. They still faced discrimination in families and communities and often found it hard to talk openly. Some young people interviewed had resorted to taking poison or tried to change their physical appearance due to their confusion and sadness.

Pappu is a 24-year-old transgendered male. He was born as female and became confused about his gender and sexual identity at 13 years, although he continued to hide his feelings. He completed school and acquired his citizenship card as a girl. He became increasingly confused and found it hard to share anything about his feelings about gender and sexuality with his parents. He only found support through visiting a local organisation in Kathmandu on the suggestion of a friend and received counselling support and orientation. Pappu said, 'my life is combination of happiness and sadness'.

Pappu suggested that he felt uncertainty because of his confusion related to his sexual identity. He bound his breasts and took medicines to change his hormones. He felt discriminated against particularly when other people called him names. This follows notions that are included in Bauman's reflections on crisis of identity of the most marginalised and how uncertainty can lead to humiliation and feeling rejected by society (2004, 2011) although his theories do not include the complexities of how relationships may counteract

such feelings and build the resilience of youth and within communities. With help from peers and a Kathmandu civil society organisation, Pappu turned around his attitude to uncertainty and his sexuality, and through working with LGBTQI activists wants to support others going through similar feelings and transitions. He would like to change his sexual identity on his citizenship card, but met with resistance from the immigration and other government offices. In the final Kathmandu and National youth seminars in the research project, many marginalised young people raised the issue of increasing awareness about discrimination towards third-gender youth in their declarations to provincial and national government officials.

Sumnima: uncertainties and opportunities in fragile environments

The April 2015 earthquake in Nepal affected Sindhupalchowk communities, creating widespread insecurity and accentuated poverty. Young people responded embracing positive uncertainty, through migrating from fragile environments of high hills to cities in search of informal employment, and by creating and sustaining movements of youth-led regeneration. Some now see futures as development workers in local communities. Young women and men from Sindhupalchowk described continual feelings of insecurity due to the fragile environment and steep slopes in many villages. They described landslides where houses and roads were swept away. As a result of the earthquake, much of the region was further destroyed.

Sumnima, a young woman of 16 years, remembered the day of the earthquake when she and classmates felt the tremors at school. They were very scared, knowing nothing about earthquake safety. Now she can see how positive her role can be in the community. She went to an earthquake-awareness day in Kathmandu and has been involved in local child-club dramas about earthquake safety. They write poems and stories about the earthquake and she recalled talking to Swiss tourists about her experiences. Across Nepal youth movements have emerged that are active in reconstruction, and led to youth being seen differently, with a positive role in community development. Many of Sumnima's family have migrated to Middle-East countries and the Philippines. She now wants to go to the Philippines to join her aunt and uncle for a better education to continue to work in the community as a nurse. She relies on her family for support and is hopeful they will allow her to travel internationally to study. She has access to social media where many young people connect and discuss issues:

I am very happy being a member of the Child Club [at school]. I was part of different trainings and orientations. I was happy being part of club and we played drama on social issues to create awareness in the community. I wish to do more drama and create awareness in the school and community . . . I also want to go to The Philippines for studying. I am quite certain that my parents and uncle and aunt will support my study.

This case study shows that in this fragile environment, the need to address uncertainties relating to the earthquake nationally created opportunities for young people in Nepal. This included young people who faced caste and gender-based discrimination. Sumnima, a 'Dalit' young woman faced such discrimination and remembers the shame she felt

when people called her names. She went to the local government school and despite continued uncertainties as her community experienced aftershocks from the earthquake and ongoing landslides, her aspirations changed with the reconstruction programmes following the earthquake. She felt valued in her community. While Bauman recognises the rejection, humiliation that people can face not being recognised and valued in society (2004, 2011), this research adds the aspects of resilience and resistance that Katz (2004) highlighted in research with young people.

