

ASPIRATIONS AND RESILIENCE OF YOUNG WOMEN AND MEN IN ETHIOPIA

ANALYSIS AND NARRATIVES OF REALITIES
DURING COVID – 19

Ethiopia Country Report

Country Report | March, 2024



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ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

<i>CBOs</i>	Community based Organizations
<i>CSA</i>	Central Statistical Agency
<i>CSOs</i>	Civil society organizations
<i>ESDP</i>	Education Sector Development Programme
<i>FDRE</i>	Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia
<i>FGDs</i>	Focus Group Discussions
<i>GTP</i>	Growth and Transformation Plan
<i>HH</i>	Household
<i>ICT</i>	Information and Communications Technology
<i>ILO</i>	International Labour Organization
<i>IOM</i>	International Organization for Migration
<i>KIIs</i>	Key Informant Interviews
<i>NGOs</i>	Non-governmental Organizations
<i>NYP</i>	National Youth Policy
<i>PASGR</i>	Partnership for African Social & Governance Research
<i>PWDs</i>	People with Disabilities
<i>SNNPR</i>	Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples' Region
<i>SPSS</i>	Statistical Package for Social Science
<i>TVET</i>	Technical and Vocation Education and Training
<i>UN</i>	United Nations
<i>UNFPA</i>	United Nations Fund for Population Activities
<i>USAID</i>	United States Agency for International Development

GLOSSARY

<i>Idir</i>	A traditional self-help organization that provides mutual aid and burial insurance services to society
<i>Ikub</i>	A Rotating Savings and Credit Association in Ethiopia
<i>Kebele</i>	The Smallest administrative unit of Ethiopia
<i>Utafiti Sera</i>	Research Policy
<i>Woreda</i>	Third level of the administrative divisions of Ethiopia after zones and the regional states

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report provides an analysis of the aspirations and resilience of young women and men in Ethiopia, focusing on narratives of realities through COVID – 19 pandemic. The analysis is based on an interdisciplinary, mixed-method research centred on listening to young women and men and allowing insights to emerge from their voices and narratives through surveys across different regions. Key informant interviews were conducted with relevant stakeholders and focus group discussions with youth in selected research sites.

In an attempt to understand the perspectives on the aspirations of young women and men in Africa, particularly amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, a research project was designed. The project studied the aspirations and resilience of young women and men in Ethiopia before and during COVID-19 in order to understand the implications of the crisis on the lives and livelihoods of young women and men now and in the future. This multi-country research project is undertaken in six other African countries including Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, Rwanda, Senegal, and Uganda, under the auspices of the MasterCard Foundation in collaboration with the Partnership for African Social & Governance Research (PASGR).

As part of this project, focusing on Ethiopia, the overall goal of the research, was to answer the following overarching research question: what are young women and men's aspirations and what adaptability and resilience strategies are employed in the pursuit of these aspirations especially in the face of militating policy, pandemic and other challenging environments? The analysis aimed to generate comparative evidence that is informative on the opportunities and potential for scalability both within the country and across Africa. The project will also contribute to updating the landscape for the employment of young women and men in a post-COVID-19 world and impact macro-level employment, accelerated inclusive economic growth, and improved wellbeing of the youth.

Ethiopia boasts a youthful demographic profile, with over half of its population comprising individuals under the age of 25 (CSA, 2016). Our research reveals that the youth in Ethiopia contend with precarious circumstances and face numerous challenges leading to frustration, often prompting them to seek various adaptive strategies. Challenges such as unemployment, underemployment, ed-

ucational setbacks, limited access to resources, absence of working spaces, violence and conflict, and lack of support networks have been persistent issues youth faced, before and during the pandemic. Further, the pandemic created additional socio-economic burdens for the youth such as feelings of insecurity and uncertainty about the future, financial constraints related to the pandemic, and increasing inflation rate in the country. The pandemic also resulted in a sharp decline in the interest in pursuing education because of extended school closures and difficulties in passing the national examination. Early marriage, unplanned or unwanted pregnancies, domestic abuse and violence, and increased household chores have also been mentioned as challenges faced by girls during the pandemic. The impact was also significant on people with disabilities (PWDs) who were stigmatized as the rule of maintaining physical distance blocked the support they get from friends, neighbors, the community, and even family members. Many of these problems have continued to exist after the pandemic leading to changes in aspiration and resilience mechanisms among the youth. As a result, the aspiration of the youth has been mainly related to creating 'successful' economic opportunities through business development and to some extent educational achievements. Financial independence has become a priority for most youth in the country, to be achieved mainly through self-employment. Social media, religion, peer networks, and family support facilitated resilience during and after the pandemic in creating safe space, entertainment and economic opportunities.

Along with these challenges, our research indicates a shift in the narrative surrounding Ethiopian youth as destructive and ill-motivated and seeking shortcuts to success. Instead, the Ethiopian youth appear resolute in attributing their resilience, personal agency, hard work, and efforts to overcome obstacles, particularly amidst the era of COVID-19, in pursuit of their goals. The youth are also very eager to discuss and share their perspectives on issues relevant to their lives. Despite the challenges they face including the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, the youth remain outgoing, active and optimistic about their future.

