

Towards a 'Bright Future'

Young People Overcoming Poverty and Risk
in Two Ethiopian Communities

Nardos Chuta and Gina Crivello



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Summary

This paper explores young people's views and experiences of poverty and everyday risks in two contrasting communities in Ethiopia. The data are from Young Lives, a long-term study of childhood poverty. Qualitative data were collected with a group of children born in 1994, at three time points (when they were aged 12, 13 and 16). The paper develops three lines of argument with respect to the multiple risks that young people negotiate as they transition to adulthood. The first point has to do with the role of local environments in shaping the risks that young people face, such that young men and women experience their spatial environments differently, and some risks differ by location (rural/urban). The second has to do with the way poverty exacerbates other risks in the transition to adulthood, by limiting choices and horizons, and by creating a sense of uncertainty. The third point has to do with the importance of social risks for young people, and the way that risks become more gender-differentiated and sexualised, in both the rural and urban settings, as children get older. This study finds that young people attempt to manage their material needs and livelihood strategies alongside their moral concerns to secure 'bright futures' for themselves and to become the kind of men and women who are looked up to in their societies. Policies and programmes wishing to support young people in poverty need also to be sensitive to the social and moral dimensions of their experiences.

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About Young Lives

Young Lives is an international study of childhood poverty, following the lives of 12,000 children in 4 countries (Ethiopia, India, Peru and Vietnam) over 15 years. www.younglives.org.uk

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1. Introduction

This paper explores young people's views and experiences of poverty and everyday risks in two communities in Ethiopia. In the past few decades, African childhoods¹ have become a focus of intensified global concern, characterised by risks and set against a backdrop of violent conflict, food shortages, extreme poverty, flawed governance, and HIV/AIDS (Christiansen et al. 2006). It is therefore difficult to imagine how young people forge a life and future for themselves when the scales of global equality are so clearly tipped against them. Some have argued that poverty is increasingly seen as an African problem (Chandy and Gertz 2012), despite some indications of improvements in human development, including for Ethiopia. The 2011 Human Development Report placed Ethiopia among the top development movers, ranking it 11 out of 135 countries in terms of registered improvements in its human development index. But the country remains low in the ranks, 174 out of 187 countries, and below the regional (sub-Saharan African) average (UNDP 2011). Adversity of one form and another remains a pervasive feature of childhood and youth experience in Ethiopia (Boyden 2009: 132).

What does this mean for young Ethiopians coming of age in uncertain times? Many of them have placed great hope in education, and initiatives like Education For All (EFA) have catalysed rapid expansion of formal schooling throughout the country (cf. Orkin et al. 2012). In 2008, the World Bank approved the General Education Quality Improvement Programme (GEQIP), a multi-million dollar initiative to improve the quality of general education throughout the country. Despite efforts to increase access and improve quality, the promises of education to transform lives and to break intergenerational cycles of poverty are not being delivered for many (Murray 2012): opportunities are limited and hope is thinning (Mains 2012).

In this paper, we use data from Young Lives, a longitudinal study of child poverty, to explore how material and cultural factors interact to shape everyday risks for a group of young people born in 1994 and growing up in poverty in Ethiopia. The data span the period from when the children were 12 to 16 years old, and the bulk of findings we present come from analysis of qualitative data, while descriptive survey statistics indicate trends within the wider sample. We focus on different risks identified by young people in the course of qualitative interviews, and we consider how these risks influence their transitions to adulthood. Although poverty is a common experience for the families participating in the study, it is not the sole defining feature of their lives and life chances. We have therefore selected two contrasting communities – one rural and one urban – and equal numbers of boys and girls, to focus the analysis and to examine different factors shaping their experiences of poverty, including gender, age and household experiences (or 'shocks').²

In the next section, we briefly describe some of the main approaches to studying risks in relation to youth transitions, then we describe current policies relating to Ethiopian youth. We then move on to the current study and to presentation of findings which we organise around

1 We use several terms to describe the sample, aged 12 to 16, including 'children', 'young people', 'boys and girls', 'and 'young adults', in some cases, interchangeably.

2 A shock is an event (from an individual injury to a natural disaster) that can trigger decline in the well-being of individuals, households, communities, and beyond.

a selection of themes, beginning with young people's understanding of 'well-being' (when aged 16), and then the main risks reported by them: these pertain to different aspects of their living environments, health, parental death and absence, schooling and social becoming. The final section draws out three key messages and raises questions for policy.

2. Risk and youth transitions

'Adolescence' is associated in the wider literature with unique physical, psychological, emotional and economic changes, and with heightened risk (UNICEF 2012; France 2000). Many studies are concerned with linking early childhood experiences with outcomes later in life, and risks associated with poverty experienced early in life have been associated with a range of negative outcomes in adulthood (Gershoff et al. 2003; Grantham-McGregor et al. 2007; Moore et al. 2009). Poverty can constrain young people's transitions to adulthood by limiting resources, choices and opportunities (Lloyd 2005; Woodhead et al. 2012), in some cases increasing young people's awareness of difference and disadvantage, contributing to social exclusion (Ridge 2002).

There is an established tradition within youth transitions research to look at risk-taking behaviours, including criminality, smoking and drinking, and deviance, and it has also been noted that the primary focus of recent preventative health measures for adolescents in low-income countries has been on sexual and reproductive health (Morrow et al. 2013: 2). Most studies are based on pre-determined risks and favour measurement. However, some strands of sociological and anthropological enquiry are attuned to risk perceptions, the social and cultural contexts of risks, and the ways in which risk discourses serve certain social and political functions (Crivello and Boyden 2012; Douglas 1992; France 2000; Lupton 1993; Scott et al. 1998).

Although most studies of youth transitions have been based on the experiences of European and North American research samples, a notable exception is the 2005 publication of *Growing up Global*, which reported on a large-scale study funded by the National Research Council (USA) on the changing transitions to adulthood in developing countries (Lloyd 2005). Primarily based on survey findings, the report offers a universal definition of a 'successful' transition to adulthood, based on the following criteria: good mental and physical health; an appropriate stock of human and social capital; the acquisition of pro-social values; adequate preparation for the assumption of adult roles; the capacity to make choices through a sense of self; and a sense of well-being (Lloyd 2005: 5). 'Success' is defined for 'individuals' and is purposely gender-neutral to reflect international norms about gender equality. At the same time, the report acknowledges that local definitions of success may differ profoundly for boys and girls. The report is therefore useful for tracing broad changes, for example, in schooling patterns (Ch. 3), health (Ch. 4), and marriage (Ch. 7) across a variety of populations and sub-groups, documenting, for example, systematic gender differences in pathways to adulthood. But normative frameworks cannot capture local meanings, values and practices, including what 'successful' or desirable transitions to adulthood might look like for different sub-groups of the population, or what constitutes attainment of maturity in different socio-cultural and historical contexts.

There is a growing body of scholarship based on qualitative and ethnographic approaches incorporating young people's views and experiences in developing country contexts. In recent years, researchers have looked, for example, at the role of mobility and migration in

young people's transitions to adulthood (Crivello 2011; Heissler 2008; Punch 2007, Thorsen 2006), on modernising influences and competing social norms (Abebe 2008; Boyden 2012), on transitions within schooling systems (Ames and Rojas 2010), on children's experiences of leaving school (Morrow 2013) and on school to work transitions among rural youth (Punch 2002).

In Ethiopia, several studies highlight the way local communities experience and evaluate modernising influences on children's lives, their views and inter-generational relations. For example, Abebe's research in rural Gedeo argues that children are being 'trapped' between two different worlds: the world of formal schooling that teaches children one set of values and knowledge, and the home and community which requires a different set of values and knowledge to support household cohesion and survival in their resource-scarce environment (Abebe 2008). Boyden et al.'s (2012) study on 'harmful traditional practices' (often referred to as HTPs) highlights tensions arising from government and NGO efforts to eliminate certain cultural practices deemed harmful to girls, including female circumcision and 'early marriage', and the controversy surrounding attempts to redefine young people's transitions.

