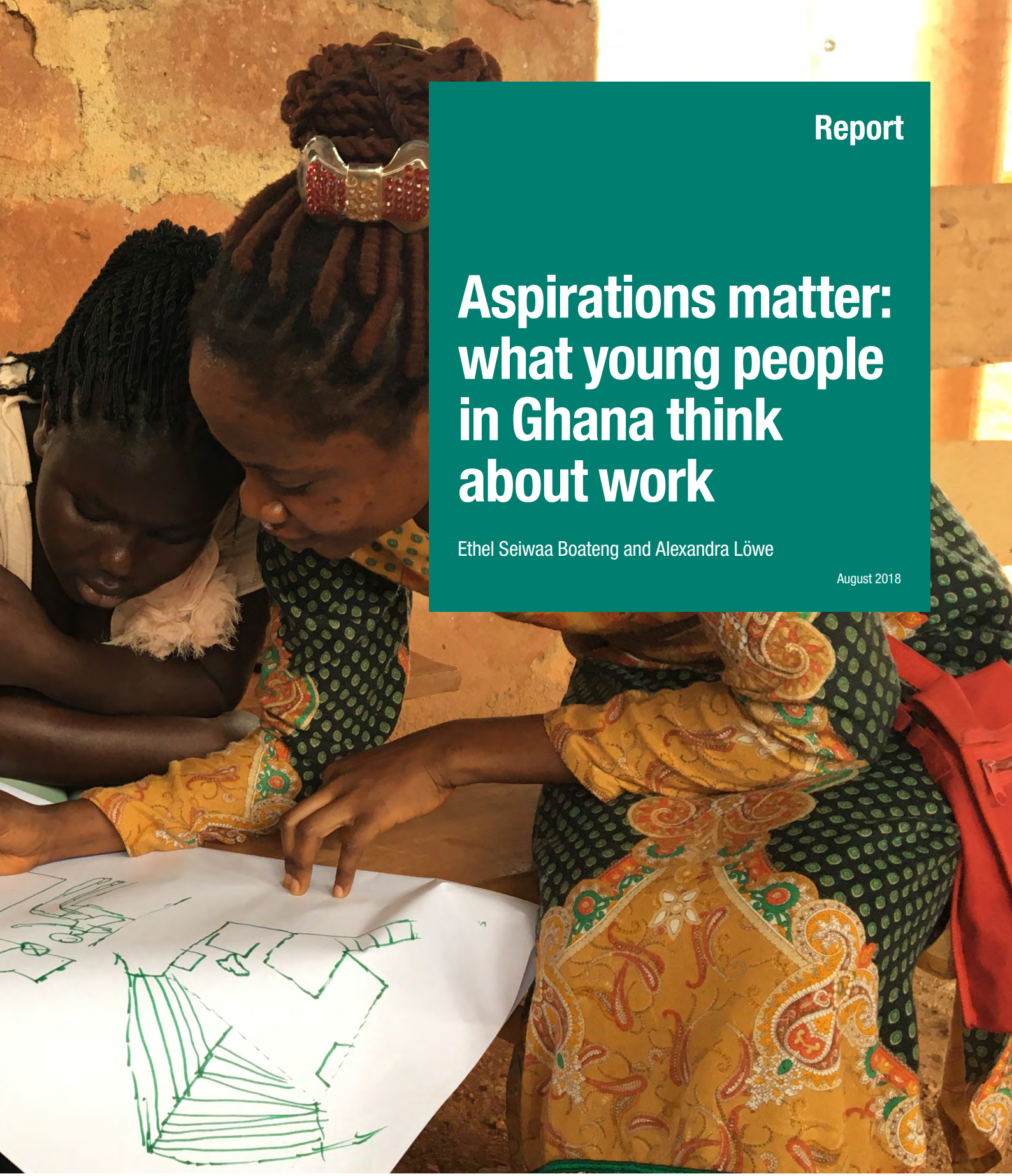
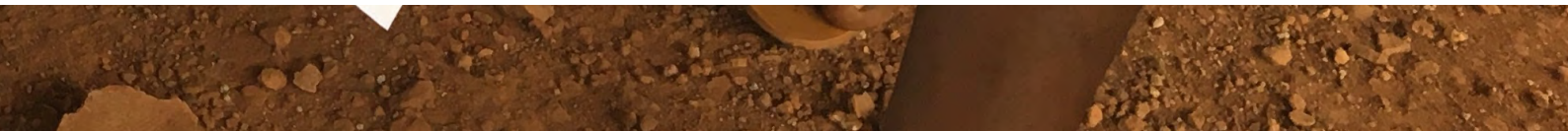


Report

Aspirations matter: what young people in Ghana think about work

Ethel Seiwaa Boateng and Alexandra Löwe

August 2018



About Youth Forward

The Youth Forward initiative is a partnership led by the Mastercard Foundation, the Overseas Development Institute, Global Communities, Solidaridad, NCBA CLUSA and GOAL. Its focus is to link young people to quality employment or to starting their own businesses in the agriculture and construction sectors in Ghana and Uganda. The Youth Forward Learning Partnership works across the initiative to develop an evidence-informed understanding of the needs of young people in Ghana and Uganda, and how the programme can best meet those needs. The Learning Partnership is led by the Overseas Development Institute in the UK, in partnership with Development Research and Training in Uganda and Participatory Development Associates in Ghana.

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Cover photo: Young women draw a picture of how they would like to live in the future. Credit: Alexandra Löwe/ODI, 2017.

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Executive summary

Why aspirations matter

Poverty is commonly understood to deprive children and youth of significant opportunities, experiences and even freedom (Sen, 1999). But do the pernicious effects of poverty extend beyond this by limiting the ability of those who grow up materially deprived to aspire to a better life and by creating a psychological poverty trap?

Where young people grow up without access to a broad range of role models and opportunities to which to aspire, they may develop aspirations that are either too high or too low to be actionable (Appadurai, 2004; Ray, 2002; Serneels and Dercon, 2014). Therefore, alongside structural barriers, poverty also creates internal psychological barriers that prevent individuals from breaking out of poverty.

Yet, despite the importance of aspirations, employment programmes – which seek to provide young people with skills and attributes to access the economic opportunities needed to achieve higher living standards than are the norm in their communities – are all too often designed only on the basis of economic growth forecasts and analyses of skills gaps. The fact that young people do not see their aspirations reflected by or fulfilled in the training programmes on offer may be why some of these programmes receive a lukewarm reception among the young people they target.

Both the process of developing aspirations and working towards them are behaviours that children and young people learn from their environment, and this presents both opportunities and challenges for youth employment programmes. We therefore set out to explore with young people their aspirations in order to understand how these are formed, what they are and how youth employment programmes – including the Youth Forward initiative – can nurture those aspirations.

This report presents the findings from primary research, in the form of focus group discussions and key informant interviews, conducted with young people in rural and urban Ghana. Based on these findings, we make several recommendations for the Youth Forward initiative specifically and youth employment programmes in Ghana more broadly.

Key findings

What is 'meaningful work' to young Ghanaians?

We found that **young people's primary concerns about work reflect the paucity of work opportunities available to them and the difficulty of achieving even the basic markers of adulthood**. Many rely on a variety of odd jobs and ad hoc opportunities to earn a living and are frustrated by the fact that much of their productive time is spent looking for work, rather than working. The priority for most young people is therefore to make ends meet and to be seen to be contributing to their immediate and extended families' well-being and upkeep. In other words, the earning potential of various tasks and jobs was the key consideration for most young people.

Beyond this, **young people are acutely aware of the trade-offs between their present obligations and their goals for the future**: in the short term, they face the financial pressures of surviving from one day to the next, which often impair their ability to work towards their future goals. In the medium term, many wanted to be able to raise a family, build up emergency savings and to set aside money for their old age. Finally, in the long term they aspired to work that was less physical, so that it could be done past middle age, and that would allow them to accumulate assets to pass on to their children. However, in the absence of the necessary skills, training programmes and even access to finance, most did not know how to move from simply surviving day-to-day to planning for the future.

Beyond these direct experiences of work, **social messages around what constitutes meaningful work also influenced young people's assessments of their labour and their achievements**. These messages may come from members of their community, the media, their religious organisations and schools. Interestingly, in cocoa-growing areas of rural Ghana young people had absorbed the message that the crop was of great value to the country, there was pride in cocoa's role in Ghana's economy and how established cocoa farmers were respected members of the community. In urban areas, on the other hand, such respect was reserved almost exclusively for those who held 'office' or 'white-collar' jobs.

Are young Ghanaians able to work towards their aspirations?

As one might expect, **young people in rural areas had a limited range of role models and experiences from which to develop their aspirations.** These young people had, for the most part, set their sights on a relatively narrow set of achievable goals that emulate the livelihoods and lifestyles of their parents and other close social networks. Within this range, some hoped to find the means to render these activities slightly more lucrative but were unsure of how to do so, particularly in the absence of resources to invest in education. They did, however, have a very clear vision of how they could achieve a reasonable living standard by following in their parents' footsteps.

Young people in urban areas had been exposed to a much wider range of professions and options, including the omnipresent social message that 'office work' and formal employment were the options that they should strive for. **Their trajectories to adulthood and a viable livelihood were less clear than those of their rural counterparts.** As a result, more of them found themselves caught between the realities of struggling to find work and their aspirations – such as working as a doctor, teacher or lawyer – which were beyond their investment means. This made it harder for the them to build a livelihood strategy that would take them beyond surviving from one day to the next.

How gender and gender norms shape aspirations

Strong gender norms determine the distribution of social roles and work between men and women in both rural and urban Ghana. In rural Ghana, as mentioned above, cocoa farming is a respected profession, but one that is generally considered too physically demanding for women. In urban Ghana, both men and women struggled with the perception that construction work and associated trades are for the uneducated and those who do not have the means to continue in education. However, women were strongly discouraged, by their peers, parents and even strangers, from manual labour as this is thought to make women too masculine, unable to bear children and unlikely to find a husband. While there were notable, brave exceptions, young women in general preferred the type of work that was socially acceptable and would not jeopardise their social standing, such as trading, catering or dressmaking. In both rural and urban areas, young women voiced a strong preference for professions that lend themselves to self-employment, given that many had experienced inappropriate behaviour by male superiors.

Recommendations

- Most young people prioritise earning potential and flexibility over the *type of work* when looking for training and employment opportunities. Recruitment drives should focus on the earning potential and flexibility (or lack thereof) of different trades.
- Young people's desire to earn money quickly and continuously should not be dismissed as impatience or laziness; many have considerable financial responsibilities and are unable to rely on their family for support. To ease these pressures, policies and programmes should facilitate young people's access to financing for education and training, as well as other investments, and support them to continue paid work while training.
- Training programmes should include guidance on personal financial planning, including for old age, and incorporate goals and transferable skills that are not limited to one single employment sector.
- Young people need to be encouraged to think about their future in a way that is both realistic and stretches them. This includes teaching how to break larger goals down, the ability to identify training opportunities, setting goals and planning for the longer term.
- Bearing in mind the importance of the aspirations window, people who are just a little more successful than their peers, rather than very successful individuals, might prove the most effective mentors for young people.
- In physically demanding sectors such as construction, employment programmes should illustrate routes into other, more sedentary jobs within those sectors to allay young people's fears about the viability of this work longer term and persuade them to take up a career in this area.
- The issue of gender is important, with many young people being held back by gender norms around what constitutes appropriate work. Employers and employment programmes should also help to ensure that women are able to provide for themselves when they are pregnant, and there is also need for a national discussion around the safety of women in the workplace.