Aminet: uncertainties in fragile environments leading to migration

In rural Hetosa in Ethiopia, some *kebeles* are drought-afflicted and young people see migrants as role models. Unlike the example above, during the youth interviews (2017–2018) there were few programmes for youth in these rural areas of Ethiopia and they chose the uncertainties associated with migration, that is potentially unsafe, sometimes illegal, and not always successful. Aminet, a 20-year-old young Oromo woman, Muslim and from Hetosa, described her family situation in relation to land and why drought locally had led youth to making choices to migrate:

The major challenge we faced in our area, in general, is related to lack or absence of rainfall during the required season. We don't get rain during the season we want it to rain. In our family we have also have the problem of land shortage. My father has two wives. He divided the land into two equal parts and redistributed it to the two families. The share of land received by each family is only half a hectare of land which is not sufficient to feed members of each family.

She explained why many youth no longer believed in formal education for employment:

I see many youth in this kebele. They are of two types. They are either those who never went to school at all or those who took national exams but did not get the pass mark to continue their education. These youth wander here and there throughout the day in the village. I think the major reason for the youth not to succeed in education is absence of family support.

Her aspiration is to migrate and even if uncertain and potentially unsafe, she sees this as a positive alternative to life on the land with her family. The point here is not that her alternatives seem positive to those outside, but that migration, despite all of the uncertainties she describes below, is what youth in this area see as their only option to escape a cycle of poverty and meet family expectations:

Currently I don't have any paid job. However, I help my family with harvesting crops as this time is the harvest season . . . I am dependent on my family for all of my expenses including food, clothes and shelter. Therefore, in order to improve the quality of my life I want to go to Dubai and work for a certain period of time. That is what I want to do even if I don't have enough information about Dubai and how to go there. However, what I heard about the country [United Arab Emirates] is mostly bad. I heard that people faced many challenges in Dubai . . . I pray for God to protect me so that I can work in Dubai and come back home safely. When I come back with seed money from Dubai I would like to set up my own small business in my

country. I want to go to Dubai in a legal way. But I don't have anyone who can support me in this regard. My parents are not willing to support me since they wanted me to get married instead of going abroad for work. Only my sister supports my idea of going abroad for work. I believe the only means I have to improve my life is to migrate out and work in another country. Being here there are no other ways by which I can transform my life.

According to Bauman, failure in the past and uncertainty about the future can lead to feelings of shame and humiliation (2011). In both Hetosa and rural Fogera in northern Amhara region, failed migrants can be unwelcome, especially if they return empty-handed. Young people in these fragile environments or who are from landless families see a certainty of poverty, especially as the most marginalised have often dropped out of formal schooling to work or have failed national exams. Youth interviewed suggested that the uncertainty of migration was a more positive alternative to carrying on their lives in drought affected fragile areas, not being able to meet expectations, or to escape traditional social norms they do not want to follow. They do not see positive futures continuing to work in fragile environments. They feel a sense of hopelessness and that they need to escape and find new futures, but they also want to belong or as Bauman indicates feel a sense of social recognition (Bauman, 2011).

Zeru: uncertainties of migration: escaping from the certainty of poverty

Positive uncertainty can be a response to an otherwise certain situation of poverty, leading some youth to migrate to live and work on streets of Woreta or Addis Ketema (urban Ethiopia). In the following example, a young man, Zeru, aged 24 from Woreta in Amhara region, explained his readiness to take uncertain opportunities when they present themselves or when he can create chances by saving money. If unable to migrate youth interviewed develop resourceful, resilient but uncertain strategies for living, because they are excluded from life in the community:

I joined school when I was 7. When I went to school with my friends, we preferred to be late and play football, gambling or seasonal games. Our families were always asked to come and talk with the school director but still we disobeyed . . . I was an average student . . . and I failed the grade 10 national exam to enter higher education. I become addicted to 'areka' and 'tela' [local alcoholic drinks] and left formal education which resulted in my current living condition. Now I work as a labourer in the nearby town and also as a farmer in my local area . . . I have good relationships with people in my area. In most cases I feel strong enough to confront my difficulties by myself rather than telling those around me . . . I have no hope in formal education so I want to work hard and become a good business person.

Research analysis across youth in Ethiopia shows feelings of hopelessness in drought-prone areas facing high unemployment. While youth demonstrate their agency and self-determination in migration, they also understand their vulnerability and lack of choices including how they perceive their fragility, and persistent structural inequalities and constraints (following Mizen and Ofosu-Kusi, 2013). Young people feel they want to escape from the country and adult expectations and so leave the security of community to seek freedom from social bonds (as noted by Bauman, 2001).