Tafere and Camfield's (2009) research in five Ethiopian communities examines the interaction between socio-cultural and material environments in shaping decisions around schooling, work and marriage transitions. A follow-up study by Camfield (2011) looks at changing aspirations and attitudes towards education and employment within the context of rapid societal change, and in changing political and economic contexts. Poluha's (2004) work examines the role of education in encouraging cultural continuity despite multiple regime changes in the country's recent history.

Bevan (2011) and her collaborators report on youth transitions within the context of a long-term study in changing rural Ethiopia through which fifteen transitions for young people are identified; these span personal, work-related, family-related and community-related transitions (p. 2). Gender differences mean that for young men, the most important transition in the passage to adulthood is economic independence and securing a long-term work strategy so that they can get and stay married; for young women, the threshold is marked by getting married followed by having a child, and this depends on finding a husband who is economically independent (*ibid*). Bevan's study echoes others that emphasise the flexibility of transitions and the need for policies to reflect this. Everywhere, young people experience multiple, often inter-related, transitions in the first decades of life (Morrow 2013). For example, the notion of a one-off transition from school into the labour market as a norm does not reflect Ethiopian reality, since many children combine school and different types of work from a young age, and it is not uncommon for them to move into and out of school several times over their schooling years (Tafere 2010, Camfield and Tafere 2009). Young women may marry, yet continue in (or plan to return to) school (*cf.* Bevan 2011; 2013).

Findings generated in developing country contexts are therefore being used to challenge many of the assumptions underlying normative transition models (Jeffrey et al. 2008; Johnson-Henks 2002; Mains 2012; Morrow 2013). These studies show that change is uneven within and across populations, and that individual experience does not conform neatly to a linear sequence of life stages, marked by birth, education, work, marriage, parenthood and on to old age (Bonilla Garcia and Gruat 2003).

3. Ethiopian youth

The terms 'adolescent' and 'youth' can be found in much of the Ethiopian Government's policy documentation. One of the government ministries has recently been re-named the Ministry of Women, Youth and Children's Affairs. The Ethiopian Government adopts standard ways for categorising young people in policy, influenced by international standards, such as those set by the World Health Organization (WHO), defining *adolescents* as ages 10–19, and *youth* as ages 15–24. On the ground, however, the language and expectations that structure social age and generational hierarchies are varied. Ethiopia is an ethnically and linguistically diverse country. What it means to be a child, young person or adult varies across social groups, and, as elsewhere, the boundary between childhood and adulthood is often difficult to delineate (Valentine 2003).

In some societies, the transition from childhood to adulthood can be short. In developing country contexts, this is often attributed to the fact that school attendance among the young is relatively low and children leave school early to find some remunerated means to support the family; this is typically interpreted as young people 'taking on adult responsibilities' early. In many African societies, including Ethiopia, it is the case that 'working' – in the home or for pay – is an integral part of children's social development and maturation (Spittler and Bourdillon 2012). Moreover, in societies where young girls are married upon attaining puberty (often to preserve their chastity, which is socially valued – and controlled), becoming mothers soon after, their social maturation may occur earlier than for boys, who marry later. Draft data from the Ethiopia Demographic and Health Survey (EDHS) of 2011 was released in May 2012, indicating that the median age at first marriage for women was 17.1, almost a year below the legal age of marriage, whereas the median for men was six years older, at 23.1 (cited in Boyden et al. 2013: 8).

There are other gender differences, including evidence that violence against women and girls in Ethiopia is widespread, although there is evidence of some change. A 2013 report on changes observed in eight rural communities found that despite the prevalence of patriarchal values, men's authority over women and sons had declined (Bevan 2013: 18).

A Population Council survey study (Erulkar et al. 2010) of over 10,000 adolescents aged 12–24 across seven regions in the country found that 15 per cent of sexually experienced young women had experienced forced sex/rape (p. iii). Girls garner special attention within the policy discourse and there has been a great deal of government and NGO interest in protecting them from 'harmful traditional practices' (HTPs), namely female genital cutting, 'early marriage' and abduction.³ HTPs are often defined in the literature as an expression of gender-based violence affecting girls and women (cf. Jones et al. 2010: 13). These campaigns are highly contested and have brought to light competing views within families, communities and the country on the extent to which these practices are harmful or protective to girls (Boyden 2012; Boyden et al. 2012). One of the aims of the National Youth Policy (2004) is to encourage youth participation in efforts to eradicate HTPs.

3 Early marriage is defined by law as any union between individuals under the age of 18, and for young girls, there are concerns with the potential reproductive health problems associated with early childbirth. In some regions of Ethiopia, if girls consent to the marriage but parents do not, it is called 'voluntary abduction'. The 1990 National Family and Fertility Survey revealed that 34 per cent of women were married before the age of 15 (CSA 1993).

One of the main policy concerns about young men is around the high rate of youth unemployment.⁴ This brings with it social anxieties about the negative ways 'jobless' young people (especially men) spend their time, such that gambling and addictions (smoking hashish and chewing *khat* – a leaf that when chewed is a stimulant) and alcohol consumption have been attributed to unemployment and feelings of hopelessness due to lack of viable alternatives in life. In rural areas, youth landlessness is a problem and decreasing chances of getting access to land has meant that in some villages, there is an increasing number of young people staying longer in their parental households (Bevan et al. 2011: 13). The young people in the current study identified some of these concerns as relevant to their lives or as troubling in relation to their future prospects, and in the next section we move on to introduce the main research behind this paper.

4. Study context

The paper is part of the Young Lives study and our analysis is based on qualitative data gathered from a sub-sample of children from the Young Lives sample.⁵ So far there have been three rounds of the quantitative survey (2002, 2006 and 2009) focused on 2,000 Younger Cohort children born in 2000/1 and 1,000 Older Cohort children born in 1994/5. The majority of children in our sample live in poor households. In 2009 (Round 3 survey), 68 per cent of the Younger Cohort households and 67 per cent of the Older Cohort households lived in absolute poverty, respectively.

The qualitative data used in this paper come from two communities, Bertukan and Leki,⁶ which have been involved in two related studies; one is a longitudinal study on children's everyday experiences in poverty (2007, 2008, 2011; five sites and six children from each of two age cohorts in each site), and the other is a sub-study on orphanhood and vulnerability (2009), involving many of the same families. We use descriptive survey statistics to contextualise findings from the qualitative research.

Information is collected from young people and adults (caregivers, community representatives, and service providers) through a mix of individual and group interviews and activities, which are transcribed, translated and coded (including for 'risk' and 'transitions'). Collective exercises with young people include a 'well-being exercise' to elicit data on their understandings of what it means to be living well or badly. Children also construct individual timelines to help focus discussions on their experiences of risk/shocks. Thematic analysis of the data collected on the Older Cohort of children (born in 1994) in Bertukan and Leki sites identified the main 'risks' outlined in the paper.

4.1 Research sites

Bertukan is an urban neighbourhood in Addis Ababa, the country's capital, and *Leki* is a village located in Oromia region. The two contrasting settings were selected to enable

4 The 2005 National Labor Force survey recorded an unemployment rate of 7.7 per cent among the population aged 15–24.

5 Young Lives is a long-term study of childhood poverty that has been operating in Ethiopia since 2001. It has been tracking some 3,000 children growing up in poverty in 20 sites distributed over five major regions in the country (Addis Ababa, Amhara, Oromia, SNNP and Tigray). See www.younglives.org.uk for information about sampling, methodology and publications.