1 Introduction: aspirations matter

'Poverty stifles dreams, or at least the process *of attaining dreams'* (Ray, 2002)

1.1 The importance of understanding young people's aspirations

Training and employment programmes aimed at young people are frequently designed on the basis of the economic analysis of experts who perceive a lack of skilled labour in a given sector. The logic is that the solution to the large numbers of unemployed young people in much of Africa is to ensure that their skills match the demands of the labour market. However, this approach does not consider the work, career or other life goals of programme participants – in other words their aspirations. This may well be one of the reasons that the recruitment and retention of participants is frequently a challenge for employment programmes targeted at young people (see Marć, 2017; McKenzie, 2017). At the very least, programming needs to better understand young people's aspirations to ensure that their non-professional priorities and responsibilities are not neglected.

Beyond employment programming for young people, there are other very good reasons to study aspirations. Aspirations are primarily determined by the context within which young people grow up – including peers, their immediate social circles and families – and this environment determines what individuals deem to be both acceptable and achievable. There has been much discussion of a 'failure of aspirations', where poor people, and in particular poor young people, do not develop actionable aspirations that allow them to achieve better living standards than their parents' generation (Appadurai, 2004; Ray, 2002; Serneels and Dercon, 2014).

These studies posit that poverty undermines the capacity to aspire and that this stands in the way of individuals investing in their own future well-being. As such, more than structural barriers, the internal psychological barriers created by poverty might, at an individual level, prevent improvements in living standards and, at a societal level, impede economic growth. These barriers may also go some way to explaining why young people are so often perceived as lazy or reluctant to invest in their futures, if young people are, in fact, held back by their inability to aspire to better living standards.

This report studies young people's aspirations in rural and urban Ghana, so as to better understand whether their interaction with youth programmes in general, and the Youth Forward initiative in particular (Box 1), are shaped by their aspirations. Given that Youth Forward works with young people in the construction and cocoa sectors in Ghana, this report focuses on these two sectors and those young people who work in these or similar professions. Based on this, it seeks to understand whether poverty has impacted young people's aspirations, what other factors shape goals and how these can best be supported.

1.2 How young people develop aspirations

It is widely accepted that poverty deprives children and young people of significant opportunities, experiences and even freedom (Sen, 1999). More recently, some authors have argued that poverty's most pernicious effect extends beyond this – that it limits the ability to aspire of those who grow up materially deprived. In other words, poverty reproduces itself by limiting aspirations, thereby creating a psychological poverty trap. This additional burden of poverty is particularly relevant to young people as they move into adulthood and attempt to shape their futures.

The ability to aspire to a life of relative wealth is, therefore, itself a marker of privilege – something that is influenced and formed by one's surroundings, and which can render poverty difficult to escape, even in the absence of structural barriers. This social capital is acquired so early in life that it becomes seen as the natural way of being and is so deeply ingrained that it does not appear so much a chosen behaviour but as the natural order of things. These internalised ideas include views on the type of work and professional aspirations that are appropriate

Box 1 Youth Forward, MASO, YIEDIE and Y-SEG

The Youth Forward initiative is a partnership led by the Mastercard Foundation, the Overseas Development Institute, Global Communities, Solidaridad, NCBA CLUSA and GOAL. Its focus is to help young people gain good jobs in the agriculture and construction sectors in Ghana and Uganda or to help them to start their own businesses. This five-year, $73.2-million initiative will reach more than 200,000 economically disadvantaged young people aged 15–24. The Youth Forward initiative takes a holistic approach that combines market-relevant skills training, mentoring, internships and access to financial services to help young people transition out of poverty and into sustainable livelihoods.

In Ghana, Youth Forward comprises two consortia: Youth-Inclusive Entrepreneurial Development Initiative for Employment (YIEDIE), which works to create opportunities for young people in construction, and MASO, which focuses on the cocoa sector. In addition, the initiative also facilitates a Youth Forward Committee, the Youth Sector Engagement Group (Y-SEG), which brings the challenges faced by YIEDIE and MASO participants to a wider audience.

MASO in Ghana

The MASO consortium (led by Solidaridad and also including Aflatoun, Asheshi University, Fidelity Bank, Opportunity International, and COCOBOD (Ghana's Cocoa Board)) seeks to empower young people as agents of change in the cocoa sector by making cocoa farming and businesses in cocoa-growing communities an attractive and economically viable career choice for them. MASO provides services to 10,800 young people aged 18–25 who are interested in working in the cocoa sector in five of Ghana's cocoa-producing regions (Ashanti Region, Western Region, Brong Ahafo Region, Central Region and Volta Region). The implementation of the programme is focused on three components:

- Agro-academies. These have been established in each of the cocoa-growing regions to equip the young people with the requisite skills and knowledge and to motivate them to undertake cocoa farming as a business.
- The Business Academy. This provides young people interested in becoming entrepreneurs with skills to start businesses in cocoa-growing communities.
- MASO Alumni Network. This facilitates a youth exchange of best practices and learning, and creates a common voice for young people's issues. The programme also aims to ensure that a supportive enabling environment is created, to facilitate young people's access to land, finance and markets, and to help break down the barriers to success.

YIEDIE

The YIEDIE consortium aims to create employment and entrepreneurship opportunities in the construction sector for disadvantaged young people. The consortium (led by Global Communities and also including Artisans Association of Ghana (AAG), Africa Aurora Business Network (AABN), Opportunities Industrialization Centre Ghana (OICG) and Republic Boafo) aims to provide technical, construction-relevant training or entrepreneurship training to 23,700 young people, as well as life skills. The programme will consider the entirety of the construction value chain, so young people are qualified to participate in all its aspects.

The project has two primary aims: the first is to increase the employment of economically disadvantaged youth in the construction sector, with an increased income, new or better employment and increased savings for 90% of these young people. The second is to create an improved enabling environment for all construction sector stakeholders. Participants can choose from one of two pathways. The first is for those who would like to acquire technical skills, who will receive six months of training through vocational training centres. The second is for those who already have technical skills and wish to complement these with three months of entrepreneurship training. High-performing trainees will be referred for business development services, but all participants will have the opportunity to take a technical certification exam. The consortium will support the development of the Improved Apprenticeship model, which is the apprenticeship curriculum approved by the National Vocational Training Institute (NVTI) for its proficiency Level 1 certification. The consortium works with financial institutions to provide financial education and refine a range of financial services and products for youth.

Y-SEG

Y-SEG is a Ghanaian policy engagement group made up of individuals serving as champions for young people. It works to address barriers in the policy environment through dialogue with influential stakeholders from government, the private sector, academia, non-governmental organisations and youth representatives. By facilitating such interactions, it serves as a platform through which the Youth Forward initiative and other audiences can better understand and respond to young people's needs, with the aim of enhancing programme effectiveness and sustainability.

for oneself and other people in the community (Ray, 2002; Wohn et al., 2013).[1]

Aspirations are heavily influenced by the context in which young people grow up, including how appropriate certain aspirations are considered to be by those they look up to, including their peers, social circle and families (Genicot and Ray, 2017). Parental figures are, unsurprisingly, particularly important both for shaping aspirations and for influencing whether young people follow their own or imposed goals. Children and young people's structural position in society is one in which they have less power and the role of adults is to regulate children's bodies and minds (Bhopal et al., 2000). While they may be able to oppose parental power, and increasingly so with age, this will involve negotiation and, at the very least, dialogue (Panelli et al., 2007), meaning parental influence on aspiration *formation* is likely to be particularly pronounced. As young people begin to achieve independence, peers become increasingly important sources of aspirations, a sense of what is socially valued and a yardstick against which to compare themselves. Contrary to common conceptions, where societies do not encourage interactions between people of different professions or social strata, peers do not necessarily expand young people's aspirational horizons (Ray, 2002).

That said, children and young people are also influenced by broader messages that are conveyed by leaders and role models beyond immediate social circles – particularly where access to media is widespread. Especially for poor young people, these messages can be starkly different to their lived experiences and may reflect meritocratic discourses that suggest virtually anything can be achieved with the correct attitude or enough hard work. Some commentators have gone so far as to argue that this kind of messaging is part of the symbolic violence inflicted on society's least powerful, by shifting responsibility for their own achievements – or lack thereof – onto individuals, thus obscuring the structural barriers they face (Zipin et al., 2015). The role of social media in the formation of aspirations remains unclear. However, it is clear from the literature that social proximity is important for shaping aspirations, meaning that young people are more likely to be influenced by those who they consider peers on social networks (ibid.). Friends' social media posts may, for example, encourage young people to migrate but they are less likely to be influenced by the messages and behaviours of people they do not know personally on social media.

This combination of messages complicates the process of aspiration formation: young people may aspire to a living standard not dissimilar to their parents' but be exposed to the message that these aspirations are inadequate at school, religious institutions, or through media, all of which advocate further education, higher living standards and white-collar jobs as worthwhile aspirations. This may also result in a situation where young people hold aspirations that are far beyond their investment means (see graphic overleaf).

1.3 The implications of aspirations

It may seem counterintuitive, but aspirations can be so low as to limit young people's opportunities, as well as being too ambitious. As Debraj Ray argues, aspirations are at their most effective when they fall within a certain range, namely somewhere between achieving one's parents living standards and 'becoming famous' or fantastically wealthy. These aspirations are effective, because they can be used to motivate action and engender meaningful investments, in terms of time, money or other resources (Ray, 2002).

