

What Kenyan Youth Want and Why It Matters for Peace

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Abstract: The international aid community presents education and employment programs as the keys to mitigating youth participation in violence. Yet, existing evidence suggests that faith in such programs may be misplaced. This study investigates this disconnect between faith and evidence. It argues that education and employment programs are commonly built on an economically-focused “dominant discourse” that makes presumptions about youth and their interests. Based on qualitative research with youth in Nairobi, Kenya, it further argues that this dominant discourse overlooks self-identity and social connectedness factors that are crucial to youth, as well as the limitations imposed by governance and structural conditions.

Résumé: Bien que la communauté d'aide humanitaire internationale présente des programmes d'éducation et d'emploi comme la clé pour atténuer la participation des jeunes à la violence, les preuves existantes suggèrent que la foi dans ces programmes peut être déplacée. Basé sur une recherche qualitative menée auprès de jeunes à Nairobi, au Kenya, cet article soutient que les programmes d'éducation et d'emploi reposent généralement sur un discours dominant incluant des hypothèses inexactes ou insuffisantes sur les jeunes et leurs intérêts. Ce discours néglige les facteurs d'identité et de liens sociaux qui sont cruciaux pour les jeunes, ainsi que la gouvernance et les conditions structurelles qui les limitent.

Keywords: Youth; conflict; education; employment; aspirations; opportunity costs

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Youth is when you make your life or destroy it.
—Eighteen-year-old male student, Nairobi

In sub-Saharan Africa today, 43 percent of the population is under fifteen years of age, and the absolute number of youth is growing faster than anywhere else in the world. Two-thirds of Africans are younger than twenty-five (UNESCO 2012:177). For many, this demographic structure is cause for concern. A number of oft-cited studies show that a large cohort of youth, termed a “youth bulge,” is associated with various forms of violence from crime to terrorism, from rebellion to civil war (Collier 2007; Goldstone 1991; Huntington 1996; Urdal 2006). Yet both academic and policy literature present an alternative view, framing the unprecedented number of youth today as a dichotomy—a disaster *or* a dividend, a peril *or* a promise, youth as “troublemakers *or* peacemakers” (McEvoy-Levy 2006; U.N. News Centre 2015)—with the outcome depending on global, national and local policies and programs.

Education and employment are often the focus of such policies and programs. At a 2014 speech to the United Nations, President Obama advocated for “expand[ing] our programs to support entrepreneurship and civil society, education and youth—because ultimately, these investments are the best antidote to violence” (The White House 2014). Indeed, education and jobs have been widely endorsed by international development and peacebuilding actors as the keys to providing youth with pro-social, peacebuilding pathways to citizenship and adulthood (Global Partnership for Education 2016; IMF 2015; World Bank 2012, 2016).

Yet, existing evidence suggests that faith in such programs may be misplaced. While cross-national studies show correlations between higher average levels of formal education and a lower risk of violent conflict (Barakat & Urdal 2008; Collier & Hoeffler 2004), in a number of cases perpetrators are more educated than the average population (Krueger & Maleckova 2003; Straus 2006) and in still others, education may itself contribute to conflict (Burde 2014; King 2014). Convincing evidence for a positive relationship between employment and peace is even more problematic, with a suite of recent studies failing to find a significant positive correlation (Berman et al. 2011; Blattman & Ralston 2015; Cramer 2010; Holmes et al. 2013; Izzi 2013). These results beg the question of why this is so.

This study offers one possible explanation for the disconnect between, on the one hand, the tremendous faith and commitment to education and employment programs aimed at youth peacebuilding, and on the other, disappointing results. It shows that a “dominant discourse” built principally on simple economic logic underlies youth education and employment programs targeting peace. Nonetheless, we know little about if and how this dominant discourse aligns with the identity and aspirations of youth and how they understand and negotiate their everyday lives. Indeed, voices of youth are typically omitted from this research altogether. This study helps address these issues through an in-depth study of youth aspirations in Nairobi, Kenya. It draws on a survey of nearly 250 youth, six focus groups, and over one

hundred qualitative interviews with youth, as well as with representatives of government, and international organizations that work with youth. This study argues that at least two crucial issues are typically overlooked by the dominant discourse: the importance of the psycho-cultural—as opposed to material—aspects of youth aspirations, and the numerous limitations on youth imposed by governance and structural conditions. The argument is not that these oversights explain everything, but that the reductionism of the dominant discourse renders our understanding of youth, peace, and conflict incomplete. These oversights have significant implications for scholarship, for the practical challenges of peacebuilding, and for the futures of youth in Nairobi and beyond.

The first part of the study explains the focus on Nairobi and describes the research design. The second part reviews the literature relating to the dominant discourse focusing on the commonality of education and job programs targeted at youth peacebuilding, the simple and consistent logic underlying them, and studies of their effectiveness. The third part presents findings related to youth aspirations and agency. The fourth part discusses the two main shortcomings of the dominant discourse as reflected by field research. The conclusion summarizes the ideas that are overlooked by the dominant discourse and explores why and to what effect this oversight occurs, presenting finally a research and programming agenda.