6 Names of communities and respondents are substituted by pseudonyms to maintain confidentiality.

exploration of possible similarities and differences between young people in these communities and the way differing environments shape everyday risks. Another reason for selecting these sites is the first author's familiarity with these communities, and her role in collecting the data that have been used for this paper.

Bertukan is a hub for commerce and small- and medium-scale industries. It is categorised under the sub-division *kebele* administrative unit called '*Kebele 04/05*' (formerly 07) and has a population of over 14,000. It is regarded as one of the city's 'old quarters' and poverty is widespread. Many people work in the informal economy; selling fruit and vegetables on the street, renting houses for storage/living, and carrying goods for cash are key sources of income for residents. The presence of the market creates opportunities for young people to find jobs, either selling or carrying groceries, or serving clients, washing cars, shining shoes, and so on. Many women earn a living by cooking and selling food, cleaning or as washerwomen. The neighbourhood residents have been targeted by the Government for re-location due to the precarious nature of many buildings, and in an effort to improve the area for commerce (see Tiemelissan and Pankhurst 2013). This has produced a degree of anxiety and anticipation for many residents who have been provided with few details about the plans and who are uncertain what the move would mean for their livelihoods and community cohesion.

Leki is situated in the eastern part of Oromia Regional State and has an estimated population of 2,835 of predominately Oromiffa-speaking Orthodox Christians. Rain-fed and irrigated farming and fishing are means of livelihood for the community. Children work as wage earners on irrigated farms and flower farms which are owned by private foreign companies. This has become an important source of income, and residents suggest that there is a temptation for young people who drop out of school to work. School and healthcare services are available though they are often of poor quality. The locality is frequently affected by rainfall shortage which have brought food crises and an increase in food prices. Crop failure and food price rises have meant that many households depend on the government Productive Safety Net Programme (PSNP) (Tafere and Woldehanna 2012).⁷

5. Findings: poverty and risk

Findings from qualitative research situate risk in the context of young people's everyday social worlds – in their daily activities, environments and relationships. In the remainder of the paper, we highlight the main areas of risk reported by young people and their caregivers, and we discuss how poverty cuts across these risks in their transitions to adulthood. By way of introduction, we describe what young people, aged 16, viewed as 'good lives' for boys and girls in their communities, thus providing a sense of the things that are important to them and worth protecting.

⁷ Launched in 2005 as an important policy initiative by Government and donors to shift millions of chronically food-insecure rural people from recurrent emergency food aid to a more secure and predictable and largely cash-based, form of social protection.

5.1 'Good lives' for children/young people

Young people's subjective well-being is highly contextual. Girls and boys discussed their views in separate groups and identified what they considered indicators of living well for someone of their age and gender (see Table 1). There were notable differences across the groups and locations.

Table 1. *Young people's indicators of well-being aged 16*

Community	Girls	Boys
Bertukan (urban)	Being economically well off	Having good health
	Going to private school	Eating a balanced diet
	Being happy and successful in education	Spending time with good friends
	Wearing neat and fashionable clothing	
	Having parents	
	Having good source of income	
	Having mental freedom (not worrying much about what to eat, wear and how to do things)	
Leki (rural)	Having plenty of farmland and cattle	Having livestock and farmland
	Having good household equipment	Having money and assets
	Having a comfortable place to live	Having better nutrition
	Being attentive in school	Being able to buy and sell food (food security)
	Having a house with a corrugated roof	Being able to go to school and concentrate on it with no worries
		Having household materials like TV, bed
		Having a house with a corrugated roof
		Not being too thin

Source: Well-being Children's Focus Group Discussion, 2011

Children also identified the things that threatened their well-being, with material insecurity a key ingredient of child ill-being, since they reported material insecurity as something that could damage most other aspects of their lives. The children in Addis Ababa emphasised the societal risks stemming from their localities and the presence of bars and smoking joints associated with anti-social behaviour; girls highlighted the sexual harassment of young women in public spaces. Rural children were especially cognisant of material vulnerability and the necessity of adequate protection against shocks affecting their livelihoods (e.g., droughts). They considered large areas of farmland and ownership of cattle essential for the fulfillment of their basic needs, including supporting their schooling, as well as their future transitions. In Leki, it is the groom who pays bride price to the bride's family. Although recent legislation has meant that males and females have an equal right to land, other studies report that landlessness is still a widespread problem for rural young people (Bevan 2013: ii). Girls and boys can own cattle, but it occupies a special place in securing boys' marriage. Boys in Leki feel that girls have an advantage in that they can 'marry up' in the future regardless of their current situation. Boys, according to them, depend on their own initiative to secure 'bright futures' through hard work and doing well in school, whether they own cattle/land or not.

The metaphor of a 'bright future' (*biruh tesfa* in Amharic; *egaree bareeda* in Afan Oromo) surfaced in different discussions with children and adults and it conjured an image of promise and hope for children's future lives. In some cases 'better futures' indicated the desire for

improvement and transcendence relative to current circumstances and difficulties. For many, formal schooling is considered an investment for the future and instrumental in securing a good adult life. An overwhelming majority (96.32 per cent) of the young people surveyed at the age of 15 reported that 'formal schooling will be useful in my future life' (n. = 979). In the sites covered in this paper, most children also agreed or strongly agreed with the statement 'If I study hard, I will be rewarded by a better job in the future.'

Table 2. *If I study hard, I will be rewarded by a better job in the future' (by community)*

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	More or less agree	Agree	Strongly agree	Total
<i>Bertukan(urban)</i>						
Boys	-	-	-	11 (69%)	5 (31%)	16
Girls				19 (73%)	7 (27%)	26
<i>Leki (rural)</i>						
Boys	1 (5%)	0 (0%)	1 (5%)	5 (25%)	13 (65%)	20
Girls	0 (0%)	1 (5%)	0 (0%)	8 (42%)	10 (53%)	19

Source: Young Lives Round 3 Older Cohort Questionnaire, 2009.

Within the context of our analysis, a 'bright future' is about hope and 'transition' because it is a vision of future well-being and represents transcendence of adversity. In the next section, we turn to the question of adversity, drawing on children's biographical accounts of hardship.

6. Difficulties across childhood

The young people lived with adversity – with *actual* hardship, much of it related to multidimensional poverty (see Table 3) – and stemming from this, a multitude of risks – *potential* threats and harm to their well-being. Children engaged actively with adversity; some adversities were of a protracted nature, such as long-term poverty or a parent's chronic illness, and others were experienced as negative events, such as when the family's cow died, or when a child failed an important school exam. Other adversities in the rural areas were seasonal, and somewhat predictable, such as pre-harvest food shortages.

The first point we draw attention to is that *where* children grow up is a strong factor shaping hardship and everyday risk. Although poverty was a common experience for the young people in both the city and the village communities, there were also important differences. Recurrent themes in the narratives of young people in Leki village included loss of livelihoods and material insecurity caused by seasonal shocks or loss of assets, such as valued livestock, this mirroring their perceptions of risk. Tufa, a 15-year-old boy from Leki said: "[Before the harvest], everyone in the family becomes hungry. Rich men may feed themselves by slaughtering cattle. But poor people have only few and cannot." These were significant events in their memories because they affected other aspects of their lives, such as their schooling and access to food. While both boys and girls reported experiences that threatened their material security, as children got older, girls' concerns over their bodily integrity and security increased (cf. Jones et al. 2010). Gender-based violence prevailed in both the urban and rural areas, and generated fears of rape among girls in both communities and of abduction for marriage in the village.

