Introduction: Young people working for better lives in West and Central Africa

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After more than a decade of emphasizing African children's and youth's agencies, possibilities and creativities in more or less challenging social, political and economic environments (see Bordonaro & Carvalho, 2010; Christiansen, Utas, & Vigh, 2006; Honwana & de Boeck, 2005; Martin, Ungruhe, & Häberlein, 2016; Spittler & Bourdillon, 2012), other recent studies increasingly highlight the young people's powerlessness, bleak presents and uncertain futures. Doing so, the image of an enduring social, political and economic exclusion is manifested in popular conceptualizations of "being stuck" (Sommers, 2012), "persistent marginalization" (Resnick & Thurlow, 2015) and probably most prominently in Alcinda Honwana's (2012) conceptualization of "waithood" (see Dhillon & Yousef, 2009), all implicitly acknowledging the more than twenty year old observation of Africa's "lost generation" (Cruise O'Brien, 1996). Seemingly affected by deficiencies of various kinds and hence often forced into all sorts of problematic or dangerous engagements in order to – socially or literally – survive, today's young generation in African settings is widely portrayed to live lives "out of place" (see Invernizzi, Liebel, Milne, & Budde, 2017) and outside social norms. It is this shift back to conceptualizations of children and youth as social problem that this special dossier aims to scrutinize and to challenge.

In particular, its contributions emphasize the modes, practices and meanings of work and mobility and critically engage with often problematized (yet one-dimensionally approached) "out-of-place" life worlds of children and youth in West and Central African settings. Work may imply various motives, shapes and results, e.g. while it may be a necessary means to contribute to the family's economy, to meet basic daily needs and secure a better future, it often comes with challenges, exploitation and hardships. While acknowledging this multitude, we aim at going beyond a debate of the pros and cons of young people's participation in work. Recognising important studies that have criticized the widespread Western ideology of a work-free childhood (Abebe & Bessel, 2011; Spittler & Bourdillon, 2012), we rather ask how children and youth seek social, cultural, political and economic participation and mobility through work (see Ungruhe, 2018).

The Western ideology of a work-free period of childhood and youth often goes along with the claim for a protected life phase and that it is best for minors to grow up under parental care and guidance until they have come of age (Hashim & Thorsen, 2011). In many African societies, however, it is not unusual that youngsters spend (parts of) their childhood and youth in other social environments, away from one's nuclear family. This mobility often forms the basis of their training, education and competence acquisition to become responsible

adults (Alber, 2011; Mahati, 2012; Ungruhe, 2014). This widespread practice does not only point to divergent cultural concepts of childhood and youth between African and Western societies (including international organizations), but also to divergent norms of how coming of age and social responsibility are achieved. This observation should, however, not reproduce conceptualizations of young people's life phases in African settings as fundamentally different from their European or American counterparts. Rather, it acknowledges that concepts and norms of how childhood and youth are understood are closely interrelated with the specific social situations and historical contexts in which they have emerged in different times and locations. Hence, focussing on the various particular insights provides us with a key to understand the situation of African children and youth and the role of training, work and mobility connected to these life phases.

Doing so, this special dossier intends to examine both the predicaments and possibilities of children and youth in sub-Saharan African countries from their own perspectives in times of seemingly widespread uncertainty and alleged marginalization and exclusion. By shedding light on the backgrounds, motives and implications of leaving home to train, work and make a living the various contributions highlight the particularities and complexities of young people's (working) life worlds in the realm of spatial and social mobilities. To what extent are poverty, conflict and lack of opportunities prevailing factors that would indeed acknowledge the observation of a marginalized generation? What other factors are at play and how important are these? How do young people experience and articulate their situations framed by work and mobility? How do they perceive their perspectives for a meaningful future, be it at home, in a village, a town or city, or abroad? What are their hopes, desires and activities, and how do these relate to the expectations of their respective families and societies?