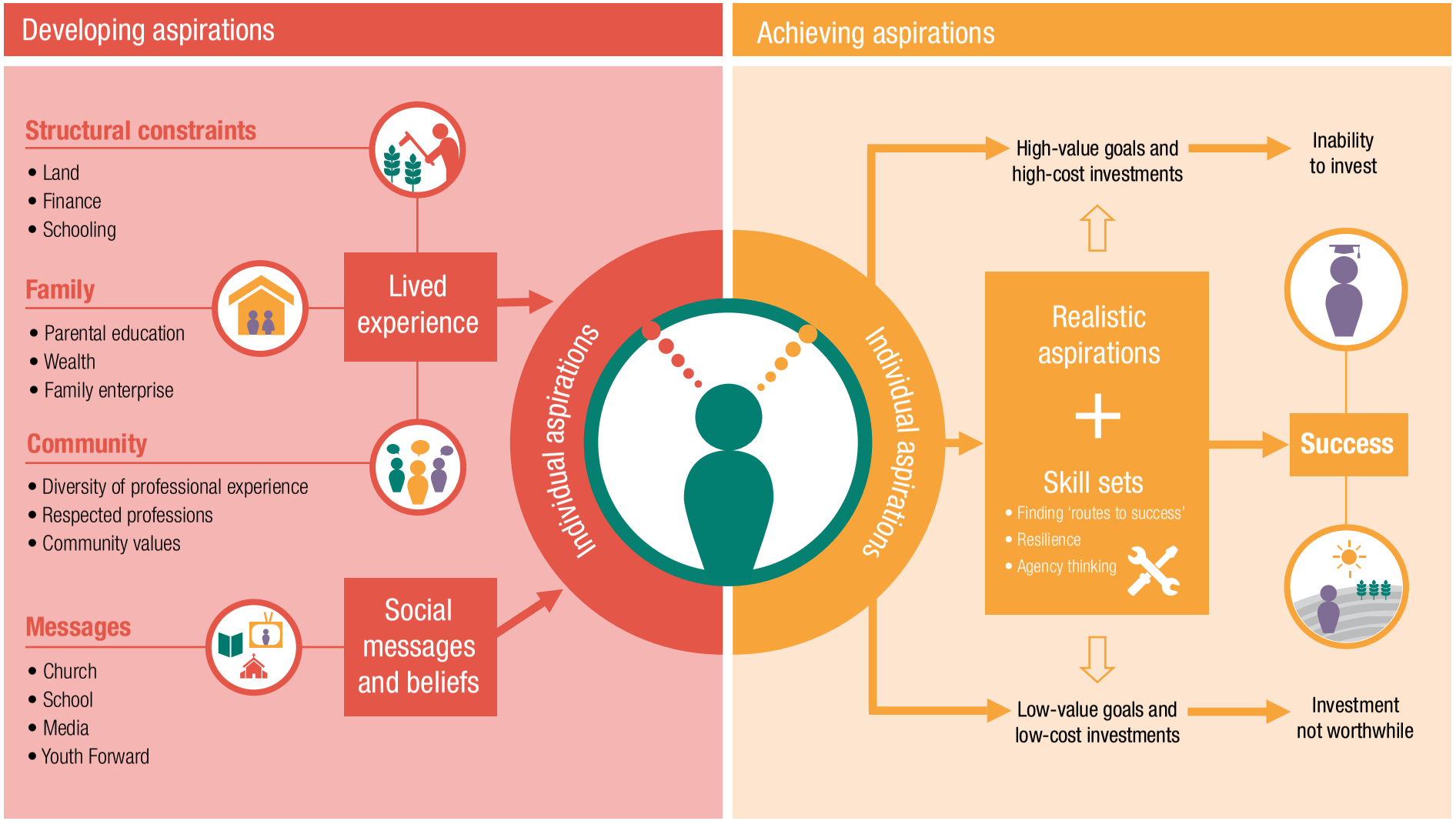
So, what determines the effectiveness of aspirations? Effective aspirations create an aspirations gap – defined as the difference between a young person's present and their imagined future living standards – that is neither too large nor too small to motivate investments of time and resources. These effective aspirations, that provide a challenge but can be achieved, are known as the 'aspirations window' (Ray, 2002). Given the nature of investment expenditures, spending money on aspirations means foregoing present consumption in the hope of an improved future. It is only if goals are affordable and likely to be achieved that financial sacrifices are worthwhile to an individual, and when these investments pay off, the aspirations gap will be closed and new aspirations may be formulated (ibid.).

However, where aspirations are unlikely to be achieved, are unaffordable or both, young people will not or cannot make those investments. Those with very low aspirations have little reason to forego current consumption as the future benefits are so low, while for those with very high aspirations any investments they can afford are unlikely to bring them significantly closer to their goals. In both cases, the rational course is to consume in the present rather than to invest. Simply put, aspirations need to be realistic and achievable, while also providing a worthwhile goal.

Both the process of developing aspirations and working towards them are behaviours that children and young people learn from their environment. This presents both opportunities and challenges for youth employment programmes. Where young people have grown up in environments that did not encourage hope or meaningful aspirations, they may not believe that they should aspire to much and may lack the courage or skills to invest in their dreams. However, if these are learned behaviours then aspirations and agency-thinking can also be taught and influenced.

1 This work builds heavily on Appadurai's notion of the 'capacity to aspire' and Bourdieu's notion of 'habitus' (Appadurai, 2004; Calhoun et al., 1993).

How aspirations are developed and achieved



Note: based on theories of habitus, aspiration and hope discussed in Calhoun et al. (1993), Ray (2006) and Snyder (2002).

1.4 Critiques of the aspirations literature

The literature on aspirations has been criticised for focusing on economic and financial concerns at the expense of the ambitions that young people may hold in other areas of life – for example, their social relationships or familial obligations (Pimlott-Wilson, 2011; Grant, 2017). Critics argue convincingly that more needs to be considered than their ambitions to increase their earning potential in the medium to long term.

Usually through anthropological work, these authors demonstrate that it is the *non-financial sacrifices* – such as the loss of relationships and community that result from migration – that sometimes put off young people pursuing their goals and interests. Further, achieving living standards or relying on livelihood strategies that are outside the norm may also result in social isolation and relationship breakdowns – a price that many consider too high. This is of particular concern to young women, for whom severing links with their communities can have significant negative consequences.

Many young women – and, to a lesser degree, young men – have obligations to their family, including parents and younger siblings, which make investing in their future more difficult. Perhaps travel is not possible where caring responsibilities require a young person to remain in their community or where any earnings that a young person is able to achieve must be handed over to the extended family for younger siblings' school fees, medical bills or other necessities. This, of course, renders any aspirational investments harder.

There is a further critique that must be taken seriously: that a focus on young people's aspirations can be used to obscure the structural barriers they may face to achieving higher incomes (Zipin et al., 2015). Where land is scarce, for example, blaming young people's inability to achieve higher living standards on their lack of ambition can serve as a cynical ploy to distract from the responsibilities of policy-makers or obscure intergenerational conflict.

Marc Sommers explores this inability to achieve higher living standards or even to follow the life trajectories society traditionally expects of young people (Sommers, 2012). Using Rwanda as a case study, he describes how the combination of government policies, land scarcity and population growth has made it near-impossible for young men, in particular, to achieve the accompaniments of adulthood – most importantly a house of their own, which is a prerequisite for marriage. Sommers argues that, in combination with rigid social norms and government policy, young people may be unable to overcome these structural barriers, rendering them 'stuck' in a liminal space between child and adulthood (Sommers and Uvin, 2011; Sommers 2012). Other authors have termed this period 'waithood', emphasising the inability of young people to achieve the progress they desire (e.g. Finn and Oldfield, 2015). It is important to stress here that, despite being thwarted in their efforts to achieve the accoutrements of adulthood, young people are not idle; they are engaging in creative ways of earning their upkeep, while they hope for the kinds of opportunities that would allow them to take up more adult responsibilities. As we will discuss herein, young Ghanaians frequently find themselves in these extended liminal spaces when entering into employment programmes or building their careers.

While our aim here is to better understand how young people can be assisted to develop realistic aspirations, it is important to keep in mind the structural barriers confronting them. For more detailed discussion of the constraints faced by young people in the cocoa and construction sectors, see *Creating opportunities for young people in Ghana's cocoa sector* (Löwe, 2017) and *Ghana's construction sector and youth employment* (Darko and Löwe, 2016).

1.5 This report: insights and guiding questions

The theoretical approaches outlined in this introduction provide some guiding questions for our report. Most importantly, they encourage us to look at how young people in rural and urban Ghana have developed their aspirations and whether these result in them taking actions to achieve better living standards for themselves. Where young people's aspirations or actions appear counterproductive, we must consider whether they are trying to maximise their incomes or whether they are pursuing other goals, such as stable interpersonal relationships, improved health or access to land, to name but a few.

Further, whether young people are able to translate their various aspirations into effective action and whether actions lead to (interim) results is of concern. How do career aspirations fit into the varied livelihood strategies young people employ in order to make ends meet? This also raises the question of which sectors young people would chose to work in, given a choice, and the sacrifices that they are willing to make where their first choices may not be available to them. Is working in a sector that is considered prestigious as important, or even more so, than making a reasonable living?

Finally, given the conflicting nature of young people's aspirations, how can youth employment programmes help them to achieve these diverse goals? A desire to raise a family and to provide for children may not always be easily reconcilable with a chosen career trajectory or with the need to invest in their own training. Certain sectors, including construction and agriculture, may threaten young people's ability to safeguard their physical health and to lead productive lives into old age. All the while, their communities will have expectations of how they should pursue their goals, and may withhold support or even prevent success.

1.6 Methodology

This report presents the findings from primary research conducted with young people in rural and urban Ghana. To ensure the relevance of the research to the Youth Forward initiative, the focus was on participants and comparable young people who, for a variety of reasons, were not able to benefit from the initiative. (For further information on Youth Forward, MASO and YIEDIE, see Box 1.)

In rural Ghana, we conducted fieldwork in several districts in the cocoa-producing belt, both in communities served by MASO and in comparison communities. These interviews and focus groups were held in July and August 2017. In urban Ghana, we spoke to young people in Accra, Kumasi and Takoradi in December 2017. Here we also held focus group discussions with young people who had chosen to take up training in the construction sector through YIEDIE as well as those who were not aware of these opportunities, but who were from similar socioeconomic backgrounds. For those participants currently enrolled in MASO or YIEDIE, programme staff assisted us in selecting participants, while for those who were not in contact with the initiative assistance came from community leaders. See Annex 1 for a table of focus group discussions and interviews.

Our focus group discussions were semi-structured to allow for topics of discussion to emerge based on young people's experiences. However, they all followed a similar structure and involved certain participatory activities to stimulate discussion. We chose participatory techniques for two reasons. The first was to enable our respondents to choose for themselves which aspects of their aspirations and experiences to highlight, rather than dictating the contents of our discussions.[2] Secondly, not all of our respondents were used to vocalising their aspirations and so found it helpful to discuss and brainstorm with their peers first, before bringing their ideas to the whole group and the research team.

We began by asking young people about the paid and unpaid work opportunities available to them and their peers, both in their communities and further afield. We then asked our participants to work in smaller groups to rank these activities according to preference before presenting their conclusions to the bigger group. This sparked discussions about what makes work meaningful and preferred economic activities. It also allowed for a

MASO participants discussing their aspirations. Credit: Alexandra Löwe/ODI, 2017.

2 For a theoretical discussion of the benefits of participatory research, see Chambers (1983); Freire (1998).

conversation about the trade-offs between different types of work, leisure and other responsibilities, and generated insight into what is important to young people in their working lives.