Case Selection and Research Methods

Nairobi is a particularly suitable place in which to investigate questions of youth, conflict, and peacebuilding programming for at least three reasons. First, Kenya has a very youthful population, with a median age of just nineteen. Kenyans under thirty comprise 75 percent of the population, and 43 percent of Kenya's population is younger than fifteen (Ministry of Youth Affairs 2013; Kenya National Assembly 2010b:26). While just 11 percent of Kenya's youth population currently live in the capital, the United Nations (UN) predicts that the global number of youth living in cities will rise dramatically in the next fifteen years and notes that if current trends continue, "the plight of young people in cities is likely to be one of the main challenges of the Century" (Njonjo et al. 2011:56). Second, in the past decade, Kenya has seen multiple forms of unrest, for which youth are often blamed. Youth are reported to have comprised 70 percent of the participants in the 2007–2008 post-election violence (EDC 2009), there are repeated concerns about the radicalization of Muslim Kenyan youth by al-Shabaab¹ (ICG 2012, 2014; Meleagrou-Hitchens 2013), and violent youth gangs appear to be on the rise in urban centers. Finally, Kenyan policy makers and international organizations working in the country routinely prescribe education and subsequent jobs as the solution that will turn "the reality of the youth menace . . . [into] the greatest resource . . . of this country" (Kenya National Assembly 2010b:28). The government also notes the importance of developing "a sustainable program to create jobs in this country and get[ting] the youths of this country

properly employed and engaged” as a strategy to prevent youth from being recruited by al-Shabaab, as well as to circumvent participation in youth gangs (Kenya National Assembly 2010c: 25–28).

This study is based on six principal sources gathered with the help of two Kenyan research assistants between June 2013 and October 2014: (1) a survey of 233 in-school youth, (2) forty qualitative interviews with a sub-set of these in-school youth, (3) eighteen interviews with principals and teachers from the same schools, (4) forty qualitative interviews with out-of-school youth, (5) nearly two dozen interviews with representatives from NGOs and the government who are involved with youth issues and (6) six focus groups from four participating schools and with two groups of out-of-school youth. While age brackets for youth differ by definition (for example the United Nations focuses on ages 15–24, the Government of Kenya on ages 18–35), this study focuses on youth in their late teens.

The Human Development Index puts Kenya in the low development category, ranking it 145 out of 187 countries (UNDP 2015). Forty-three percent of the Kenyan population lives below the poverty line of PPP USD1.25 per day (Malik 2013). There are more than seventy ethnic groups, with five principal groups accounting for approximately 70 percent of Kenyans, and a political system that has consistently privileged some groups over others. In order to vary the socio-economic, ethnic, and other background factors of participants, I purposively selected six secondary schools, as illustrated in Table 1. The latter two schools were both located in slums (Over 60 percent of Nairobi’s population lives in slums.) (Oketch & Mutisya, 2012; UNESCO 2011). In each high school, a school official chose one form four (final year) class to participate in a written survey on themes related to aspirations, education, and day-to-day attitudes and behaviors. Students in form four are on the brink of graduating and entering the adult world or continuing their education, which places them in a unique position to reflect upon the themes of interest.

In these six schools, we collected survey data from 233 participants. We then used the surveys to purposively select five male and five female

Table 1. Schools in Sample

School	1	2	3	4	5	6
Tuition (in KSh) ¹	90,000	98,000	140,000 ²	85,000	11,000	23,000
Type	National Boarding School	National Boarding School	National Boarding School	National Boarding School	Private Church-Run Day School	District Day School
Gender	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Mixed	Mixed
Number of one-on-one interviews	5	5	5	5	10	10

¹ USD1 = KES100 (Kenyan Shilling)

² Students receive significant scholarships based on merit. Kenya Certificate of Primary Education (KCPE) scores for this school are consequently higher.

students from each school to participate in a total of forty in-depth, one-on-one interviews, varying factors such as demographic and socio-economic background, school achievement, and civic engagement to access a cross-section of the different circumstances that characterize youth experiences in Nairobi. The sample demographics are summarized in Table 2. Using snowball sampling, we also spoke with forty out-of-school youth whose

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics of In-School Youth Sample for Interviews

Characteristics	Male	Female	Total
Age:			
15–17.....	7	9	16
18–19.....	10	10	20
20+.....	3	1	4
Total.....	20	20	40
Ethnicity:			
Kalenjin.....	1	0	1
Kamba.....	3	3	6
Kikuyu.....	2	7	9
Luhya.....	2	2	4
Luo.....	4	2	6
Other.....	8	6	14
Total.....	20	20	40
KCPE Scores:			
200–249.....	0	1	1
250–299.....	0	4	4
300–349.....	6	4	10
350–399.....	4	6	10
400–450.....	9	6	15
Total.....	20	20	40
School Tuition:			
KES11,000.....	5	5	10
KES23,000.....	5	5	10
KES85,000.....	0	5	5
KES90,000.....	5	0	5
KES98,000.....	0	5	5
KES140,000.....	5	0	5
Total.....	20	20	40
Funds for food:			
Never lacking.....	9	4	13
Sometimes lacking.....	10	15	25
Often lacking.....	0	1	1
No response.....	1	0	1
Total.....	20	20	40

demographics are summarized in Table 3. These youths were concentrated in the slums around two schools in our sample. About a third had dropped out after primary school, another third had completed a few years of secondary school, and roughly a third had finished secondary school but had no prospects for continuing their studies. Nearly all of the out-of-school youth told us that lack of funds explained their being out of school.

I also interviewed more than two dozen representatives from NGOs, bilateral agencies, and government ministries involved in youth-related issues to elicit their understandings of challenges and opportunities for youth in Kenya.