In Nepal, environmental fragility also led to migration, but there were some opportunities for youth involvement in reconstruction that resulted in hope, dreams, and aspirations. Migration out of fragile rural areas was therefore linked to their return to become community workers and further support reconstruction of their communities. It will be interesting to see how youth aspirations shift in Ethiopia after a dramatic change of government and government policies towards youth during 2018–2019 that potentially offer the support that marginal youth were asking for in vocational education, informal sector assistance, safe migration, and to feel accepted back into communities on return.

Conclusion: positive uncertainty and listening to the most marginalised

Findings suggest that it is important to listen to marginalised youth, and support youth creativity and their ability to see uncertainty as potentially positive. This is reflected in the broader literature where children and youth across global contexts have offered creative solutions in the face of uncertainty (Di Nunzio, 2019; Katz, 2004). In fragile and conflict-affected environments, and for youth that have become street connected, involved in informal and sometimes exploitative work, or who have followed unsafe and sometimes insecure and illegal migration, support that they require to navigate uncertainty and achieve their aspirations is not always obvious to adults.

This research sought to understand lived experiences of marginalised youth in the context of an unstable and rapidly changing world, described as ‘liquid’ by Bauman. Writing about memory in community and seeking security in relationships, he suggested: ‘gone are most of the steady and solidly dug-in orientation points which suggested a social setting that was more durable, more secure and more reliable than the time span in an individual life’ (Bauman, 2001: 47). This fits with the rapidly changing contexts in the research sites, although it does not entirely fit with the persistence of often slow-moving social norms, some of which are highly gendered and/or harmful to youth in Ethiopia and Nepal. Youth in this research try to negotiate these intergenerational perspectives, and although they feel the need to break away from social bonds in families and communities, this is often temporary. Youth embrace uncertainty with creativity, but they value relationships that provide support from adults and want to belong, if they have to move out and then return to their communities of origin.

Youth perceptions of uncertainty included views about places and spaces, where they are educated and work, changing contexts, and how their strategies thus change over time. They often suggested they are caught in a situation where expectations from adults and communities remain the same, but their contexts and lives are rapidly changing. Therefore, the ways in which they need to negotiate relationships and contacts need to be innovative and creative in order to meet their aspirations or hopes for the future, or sometimes merely to survive and avoid a certainty of poverty. Adult expectations of youth were always mentioned by young people in talking about their futures. Many had strong feelings about how they wanted to continue to belong and fit into families, communities, and cultures. Youth as depicted in the case studies address uncertainty in their lives with positive and creative action to break intergenerational transmission of poverty (following Moncrieffe, 2009).

Shifting aspirations or future orientations towards the future (as constructed by Huijsmans et al., 2020) are embedded in the complexities of marginalised youth lives and need to be understood through young people's narratives. Youth interviewed in this research balanced competing pressures from family expectations across work and education; transitions were no longer seen as a journey through formal education to formal employment (also noted in Ethiopia by Boyden et al. (2019)). Young people's expressions of their aspirations included having migrants as their role models, changing or escaping from often highly gendered social norms, and finding solutions in the informal sector. Even if choices seemed uncertain to others, the alternative for many young people was to escape from certainties of poverty and marginalisation and embrace uncertainty (also noted by Di Nunzio (2019)). Growing research beyond youth suggests that embracing uncertainty requires understanding non-linear pathways through rapidly changing and fragile contexts affected by social difference and diverse knowledges and capacities (Scoones, 2019).

Many of the marginalised youth interviewed in YOUR World Research showed how they were creative and positive in the face of uncertainty in their lives growing up and in fragile and changing contexts. Many expressed a desire to meet adult expectations even if they had to break bonds in order to do so but on return, they hoped to be accepted back into communities and feel that they belong in their communities. Understanding how marginalised youth navigate and negotiate uncertainty can surely be invaluable in helping adults to also find new futures in communities, but this requires listening to marginalised youth perspectives and responding appropriately, depending on their suggestions.

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