After this, we asked participants to work in groups to draw a picture of what they hoped their lives would look like in a decade – what kind of work would they want to be doing? What would their living standards look like? We found that this activity allowed respondents to start thinking about these questions and to articulate them to each other, before feeding back to the rest of the group. This was followed by wide-ranging discussions about how these aspirations could be achieved, whether they were realistic and who encouraged or discouraged investment in these aspirations.

We complemented the data gathered from our focus group discussions with interviews with purposely selected individuals. These interviewees were selected from focus group discussion participants because they had chosen unusual career trajectories or were facing particular difficulties in attempting to fulfil their aspirations. This allowed us to explore in more depth how aspirations are formed and how young people do or do not attempt to invest in their goals.

In addition to generating data with young people, we also conducted interviews and discussions with implementing partners. These were conducted at the annual meeting in Uganda, in Ghana with MASO and YIEDIE consortia leads and by learning from those directly involved in working with young people about what they had learned about their aspirations and motivations.

This report is part of a broader research project to understand the context of young people living in the countries served by Youth Forward. Therefore, the primary data collected for this report is complemented by research already undertaken by the Youth Forward Learning Partnership in Ghana (Löwe, 2017; Darko and Löwe, 2016), work that provides the background against which we here interpret young people's aspirations and work-related challenges.

2 Who wants to be a cocoa farmer?

2.1 What are the work opportunities available to young rural Ghanaians?

Aspirations are, to a significant degree, determined by the lived experiences of young people and their immediate surroundings. As a result, it is significant that rural young people's experience of work is in keeping with the unskilled, low productivity jobs often associated with rural communities. The main occupation for the majority of our respondents was agricultural labour – either on their family's land or, for payment, on other people's farms. Only a fortunate minority of young people had their own land with which to generate income that they could use as they saw fit.

Regardless of their ability to access land, young people sought to diversify their income generation and complemented their farming work with other activities that brought in regular, if smaller amounts, of income. Such activities included fetching sand or water, patching up roads, making brooms, harvesting and preparing natural sponge materials for sale, petty trading, selling street foods or laundering clothes.

These activities tend to be gender-specific. Typically, young women engage in petty trading or basic food production and catering services, which provide daily income and can be easily combined with other household and caring activities. Young men were more likely to engage in physical labour, such as making bricks, fixing roads or chainsaw operating. Communal labour duties were done by both men and women.

Young women sought to avoid the employer–employee dynamic, as this renders them vulnerable to sexually exploitative and predatory behaviour, such as bosses demanding sex in return for employment. Young men, on the other hand, complained about the amount of time they spent looking for work: at certain times of the year many more hours of every day were given over to finding work than to actually doing work. Understandably, this proved a frustrating experience.

Both young men and young women carried out a considerable amount of unpaid work, alongside their income-generating activities. For women, this consisted in large part of reproductive labour, including domestic tasks and communal activities such as keeping the village and local church clean, fetching water and cooking. Both men and women were engaged in farming on their extended family's land as a means of contributing to their upkeep. Young men did more farm labour and work that was more physically demanding than the young women, but they were expected to do less unpaid labour than their female counterparts. For both genders, however, unpaid work was a means of acquiring skills as well as contributing to their families' well-being and helping their parents.

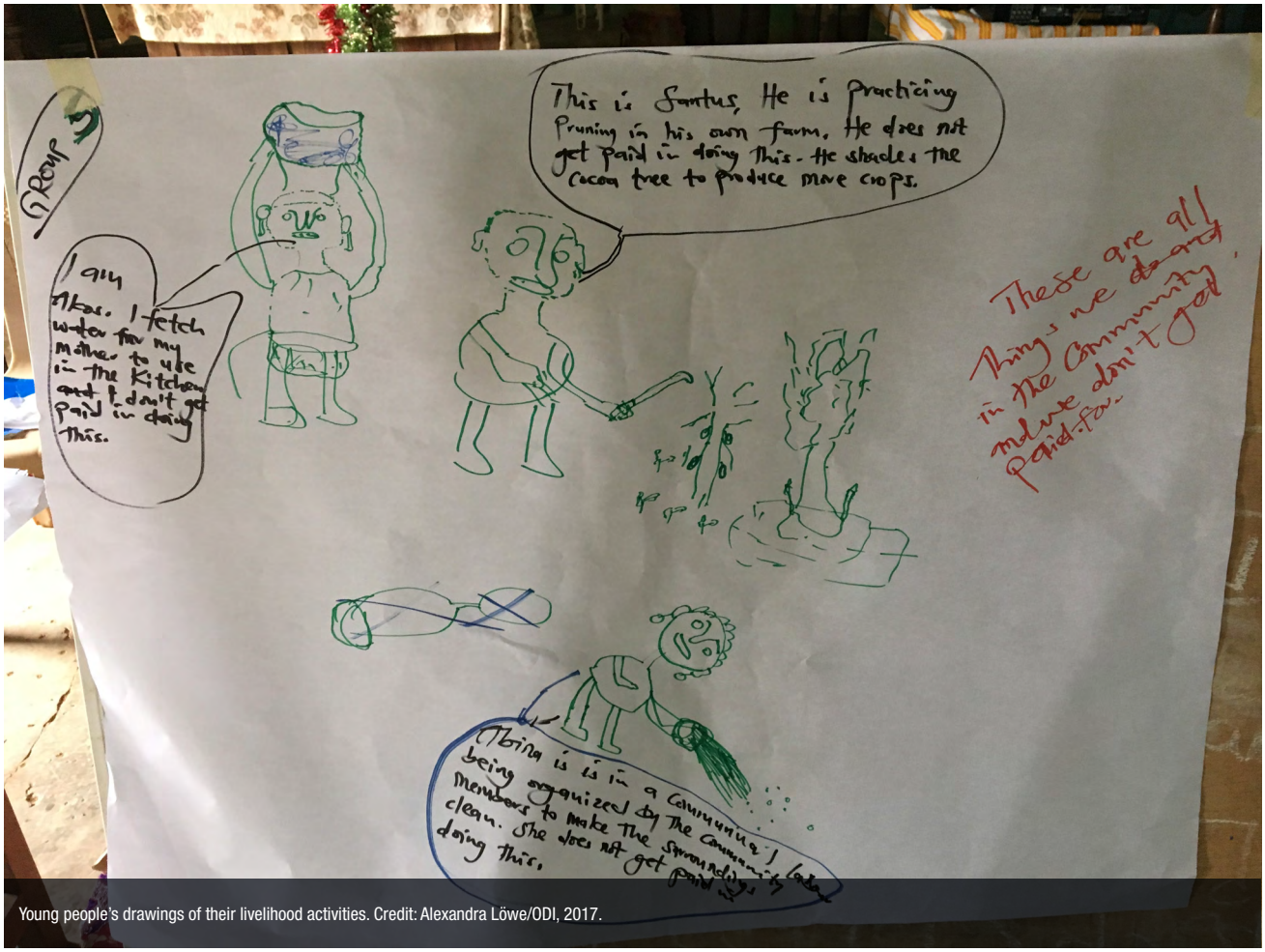
2.2 What makes for 'good' or 'meaningful' work for rural youth?

> *'Work that allows me to take care of myself and my family. That to me is meaningful work.'*

Perhaps unsurprisingly, given income levels in rural Ghana, most young people looking for work were primarily concerned with their ability to contribute to family expenditures, their wider community and social circles, and to meet their financial obligations. The earning potential of various tasks and jobs was therefore the foremost consideration for most rural young people.

Beyond this, young people preferred work with regular, ideally daily, income rather than weekly or monthly wages. Weekly or monthly payments were frequently listed as a downside of more formal employment, due to the difficulty of managing expenditure across longer time periods, given the lack of formal finance and pressures from extended families to contribute to various necessities. At the opposite end of the spectrum, investments in agricultural activities with returns that took months or even years to pay off posed significant challenges for young people's financial planning. The high risks involved in rainfed agriculture only aggravate this problem. However, where agricultural activities could easily be combined with other income-generating activities this was less of a concern.

Young people had very sound reasons for these preferences, beyond simply wanting 'quick money'. From a certain age, they are expected to earn their upkeep and to



Young people's drawings of their livelihood activities. Credit: Alexandra Löwe/ODI, 2017.

contribute additional resources to the extended family. It is not uncommon for young people to be working to pay their younger siblings' school fees, for example. At the same time, they do not have the savings and non-financial resources of more established adults that allow for consumption smoothing. Longer term, more lucrative investments are, therefore, a luxury that most young people cannot afford.

Despite often being accused of short-termism by elders, parents, teachers and policy-makers, the longevity of young people's occupational choices was of concern to them. They worried that some work – such as unmechanised farming – would only take them to midlife and would be difficult to continue beyond a certain age. Young people were very aware of the toll that a life of physical labour could have and that, even with the best of health, some work becomes impossible in old age.

While young people did not generally subscribe to the view that farming is dirty work or does not offer relevant opportunities, many were quick to point out that it comes with considerable psychological stress. Agricultural activities require significant investment of time and money, with relatively slow and very uncertain returns. Many of those with family responsibilities found this situation anxiety-inducing. Simultaneously, agriculture involves a lot of drudgery, which in the words of one young man 'gives you far too much time to think'. Both the risk and drudgery can be reduced through mechanisation and inputs, but these options were not always available to young people who lacked the capital.

2.3 Social messages on the value of work

Young people did not develop these assessments of the value of their work simply as a result of their experiences but were also influenced by messages as to what constitutes meaningful work that came from members of their community, media, their churches and schools. Interestingly, in most cocoa-growing communities – whether MASO communities or not – one of the most important messages that young people had absorbed was around the value of cocoa production to Ghana. There was great pride in the role of cocoa in Ghana's economy, and young people were aware that well-established cocoa farmers were respected members of the community. These messages were reinforced by media campaigns run by the Cocoa Board as well as teachers and church leaders.

However, while cocoa farming was a well-respected occupation, women who engaged in farming did not earn

the same level of respect. On the contrary, many young women mentioned their families' and communities' reservations about their wish to farm cocoa. One young woman said that her parents would prefer her to marry a cocoa farmer rather than become one herself.

Parallel to this, young people were aware of individuals who were able to mechanise or improve their farming practices, as they saw that successful farmers received respect and a much-improved income for their work. It was not always clear to young people how such changes could be achieved – particularly where their parents had not adopted such farming practices. Many young men, in particular, spoke of wanting to mechanise their farms so as to reduce the labour and, especially, the drudgery involved in crop production, and of hoping to increase their use of inputs so as to earn a better living from their land.

Another widespread message that young people were exposed to, not only within their communities but from a wide range of sources, was the power of education. Young people were taught by their parents, media, social media and teachers that if they were only able to stay in school long enough and to get the right academic qualifications, then they could surmount all other obstacles. The fact that most young people were not able to afford or otherwise access these educational opportunities meant that some felt they had failed in their careers before these had even begun.