Finally, I presented the preliminary results to four focus groups in the participating schools (different from four students than those who participated in the interviews, since the original sample had already moved on) and two focus groups of available participants from the out-of-school interviews. The focus groups also served as an opportunity for youth to help explain and interpret the preliminary findings.

One limitation of these approaches is the likelihood of social desirability bias. In order to minimize potential bias and increase the comfort levels of

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics for Out-of-School Youth Sample

Characteristics	Male	Female	Total
Age:			
15–17.....	0	5	5
18–19.....	10	6	16
20+.....	11	7	18
Unknown.....	0	1	1
Total.....	21	19	40
Ethnicity:			
Kalenjin.....	0	0	0
Kamba.....	1	3	4
Kikuyu.....	7	6	13
Luhya.....	4	6	10
Luo.....	6	3	9
Other.....	3	1	4
Total.....	21	19	40
Last Year of School Completed:			
Standard 8.....	7	4	11
Form 1.....	0	3	3
Form 2.....	5	2	7
Form 3.....	1	3	4
Form 4.....	8	7	15
Total.....	21	19	40

the participants, all interviews were one-on-one. Most interviews with youth were undertaken by one of two youthful research assistants of the same gender as the youth participant and in the language of the participant's choice (English, Kiswahili, and/or Sheng²); I conducted five interviews with male participants and five with females, all of whom were comfortable in English, as well as all of the organizational and governmental interviews. We communicated clearly that we were not engaging in programming, only research, in an effort to minimize efforts to impress us. With out-of-school youth, we tried to build rapport and trust via snowball sampling from known organizations and individuals. We have remained in touch with a number of participants and continue to engage in informal discussions with them. To the extent possible, in both surveys and interviews, we asked questions related to negative attitudes and behaviors about other youth, rather than about the participants themselves.

The Dominant Discourse: Youth, Conflict, and Youth Programming in Conflict-Affected Contexts

Education and employment programs are common strategies deployed with the aim of deterring youth participation in violence. Indeed, education and training are becoming the most common youth-targeted programs in conflict-affected countries (Olenik & Takyi-Lerea 2013). Likewise, employment programs are consistently identified as a top strategy (World Bank 2009; Creative & International Peace and Security Institute 2016). International aid organizations continue to expand both types of programs. For example, from 2000 to 2010, the World Bank increased its investments in youth-targeted initiatives fifteen-fold (World Bank 2010). While the end goals of such programming vary, there is often little variation in design; education and jobs are believed to be effective measures to deter youth from political violence, rebellion, violent extremism, and civil war (Monaghan & King, forthcoming).³ While scholars often carefully distinguish between these variables, in practice, the international aid community often refers to these outcomes interchangeably.

Education and employment programming are consistent with the scholarly literature on youth and conflict that commonly attributes the correlation between youth bulges and various forms of violence to low opportunity costs among youth (Collier et al. 2003; Collier & Hoeffler 2004). While most youth do not engage in violence, when there are many young people in a society, youth are said to have a "comparative advantage" in violence, similar to the argument often made of the poor that "life is cheap." Youth's opportunity costs—the cost of participating in violence, compared with the value of the sacrificed next best alternative (not participating)—are said to be particularly low. The upshot is that educated (Barakat & Urdal 2008; Fearon & Laitin 2003) and/or employed youth (Berman et al. 2011; Izzi 2013) are busy with other things and have, for the most part, too much to lose to engage in conflict or other acts of violence.

Likewise, that education and employment are both thought to raise opportunity costs makes them attractive as widespread programs across the international aid community (see for instance Chaffin [Inter-Agency Network on Education in Emergencies] 2010; Dupuy [Save the Children] 2008; IMF 2015; Mercy Corps 2011; Østby & Urdal 2011; Smith Ellison & Smith [UNESCO] 2012; World Bank 2011). Interviews with representatives of non-governmental organizations, bilateral organizations, and the Kenyan government also echoed the same narrative. Nearly every interviewee discussed education and jobs as the solutions to getting youth onto pro-social pathways. Notably, each interviewee referred to youth as “idle” in explaining why youth involve themselves in conflict. And, as such, in explaining these initiatives, many interviewees invoked the logic of opportunity costs. For example, as one representative of an international NGO explained, “A lot of young people who participated in violence are [a] vulnerable group. They don’t have much education...which may then really limit opportunities for them, and makes them take an attitude of [having] nothing to lose.” Of course, the existence of the dominant discourse does not mean that all actors in the international aid community are identical and equally committed to the programs and logics presented here. Yet, reliance on this simplified narrative is a widespread practice of “Aidland” or “Peaceland” (Autesserre 2014).

Moreover, as discussed in the introduction, the commonality of the dominant discourse is not matched by evidence of program effectiveness. As Blattman and Ralston put it, referring to employment programming in the aim of stability, they are “based first on faith, second on theory, and last on evidence” (2015:i). The same is true of education for peace, with governments, aid agencies, and scholars facing an “absence of robust evidence” and still seeking to “understand what works best among various practices and program interventions” (Burde et al. 2015:12). Many explanations for the disappointing results have to do with *programmatic* elements: inadequate access to education, poor quality education, a lack of long-term vision, unpredictable funding cycles, an inadequate understanding of the local economy and labor needs, inadequate attention to increasing demands as opposed to youth employability, and/or poor targeting of those most at risk (Beasley 2009; Chaffin 2010; Izzi 2013). As Spears writes,

when efforts at building peace have failed, the assumption is made that there has been a problem in terms of implementation or method. . . So the international community continues to advocate the same practices but recommends starting sooner and allowing for longer time frames, being more pro-active, being more inclusive, being more free of other countries and their meddling ways, involving more of the community, and being more educated and informed. All of these may be worthy endeavours. . . it is not clear that more of anything will produce more favourable [. . .] outcomes (2012:300).