By ethnographic fieldwork and actor-centred approaches the contributions examine the practices of children and youth and the ways in which they enlarge their knowledge and life experience and shape their futures. Far from romanticizing young people's life worlds, the authors also consider the detrimental aspects such as anxiety, stress, exploitation and expulsion that some of them experience and which hinder their development and the realization of their hopes for a better future. Doing so, they acknowledge that being young in Africa means more than either deficit, innocence or heroic struggle, popular conceptualizations that tend to reproduce Africa's otherness (Abebe & Ofosu-Kusi, 2016). Rather, they show how children and youth act and are being acted upon in social environments that are both partly shaped by actors like those young people, yet, also embedded in broader, complex and intertwining social, cultural, economic and political settings of power.

In the first article following this introduction, Isaiah Afu illustrates some of the alarming experiences of mobile young people in contexts of violence. The region of northern Cameroon experienced severe conditions of violence when Boko Haram began to disseminate terror in many rural areas close to the Nigerian border. Afu collected the stories of young people who managed to escape from villages that have been attacked and destroyed by Boko Haram and arrived in regional towns where they hope to find an opportunity to learn a trade and pursue a better future. He shows how these hopes may or may not materialize among them and how working for better lives are directed to questions of the possibilities of settling in a new place versus the dream of returning home.

The following two contributions emphasize the life worlds and mobilities of young people living and working under challenging conditions characterized by "street life" and violent conflict. Rather than depicting youth merely as victims, their research sheds light on the linkages of young people's agentive moving and social becoming. Based on fieldwork in southern Ghana, Christian Ungruhe engages with the social, spatial and temporal mobilities of "street children" who frequently move between the various domains of socialisation, such as their peer group and work sites in the street and their family at home. By engaging with their biographical life stories, he sheds light on both the possibilities and challenges of "street life". Doing so, he shows that their ability to act is not limited in scope as it has often been suggested by studies which ascribe lower degrees of agency to "street children". Rather, he argues, "street children's" life worlds are shaped and actively produced by their various mobilities. By shifting the focus from (limited) agency to mobilities, Ungruhe moves beyond the reproduction of the dominating image of "street childhood" as a bounded and primarily problematic life phase.

Silke Oldenburg has worked with young moto taxi drivers (*motards*) who are a pervasive phenomenon on Goma's streets in eastern Congo (Democratic Republic of the Congo). Their emergence and proliferation are closely linked to both the context of the protracted violent conflict in eastern Congo and the liberalization of the economy and niches of private trade. Oldenburg highlights the nexus of physical and social mobilities, street-wisdom and solidarity in their trajectories that go beyond concepts of "being stuck". Hereby, she shows that being young in the city does not necessarily lead into "abject futures" or condemn youth to endless "waithood" resulting in "social death" as many other studies have observed. While many of the young men in her study have fled from rural backgrounds to the town and managed to get into this indispensable means of public transport on Goma's streets they actively work towards a better future for themselves. While

street-wisdom when they roam the terrain and the solidarity among the *motards* are important features to achieve their aim, Oldenburg shows how their everyday physical mobility contributes to achieve a social one: reaching the sphere of social adulthood.

Thereafter, the chapters by Youssouf Karambé and Fodié Tandjigora depict the situation of young people who come from middle class families in Mali and have completed their studies in the higher education sector. They illustrate the difficulties of finding secure employment opportunities in the public sector which have become scarce due to the measures of Structural Adjustment Programs and cuts in the public administration that Mali's government implemented in the 1980s. Karambé researched the different ways in which young diploma holders have begun to reorient themselves into exploring the condition of *débrouillardise* and self-employed small-scale ventures. He compares such entrepreneurial activity of young people in three regions of Mali: Bamako, San, and Bandiagara. To the extent that these young people succeed, they begin to serve as role models for other young people. Karambé observes a gradual change in the expectations of young Malians who no longer count on the state and orient themselves more and more to self-employment as a pathway to achieve a higher social and economic status.