2.4 The window of aspirations

As one might expect from the theoretical models of aspirations outlined in Chapter 1, the young people we spoke to had, for the most part, set their sights on a relatively narrow set of achievable goals that emulate the livelihoods and lifestyles of their parents and other close social networks. A significant minority spoke of aspirations that far exceeded the living standards and career options available within their communities, which would be very difficult, if not impossible, to attain. These included careers as football players, TV presenters and doctors or lawyers – the training for which very few would be able to afford or they would have to compete for extremely limited scholarship opportunities.

Within the achievable range, the 'aspirations window', young people limited themselves to more established and lucrative versions of the work that they were already doing or in which their parents were engaged. These include expanding or intensifying agricultural investments – for example, by purchasing machinery or modern inputs. For women, this most often meant acquiring the means of producing larger quantities of the processed food – such as fufu or baked goods – that they sell, or to set up a shop rather than trading on the street. Young women hoped that these changes would allow them to increase their income sufficiently to pay for their children's education and to build their own homes.

Those that held aspirations within this aspirations window had a much better idea of the steps they needed to take to achieve their future success, the investments that would be necessary and how they would fund these. Generally, they had some sense of how to build their farming investments gradually and an idea of how they might be able to find customers for their services. They planned to invest this additional income to upgrade their enterprises. This understanding comes from the fact that these goals can be realised through incremental investments and that there are usually some individuals within the community who have succeeded in realising modest increases in their living standards through similar strategies. For young women, however, it is harder to find directly comparable role models – particularly if they choose to invest their energies in cocoa farming.

When it came to higher cost aspirations, young people had less well-developed plans – for example, to return to education or training – as these investments involved much larger sums. Further, these opportunities cannot be accessed incrementally as funds become available.

The majority of our young respondents were much clearer about how they wanted to live than how they would achieve these living standards. In our discussions, when we asked about the plans and aspirations that young people held for their future, they more frequently focused on how they would live, rather than the work that they hoped to be doing in the future. The most likely explanation for this is that young people place more emphasis on being able to earn a decent living than the means by which they earn this.

In addition, where young people had aspirations that were beyond their investment abilities, it proved easier to focus on how they wanted to live rather than how these living standards could possibly be achieved. As these ambitions fall outside the actionable aspirations window, they do not engender useful investments and young people are unable to map out effective pathways to their goals.

2.5 Aspirations and migration

The issue of migration surfaced frequently in our discussions, both as a well-conceived strategy for achieving realistic life goals and as the means by which to achieve unrealistic aspirations. For many, migration made up part of a portfolio of activities that was designed to maximise income and minimise risk. The experience of migration was so varied that no trends or conclusions can be drawn, except to say that for those who had chosen to live in rural Ghana and so could take part in our focus group discussions, migration was often a temporary strategy. It could serve as the means to survive a lean period or to generate the investments

needed for a business idea. (For further discussion of migration see Chapter 4.)

2.6 How does cocoa fit into young people's aspirations?

> *'When you die, your farm doesn't die with you. But when you die as a teacher, your brain dies with you.'*

In Ghana's cocoa belt, young people have little choice but to accept cocoa farming as a part of their work life. As one young woman said: 'We are here because of cocoa, so it is our life.' In childhood and adolescence, young people work on their parents' farms and later rely on paid labour harvesting, pruning and weeding cocoa farms.

Whether they aspire to continue working in cocoa and whether they are able to turn this into a reality depends largely on how the distinctive life cycle of a cocoa farm maps onto their aspirations. Investments in a new cocoa farm take three to five years to pay off, which has a heavy bearing on young people's decisions. If their priority is to secure a reasonable income in the short term, then only certain types of work in the cocoa sector will do. If their priority is to ensure their retirement or their children's inheritance, then a cocoa farm is an excellent investment. For these same reasons, cocoa can also provide a long-term, aspirational goal for certain young people, in particular those from immigrant communities.

When discussing aspirations around the cocoa sector, it was rare for young people to aspire to sharecropping arrangements (such as *abunu* or *abusa*);[3] instead they preferred a future in which they would own a farm. They wanted the flexibility of deciding whether they would work the farm themselves in order to maximise income or have a caretaker look after it to free up time. Young people were primarily interested in cocoa for its ability to provide a reasonable standard of living and the fact that it requires relatively little labour once established. Respondents considered cocoa less risky than other professions: the risk of losing an established farm is small, especially when compared to other investments that require large capital outlays on equipment or machinery.

In addition, cocoa wealth can be passed down generations in a way that other investments cannot. A cocoa farm confers land rights on its owner, which can be passed on to children, a factor that was particularly important to young people in communities with large migrant groups that had not yet managed to acquire secure land tenure rights (see also Chapter 4 for more on migration). Young people also demonstrated long-term thinking when considering cocoa farming, and appreciated the ability of cocoa farms to provide a pension in old age.

Finally, in communities where cocoa has long been a mainstay of economic development, those who work in cocoa are well respected. This is not only due to the fact that cocoa can provide a relatively stable income for individuals, but also because of its role in generating foreign exchange for Ghana and keeping the national economy healthy (see also Löwe, 2017). Young people compared cocoa positively with other professions, such as being a motorbike taxi driver, for the respect it earns them from community elders, leaders and parents.

For many the main appeal of cocoa is that it provides a stepping stone to other opportunities. According to one young person, once you have an established cocoa farm 'you can add dreams with time'. Cocoa provides a basic income that can provide capital for investment in other businesses and it was often these businesses that our respondents were really keen to try (such as providing services to cocoa farmers, expanding their catering

Young cocoa farmers participate in a MASO training session. Credit: Alexandra Löwe/ ODI, 2017.

3 *Abunu* is the arrangement where a farmer plants a cocoa farm on behalf of a landowner in exchange for half of this farm once the cocoa trees begin to yield fruit. *Abusu* is a sharecropping arrangement where the caretaker farmer looks after a mature farm in exchange for one third of the annual harvest.

businesses or moving into skilled trades). Others expressed this less positively by saying that cocoa was a back-up plan, should they fail to achieve their other goals.

2.6.1 Cocoa and gender

As discussed, there are significant differences in the type of work that young men and women expect to shape their lives. Women stated a strong preference for trading as it could easily be combined with caring responsibilities, provides a steady daily income and is a socially acceptable activity for women. Cocoa farming, on the other hand, was considered by many too physically demanding for women. Young women did not feel encouraged by their parents to take up cocoa farming independently; they were encouraged to assist their fathers, husbands and brothers, but not to work a farm independently. Where young women had already received MASO training, they sometimes sought to challenge these social norms.

It is important to emphasise that young women who did not believe cocoa was for them did not feel this way because they did not value cocoa production per se, as their parents, husbands and brothers supported themselves through cocoa production. Instead, they simply did not consider it an option for themselves.

Box 2 *Galamsey*: when cocoa is not an option

We conducted one focus group discussion in a community where the farmland had been given over to small-scale mining – *galamsey*. *Galamsey* was outlawed in early 2017 which decimated local economies, where the majority of the economically active population relied on mining. A return to farming is not possible as the land will take several years to recover from the damage wrought by mining activities.

Young people who had been involved in well-paid, but unskilled, *galamsey* work found themselves without the skills for other work or the means to fund their education. In this community, the lack of options meant that young people could not develop realistic and achievable aspirations for their futures. When asked to reflect about the kind of work and lives they wished to be leading in the future, they suggested white-collar work that they did not have the skills for, and did not know how they might achieve these either. They had certainly not taken any steps towards investing in their goals and did not believe that they could achieve their aspirations.

3 Who wants to work in construction?

3.1 What are the work opportunities available to young urban Ghanaians?

Young urban Ghanaians are involved in a broader range of work than their rural peers, particularly with regard to paid employment. On occasion, urban residents in Takoradi and Kumasi had access to agricultural opportunities similar to those of their rural peers as well as to work in the other sectors. In particular, significantly more opportunities were available in service provision, with varying skills levels. Unskilled opportunities included working as a bus conductor (*trotro mate* in Twi), mobile money operators and filling station attendants. For women, opportunities that required training and skills included dressmaking, hairdressing, teaching and typist work. Young men reported working in such skilled professions as mechanic, barber, driver and boat operator. A significant number of young men also worked in construction, in the usual range of professions such as plumbing, painting, masonry, tiling, carpentry and welding.

Urban youth were exposed to a broader range of professions and options than their rural counterparts. However, they were also more aware of the difficulties in accessing skilled professions, given the quality of training and the significant costs involved in apprenticeships (Darko and Löwe, 2016).

For young women, one of the most frequent occupations was still petty trading – though they traded in a broader range of goods, including clothes, household necessities and mobile phone credit, rather than overwhelmingly food as was the case in rural areas. Again, this preference for petty trading was the result of the low barriers to entry, particularly the ability to start small and to plough any profits back into expanding the business.

Urban youth also undertook a lot of unpaid work, especially where they were unable to contribute to their extended or immediate family financially. Particularly for the young men, this allowed them to gain new skills or build networks to find paid employment. Most of this work was domestic, and separated along gender lines, with men preferring ironing, gardening, fetching water, washing cars and cleaning kitchen utensils, while women were responsible for sweeping, cooking, laundry and general cleaning and childcare activities. Young women expressed a dislike for childcare, stating that it is time-consuming and boring. Young men were often also expected to assist in community-led security and watchdog activities, despite their concerns for their own safety.

3.2 What makes for 'good' or 'meaningful' work for urban youth?

The pressing need to earn money is similar for rural and urban young people. As they have, generally, not yet accumulated savings, they prioritise work that pays daily or weekly, or that generates quick profits. Where young men have been able to acquire the skills necessary to access better-paid employment, their preference is for those professions that provide the greatest returns for their labour. In Accra, Takoradi and Kumasi, this was frequently in construction as the sector is expanding rapidly in these towns. However, many expressed concerns about the effect of physical labour on them over time, particularly that certain professions would be physically harmful, leading to lower-back pain and poor sexual performance, which expresses a fear of failing to fulfil their social roles as husbands and fathers.

The consensus was that welding, electrical work, masonry and carpentry provided the greatest returns, due to the high demand in domestic and industrial construction. In domestic construction, there is high demand for aesthetically pleasing burglar-proof doors and windows, which meant that skilled artisans could also charge a premium for quality craftsmanship – a scarce skill in all three major cities.

The picture was slightly different for young women, who did not consider many of the above occupations suitable for their gender. Beyond the difficulties involved in negotiating employment or training with a male superior, young women were concerned about social castigation – especially that they would be unlikely to find a husband if they worked as manual labourers. Their fear is not unfounded: their male contemporaries expressed quite openly their own convictions that women could not

do physically demanding work and, on occasion, views that such work could lead to a loss of secondary female characteristics and even the ability to bear children. As a result, only the bravest young women sought careers in non-traditional sectors, while the majority aspired to trade, dress hair, tailor or to start catering businesses.

