



HEHD RESEARCH BRIEF

CREATING VALUABLE POST-SCHOOL PATHWAYS FOR VULNERABLE YOUTH IN MALAWI

Andrew Achichizga Nkhoma

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About this Brief

This brief summarises a research project conducted between 2020 and 2022 on the educational aspirations of youth in Malawi and their experiences of attending post-school programmes provided by an international non-governmental organisation (NGO). The brief will be useful for managers of youth education programmes, educators, researchers, NGOs involved in youth development initiatives, and technical, entrepreneurial and vocational education and training (TEVET) policymakers. The brief will also be useful for those interested in propagating social justice in higher education.

Context

In Malawi, higher education – and education more broadly – is underpinned by human capital approaches that seek to cultivate employable young people to participate in the nation's development. Yet, Malawian universities struggle to accommodate most youth who qualify and aspire to pursue higher education studies. This impedes youth aspirations. While diverse pathways to higher education exist, there are limited critical explorations of the post-school pathways offered by NGOs who are active in the youth development space in Malawi. The paucity of relevant studies necessitated empirical research on this topic. The research therefore explored the higher education programmes that Malawian youth had access to through an NGO, shedding light on their experiences in the programmes. The study also examined whether the programmes aligned with the aspirations of youth

and if the programmes helped mitigate their vulnerability in Malawi. Thus, the study revealed the unique experiences in NGO-provided higher education programmes for youth, and the programmes' potential to prepare young people to live meaningful lives that they had reason to value, and to enhance their well-being.

Conceptual framework

The project used the capability approach – a normative framework for studying different forms of dis/advantage (Sen, 1999; Nussbaum, 2000). The capability approach provided lenses for exploring youth aspirations and their experience in skills training and education programmes provided by an NGO. This study used the approach to evaluate how well youth aspirations were supported in and through these programmes. Also crucial to this study was the capability approach's emphasis on what individual youth have reason to value about their lives (Alkire, 2002; Robeyns, 2005). The approach was helpful, as it allowed for the examination of individuals' lives and revealed their opportunities to attain the valuable states of being they aspired to. It allowed for a detailed analysis of how youth participated in educational programmes that enhanced a range of capabilities for them. The approach also helped to highlight how youth aspirations are influenced by social, political, cultural, and economic contexts.

Methodology

The qualitative case study focused on the views of 24 youth from low-income backgrounds (in group interviews and individual in-depth interviews) and nine staff members (in semi-structured interviews). The staff members worked at a faith-based NGO that offers skills and vocational training to marginalised youth. A document review, primarily of policy documents, was used to capture official institutional positions, ask for further understanding of the matter under investigation, and provide a triangulation of the findings from the interviews.

Key findings

The study focused on critically examining the role that education and skills training programmes offered by NGOs can play in fostering capabilities and supporting youth aspirations and well-being. The study argues that the lack of access to mainstream colleges and universities constrains the scope of youth aspirations. However, institutions such as NGOs can play a valuable role in supporting youth well-being and capability achievement to a certain extent, especially in developing countries such as Malawi. The findings revealed that youth could enhance their capabilities and functioning in and through the study programmes run by NGOs, but not all valued capabilities were achieved by the youth. As an analytical framework, the capability approach has also contributed to evaluating the benefits of higher education more broadly, thus highlighting the importance of higher education beyond its role in increasing employability opportunities.

Therefore, the study extrapolated the following capabilities valued by youth and enabled by NGO-provided education programmes in Malawi.

1. **The capability to access post-school training.** Accessing and participating in post-school training to gain relevant and valuable skills.
2. **The capability to be self-reliant.** Getting a skilled job and being self-reliant; to be an entrepreneur and generate income for self-reliance.
3. **The capability to gain practical skills and occupational knowledge.** To have access to practical training, access internship placements, and put the acquired skills into practice. An individual is adequately equipped with skills and qualifications that are marketable and required in the world of work.

4. **The capability to care.** To be able to care for others and develop one's humanness.
5. **The capability to aspire.** The ability to have hope for a better life in future and work towards achieving it.
6. **The capability for bodily integrity.** To have safety at school, not to be subjected to corporal punishment, freedom from sexual harassment and violence, choice in sexual relationships, and protection against HIV.

While these capabilities emerge in the study, the critical outcome from the data is that the main achievement for youth is access to post-school training, which enhances their ability to aspire and imagine what kind of skills and training can enable them to achieve their aspirations in the future. However, their existing aspirations were rarely achieved. Therefore, the critical contention reflected in the study is whether access to post-school training and the capability to aspire is enough for vulnerable youth's well-being, especially in the context of countries such as Malawi that face many human development challenges related to persistent poverty.

Further, while the skills and education programmes offered by NGOs enhance some valuable capabilities and functioning, the study revealed that the youth's capability achievements in and through these programmes were influenced by different personal, social, and environmental conversion factors. The study reveals the complexities and limitations of the educational interventions offered by faith-based NGOs, thus demonstrating the successes and failures of providing diverse pathways to skills development and capability formation in the higher education space, particularly in contexts where access to mainstream institutions such as universities is limited.

Recommendations

Informed by the main findings of this study and its implications, the following recommendations are proposed at policy and practice levels:

i. **Youth development NGOs should appreciate the context in which they operate**

The conceptualisation of higher education programmes by NGOs should consider the contextual dimensions in which the programmes are set. They should also be informed by data on youth aspirations and be developed with youth from local communities. A more acute awareness of the context and how it shapes youth aspirations for higher education will reveal the unique conversion factors hindering youth development in Malawi and allow more enabling higher education pathways for vulnerable and low-income youth.

ii. **TEVET regulatory bodies should adopt a multidimensional view of the meaning of access**

Regulatory bodies such as the Technical, Entrepreneurial and Vocational Education and Training Authority (TEVETA) and institutions that offer vocational education should reconsider the meaning of access in the design and implementation of higher education programmes. While it is important to design programmes for youth employability, these programmes should have a broad-based curriculum to develop multifaceted capabilities and foster the achievement of a wide range of valuable ends that transcend employability.

iii. **Government should collaborate with NGOs**

While it might seem counter-intuitive or contradictory, there is room and good reason for government and NGOs to work together to help create feasible pathways to higher education for vulnerable youth. Through the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) that is being developed (UN Malawi, 2019), the government should create a deliberate policy to make it possible for youth who come through NGO-provided higher education programmes to transition to mainstream public higher education institutions without requiring additional qualifications. This would allow NGO education programmes

to act as bridges to other programmes and opportunities to which youth aspire. The development of the NQF should be expedited, and once completed, implemented fairly.

Conclusion

Higher education skills and training programmes, even though grounded in human capital approaches, can foster capabilities beyond employment. While the educational programmes offered by NGOs can help address the higher education access gap for vulnerable youth in Malawi, more needs to be done. Existing programmes need to be reconceptualised to achieve broader outcomes that align with youth aspirations and valued capabilities.

References

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