Meanwhile, young people in the city were more likely to report parental death and illness than young people in the village. The Round 3 survey (2009) reported 204 Older Cohort children who had lost one or both parents to death; among them were 30 per cent of the urban sample (402 children) and 14 per cent of the rural sample (568 children). In Bertukan, 13-year-old Afework noted that parental death was a common experience for children in his neighbourhood, which for him encouraged a sense of solidarity and compassion. Afework's mother died when he was 7 years old and his father died three years later, and since then, he has been living with his older brother and his cousin, who is considered like a father to both young men. He has formed close bonds with other children through his participation in a *mahber* (informal community association):

“You know it is not uncommon to see children who lost one or both of their parents ... whenever a friend of ours loses one of his parents, we will sympathise with him ... everyone around here is the same.”

(Afework, 13 years old, Bertukan)

Afework's case suggests that the experience of parental death does not automatically bring shame and stigma. In his case, losing both parents was an adverse, but it prompted him to position himself as a source of support to other children facing similar difficulties, facilitating his social integration, which in turn influenced his sense of identity positively.

Table 3. *Adverse events across childhood reported by young people*

	0–5 years old	6–10 years old	11+ years old
Leki: Rural girls	Brother died; lost cattle while herding; death of mother; death of father; swelling of ear; father absent	Eye illness; neck illness (swelling on the neck); too much domestic work; death of father; death of mother; dropped out of school; lack of food and clothing; snake bite while collecting wood	Excluded from PSNP; father started to drink; mother ill; death of oxen; neck illness; dropped out of school; sister went abroad; death of cattle; death of father; father injured; child illness; death of goat; fears rape; fears leaving school if married; friend gravely ill
Leki: Rural boys	Father imprisoned; death of family calf	Child ill; family conflict; caught less fish than his friends; rainy season affected food availability; death of family cow; mother ill	Crop failure, causing family to suffer; father imprisoned; dropped out of school to herd cattle and because of lack of school supplies; family conflict over child leaving school; death of family cattle; child ill (malaria); food shortage (every year during summer season)
Bertukan: Urban girls	Mother's death	Mother ill; child ill; father's death; death of grandmother	Anxiety over passing national exam; caregiver ill (ongoing); economic problems
Bertukan: Urban boys		Injured while playing ball; injured falling from a bus; death of mother; death of both parents; father accident, stopped working; mother disappeared; car accident in neighbourhood/ witness death	Injured playing sport; failed Grade 8 exam; school sports team defeated; conflict with teacher; workplace injury – fell behind in school

Sources: Study on orphanhood and vulnerability, 2010; Longitudinal qualitative study, 2011.

In the remainder of the paper, we turn to the risks young people face in their everyday lives, and how these risks impact on their experiences of transition to adulthood.

7. Risks in everyday environments

Daily life entails managing everyday risks, both within and outside the home. Risks emanating from young people's everyday environments are not solely of a physical nature (e.g. dilapidated houses or pollution), such that a vital social dimension is inseparable from their physical worlds. This section draws on young peoples' narratives to explore social and spatial aspects of poverty and risks, namely the community-level and household-level risks related to their everyday environments.

Community-level risks shape young people's livelihood possibilities, their health, mobility, sense of safety, well-being and social belonging and participation. Gender and social age influence risks for young people and their ways for managing them. For example, in Leki village, girls are worried about their journeys to school (some girls travel up to 10km to get to school) and what could happen in the course of carrying out daily chores for the household, such as fetching water and collecting firewood in the forest. What they fear most is being sexually assaulted or being forced to marry, and being abducted against their will for this purpose, which is known to happen in their village. These are not significant concerns for boys.

In Leki, 'early marriage' (marriage below 18 years of age) is being targeted by the Government and international organisations as a 'harmful traditional practice' (Boyden et al. 2012; UNFPA 2008). A related practice is marriage by 'abduction', which can involve force and coercion, especially when a boy's proposal is rejected by a girl's parents, or by the girl herself. A boy may also abduct a girl in order to avoid paying bride price and other costs related to formal marriage, which he cannot afford; sometimes this is done in collusion with the girl and without the knowledge of their families. Early marriage is considered more of a problem in the north of the country and abduction in the south (see Boyden et al. 2013).

Both 'early marriage' and 'abduction' are contested practices, but they continue to happen in Leki. In practice, they involve young women *and* young men, but the discourse and concerns are focused on females. Girls discussed these practices, not as distant traditions from the past, but as current threats to their well-being and to their transitions to adulthood. A report on a group discussion with the girls (aged 14) in Leki stated:

Both sexes may start having relationships with the opposite sex and at times girls of such an age [12–17] may marry with or without the interest [knowledge] of family, i.e., without wedding and through abduction (with full interest [consent] of the girl) . . . such form of marriage is not acceptable by the society and so they do it by themselves. . . [T]he more sustainable form of marriage is the formal one and those who marry via abduction most likely get separated and sometimes the family of the girl refuses to go to the home of their child which means that they do not accept the marriage via abduction. As a result, the new family will face social exclusion both from parents as well as from community.

(Survey researcher's notes, 4 October 2008)

Ayu, for example, was married by abduction at the age of 16. Her mother indicated that the family was aware that Ayu had consented to the marriage clandestinely. Ayu did not regret marriage, but she did worry that if she became pregnant her plans to return to school would

be thwarted. Ayu herself did not frame her marriage in terms of an 'adverse event' or negative experience. Mothers in the community echoed the sentiments of Ayu's mother; they worried that even when their daughters consented to early marriage, the partnerships would be likely to end in divorce or conflict, resulting in the girls returning home.

These inter-generational tensions were sometimes attributed to government interventions encouraging girls to have more say in decisions affecting the timing and nature of marriage and other life-course transitions. In a group discussion, caregivers asserted that girls in the community used to marry at 15, but nowadays parental control had been weakened, and girls initiated sexual relationships as early as 12 years old. In the view of caregivers, the protective role of families in girls' transitions has been diminished, yet girls cannot foresee the consequences of their decisions. A discussion with male community leaders in Bertukan echoed the theme of parental 'control' and advice; their concern was with the way girls this age started to dress (to attract boys), making them targets of sexual abuse; hence the need for 'follow-up by parents'.

So far, we've highlighted changing community practices and the different ways these are perceived as risks to child well-being, especially in the rural area. In the city, young people spoke about risks associated with their neighbourhood environments, which affect boys and girls differently. Prominent sources of perceived danger are the presence of alcohol and *shisha* (hubble-bubble smoking) houses, as these are located in close proximity to family housing. Young people feel threatened by the people who go to these bars because they think that they behave badly to others when they drink, smoke and chew *khat*, and that the bars attract "addicts". Fatuma, aged 15, says, "I think those who drink are more threatening to girls [than those who chew *khat*] because they tend to insult you." The people who go to these places are viewed as "wanderers" and transients who come to the area to seek work as day labourers; they characterise what is bad about the neighbourhood and at the same time are considered 'out of place', and therefore threatening. The seedy establishments are also thought to draw in young people in the area who cannot find work and who spend their time on the streets.

How young people navigate their everyday environments has moral implications, especially for girls, whose daily movements come under more scrutiny than those of boys. But boys' reputations are also at stake when they succumb to "addictions" and adopt disrespectful behaviour. Afework (14 years old) said of the boy he drew in one of the collective exercises, "If he was a good boy, he would have appealed to the government bodies about the place and tried to change their residence."

Girls often stay at home after dark to protect themselves, as described by Netsa, 13 years old, in Bertukan:

"[I] do not want to get out of home at night ... It is because I am a female. I might be exposed to rape. Some others might want to loot my money. For that matter my family does not send me anywhere at night ... I am not allowed to go out after eight in the evening."

Girls fear the negative consequences associated with being raped: unwanted pregnancy, HIV/AIDS, rejection by their families and social stigma. In this context, social stigma is attached to women who have been raped, so they face discrimination and limited prospects for marriage later in life. The Amharic term for rape – *asgededo medfer* has a broader use than in the English language. It can also refer to a situation where a woman is coerced and duped into a sexual relationship.