Many of the latter occupations had the added benefit of not putting women in a subordinate position to an employer. In urban Ghana, young women were, if anything, even more reluctant than their rural counterparts to engage in paid work because of concerns about sexually predatory behaviours, which many of them had experienced when applying for formal employment. The high prevalence of such incidents is an important limiting factor on the aspirations of young women.

3.3 Social messages on the value of work

Despite being exposed to a broader range of influences than their rural counterparts, urban young people received messages about their careers that were, in at least one sense, more limited. While they were aware of a broader range of hypothetical career options, the message that 'office work' was the only career that would provide respect appeared to have been impressed on urban youth with great success. Through the examples set by the successful minority in their surroundings, the messages repeated at school or the promises in adverts placed in various media by private education providers, young people had come to believe that they should be aspiring towards higher education and white-collar professions. Many believed that they should pursue these options regardless of ability, inclination or whether they could afford them, and perceived themselves as having failed where they were not able to move out of blue-collar professions.

Those that had already passed through YIEDIE's training programme had absorbed more nuanced messages, stressing that while they had not been able to attain further education in a classroom, they had acquired skills that commanded some respect. Further, many of YIEDIE's participants had discovered that they had talents in certain occupations and enjoyed putting these to use earning their living. A small subset hoped to save enough to one day return to education, so that they could build a larger business and manage skilled tradesmen, rather than working as one.

Where there are more choices for young people, their parents' views became more important and so did their perceptions of a career's profitability and social status. Teaching, for example, was not an unusual aspiration among young women but, because teachers are poorly paid, many parents did not want to invest in teacher training for their daughters. Parental concerns were all the stronger for women who hoped to enter into non-traditional jobs, such as masonry, the military or welding.

The reverse of this emphasis on education is that in urban contexts agricultural work was rarely popular among young people. They complained of occasionally being asked to weed on their parents' farms in peri-urban areas, stating that it was 'dirty work' and made their palms hard. The respect that rural young people had for cocoa farming did not seem to exist in the same way among our urban interviewees, and virtually any kind of work was preferable to agricultural labour, which was seen as something to leave behind in the village upon migration.

Finally, urban respondents frequently listed betting and playing the lottery when asked about the work opportunities that were available to them, as these could potentially yield large windfalls. However, most had absorbed the message that these were socially and morally unacceptable activities and at least tried to resist the temptation. Few cited the fact that winning money on these activities was very unlikely as a reason not to engage, which may be a cause for concern.

3.4 The window of aspirations

Very few of the young people we spoke to reported that they were doing their desired type of work or that they were on a trajectory towards their career goals. Even those who had succeeded in acquiring additional formal schooling or learning a trade often found it challenging to find fitting job opportunities, given the economic and employment structure. For example, a number of young women who had trained as hairdressers struggled to find a job and had to resort to unskilled work to earn their living. One woman in Accra had even retrained as a forklift operator and still struggled to find employment. She was finally forced to resort to washing laundry to generate income. More commonly, young people had not found the means to invest in their education or training and had been unable to move beyond unskilled ad hoc work. A young man in Takoradi, for example, had wanted to join the military but could not afford the training, resulting in him becoming an electrician through YIEDIE's training.

For the most part, young people pursued work that was readily available, socially acceptable and provided a means of survival, rather than pursuing their desired professions – be it teaching, nursing or working as a lawyer. Where they could not afford any education beyond primary school, this meant, for men, working as unskilled labourers on construction sites, in factories and loading and offloading trucks or boats. For women, this typically meant working as street vendors, caterers or providing cleaning services.

It seems that, rather than holding realistic aspirations, young people had resigned themselves to the options

available to them. Most aspired to work in white-collar professions, often without knowing which ones. Given the costs involved in the education necessary for these careers and the years of income lost, they instead made peace with the work opportunities available to them. The more aspirational young people wanted to expand their businesses sufficiently to be able to employ other people, both for the prestige and the increased income. Others hoped to increase their income by selling their skills to larger companies so that they could attain a more stable income.

As such, the goals most young people set for themselves were realistic and only occasionally did a young person report an unrealistic aspiration, such as wanting to be extremely wealthy without having any idea how to achieve this. This included a young woman who wanted to move to Accra's most affluent neighbourhood without any sense of the income necessary to achieve this, or the young men who wanted to play football for Liverpool or Barcelona.

The extent to which young people felt that they could achieve their (realistic) goals depended largely on the support that they had received from their communities and whether they had been encouraged to believe in and work towards their goals. Perhaps worryingly, young people mainly identified problems within themselves as the obstacles that they might face in achieving their goals, including a lack of planning, laziness, doubt, sickness and unplanned pregnancies. The structural barriers they face were not discussed directly, but are reflected in the fact that they had adjusted their aspirations to fit their realities.

3.5 How does construction fit into young people's aspirations?

Construction work does not feature in the career dreams of the majority of urban youth, but it does have an important role in the realisation of other life goals – such as earning a decent and respectable living, having educated children and contributing to society in meaningful ways. Young people expressed a general preference for work that required tertiary education but they were well aware that this path was unlikely to be open to them. As a result, their interest in the construction sector was based on the fact that there is demand for skilled artisans, incomes are higher than in unskilled work, and they are able to contribute to society by building people's homes and infrastructure. Those who had dropped out of school or could not further their education beyond junior high school, saw construction as a means to an end. That said, some had not given up the hope of earning enough money to return to higher education.

Even within construction, attitudes towards the sector differed based on education levels. Those who had been through formal training, such as that provided by YIEDIE, had by and large settled into pursuing and advancing their careers in the sector with a great deal of enthusiasm and energy. Many had achieved their ambitions of earning a good living and had identified further goals for their future, such as expanding their skills in order to offer a niche product or opening their own business. However, some youth who engaged in unskilled labour in construction saw it as a means of economic survival while they found ways to pursue other goals, including learning a trade or leaving the sector and returning to education.

There were many young people who did not want to work in construction, mainly due to the strenuous nature of the work. Many young people expressed concern about the physical damage and pain caused by a lifetime of physical labour, which they had seen lead to the abuse of painkillers by construction workers. Both men and women complained of the lower-back pain often associated with construction work, which could lead to poor sexual performance and the break-up of relationships. Also of concern was the high risk involved in working in construction, especially for those jobs that involved climbing multi-storey buildings, exposure to dust and smoke, or vibrations from drilling machines and high noise levels. The lack of job security and pension benefits were also a significant worry.[4]

3.5.1 Does construction pose specific challenges for young women?

Our discussions with young women reflected and shed light on the low number of female trainees working in the construction sector. The importance of physical strength means that society perceives the sector to be the preserve of men, and women are strongly discouraged from pursuing construction careers. There is a general perception that women who work in construction become too muscular and 'hard', lose their femininity and develop lower-back pain. The combination of these factors was thought to culminate in infertility, which left young women worried that their careers would prevent them from fulfilling their other aspirations – primarily, to start a family. In other instances, they worried that if they did find a husband, he would not be happy for them to continue working in construction, rendering their investment in training futile.

Those young women who had entered the sector reported being threatened and discouraged by family members or having their family's financial support withdrawn when they considered learning any of the construction trades offered by YIEDIE. For women who defy these odds and take up trades in the sector, the societal perception of women as the weaker sex affects

4 Watch Patrick's story: www.youtube.com/watch?v=A73i303tCEE.

their ability to compete with their male counterparts for jobs. Some young women trained by YIEDIE spoke of how most customers are sceptical of their abilities in their skills such as welding, tiling and electrical work until they see them perform tasks with their tools.

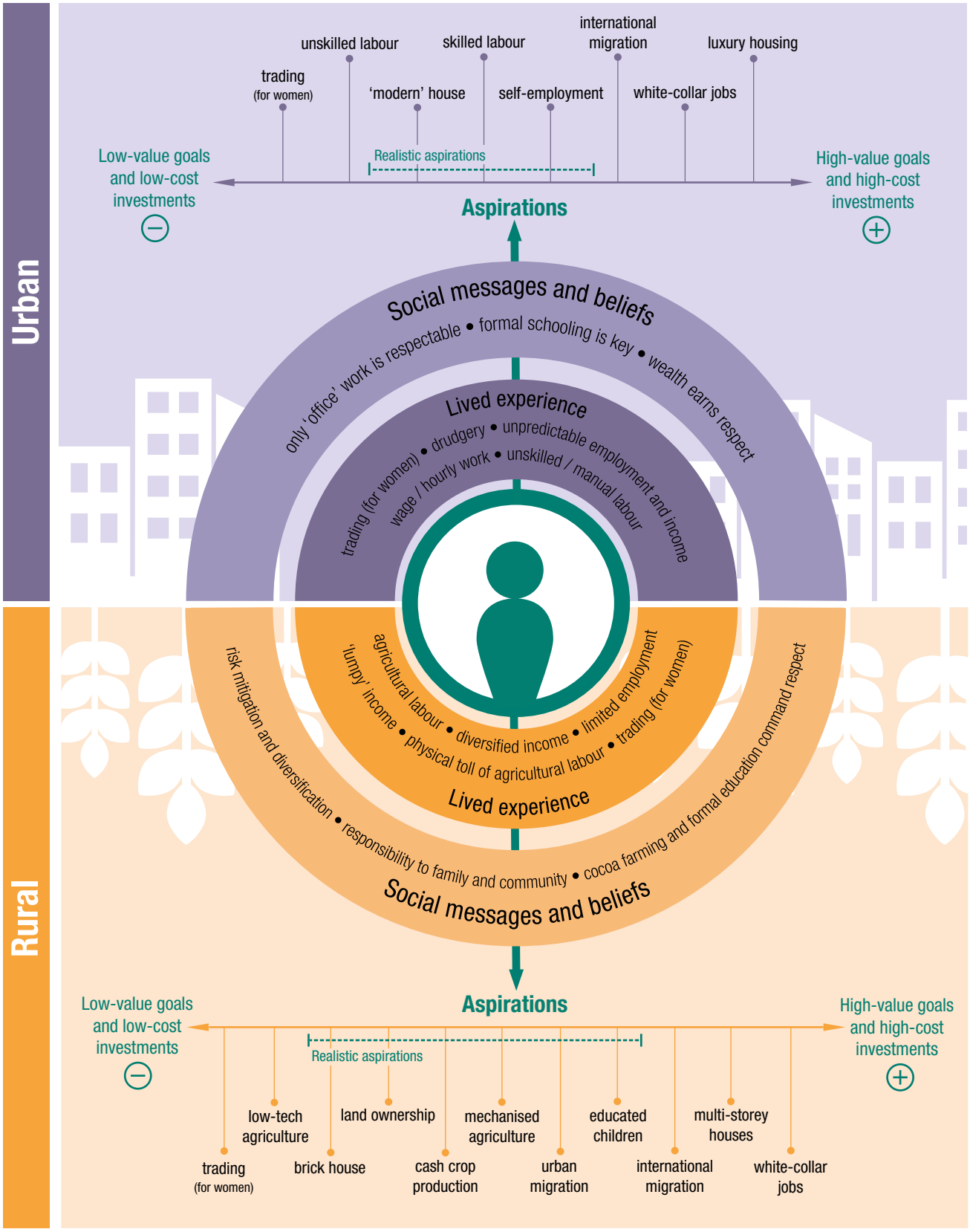
Apart from this, young women also spoke of finding it challenging at times to lift or operate heavy machinery or engage in certain tasks requiring more physical strength than skill. The absence of automated machinery in their workshops means their male counterparts, who have greater physical strength, complete tasks faster than the women who are disadvantaged in terms of physical strength. Finally, the conditions on building sites are particularly problematic for women during antenatal and postnatal periods. Not only are safety concerns more important for pregnant women, but many reported that they would lose their job in the event of a pregnancy as they would not be able to work in the event of a pregnancy as they would need to take longer maternity leave than for an office job, for example. The combination of these factors meant that even those women currently working in construction envisioned moving from on-site construction activities to providing services to the sector, such as trading in construction materials or performing supervisory roles.