Less common explanations target the more fundamental *assumptions* underlying such programming. These include that insurgency may not be

as low-skilled an occupation as the logic presumes or that poor households typically have a “portfolio of work” as opposed to one job (Berman et al. 2011; Blattman, Jamison & Sheridan 2015).

This study focuses on yet another set of fundamental assumptions: the dominant discourse surrounding youth, education, and jobs continues to understand youth within a materialist, economic, or “human capital” framework.⁴ Nevertheless, there are many aspects of youth attitudes and behaviors that cannot be explained in these ways (Cramer 2002; Frye 2012). Indeed, recent studies point beyond economic rationales for participation in various forms of violence to the importance of psycho-social motivations (Blattman, Jamison & Sheridan 2015; Gilligan 2016; Morris 2014; Mercy Corps 2015), and there has long been a debate over the relative merits of understanding such motivations as rooted in greed and/or grievance (Collier & Hoeffler 2004). While simple and reductionist narratives, of the education-jobs-opportunity-costs type, are common in explaining developing and conflict-affected contexts, they often lead to unintended consequences that may be counterproductive, or even detrimental, to peacebuilding (Autesserre 2012, 2014). It is thus important to focus on more localized and contextualized understandings of youth aspirations and lives and to bring more youth voices, still too often left out, into the conversation. This study endeavors to do both by drawing on qualitative methods that prioritize youth voices and by focusing on youth aspirations.

Youth Voices: Aspirations and Agency

There are relatively few studies in sub-Saharan Africa that seek to understand what it is that youth want and why they want it.⁵ Nonetheless, the period of youth is widely understood as a crossroads or watershed in which difficult or important decisions must be made—not the least by youth themselves, as suggested in the epigraph. While identity is constructed across one’s life course, identity formation is an especially important component of youth. The transition to adulthood leads youth to seek connections and to “find their place in the world” (Erikson 1968; Guerra & Olenik 2013).

Aspirations are a key part of this process. Here, *aspirations* means “hopes for the future”; an individual’s desire to attain status, an object, or a goal. Aspirations are multi-dimensional, with education and career most common among studies, but with youth also often developing aspirations in many other realms such as environment, religion, and community (Hart 2012). Aspirations may be the same as or different from expectations; *expectations* are realistic estimates of one’s ability to achieve one’s aspirations (Howard et al. 2011). While aspirations typically develop at an earlier age, it is during the period of youth in which people expect their aspirations to begin to be actualized. Youth in their late teens, the age of focus in this study, may become increasingly pessimistic about their ability to achieve their hopes for the future (Armstrong & Crombie 2000). Indeed, in contrast to traditional accounts, where youth was seen as a clear, transitional, and linear phase

between childhood and adulthood—during which young people typically completed their education, got secure jobs, got married, and had children—scholars are increasingly describing youth, especially in the developing world and across Africa, as a prolonged, or even permanent, period of “waithood” (Honwana 2012; Singerman 2007).

Despite the many challenges of youth and “waithood” today, a host of studies show that youth the world over have high aspirations and are optimistic about the likelihood of achieving them. Most of these studies are from the United States and the United Kingdom, but they also represent such places as Burundi (Uvin 2009), Malawi (Frye 2012), and Tanzania (Nalkur 2009), which are consistently among the poorest countries in the world and in the bottom forty on the Human Development Index (UNDP 2015).

Youth in Kenya too have very high aspirations, although “youth” need to be disaggregated, and there are some important variations (see Sommers 2015). For instance, the surveys and interviews with secondary school students illustrate important educational aspirations. In an open-ended question asking students in the final year of secondary school to list “what are your hopes for the future?” the most common answer was to successfully complete secondary education, with the aspiration of going to university coming in as the second most common choice. No clear socioeconomic patterns emerged; even those that experience various forms of economic hardship, such as regularly not having enough money to buy food and/or to buy school supplies like pens and notebooks, aspired to university degrees, including Masters’ and PhDs. Likewise, there were no statistically significant differences between ethnic groups. Girls, however, had higher future schooling aspirations than boys.⁶ Out-of-school youth generally shared in-school youth’s high regard for education, noting the importance and power of education in bringing about social mobility. More than a third of out-of-school respondents, who had discontinued their education at different stages, named education as their top aspiration. Some out-of-school youth wanted to finish high school, some wanted to go on to university, while others wanted to take a course related to furthering their job opportunities.

In terms of careers, the in-school youth who participated in this study aspired to high salary, high prestige, formal sector positions that typically require not only university degrees, but post-baccalaureate degrees as well. In response to the question “what kind of job would you like to have?” the top four target occupations, in order, were engineer, doctor, “a well-paying job,” and lawyer. Again, socioeconomic background did not make a clear difference in aspirations, although gender did. Eleven boys, but only one girl, for instance, aspired to be engineers, while twice as many girls as boys wanted to be lawyers. More girls than boys also aspired to be medical doctors or surgeons.