For this reason, in our sample, there were some cases of older sisters and mothers who had married their rapists, and this often resulted in eventually being abandoned by them. The mother of a 16-year-old girl in our sample was raped and became pregnant then married her rapist.

Boys in the city also identified poor living environments as a major threat to well-being, and this was depicted strongly in a series of drawings they produced in the context of group discussions. Describing a boy who was faring poorly in life, 15-year-old Belayneh emphasised the boy's wider living conditions:

"I know [he is not doing well] because the house is made of plastic material ... the house is very near to the waste disposal area. There is also a canal filled with waste. Because of this there are flies all over. He does not move from the waste. He sometimes begs there by sitting in the dirt. He also eats food by picking from the waste ... He does not go to school since he does not get money to buy exercise books and pens. Schools do not admit him because his clothes are dirty. He also does not have a place to play."

The spatial aspects of risk are clear, as poverty and ill-being are emplaced in the spaces children inhabit on a daily basis. Belayneh's account, above, constructs an image of a boy who is inseparable from his surrounding physical environment, and who is excluded from opportunities to improve his prospects and to garner respect from others. In the same discussion, Miki, 16 years old, depicted a different boy who was equally influenced by his poor environment:

"The boy has bad habits. He is smoking cigarettes, chewing *khat* and also stealing. ... The absence of a clean environment damages health. Even people who pass by hate that area. And since the boy does not have a place to go, he cannot leave the place unless he gets a good amount of money. Therefore he is living an uncomfortable life."

In the city, the physical and social environments affect boys' and girls' livelihood opportunities differently. Girls' work tends to be carried out closer to home, assisting mothers in cleaning, preparing and selling food, and laundering. They try to carry out their household chores in the hours before and after school, but with difficulty. Girls in the village are similarly challenged by competing demands on their time; Beletch, from Leki, finds it difficult to balance schooling and housework. She only gets her homework done if she does it at school or she waits to do it late in the evening after completing her house chores. Fitting in work around school often means girls get to school late; they may not be able to pay attention in lessons properly and they have little time to study. Rather than causing them to quit school, the effects of these difficulties are more likely to be seen in their school performance and grades.

Boys in the city venture further afield to pursue job opportunities: in mechanic shops, washing cars, and at taxi stands. They have fewer responsibilities for household chores, but it is also more difficult for them to fit their paid work around school hours. Boys in the village engage in fishing, farm work and cattle herding.

Young people also emphasised their housing conditions as a major source of risk. In rural Leki, this had to do with abject poverty. Sixteen-year-old Biritu's view was common amongst the group of girls in Leki. She said that poor housing threatened children's schooling and everyday quality of life. Houses made of grass were inferior to houses with corrugated iron roofs because during the rainy season the grass huts leaked, children could not study properly, and the family members, who slept on mats on the floor, did not have a dry space to sleep. Houses with corrugated roofs did not have these defects and also often had several

rooms with different purposes, such as separate kitchen and sleeping areas (which was preferred).

Describing a boy who he considered was experiencing a bad life, Afework, in Bertukan, made a similar connection: "Since the house is not clean, he [the boy] worries about where to study. A person can do whatever he wants when the house is pleasant; he cannot do so when the house is not clean."

Poverty, overcrowded housing and poor sanitation were problems reported by urban youth, and there was an additional concern around the social risks resulting from their living conditions. Many of the families in Bertukan lived in subsidised housing for which they paid rent to the *kebele* (local government administration). It is common practice to partition the house into two or more units in order to rent out space to others for a fee. It is an important source of income for the poor families in this study, but it can present risks to the residents, especially to girls. Houses are generally overcrowded. Sometimes strangers sleep together in the same room, and unrelated boys and girls are in close contact in the home. A mother from Bertukan worried because her daughter shared a single room with others, she observed adults having sex, and she might imitate such behaviour, without fully understanding the consequences. She said: "Because we share a narrow room together ... when we have sex [husband and wife] they [the children] see what the family is doing and imitate that, thinking ... it is a simple and normal thing to do."

Fatuma's case is illustrative, because her mother relies on the income generated by renting out sections of her small home to strangers needing a place to sleep. One of her boarders, a young day labourer, has raised her suspicions. "I am not comfortable with the way the boy is approaching my daughter," she said, especially since he loaned Fatuma his mobile phone. She warned Fatuma, "He can cheat you through a mobile phone" and urged her not to accept his offer. The family cannot afford to ask him to leave the house, but Fatuma's mother said she was going to try to buy her daughter a mobile phone of her own, perhaps by using aid from one of the NGOs in town. Fatuma, on the other hand, did not share her mother's worries (as far as we know).

The risks stemming from young people's community and housing environments are more than a reflection of the physical world; they reflect an intimate interaction between material and social factors, yielding contextually specific results, even where poverty is a shared experience.

8. Poor health and injury

Risks manifest themselves, as shocks, at different levels, from individual and household ('idiosyncratic') shocks to shocks affecting groups of households, entire communities, and so on ('covariant' shocks). The health shocks reported in this study are 'idiosyncratic' in this sense, but the way they are experienced in children's everyday realities is deeply social and inter-personal. There are patterned differences between groups of children, as reported in the survey with the full sample of Older Cohort boys and girls in this study.

In Round 3 of the survey, around 42 per cent of Older Cohort children were living in households reporting long-term illness. The proportion of children who had a healthy height-for-age and BMI-for-age was larger in wealthier households than in poorer households. There were more children with healthy height-for-age and BMI-for-age in urban areas than in

rural areas.⁸ Fourteen per cent of the Older Cohort sample reported a serious injury that had prevented them from doing everyday activities (e.g. school, work) for at least one day and/or required medical attention in the last three years (Morrow et al. 2013). Boys reported more work injuries than girls, and children in poor households were at greater risk than the ones from better-off households (ibid: 8).

In qualitative research, poor health and illness are commonly reported by young people, both in relation to their own health, and that of their caregivers; young people are important sources of care when household members become ill, incapacitated or injured.⁹ Chronic illness of caregivers was a major source of worry for the young, creating a sense of uncertainty about 'what would happen' if their conditions worsened, and impacting on their roles within the family.

Young people also reported many ailments of their own; for example, Biritu, 16 years old, from Leki, has had to deal with a recurrent eye illness for several years. When she was 13 (in 2008), she was asked if her illness would have long-term effects and she replied: "I fear that my eye sickness may make me blind." She further indicated that when her eye becomes painful she cannot read and she is unable to copy notes from the blackboard. She feels that this hinders her studying and her performance at school, and that this is reflected in her deteriorating grades. Beletch, already mentioned above, was affected both by a swelling on her neck, and by the illness of both her caregivers. She is especially worried about her caregivers, and she often misses school in order to care for them and to undertake household tasks.

Bereket, aged 16, lives in the city with his maternal grandmother, following the death of his mother when he was 6 years old. His father is alive but his whereabouts are unknown. His grandmother is raising several grandchildren, including Bereket's brothers. She has instilled in each of them the value of work. At around the age of 10, Bereket began earning money by washing cars and changing tyres in a garage. He earns 20–200 birr (approximately US\$1–11) a day. From the money he gets, he pays his tuition fees of 30 birr per month, and buys shoes, clothing and food for himself. One of his most significant experiences happened at work when he was 14 years old; a tyre exploded and seriously injured his hand. The injury kept him out of school for several months, and he eventually had to repeat the school year, making him lag behind his friends. He does not regret working, and explains:

"I might regret the particular day when I encountered such a situation [his injury]. But I don't totally regret working there. You know what, if I had to choose between not working there at all and being injured and working there, I would still go for the latter."