It is worth noting that although many young women told stories of sexual harassment at work, this was not the case for YIEDIE's female apprentices. This could be as a result of the measures taken by the project to ensure that female participants are protected from harassment.[5]

A young woman works on a building site. This image was produced as part of the Youth Forward initiative in partnership with the Mastercard Foundation. © Janet Blankson/ODI/ PhotoVoice, 2017.

5 Watch Janet's story: www.youtube.com/watch?v=MajsFha7oX4&list=PL8sELjFjXUp_aFCqgEe3zX_AMOEGgcFPG&index=3&t=0s.

Young people's aspirations in urban and rural Ghana



4 Aspirations and migration

The issue of migration surfaced frequently in focus group discussions – both as a well-conceived strategy for achieving realistic life goals and as the means by which to achieve unrealistic aspirations. For many, migration made up part of a portfolio of activities that was designed to maximise income and minimise risk. This made for a very diverse range of experiences among our respondents with regards to migration.

4.1 From village to city, or city to village

The main driver of migration for men from rural areas was the pursuit of work and economic opportunities, while women moved more frequently to join their husbands. The search for better economic opportunities in urban areas was not always a permanent strategy, but often a means of earning money to cover a lean period or to generate capital for investment in a business. However, there were also young people in rural areas who had attempted to migrate to urban centres but had not been able to establish themselves given the high costs of urban living and had returned to their villages of origin. For these young people, farming felt like the option for those who had failed and had few options.

Access to land was an issue central to movement between rural and urban areas, and young people migrated where they could not access enough land to build their livelihoods in rural areas. This dynamic not only resulted in rural to urban migration, but also to other rural areas where land shortages were less of a concern.

A second motivation, especially for young men, was to move to communities where small-scale gold mining – *galamsey* – was common and wages were higher. *Galamsey* can lead to land degradation, the destruction of water bodies and a decimation of the agricultural economy (section 2.6.1: Box 2), but it nevertheless allows young people to earn very high wages in the short term. In addition to the mining itself, mining communities often provided opportunities in service provision, including food vending and providing transport services to other migrants.

4.2 Life as a migrant in urban Ghana

The majority of youth who migrated to urban areas engaged in unskilled work, such as street vending, working as a minibus conductor or shop assistant. These jobs were valued by young people because they allow them to earn a living while acquiring new skills in other areas – for example, driving or tailoring – either through their work or by attending a training course. Despite the hardship of urban life, young people were able to send remittances to their families and to take care of their basic needs. As one respondent said: 'In the village, I was eating once a day, but now I am able to eat three times a day and whenever I want to eat.' Housing, on the other hand, remained a challenge, with many living in unsafe and makeshift accommodation, where they were exposed to adverse weather, mosquitos and the risk of physical violence. These young people also struggled to access amenities such as electricity, and paid about 1 Ghanaian Cedi ($0.21) to charge their mobile phones daily. Despite these challenges, they chose to remain in the city, where life was hard but better than in rural areas.

4.3 Migration to Europe

While for some young people migration to the city provides a solution to unemployment and poverty, others believe that their best chance of improving their opportunities is to emigrate. They dream of destinations such as Europe, the United States and China, where they expect to find better-paid jobs and the ability to accumulate significant wealth. The possibility of migrating was a motivating factor for some in choosing to invest in their skills with YIEDIE and through other training providers. One respondent even stated that he chose to participate in YIEDIE because it was rumoured that participants are taken abroad to work in factories on completion of their training.

Our respondents were aware of two options for migrating beyond Africa. The first is over land to Libya and then across the Mediterranean Sea; the second was to travel by sea from Takoradi – Ghana's second

largest port – as a stowaway. The costs and the very real risks were well known to young people, but many felt that these were risks worth taking, given the potential benefits. Nonetheless, very few of the young people to whom we spoke had concrete or plausible plans to emigrate, mainly because they were unsure of how to embark on the process or how they would adjust upon arrival.

4.4 Migration and social networks

One particular community in rural Brong Ahafo stood out for the widespread experience of and attitude towards migration. In this village, young people were not at all interested in cocoa or farming. Perhaps surprisingly, this was neither one of the communities in which land was particularly scarce nor one where *galamsey* had rendered cocoa farming impossible. Instead, young people came from cocoa-producing households and could reasonably expect to inherit a farm, find one to rehabilitate or even to find sharecropping arrangements (for more information on these arrangements and how they affect young people, see Löwe, 2017).

Instead, young men in this community spoke of only one aspiration with any real conviction: their desire to emigrate to Europe via Libya and across the Mediterranean. Memorably, one young person laughed at our questions about the future, saying: 'Come back in two years' time and you will not find us here. We will be on our way to Europe.' Their determination to travel to Europe on such a dangerous route was not for lack of information: young people were aware of the dangers involved in this particular journey. They knew of people who had been deported, imprisoned in Libya or who were presumed to have drowned in the Mediterranean Sea. Nevertheless, they were not deterred and considered these risks part of being a young man and, most importantly, worth taking to get to Europe.

Young women in this community were not interested in cocoa production either. However, they felt that the benefits of a life in Europe were not worth the risks of the journey, and had heard that most women had to work as prostitutes to pay for the boat crossing. Instead, they hoped to use the remittances from their relatives or husbands in Europe to start businesses or to continue their training to become nurses or teachers.

These aspirations were clearly shaped by social networks: this part of the Brong Ahafo region has a long history of migration flows to Europe – initially via safer routes but increasingly via the Mediterranean as other routes became impassable without a visa. The large number of young men who expected to migrate to Europe can be explained by migrant network theory, where the costs of migration are thought to be lower as migrants who are already relatively well established provide financial and social assistance for new arrivals (Castles et al., 2014). This also explains why a large number of Brong Ahafo's young men end up in Italy or Spain, where they have the necessary contacts, rather than in European countries with higher wage rates.

The importance of social networks to migration trajectories was also evident in the migrants who participated in our research in urban areas: many had been inspired to move to a particular area of a certain city by the prospects and promises described by returnees to their village. In one focus group in Accra, participants recounted how 12 of them – a mix of men and women – had migrated to Accra with the help of the first person who had moved there from their rural fishing settlement in Ghana's Central Region. This group had supported each other with the costs of migration and they all shared accommodation in an uncompleted multi-storey building in central Accra, where together they felt safer.

5 What shapes aspirations?

Our research clearly demonstrates that young people's aspirations are shaped both by their lived experience and by the messages that they have absorbed from society at large. In both rural and urban areas, young people's aspirations are influenced by the work, roles and values of their community. Imposed on these ways of living and working are broader social values that are taught at school, in religious institutions or broadcast or published on various media.

5.1 Differences between urban and rural young people's aspirations

Without a doubt, the main difference in young people's views on their work life between rural and urban areas was the level of respect enjoyed by agricultural professions. While young people in rural Ghana had been raised in farming communities, they felt that farming in general, and cocoa in particular, were meaningful occupations. They had also been taught the value of education, but did not feel that they needed to achieve higher levels of education in order to earn the respect of their community. However, this was very different for urban young people, for whom working in agriculture was not infrequently considered a personal failure. Agriculture, for the most part, was really an option of last resort. Although weeding work was an option in many urban and peri-urban areas, and work was hard to find, young people were reluctant to engage in farming or related activities. Instead, they preferred to hawk goods by the roadside or to work unloading trucks or boats.

So why are attitudes different in rural and urban areas? Undoubtedly, parents played an important role, as many urban young people responded to questions about agricultural labour by saying that they or their parents had moved to urban areas in order to escape agricultural work. It is, of course, possible that those who remain in rural areas are those who have more respect for agriculture. However, the messages in urban areas on the importance of education are much louder, whether they take the form of adverts for private education institutions, the discourse in mosques and churches, or the nature of the labour market. Equally important is the proximity in urban areas of those who have achieved higher levels of education, work in higher paid jobs and are clearly much wealthier. While the social distance between our respondents and their age-mates who worked in white-collar jobs may have been as large as for rural young people, due to migration and social media, urban young people live in much closer proximity to their peers who do have access to such sectors. The sense of pride young rural people spoke of when talking about their role as farmers in Ghana's economy was replaced in urban areas by fear of the disrespect society holds for farming work.

In addition to these social messages, it is worth noting that the young people who were working in the construction sector in urban Ghana had a slightly different profile. Those working in construction in Takoradi, Accra and Kumasi were those who could not afford to continue at school, but who were able to invest further resources into their training – for example, by foregoing some income while training under a master craftsperson. Young people who remained in their farming communities, on the other hand, were not able to make such sacrifices and,

Luliana, child of a cocoa farmer in Ghana. Robert Harding/Alamy stock photo. CC BY-NC-ND 2.0.

A young woman working in Ghana's construction sector. This image was produced as part of the Youth Forward initiative in partnership with the Mastercard Foundation. © Janet Blankson/ODI/PhotoVoice, 2017.

instead, needed to begin earning money for themselves and their families as soon as possible.

Young people in both areas had in common the fact that they had adjusted their expectations to what was realistic in their communities, and in both cases young people saw cocoa and construction as a means to an end, rather than as a chosen vocation. That said, young people in urban areas were more acutely aware of the gap between their aspirations and their realities. While rural youth would have liked to achieve higher levels of education, they did not feel that they had failed because they could not fulfil their dreams. In Accra, Takoradi and Kumasi, young people found it harder to come to terms with not being able to achieve the lifestyles of educated young people.

It is worth adding that young people did not seek to maximise their enjoyment of work so much as their ability to earn a decent living and their community's respect. Central to this sense of respect from their community and elders was the notion of socially useful work. Young people in cocoa-growing regions spoke of their pride at contributing to Ghana's economy by generating foreign exchange, and those working in construction were proud of providing their customers with plumbing, security gates or homes to live in. For women, their safety and protection from harassment from bosses and co-workers was another important consideration when choosing their work.