There were again both important similarities and key differences in the job aspirations of out-of-school youth as compared to those who are in school. The most frequent responses to the question about career aspirations,

in order, were: business professional, nurse, and (tied for third) athlete, doctor, engineer, and lawyer. Other jobs that out-of-school youth mentioned included: actor, chef, coach, computer professional, fashion designer, editor, entrepreneur, and journalist. Many out-of-school youth were more modest in their income goals and more specific in the personal and family needs that would be met with their earned incomes than in-school youth. Very few of the out-of-school cohort spoke about living a high standard of life or being rich. The humblest aspiration we heard across all interviews was from an out-of-school youth who aspired to a “decent job” which he defined as “one where you earn a legitimate wage, not something clandestine.” While there was more variation among this group than among the in-school-youth, out-of-school youth too aspire—and do so unprompted—to higher-earning, prestigious, formal sector positions that require significantly more education than they have.

Every in-school youth that we interviewed, as well as all but three of the forty out-of-school youth with whom we spoke, believed that s/he would achieve his or her aspirations. For many, it was difficult to even imagine not reaching them, as if it were sacrilege or tempting fate to discuss the possibility. Even when we asked some participants about whether they thought being from a poor background or being a woman could prevent them from reaching their goals, we typically received responses like this one from a woman living and attending school in a Nairobi slum: “No. If you believe you can, you can.” The in-school youth who participated in the survey (recall there was no survey for out-of-school youth) asserted strong agency and the belief that they could shape their own lives. Their survey responses suggest a strong sense of self-efficacy: the vast majority (217/233, 93 percent) “agree strongly” that they are “able to improve my own life”; “agree” or “agree strongly” that when they see a problem in their neighbourhood they can help fix it (197/233, 85 percent); and “agree” or “agree strongly” that “if Kenya is on the wrong track, I believe I can do something to help my country” (193/233, 83 percent).

Many interviewees, both in schools and out, described that in the face of challenges, *other* youth despair. Several participants explained, for example, that youth turn to drugs or even commit suicide after failing exams because of hopelessness and a sense of failure. Raising issues directly related to peace and conflict, many youth talked about how failure to reach aspirations makes youth susceptible to mobilization by politicians seeking to abuse youth. Two interviewees talked about how youth who do not meet their aspirations are likelier to join al-Shabaab. Part of these responses may in fact be about the responders themselves, responding in ways that engage in self-promoting bias. Yet, it was also marked that nearly every interviewee espoused that s/he was different and many said that they would “never lose hope,” displaying an optimistic bias (Harris 1996).

In discussing possible failures to reach aspirations, youth often blamed *themselves* and believed that their personal characteristics are what either hold them back, or enable them to triumph. Consistent with prominent

explanations for aspiration-achievement mismatches in US-based sociological literature, Nairobi youth appeared to have bought into ideologies of meritocracy and individualism epitomized by the American Dream and rags-to-riches stories. They believed in the possibility of upward mobility and were convinced that, despite challenges, “hard work and talent bring a just reward” (Sawhill & Morton 2007:2). Also, consistent with explanations in the US-based literature, our study participants viewed education as the best means for achieving upward mobility.⁷ As Silva shows, for instance, in her study of working-class adulthood in the United States, youth often see themselves as the principal barrier to their own success, as opposed to such factors as unexpected economic or social shocks and racism, “cling[ing] so fiercely to neoliberal ideals of untrammelled individualism and self-reliance” (2013:19). While nearly all participants’ responses indicated that they have a plan to achieve their success, most youth, both in-school and out-of-school, of both genders and from different socio-economic backgrounds, were very vague on the details of such plans. Most youth referred only to traits in responding to the details of their particular plans such as “work hard and have determination”; “being positive in everything I do”; and “trusting in God.”

There are both consistencies and inconsistencies with the dominant discourse that arise from these interviews with youth. Consistent with the dominant discourse presented above, youth highly value formal education. This does not mean that they found the education system in Kenya to be perfect—they had multiple complaints—but they had strongly embraced the instrumental value of education. They further placed high value on jobs. Also consistent, youth’s aspirations were, in part, driven by material concerns. As one boy told us in a statement representative of many, “In the future I hope to achieve in terms of my career to enable me to live a sustainable life, without any suffering or I can be able to fend for my family to put food on the table, such a life [in which] I can afford something.” Yet, while material concerns certainly underlay many of our conversations with youth, it was not generally what youth themselves chose to speak about. This suggests that the dominant discourse—focusing on education and jobs for predominantly material reasons—is too simple and reductionist; it may be fundamentally overlooking important components of what matters to youth.

Complicating the Dominant Discourse

Youth Aspirations and Identity in Nairobi

In the context of “waithood,” where youth struggle to find their place in society, it is a critical oversight of the dominant discourse that what youth appear to want is not only, and perhaps not predominantly, material. Youth aspire to find a meaningful identity and place in society. Indeed, their desire for social connectedness emerged strongly in the interviews. While education and jobs were consistently raised as important aspirations, rather

than understanding the motivations for these aspirations as only material, a psycho-cultural interpretation offers a more complete understanding of *why* youth hold these aspirations, a nuance that may lead to different policy prescriptions.