Tandjigora looks at students who have received fellowships from the Malian state that enabled them to study highly valued academic subjects in France such as engineering and other technologies. The Malian state expects them to return after completion of their studies and serve the nation. Many of them, however, fear unemployment on their return and, encouraged by their families that hope to economically partake in their lives abroad, remain in France. While they receive attractive job offers from French companies this does not contribute to change the perception and increase the social status of Malian immigrants in the country more generally. Further, Tandjigora reveals a paradoxical situation in which the Malian state invests in expensive fellowships that finally serve the economy of a European state. While staying abroad often offers indeed better lives for these young people and contributes to their individual social mobility, it points to problematic questions and consequences on a broader social and economic level.

The two concluding contributions consider the social background and the expectations of the societies from which the young people have moved away or wish to migrate. Moris Samen studies the notions behind the massive out-migration of youth from the Cameroon Grassfields and elaborates on the paradox of a dynamic expressed in the local dictum that staying at home is equivalent to

being alive and living a good life whereas leaving that homeland means crisis and alienation from this good life. Samen examines the perspectives of people in the Grassfields to explain why nevertheless so many young people decide to leave their homeland often at all costs and want to live and work somewhere else under often complicated conditions. By showing the socio-cultural tensions that young people are confronted with when deciding to migrate, Samen adds an important perspective to youth migration beyond a sole image of an economic and social necessity.

Susanne Schultz examines the unfulfilled expectations of young Malian men, who sought to make a better life through adventure on their way to Europe, but were forcefully returned home. Based on research in rural southern Mali, she studies how they are received by their families, peers and communities and sheds light on the difficulties that this situation provides for them. While, at first sight, their feelings and fears related to their return seemingly throw them back into a potential "waithood" which might prevent them from gaining the status and responsibilities of social adulthood, the young deportees embark on various alternatives in order to hold on to the hope of a better future. However, and despite their previous experiences, many seem to be keen to embark on a migration again. Yet, while most of them find it difficult to materialize their aspirations, some are indeed able to achieve better lives in the local rural setting in Mali.

By engaging with different young people's life worlds in various African settings this special dossier aims at shedding light on the particularities, commonalities and complexities of young working lives and mobilities. Foregrounding their own perspectives, the contributions aim to draw a more nuanced picture of their hopes, practices and difficulties to fulfill them beyond popular conceptualizations of children's and youth's sheer marginalization and exclusion in Africa. Centralizing young people of various ages and from various social, cultural and economic backgrounds, the contributions do not follow a biological or legal definition of this group. Rather, they define children and youth as people with varying degrees of social, cultural, political and economic dependency, rights, responsibilities and knowledge and "whose access to resources, whose experiences, representations, practices and objectives relate to their specific positioning and self-ascertainment within (different and sometimes overlapping) social orders" (Martin, Ungruhe & Häberlein, 2016, p. 3). Hereby, we aim to take into account both the specific and general features of young people's working life worlds in Africa that may allow for comparison and identifying communalities and hopefully inspire further debates around the topic of children and youth working for better lives.

The set of papers consists of four articles in English and three in French language. It is based on the authors' participation in two workshops organized by Ute Röschenthaler and Mamadou Diawara: The first one, "Youth, migration and labour in sub-Saharan Africa", was held in Bamako in March 2016 in the framework of the Programme Point Sud, funded by the German Research Council. It was followed by a panel on "Youth, work and making a living in sub-Saharan cities" at the European Conference of African Studies (ECAS) of the Africa-Europe Group for Interdisciplinary Studies (AEGIS) in Basel in June 2017. We are grateful to the respective institutions to support and facilitate the workshops and making this special issue possible. We would also like to thank Clara Paquet and Janine Murphy for their copyediting of the French and English manuscripts as well as the anonymous reviewers for their valued contributions.

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