At the age of 16, he wants to focus fully on working, but his grandmother will not let him leave school. He was disheartened when he had to repeat a grade because of his injury and he has gradually lost the desire to persevere in school, seeing it as not very useful to his goals of becoming a good mechanic and a wise and wealthy man.

It is clear that the risks faced by young people in the study are not easy to separate out from one another; they accumulate, deepening the severity of already difficult situations (Pells

8 Measures for height and weight were transformed into standardised height-for-age and BMI-for-age, according to the WHO international norms. They were transformed using AnthroPlus, a WHO software. A healthy range for height-for-age and BMI-for-age is within 2 standard deviations (SD) of the mean.

9 Young people reported experiencing headache, stomach ache, eye illness, neck illness, injuries, vomiting, anaemia, abdominal cramp, injuries and gastritis; while caregivers experienced chronic illnesses, diabetes, hypertension and asthma.

2011). When children or their caregivers become ill or injured this has reverberating effects on other aspects of their lives, and families often lack sufficient means to receive adequate medical attention for their ailments. Dealing with health problems, like poverty, is therefore often a burden shared by children in families.

9. Parental death and absence

'Orphanhood' was not a criterion for recruiting participants to Young Lives; nonetheless, we found that by the time they were aged 15, around 21 per cent of the older children had lost one or both parents, and among the younger group, aged 8, the figure was 10 per cent. Nationally, an estimated 18 per cent of Ethiopian households include at least one child who has lost one or both parents. At the Round 3 survey (2009), the younger children in the Young Lives sample were aged 7–8 (n=1,882) and the older children were aged 14–15 (n=973). Some 5.8 per cent of the younger children and 14 per cent of the older children were paternal orphans; reported maternal orphanhood was 2 and 4 per cent, respectively. Parental 'absence' was even more prevalent than parental death: 19 per cent of the Younger Cohort and 22 per cent of the Older Cohort were reported seeing their fathers less than once a week.¹⁰ Thus, paternal death was more common than maternal death, and when a parent was reported absent, it was also more likely to be the father. Despite these circumstances, most children were reported to be living with relatives: only 2 per cent of the Older Cohort and 0.4 per cent of the Younger Cohort were living with non-relatives.

Over half of the children involved in the qualitative study on 'orphanhood and vulnerability' had had one or both parents die. Some children lived separately from their parents, and some of them had been abandoned by one or both parents. Children's care arrangements were therefore diverse, including surviving parents, aunts/uncles, cousins, siblings and grandparents.

Families constituted a crucial source of support for young people even in this context, where parental death, absence and abandonment were commonly reported. Regardless of who their primary caregivers were, the quality of their current family relationships and household circumstances influenced whether or not they perceived 'orphanhood' as a risk for their current and future well-being. Children who feel well looked after, loved and materially secure in their care arrangements do not explain their current circumstances with reference to parental death (see Crivello and Chuta 2012). Instead, poverty is a more present risk in their daily struggles, and in terms of well-being outcomes related to schooling and health, 'orphans' do not necessarily fare worse than those children with two living parents (ibid).

In a group discussion with young orphans and non-orphans in Bertukan, some participants maintained that losing a parent early on in life had a greater impact on children's life prospects than losing a parent as an older child: "When children lose their parents early on it affects them more at a younger age, but when they reach 15 or 16 years old it is not so much because they have their own lives. Nobody lives with their parents forever!"

Beletch is 16 years old and both of her biological parents died when she was very young. She lives with her aunt in Leki, and she recounts how she has been living there since even

¹⁰ The survey asks how often the child sees his/her biological parents. 'Absence' here captures anything from 'sees weekly' to total absence.

before she was able to walk, and she has no memory of her parents' passing. She says she is not saddened by their deaths because she cannot remember them, but she believes that when girls lose their parents, it can have repercussions on their marriage prospects.

Interviewer: What do you think the death of parents brings to children?

Beletch: If parents are dead, a child may not get a proper education and other things.

Interviewer: What else?

Beletch: Marriage.

Interviewer: If parents are dead, you think that the child cannot marry?

Beletch: Yes. Who gives you to a husband?

Beletch's concern is that being an orphan decreases her honour for betrothal and marriage, since according to the local culture, parents are valued in their role of 'sending off' the bride to the husband's family. Besides, when biological parents are present on a child's wedding day, they are obliged to bless the newly-weds and wish them a prosperous life together, and this is considered important for the good fortune of the couple. In two separate interviews, Beletch highlighted this as a source of worry for girls like her.

Children who had lost one or both parents sometimes used their parents' passing as a way to make sense of their current situations, especially when their poverty was deep and/or chronic. For example, Beletch compared her poor material circumstances with her friends who could afford to wear nice clothing: "I feel and say, I would have dressed the same if my mother had been alive." Beletch also maintained that having wealth and parents was the formula for a good childhood, which was in contrast to her own difficult situation.

The experiences of boys and girls often differed in the face of parental death, absence or abandonment. For example, Tufa, aged 16, in Leki, had to leave school to seek paid work following his father's imprisonment:

"My father was imprisoned two years ago when he was working as a guard on one of the private irrigated farms. One night, while he was on duty, one of the irrigation pumps was stolen and my father was accused of it. Then he was put into prison for a year. Following his imprisonment, I was forced to substitute for him and run the family. As I am the only boy in the family and my family is poor, I was forced to drop out of school and engage in paid work to sustain the life of my family. I was hired to herd cattle in one of the houses in the community ... in order to feed my family."

There are many examples in the literature of how young people in Ethiopia who find themselves in situations like Tufa's often assume essential roles in contributing to the household economy (e.g., Abebe 2012, Boyden 2009; Heissler and Porter 2010). Tufa had dropped out of school on several occasions, when there was no one to plough and guard the farm. He struggled to balance the demands of work with his desire to continue in school. He is still in Grade 2, while other boys his age are in Grades 5 to 8. His father's imprisonment meant that he had to assume greater responsibility within the household, but now that his father has returned, he worries about ongoing food insecurity and the possibility of having to leave school again: "If I do not have anything to eat, I will drop out and engage in work. If there is corn, I will learn." The material and social factors underpinning Tufa's decisions to leave or return to school are clear, and for him, leaving school was not a one-off transition, but a way of coping with risks related to securing a livelihood for his family in his father's absence.

10. Leaving school

Ethiopian education policy dictates that school is compulsory in Ethiopia until a child is 11 years old (covering the first four years, which provide important basic education) but increasingly, the expectation is that children will continue at school for longer. Only 57 per cent of those who attend primary school complete it and only 3 per cent attend university (UNESCO 2007, cited in Camfield 2011: 686). There are many reasons why young people leave school early. Tufa's case gives an example of one reason caused by poverty and other demands on children's time. Leaving school is itself considered a risk to children's well-being, life chances and the possibility of their experiencing a 'bright future', even if leaving school is the 'right' decision given one's current circumstances. At the age of 15, most of the young people in the wider study remain enrolled in school; about 8 per cent of the Older Cohort left school between the ages of 12 and 15 (Woldehanna et al. 2011). The rural drop-out rate (12 per cent) is higher than the drop-out rate in urban areas (4 per cent), and fewer girls left school (7 per cent) than boys (9 per cent). The latter is probably because boys work more in unpaid activities than girls and they can access the informal job market more readily than girls.

Despite high levels of household poverty, the young people report high educational aspirations. When they were surveyed at the age of 15, they were asked: 'Imagine you had no constraints and could study for as long as you liked, or go back to school if you have already left. What level of formal education would you like to complete?' Table 4 reports on their most frequent responses by location and gender. It shows that aspirations are higher among urban young people than rural young people; urban girls report higher aspirations than rural boys. Rural girls have the lowest educational aspirations, which probably reflect a combination of cultural and material factors placing them at a disadvantage in relation to schooling, such as social expectations regarding work, caretaking and marriage.