Youth who participated in this research were very much motivated in their aspirations by the desire to be respected and to improve their social status. For example, rather than speak about the material value of education, participants repeatedly explained that having had to “toil” in school is one of the hallmarks of respect. As one focus group suggested, imagining the situation of a very rich man who did not pursue his studies far enough, “the way people look at you, it still matters. People still look at you like he is very rich but he didn’t quite go to school and do a meaningful course... People still look down on you, even if they look up to you on money.” Likewise, even simply being in school granted a measure of status and allowed youth to imagine themselves as having prestige. Motivations underlying career choice were similar and perhaps stronger as “work has [long] remained *the* defining role identity of most people” (Goyder 2009:3). As one respondent in a focus group of out-of-school youth explained in response to my query as to why most youth aspire to their careers of choice, “respect—people will care about you and know you are someone. You are identified with that job.” Another noted the pride and reverence with which people refer to certain careers—“my cousin is a doctor”—and aspired to this praise.

Youth were generally equally motivated by a desire to find an important place in their communities. The desire of participants to give back to Kenya, to their neighborhoods and communities, was strikingly common, and additionally functioned as the motivation for their aspirations. Being seen as someone able to help others is important to positive valuations of self-identity. Those who had received scholarships or other help to get through schooling or employment training programs recognized the importance of “giving back” as well. When we discussed the purported importance of community service in focus groups, ideas of Kenyan or African brotherhood often emerged, as well as references to Christianity. Another line of reasoning involved remembering one’s roots and wanting to help people avoid the hardships one had experienced. In our survey of in-school youth, most students identified “help[ing] improve the lives of others” as the best definition of success for their futures ($N=146/229$) compared to earning lots of money ($N=19/229$), being able to take care of parents, siblings, spouses, and/or children ($N=20/229$) and other answers ($N=21/229$).⁸ Many espoused the aspiration of becoming a role model for their communities.

It appeared in this research that simply maintaining these aspirations was also important to youth, making the analytical concept of “aspirational identity” useful. An “aspirational identity” provides a narrative that allows “an individual [to] construe him or herself as one who is earnestly desirous of being a particular kind of person and self-consciously and consistently in pursuit of the objective” (Thornborrow & Brown 2009:355; see also

Markus & Nurius 1986). Individuals imagine future versions of themselves, “possible selves,” that represent their hopes, fears, and identities. As Swartz et al. (2012) explain in the South African context, and equally applicable among the Nairobi youth who participated in this study, youth “deal in dreams,” and aspirations have a “survival value.”

Two examples among many illustrate this phenomenon among youth in Nairobi. Whereas government and NGO representatives commonly referred to youth, especially those who are out-of-school, as “idle,” out-of-school youth themselves usually described their situation as one of “tarmacking,” or less commonly, “hustling.” “Tarmacking” refers to someone, usually with an education, “hitting the pavement” in search of a job. In contrast to sitting still, or idling, tarmacking is an active verb suggesting forward movement. Tarmacking also contrasts with the more permanent state of “hustling” (piecing together odd jobs, making money any way you can), suggesting a transitional, temporary phase on the way to something better. In a focus group activity where youth were asked to place a set of ten occupations against a nine-point prestige scale (an adaptation of Nakao & Treas 1994), youth consistently placed tarmacking as having a higher social standing than hustling. This exercise often led to heated debates about whether or not tarmacking—seen by some as endeavouring to follow one’s dreams—should have a higher or lower social standing than actually holding a job in an occupation deemed “beneath” one’s aspirations. In a different example, and standing out among all interviews in Nairobi, one young man spoke about the importance of “false hope” in motivating young people to work through the difficulties of daily life; “If poor people didn’t have that,” he said, “everyone would commit suicide.”

While some participants thought the country valued its youth as the “leaders of tomorrow,” many complained that youth are the victims of over-generalized negative perceptions. One boy enrolled in a top Nairobi school said, “They think of us as selfish, arrogant people who can cause trouble and can be manipulated easily because once you get the leader of these small circles of people, it is like you have everyone.” An out-of-school youth explained that youth are often considered “bad people” that others try to avoid. Participants did not always think this was undeserved—many spoke of peer pressure influencing them to engage in negative behaviors like drugs and alcohol, stealing and mugging. Nonetheless, they saw negative stereotypes of youth as a recurring challenge (one that those in power, to be discussed in the section below, have incentive to reinforce).

The desire for belonging and respect and other identity-related factors that underlie youth aspirations suggest important limitations of the dominant material-focused theories of change that drive youth programming in conflict-affected contexts. The importance of self-identity and social connectedness are increasingly cited as the motivations for certain types of political violence and need to be considered in meaningful peacebuilding responses (Blattman, Jamison & Sheridan 2015; Gilligan 2016; Morris 2014; Mercy Corps 2015). The aspirations of youth, and the underlying reasoning

for their aspirations, speak to the importance of addressing the psychosocial needs of youth in peacebuilding programming.

Governance and Structural Constraints

The dominant discourse also sidesteps many governance and structural constraints that youth raised in interviews and that characterize the reality of the Kenyan landscape (and that of many other countries as well). Cramer explains that in such “methodologically individualist models of conflict [and peacebuilding], there are...problems deriving from the failure to incorporate the social, or to embed the economic and individual in the social, relational and historical” (2002:1855).