5.2 Who do young Ghanaians model their aspirations on?

It is clear from our research that the aspirations of young Ghanaians are, largely, informed by the communities in which they live, as is witnessed by their desire to find work that earns them respect and the ways in which the higher prestige of white-collar work has influenced the work goals of urban youth in particular. In some instances, there was also a sense that young people's aspirations were limited by their lived experience, for example where they could not imagine improving much on the lot of their parents.

Less positively, many young people in urban areas felt that their families and communities, in particular their parents, seek to limit their aspirations. Young people often felt that their parents discouraged big dreams, dismissing them as youthful fantasies that should not be pursued. One young person spoke of how his parents had 'killed [his] dreams' to train to become a teacher because they did not think that he could raise the money necessary for schooling. There was also a sense, particularly among our rural respondents, that they lacked appropriate mentors. One young man said that 'some people have mentors, but not people here. Because the people indigenous to here, they don't know how the outside world works'.

As a result, many do not talk to anyone about their dreams and aspirations, and certainly not someone who would be able to advise them on how they can close their aspirations gap. The lack of suitable mentors was not helped by a frequent sense of mistrust or insecurity, where some young people chose not to disclose their plans for the future for fear that they would be mocked or sabotaged. Some feared that to share their dreams would be to invoke jealousy and witchcraft that would ultimately ruin their efforts.

6 Conclusions and recommendations

We began this report by asking if there is a mismatch between young people's aspirations and the focus of most youth employment programmes on growth sectors rather than those that correspond to career aspirations. Our research shows that young people's focus in Ghana is as much on being able to fulfil their social obligations and achieve certain living standards as it is about pursuing specific careers. The majority of young people would choose a profession that involved less drudgery and physical exertion, while providing a good income and ensuring the respect of their community. However, for most, it was clear that they would not be able to pursue those types of careers and that they would have to make do with the work that is available in their communities, given their education levels.

One could argue that this speaks of a 'failure of aspirations', but it was clear that our respondents had not given up on improving their living standards. Rather, they were unsure what options were available to them, how they could invest in their skills and how they were going to pay for these. This meant that some had developed either low or excessive aspirations. But the majority of young people to whom we spoke were looking for routes to realise relatively modest aspirations. That they were not able to find ways of achieving these aspirations is to do with a number of factors, including a lack of guidance from parents or peers, an education system that does not prepare young people for jobs that do not require tertiary education, the inability to put off earning money while they continued to learn, and the limited range of careers they had seen in their communities.

It is also important to note that, unlike young people who are born into wealthier communities, our respondents had moulded their aspirations to fit the reality of their responsibility at different life stages. So, young people were constrained by the fact that they needed to maximise their current earnings while trying to invest in a viable future for themselves. This often prevented young people from maximising their overall lifetime earnings and stood in the way of their ability to pursue their goals. The longevity of cocoa provided some viable solutions for rural youth, provided they were able to secure land tenure rights. Construction, on the other hand, posed some challenges on this front given the difficulties of continuing to work in a trade beyond a certain age.

Where young people had interacted with MASO or YIEDIE, these initiatives had helped to broaden their goals or to find pathways to achieving them. In urban areas, YIEDIE's work had helped to expose young people who lived in tight-knit communities with limited professional opportunities to other careers. This worked better with young men, given the considerable social and cultural barriers to women's participation in construction work. In rural areas, young people had plenty of experience of cocoa farming, but were unaware of the ways in which it could assist them in achieving their aspirations, largely because they had little knowledge on how to farm cocoa effectively and often could not access the necessary land. Both MASO and YIEDIE, therefore, filled an important gap for young people by assisting them to navigate contemporary labour markets and helping them to understand the options available to them.

Given the evidence generated in the course of this research, it seems that young people are keen to improve their living standards and to find fulfilling work, but that they do not always recognise the opportunities that are suitable or available to them. This may make recruitment and retention of participants harder, as young people may not recognise themselves and their aspirations in the training and job opportunities offered. The most persuasive arguments for young people in these situations are the medium-term possibilities created by pursuing a given training course and a sense that they would have the opportunity to do work that is socially valuable.

6.1 Implications for Youth Forward and other youth training programmes

The findings from our report provide some insights into how youth programmes can help fulfil young people's aspirations and thereby improve retention and success rates.

6.1.1 Implications for Youth Forward

- Cocoa, even less than agriculture in general, does not meet young people's need to provide for themselves and their family in the present. Therefore, young

people appreciated the ability to engage in other activities in the meantime and expressed the desire for training around other activities that can earn them money in the short term.

- The long lifespan of cocoa, the fact that it would provide a pension for young people once they reached old age and that they could transfer the wealth they created to their children, was a major advantage of the crop that many respondents emphasised. In addition, cocoa was valued because if time could be found now to invest in a farm, then it could provide an income that could be used for other, non-agricultural activities further down the line. However, this presupposes land ownership or secure tenure arrangements.
- A focus on innovation and mechanisation within the cocoa sector (and farming more broadly) is likely to appeal to young Ghanaians. This will not only increase the status of the sector but may also help to make it more accessible to young women.
- In the construction sector, the biggest concern for respondents was the ability to continue in the job in the long run: they were worried that they would lose their physical strength and be without a job. For young women, pregnancy was also a concern, as construction is less compatible with pregnancy than more sedentary occupations. Illustrating routes into other, less physically demanding jobs – still within the construction sector – would help to persuade young people to take up a career in this area.
- Relatedly, while everything is being done within Youth Forward to ensure young people are safe while learning their trades, many are aware that they may not be fortunate to work with such careful employers in the future. Broader policy discourses around building site safety in Ghana is something that should be taken up with relevant policy-makers and the private sector by the Y-SEG.
- While this did not come up frequently, some respondents did mention that more and more people in the construction sector were abusing and becoming addicted to painkillers. As Ghana has recently been flooded with cheap opioids from India and China, and is seeing more and more people addicted to these, it is worth including some education on painkiller and drug abuse as part of YIEDIE's curriculum.
- The issue of gender is important in both sectors, where many young women expressed the belief that cocoa-growing or construction work were not for women. Those who refused to be held back by gender norms were rightly proud of their work, but often this had come at a significant personal cost to them. Again, the Y-SEG should assist in addressing gender norms.
- Young women felt safe within the confines of their MASO and YIEDIE training spaces, but this was not always the case when they were working in other jobs and, in the future, the initiative will not be able to guarantee their safety. A national discussion around the safety of women in the workplace is necessary.
- Likewise, ensuring that women are able to provide for themselves when they are pregnant is a major concern, especially for women employed in the construction sector. If this is not addressed adequately, the few women who have been trained are likely to drop out of the sector in due course.

6.1.2 Implications for all youth training programmes

- The starting point for many youth programmes is to provide training in areas where skills gaps and demand have been identified. This approach works well with the aspirations of most young people, who prioritise earning potential over the type of work. Besides earning potential, young people prioritise flexibility in the work they seek, for example the ability to work more than one job at a time, or to take time off to fulfil obligations such as helping out on the family farm during harvest time. Recruitment drives should focus on the income potential and flexibility (or lack thereof) of different trades so that young people can make informed choices before investing resources in training.
- Young people's desire to earn money quickly and continuously should not be dismissed as impatience or laziness. Many have considerable financial responsibilities and are unable to rely on their family for support. This will stand in the way of their ability to participate in training, and programmes should be designed to provide paid work opportunities to participants or, at least, not to interfere with the ability to earn money. One way to ease these pressures is to facilitate young people's access to financing for education and training, as well as other investments.
- Aspiring is a skill that not all young people have developed and so needs to be taught by youth programmes. Young people need to be encouraged to think about their future in a way that is both realistic and stretches them. This includes teaching how to break larger goals down, the ability to identify training opportunities, setting goals and planning for the longer term. This builds self-esteem and encourages young people to forego consumption for the sake of a better future standard of living.
- Perhaps surprisingly, young people were worried about the long-term implications of their work, and were concerned about their future pensions and social security benefits. Training in financial planning, including for old age, should form part of training programmes.
- Ideally, parents should be involved in teaching aspirations. As parents may not have learned how to aspire either, they need to be informed of how investments in training and non-traditional businesses can be realistic and lucrative options for their children. Too many of our participants complained

that their parents 'killed [their] dreams' when they most needed someone to support their efforts.

- Very few young people aspire to a career or working life in one sector, whether that be agriculture, construction or office work. Usually, they see it as a means to an end and plan to transition to other work over their lifetime. They associate a diversified portfolio with financial stability and planning for old age. They want to know how their chosen trade or work can fit into such a portfolio. Training young people in planning, budgeting and how to invest widely will help their efforts to diversify. Goals that are not limited to the sector in which young people receive training should form part of the life skills education provided.
- One of the reasons that young people are not able to realise their aspirations is that they are not introduced to alternative ways of living and earning due to social polarisation and the lack of social mobility. Mentoring by people who are just a little more successful than their peers, rather than very successful individuals, might prove most effective here, bearing in mind the aspirations window. In other words, peers, parents or community members who have broken out of the mould and found innovative ways of making a living are likely to be most inspirational to young people.

A young woman working with a young man in a workshop. This image was produced as part of the Youth Forward initiative in partnership with the Mastercard Foundation. © Ruth Medufia/ODI/PhotoVoice, 2017.

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Annex 1 Focus group discussions and interviews

Activity	Date	Region	Location
Focus group discussion with MASO youth	1 August 2017	Volta	Likpe Kukurantumi
Focus group discussion with non-MASO youth	2 August 2017	Volta	Ve deme
Focus group discussion with MASO youth	3 August 2017	Central	Doriyemu
Focus group discussion with MASO youth	4 August 2017	Ashanti	Dotomu
Focus group discussion with non-MASO youth	5 August 2017	Ashanti	Kumpese
Focus group discussion with non-MASO youth	6 August 2017	Central	Asikuma
Focus group discussion with MASO youth	7 August 2017	Western	Kojokrom
Focus group discussion with non-MASO youth	8 August 2017	Brong Ahafo	Kantanka
Focus group discussion with MASO youth	9 August 2017	Brong Ahafo	Abeberese
Activity	**Date**	**Region**	**Location**
Focus group discussion with YIEDIE youth under training	30 November 2017	Ashanti	Kumasi
Focus group discussion with YIEDIE youth who have completed training	1 December 2017	Ashanti	Kumasi
Focus group discussion with non-YIEDIE youth	1 December 2017	Ashanti	Kumasi
Focus group discussion with YIEDIE youth under training	4 December 2017	Western	Takoradi
Focus group discussion with YIEDIE youth who have completed training	5 December 2017	Western	Takoradi
Focus group discussion with non-YIEDIE youth	7 December 2017	Western	Takoradi
Focus group discussion with non-YIEDIE youth	10 December 2017	Greater Accra	Accra
Focus group discussion with YIEDIE youth under training	11 December 2017	Greater Accra	Accra
Focus group discussion with YIEDIE youth who have completed training	12 December 2017	Greater Accra	Accra

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