Table 4. *Educational aspirations by location and gender (age 15) (%)*

	Rural		Urban	
	Boys (n=295)	Girls (n=271)	Boys (n=200)	Girls (n=203)
Religious education	2	0.5	-	-
Below Grade 10	5	6	1	2
Grade 10	6	6	1	4
Grade 11	1	0.5	-	-
Grade 12	11	26	5	6
Vocational	4	4	4	3
University	71	57	89	85
Total	100	100	100	100

Source: Young Lives Older Cohort Round 3 questionnaire.

Poverty is an underlying reason for leaving school and the experiences of girls in urban and rural locations differed. Rural girls struggled to combine heavy workloads and their schooling, whereas girls in the city often lacked the finances to pay for school materials and uniforms and extra classes, regardless of whether they were studying in government or private schools. Netsa, from Bertukan, said: "When I fail and my friends pass, I feel it." Her family

could not afford to pay for the extra classes she needed to take, and when she eventually failed the Grade 10 National Examination, she worried about what this meant for her future. She is concerned about becoming a burden to her family and being left with few job prospects as an adult. This is a risk she has been contemplating since the age of 12, and now, because she hasn't passed the exam, her initial aspiration of becoming a doctor is not going to happen.

Young people in the village face an additional challenge in that they often say they aspire to professional jobs that require formal school-based education, yet there are extremely limited opportunities for such work in Leki, which is an agricultural and fishing community. They have schools to choose from than their urban counterparts and the quality of schooling in rural areas is relatively poor. They also contend with a much higher proportion of household shocks (cf. Boyden 2009). In the Oromia region (where Leki is located) the main reasons why children left school were because they were needed to help out at home or on the farm, to find paid work, or because they couldn't meet the costs related to schooling (Round 3 survey). Poverty in its many expressions – as hunger and food insecurity, as time poverty, as sub-standard schooling, or as the inability to pay the costs of schooling – is the main reason why young people leave school early. Nevertheless, even where school quality is lacking, school education remains a source of hope for young people in poverty, and the decision to leave school is often underpinned by ambivalence. Leaving school early may seem a sensible option in the light of changing household circumstances, as well as the job opportunities that await them.

11. 'A hopeless life': social worth and resistance

The paper has so far described the kinds of risks facing young people that emanate from their everyday environments, such as their neighbourhoods and households, from the fabric of their family relationships, and in relation to their physical well-being. But poverty constrains young people's opportunities and life chances in other ways too. Despite growing up poor, they fear "leading a hopeless life", which is a sign of having given up, of not making an effort to improve oneself and of lacking dynamism. We saw, above, how Bereket considered work to be an essential part of his well-being, and he emphasises that it is important for boys like him to avoid becoming "idle".

"If his life is not changing from day to day and if he does not do anything to boost his morale, he starts to lead a hopeless life. He starts to say 'there will be no change' whether he lives today or tomorrow and that all the gain is toiling."

A religious leader in Bertukan echoed the sentiment that poverty threatens children's sense of hope and hence their 'bright futures', saying:

"Children know the reality of the life which is poverty. Children lose hope for the future due to poverty. They do not think about a bright future to have a higher position. That is why they become thieves and develop bad behaviour. They just live for the sake of the time being. They do not think about the future. This is the result of understanding the reality of the present life of the community."

Though poor families in both Leki and Bertukan rely primarily on informal sources of support (Pankhurst and Tiemelissan 2012), there is greater governmental and non-governmental support available in Bertukan than in Leki. Such scarcity of formal support may be one of the reasons why young people emphasise personal initiative, and although daily life is made more difficult by poverty and resource-poor environments, the general view is that poverty is something that they can overcome. Miki said that even if families were not supportive, boys like him could work to make the “good life” happen. Most young people in the study work to improve their lives and life chances, and while education promises a ‘bright future’, working hard is also considered a personal and collective strategy for improvement.

Bereket does not like the idea of children working simply to survive, and he values highly work that changes one’s life positively. Miki has a similar view, and defines poverty as “working but not changing one’s life”. In Leki, young people consider “laziness” an important cause of poverty and hard work as a requirement if children expect to move out of poverty.

Neither boys nor girls consider poverty an insurmountable barrier to their transitions to adulthood, or the defining feature of who they are as people.

“[I] am equal to my friends of my age ... I can do what they are able to do. ... I have the courage to fight for my goal up to the last minute. I don't give up easily ... I am responsible for my own strength.”

(Bereket, 16, Bertukan)

Afework from Bertukan said, “I never felt inferior to anyone. There is a guy who always teaches us to remember that we are equal to one another. He is a mate.”

Fatuma from Bertukan was asked if there were differences between herself and her better-off friends, to which she replied:

“I think we are both the same. It is not just about them being able to pay a lot of money. What matters is individual effort. If I work hard, there is no reason why I should not fulfill my future goals the same way as my friends, and even reach a better position.”

Miki compares himself to his friends and says, “I consider myself as better ... I am sympathetic to others.” Through their personal narratives, young people resist discourses that equate poverty with moral deprivation, and they assert their moral worth within the context of their efforts to overcome poverty.

Yilunta (literally, ‘what people would say’) is a compelling sense of what is ‘right or wrong’ and plays a prominent part in the way these young people evaluate and confront risk. A local concept, *yilunta* describes motivation from social expectations to do what is considered right or to avoid behaviour of which others would disapprove. It is a way for individuals to gain a reputation for good manners and good behaviour. *Yilunta* has also been defined in terms of honour and shame (Heinonen 2011). As children grow older, they are meant to acquire a stronger sense of *yilunta*, which encompasses the culturally acquired knowledge of boys’ and girls’ places in Ethiopian society, as well as how young and old relate to each other in shared hierarchies (see also Poluha 2004: 67–98). Despite having very little material wealth, the young people we interviewed were increasingly concerned with their social worth and status, and these were highly gendered.

Examples from the urban neighbourhood of Bertukan and the village of Leki are illustrative. For girls, responsibility, respect, hard work, the acquisition of new and useful skills (especially domestic ones, such as knitting, embroidery, and coffee and food preparation) and modesty are valued attributes in the transition to adulthood. Fatuma sees herself somewhere between

childhood and adulthood (cf. Poluha 2004). She places great importance on modesty, as well as respect for elders (any older persons), obedience and self-control. She avoids the dangers in the neighbourhood by avoiding the streets, and she distinguishes herself from girls who spend time outdoors: "It's not the same for a girl that spends her time in the house and for a girl that is often seen outside." When she does leave the house she tries to go accompanied by a friend.

Genet also considers herself "not a child" yet "not an adult", and like Fatuma she prides herself on being responsible, respectful of others and trustworthy. Netsa emphasises her growing self-confidence and her capacity to recognise and confront the risks around her: "For instance, when people order me to do things outside of our compound ... I used to go even without the consent of my mother." This case demonstrates that social maturation is not necessarily defined by increased autonomy in decision-making; rather the strengthening of Netsa's interdependence with her mother is a sign of growing up well. In many cultures, strong family and community bonds are valued more than autonomy, and 'successful' transitions may be judged by the ability to mobilise social networks rather than by the ability to act autonomously (Mensch et al. 2003; Rogoff 2003).

The view that confronting risk is a critical part of social and moral development of the young (Boyden and Mann 2005) is illustrated by one of the local proverbs mentioned during the group discussion with male elders in Leki: 'Daa'imnii ibiddaan gubatee hin beekne, ibiddatti gamma' (A child who has never been burnt by fire will always try to play with fire); this phrase suggests that young children lack experience, but also that children develop through their interaction with everyday risk.