Some of the challenges referenced by the participants are related to issues that education and employment programs are meant to address. According to the most recent available figures, while the primary Gross Enrolment Rate (GER) in Kenya is 101 percent, secondary GER drops to 41 percent (Glennerster et al. 2011; UNESCO 2011). Yet, as an out-of-school female summarized, “If you are not in school, I most times feel not good because those who are in school are working hard to change their lives, but with me, I’m not.” Recall that education was often itself an aspiration and otherwise instrumentally crucial to the fulfillment of career aspirations of most youth with whom we spoke. In addition, the majority of Kenyan youth are unemployed, underemployed, or underpaid (Njonjo 2011), and this was a major concern among youth, NGO representatives, and government officials with whom I spoke. Perhaps 40 percent of Kenyan youth are unemployed, and 80 percent of all Kenya’s 2.3 million unemployed are youth (Oketch & Mutisya 2012). Whereas most jobs to which youth aspired require post-secondary education, tertiary GER is just 8 percent—10 percent for men and 6 percent for women (UNESCO 2011). Poverty was a recurring challenge mentioned by interviewees, especially those living in Nairobi’s slums; in one focus group, participants told me that “very few youth who live in the ghetto succeed.” Participants repeatedly mentioned the related challenges of turning to drugs, alcohol, crime, gangs, and prostitution as ways to face and sometimes escape their poverty. In some ways, education and employment interventions could indeed help address these particular challenges.

Yet, many of the challenges that youth mentioned are left unaddressed by typical education and job programs. For example, corruption in both education and employment was cited frequently in interviews. Some youth complained that the children of ministers and their inner circles gained access to exams prior to the test and that public scholarships went to the rich. But equalizing access to education would be insufficient, according to participants: “You can have degree, but you are working in *mjengo* [a construction site] because you do not have connections to go to or you don’t have that money to bribe those people.” Indeed, the young people emphasized the importance of having a “godfather” (someone who could

help get you into the right circles) or being from the “right tribe.” One participant explained the best piece of job advice he ever got, although he hasn’t been able to put it to use due to lack of funds, was the importance of bribing hiring managers to recruit him. These concerns are well-founded: Transparency International (2015) scores Kenya twenty-five on its one hundred point “corruption perceptions index” with 0 being highly corrupt. Linked to the importance of gaining respect mentioned above, one focus group offered the idea that when you hold a respected job, people do not discriminate against you.

The participants also emphasized their societally subservient role to Kenyan elders and to government officials. They talked about how politicians and other powerful people try to manipulate them by offering them a little bit of money to take on dirty work. This practice was most evident during the 2007–2008 post-election violence, but the study participants believed that this was a more generalized tactic, and that powerful people universally seek to keep youth subservient. They frequently invoked the Kiswahili phrase “kazi kwa vijana, pesa kwa wazee” meaning that the youth do all the work but the pay goes to elders influential with government. The phrase emerged from a well-known project, *Kazi kwa Vijana*, Kiswahili for ‘Jobs for the Youth,’ initiated by the Government of Kenya in 2009, which was the World Bank’s first public works program aimed at African youth. This program was intended to “turn the negative energies of youth into positive and constructive energies” (Office of the President 2011) by employing them in short-term public works, doing things like, at least in Nairobi, fixing roads and sewers. The youth with whom we spoke saw the program as insufficient—short-term, unskilled, low prestige jobs—which further confirmed their prior beliefs, as the effort was tainted by government corruption (see also Kenya National Assembly 2010a:35). Some of the participants recognized efforts in government policies. A few knew vaguely, for instance, about the provisions for youth in the newly ratified Kenyan constitution⁹, although they did not know the specifics and usually complained that the provisions are not acted upon. At the time of this writing, a new scandal was plaguing the government’s Youth Development Fund (KTN News 2016).

The many challenges mentioned by these young people highlight the weight of governance and structural factors that are overlooked in the material focus and individuality of the dominant discourse. Youth programming focuses on the supply side—increasing youth access to education and/or youth employability, typically putting the locus of responsibility for change squarely on the shoulders of the youth themselves. These foci overlook the structural conditions that encourage corruption and other social injustices that are likely to hinder the success of youth peacebuilding programs. Many such constraints cannot be overcome with the current model of education or jobs that aim to fit youth into the status quo. Youth may be motivated to engage in violence for a desire to remedy perceived injustices and to change the status quo (see i.e. Gilligan 2016).

Charting a Research and Programming Agenda

The dominant logic in the current scholarship is twofold: material motivations underlie youth participation in political violence, and education and jobs raise human capital in a way that makes it costlier to participate in conflict. This dominant logic has oriented peacebuilding policy and programming on the ground, yet evidence of effectiveness has not kept pace with enthusiasm. Understanding *what* is overlooked by the dominant discourse and *why* it is overlooked is crucial to building a research agenda in regard to youth and peace in Africa as well as to actually designing youth-focused peacebuilding programs that address youth's needs.

The dominant discourse is simple in its materialist approach and in its consequent assumptions about the interests and concerns of youth. Its simplicity is part of its success, as it has been readily accepted by the organizations concerned about youth violence. As Autesserre (2012:207) writes, "an uncomplicated story line, which builds on elements already familiar to the general public, and a straightforward solution—is particularly important in enabling a narrative to achieve and maintain prominence." As a way to understand and address the "problem" of youth, a materialist lens that recommends providing more education and jobs (or training ostensibly leading to jobs) is relatively straightforward. Efforts can be measured quantitatively. This approach does not raise fundamental questions about the complexities of what youth want, why youth involve themselves in conflict, the purposes of education, or the place of youth in society. It does not fundamentally challenge power or existing social or political frameworks. It is, admittedly, much more difficult to think about concrete, implementable, interventions that would help a broad spectrum of youth feel more connected to their identities and communities and/or that meaningfully challenge governance and social structures.