Boys in Bertukan noted changes in themselves and their capacity to confront risk, such as being better equipped to face their problems independently, developing a better "understanding", and relating well to others. Afework points out that now he "always tries to learn from others' mistakes" and that although he is young, he has a "good understanding". Now that he knows what a young man his age should be doing, it is up to him to make the right decisions: "Now I am grown up and do everything on my own. Nobody advises me. ... I have to take the initiative to do things by myself. For instance, if I have to succeed at school, I need to study hard. If I need to have something, I will have to speak my mind."

Bereket also considers himself to be a "good boy" (*tiru li*). This is evidenced by his "love of work", "respect for others", "good use of time", "getting along well with others", and "improving". "I make decisions on my own, starting from a long time ago", and he says that he no longer does things "just to please others", he does things because he knows they're "the right thing" to do. This balance between doing things for oneself and doing things for others is a critical aspect of young people's evolving identities and sense of growing up.

Miki also has a strong sense of himself as a young man who is changing: "I have become a mature and disciplined person. I reconcile individuals when they quarrel. I am also a man who fulfils the will of God." Religion plays an increasingly important part in young people's identities. And, like Bereket, Miki considers work a positive influence on his development and has positioned him as a moral advisor to his friends. He describes himself as "one who respects others, who is thoughtful and does not quarrel with others ... if someone is obedient, they will be loved and respected by others." "Yilunta", explains Miki, "is to do things for the sake of others but you do not believe in it." He gives the example of when he met a blind and deaf man in the street: "I gave the money I had due to *yilunta*." 'Isn't this compassion, not *yilunta*?' questioned the researcher. Miki responded that if he did not have *yilunta* he would have given the man 50 cents (less than he actually given). He wanted to give less, but gave

more because, as he stated, you “do things for the sake of others but you do not believe in it”. There is another side to *yilunta*, which is often referred to in the negative sense of being too self-effacing, and of being overly dictated by ‘what people would say’. So, alongside meeting their material needs, young people growing up in poverty are also in the process of social becoming, and their encounter with risk often involves moral decisions.

12. Discussion

Looking across the multiple risks negotiated by young people as they transition to adulthood, this section pulls out three main points for discussion.

The first point has to do with the way local environments shape the risks young people face. Young people in the rural area contend with wider environmental shocks, which deepen household material insecurity in the context of fragile agricultural livelihoods; those in the urban area emphasise poverty and a variety of social ills that impinge on their capacity to carry out routine tasks in safety. Young people in the city view their everyday environments as unhealthy and unprotective, even though, compared to their village counterparts, they have better access to schools and healthcare facilities. Their poor, overcrowded housing conditions create a different set of risks, and girls, especially, face sexual risks under these circumstances. It is therefore essential that policies aimed at supporting young people in their transitions to adulthood take into account the contextual factors, including gender, age and location, that shape experiences of poverty, risks and opportunities.

The second point has to do with the way poverty exacerbates other risks in the transition to adulthood. Poverty is a source of adversity for young people; it creates hunger, pain and shame. Poverty manifests itself differently in different contexts (as does well-being). Yet poorer households shoulder a greater burden of risk, and they often lack the resources to deal with adversity. Poverty also interacts with other risks, with potential knock-on effects, often worsening already difficult situations (for example, precluding medical attention when ill, which may worsen one's condition, and preventing children from attending school).

Therefore, the choices that families make in relation to young people's transitions are made in the context of material constraints; for example, whether or not a 15-year-old girl will marry, whether a bright young man will carry on in school or drop out to herd the cattle, or who should care for a chronically ill mother. Poverty limits choices and creates uncertainty, and yet, in spite of this, many of the young people remain hopeful about their future. Their insistence that all are equal, despite material differences, may reflect both an egalitarian/socialist heritage, possibly religious influences, and messages relayed in school teaching.

The third point has to do with the significance of social risks for young people. Young people growing up in poverty not only contend with material disadvantage; they are also in a process of social becoming. As children get older, social risks become more gender-differentiated, in both the rural and urban settings. Supporting young people in their transitions to adulthood needs to reflect this dimension of their transitions. This study finds that young people are concerned about securing livelihoods for themselves in the here and now, which will benefit their families and their societies. It is a daily struggle and part of longer-term goals. These material concerns stemming from poverty and uncertainty are managed alongside their desires to secure ‘bright futures’ and to become the kind of men and women who are looked up to in their societies.

Normative views of youth transitions would suggest a single version of what a 'bright future' looks like, one that looks the same for boys and girls and for all children across a variety of cultural landscapes and environmental settings. Current research into children's future well-being is dominated by concerns about 'human capital formation' and the future value of children's labour to their country's economy. This paper presents evidence suggesting that young people negotiate their transitions within very different contexts of risk and with nuanced understandings of what 'living well' means to them individually and as part of families and communities. At the same time, young people seem to be increasingly assuming responsibility for their 'success' or 'failure', as measured by their schooling achievements and capacity to secure certain types of jobs.

There are many international, government and NGO interventions attempting to redefine the timing and nature of transitions for young people in Ethiopia, and elsewhere. It is only recently that research into the transitions to adulthood in developing country contexts has received focused attention, and it should be a priority for programmes to be evaluated for their impact on individuals, families and communities in their local physical and social contexts. There is also a vital role for qualitative research to document how the contexts and textures of these transitions are changing across the developing world, and to examine young people's agency and resistance within these complex processes.

This study shows how poverty and culture mediate boys' and girls' transitions and their experiences of risk. It illustrates how the transition to adulthood is about much more than the move from school to work, and includes processes related to young people's evolving identities, moral development and sense of social worth. Policy, programmes and practice therefore need to support transitions in this wider sense, in ways that are sensitive to context and to local expectations for young men and women (including existing gender and inter-generational relations), as well as respectful of difference.

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Towards a 'Bright Future': Young People Overcoming Poverty and Risk in Two Ethiopian Communities

This paper explores young people's views and experiences of poverty and everyday risks in two contrasting communities in Ethiopia. The data are from Young Lives, a long-term study of childhood poverty. Qualitative data were collected with a group of children born in 1994, at three time points (when they were aged 12, 13 and 16). The paper develops three lines of argument with respect to the multiple risks that young people negotiate as they transition to adulthood. The first point has to do with the role of local environments in shaping the risks that young people face, such that young men and women experience their spatial environments differently, and some risks differ by location (rural/urban). The second has to do with the way poverty exacerbates other risks in the transition to adulthood, by limiting choices and horizons, and by creating a sense of uncertainty. The third point has to do with the importance of social risks for young people, and the way that risks become more gender-differentiated and sexualised, in both the rural and urban settings, as children get older. This study finds that young people attempt to manage their material needs and livelihood strategies alongside their moral concerns to secure 'bright futures' for themselves and to become the kind of men and women who are looked up to in their societies. Policies and programmes wishing to support young people in poverty need also to be sensitive to the social and moral dimensions of their experiences.



About Young Lives

Young Lives is an international study of childhood poverty, involving 12,000 children in 4 countries over 15 years. It is led by a team in the Department of International Development at the University of Oxford in association with research and policy partners in the 4 study countries: Ethiopia, India, Peru and Vietnam.

Through researching different aspects of children's lives, we seek to improve policies and programmes for children.

Young Lives Partners

Young Lives is coordinated by a small team based at the University of Oxford, led by Professor Jo Boyden.

- *Ethiopian Development Research Institute, Ethiopia*
- *Pankhurst Development Research and Consulting plc*
- *Save the Children (Ethiopia programme)*
- *Centre for Economic and Social Sciences, Andhra Pradesh, India*
- *Save the Children India*
- *Sri Padmavathi Mahila Visvavidyalayam (Women's University), Andhra Pradesh, India*
- *Grupo de Análisis para el Desarrollo (GRADE), Peru*
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