Including and prioritizing youth voices in research and policy-making is important in and of itself and may lead to a more holistic understanding of the needs and motivations of this demographic. In particular, two key challenges to the dominant discourse emerged from this in-depth research with youth: the importance of self-identity and community belongingness, and the challenging of governance and social structures. Both suggest further avenues of exploration for research and a revised approach to programming for youth peacebuilding interventions.

First, with a dearth of evidence regarding the effectiveness of education and job programs in fostering peace, this research suggests that programming is less likely to be successful if it does not engage with the aspirations and identities of youth. A number of recent NGO reports likewise attest to the importance of doing more to harness youth hopes and optimism (Mercy Corps 2015) but offer few suggestions in regard to the specific ways to do so. According to our interviews with young people, it is clear that current educational programs are not entirely wrong: youth do indeed desire education and ultimately jobs. Yet these programs also leave too much overlooked.

Borrowing Amartya Sen's terminology, "human capital" interventions—that concentrate on knowledge, skills, and effort in increasing productivity—are much easier than "human capabilities" interventions—that focus on the ability of human beings to "lead the kind of lives they value—and have reason to value" (Sen 1999:18). In response to questions about programming that youth themselves would like to see implemented, many of them advocated for mentorship. One possible avenue for research might examine interventions that focus on soft skills, such as grit, self-regulation, mindsets, and implementation intentions (Duckworth et al. 2007; Dweck 2006; Gollwitzer 1999; Steinberg 2014; Tough 2013). Such interventions may help operationalize aspirations and offer a culturally embedded alternative to the dominant materialist focus. One promising study shows that, among criminally-engaged Liberian men, training in non-cognitive skills including self-control and self-image significantly reduced their involvement in crime and violence (Blattman, Jamison & Sheridan 2015).

Second, this research suggests that doing more to address the structural challenges that youth face could also improve programming and related research. These dimensions, too, are omitted from the dominant discourse. Education and job programs generally overlook the structural conditions that enable corruption and other social injustices. However difficult, addressing deep-rooted questions of governance cannot be side-stepped.

Third, building on this study of youth aspirations, further research is required to understand the links between youth aspirations and their attitudes and behaviors, especially as they relate to peace and conflict. In the context of the United States, researchers are beginning to explore the role of aspirations, optimism, and hope as potential mediators of a host of positive behaviors. Higher aspirations have been associated with a reduction in a variety of violent actions (Aspy et al. 2004; Bernard et al. 2014; Bernat et al. 2012; Howard et al. 2011; Stoddard et al. 2011). Then, equally importantly, more research is needed to understand how, under what conditions, and to what effect, youth lose hope (Mains 2012; Sommers 2012). Unmet aspirations are increasingly cited in the youth and conflict literature as a driver for participation in violent conflict (McLean Hilker & Fraser 2009; Ray 2006), although with little empirical study.

The world population is currently comprised of the largest number of youth in history, and projections suggest that the "youth bulge" will never again be so large (Sommers 2015:18). By 2020, there are projected to be 57 million more fifteen-to-twenty-four year olds in Arab states, south and west Asia, and sub-Saharan Africa. This youth cohort will require significant expansion of education and employment opportunities, simply to remain at current levels. The situation is particularly acute in Africa since, within two to three decades, three of every four youth-bulge countries will be in sub-Saharan Africa (Borton 2009; Njonjo et al. 2011; UNESCO 2012). In the next decade, Kenya is projected to move from a child-rich population to one dominated by youth. While the questions raised herein are globally pressing, they are of heightened relevance for Kenya and Africa.

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Notes

1. Harakat al-Shabaab al-Mujahideen (al-Shabaab) is the militant group based in Somalia literally meaning Mujahideen Youth Movement or Movement of Striving Youth.
2. Sheng is a language used by youth, especially in urban slums in Nairobi, combining Swahili and English.
3. Although it bears warning that unequal distribution of such educational opportunities can underlie conflict.
4. Human capital concentrates on the agency of human beings, through skills and knowledge as well as effort, in augmenting production possibilities (see an overview in Sen, 2003:35).
5. Exceptions include Frye (2012), Kritzinger (2002), Sommers (2012) and Uvin (2009).
6. A one-tailed t-test comparing aspirations for the level of education of girls ($N = 118$) to boys ($N = 114$) was significant at a 0.05 significance level.
7. Paradoxically, for instance, studies show that African-American students, who experience the gravest challenges to social mobility and have lower academic achievement, often most strongly view education as the key to upward social and economic mobility (Mickelson, 1990).
8. Some respondents, in contrast, highlighted the instrumental value in "giving back." Among some of the wealthiest respondents, we heard things like "if you don't help others, they also bring you down. They will steal and break into your house. If you have a plantation . . . and you don't live there and you don't give, the people will steal from you and they'll bring you down." As others explained, you need to give back so that people don't try to steal from you or make life hard for you. Still others suggested that it was "wise" to help those in need in order to get God's blessings.
9. Article 55 of the 2010 Kenyan Constitution states that "The State takes measures, including affirmative action programs, to ensure that the youth (a) access relevant education and training; (b) have opportunities to associate, be represented and participate in political, social, economic and other spheres of life; (c) access employment; and (d) are protected from harmful cultural practices and exploitation."