This report thus provides several recommendations aimed at addressing the paths to sustainability in relation to young men and women's aspi-

ration and resilience in Ethiopia:

- Identify sectors within the economy for expansion and create an entrepreneur-friendly environment to facilitate youth entry into the workforce.
- Leverage the government's convening power to establish partnerships among diverse group of stakeholders, including businesses, civil society organizations, universities, and youth-led initiatives, to support and establish entrepreneurship initiatives.
- Design policies and strategies that prioritize the positive personal development of the youth.
- Adopt an inter-sectional approach in youth development programs considering factors such as gender, age, background, ethnicity, marginalized groups, minorities, socioeconomic situations, environmental factors and others
- Provide support to young entrepreneurs and businesses to navigate economic challenges arising from various crises such as COVID-19 and other disasters.
- Implement, monitor and evaluate the implementation of different packages and programs aimed at supporting and promoting entrepreneurship among the youth.
- Re-orient education system and training systems to meet the knowledge, competencies, skills, innovation and creativity required to match employment market needs.
- Foster youth active engagement in the policy-making process to bridge the gap between policy formulation and implementation.

INTRODUCTION

This report presents findings of one component in an innovative multi-country research undertaken in seven African countries including Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, Rwanda, Senegal, and Uganda, under the auspices of the MasterCard Foundation in collaboration with the Partnership for African Social and Governance Research (PASGR). The research was conducted to cultivate a comprehensive understanding of two aspects of youth lives: aspirations and resilience in the context of Ethiopia. Using a mixed-methods cross-sectional approach, the research sets out to answer the question: ***What are young women's and men's aspirations, and what adaptability and resilience strategies are employed in the pursuit of these aspirations, especially in the face of militating policy, the pandemic and other challenging environments?*** The aim was to develop a deeper understanding of the complex social phenomenon of 'youth aspirations and resilience' and examine the effect of targeted services on the youth.

The concept of youth does not refer to a homogenous construct but rather encompasses a wider set of perspectives and connotations depending on socio-cultural, legal, and institutional circumstances (Peters, 2008). The term 'youth' entails young people whose social, economic, and cultural capital, as well as social relations, assign them to a specific position in society. It further implies certain rights and duties, social responsibilities, as well as individual drive to achieve independence, moral and social expectations, rites of passage, and assignments and experiences that differ from those of adults and children (Pankhurst et al., 2018). The UN, for statistical consistency across regions, defines 'youth', as persons between the ages of 15 and 24 years, without prejudice to other definitions by the Member States. The Ethiopian National Youth Policy of 2004 defines it with reference to age groups to be between 15 and 29 extending five more years to the UN definition. On the other hand, the African Union defines youth as people from the age of 15-to 35 (African Union, 2017). In Ethiopia, achieving social adulthood is associated with an increase in both responsibility and authority representing a person's increased social status in a given community (Chuta & Crivello, 2013; Pankhurst et al., 2018). With this in mind, this research adopts the Ethiopian National Youth

Policy definition of youth as those aged 15 to 24. However, it also acknowledges that the community may have a broader understanding of who constitutes "youth".

Ethiopia is characterized by a youthful demographic, with more than half of the population aged under 25 (CSA, 2016). The National Reproductive Survey (2020) reports that 20% fall between 15 and 24 years old, while 70% of the population is under 35. Young Lives (2013) notes a 7% increase in the young populations over the past two decades, projecting growth to 40 million by 2030. This burgeoning young population positions Ethiopia as the second-largest youth bulge in Africa, after Nigeria (USAID, 2018). This is reflective of a country's urban/rural gap, majority of the young population resides in rural areas. Nonetheless, the urban young population is higher than the total population residing in urban areas (Abduselam, 2023). The proportion of young women living in rural areas is higher when compared to male youth as three in four young women live in rural areas (UNFPA, 2020).

Youth in Ethiopia appear in precarious circumstances and face several challenges that result in de-motivation, and frustration and are often seen to opt for alternatives such as migration. This was affirmed by the statistical survey of Ethiopian emigration conducted in 2021 revealing the same. While the survey lacks data on current emigration trends, it came up with a number of Ethiopians living abroad of which more than 77% are found to be between the age of 15-29.

Despite the absence of comprehensive data on migrants and the challenges in determining migration time frames, it is evident that the youth constitute the largest segment of Ethiopian migrant populations. These challenges, including limited employment opportunities, restricted access to education and housing, low participation of the youth in societal affairs, and compounded crises, often drive migration or lead to de-motivation. The global COVID-19 pandemic exacerbates existing social and economic inequalities, further impacting the youth (Porter et al., 2020). Nevertheless, the youth maintain aspirations for a better life and cling to positive motivations to navigate pivotal moments of risk, transformation, and opportunities throughout their lives.

Context: Youth in Ethiopia

The increasing number of young population in Ethiopia has profound implications on the country's demographic and socioeconomic landscape. While the influx of the youth into the labour market escalates, employment opportunities lag behind, particularly posing a significant challenge for urban youth. According to the Ethiopian Central Statistical Agency and IOM (CSA and IOM, 2021), the rate of unemployment among urban youth in Ethiopia in February 2021 is 23.1 percent, of which males were 15.9 percent and females were 28.8 percent. At a much lesser rate, unemployment among rural youth sets at 8.1% in February 2021 (11.6 percent for female and 5.1 percent for men) (CSA, 2021). In the same vein, many empirical studies have shown that, though there are significant improvements in educational attainments, there has been less job creation that can provide employment opportunities for newly produced job seekers (Crivello et.al, 2021). Although the Ethiopian government has expressed a commitment to enhancing youth living standards by offering livelihood opportunities, such as small and micro-enterprise loans, the CSA 2021 survey reveals a 3% increase in national unemployment of youth from 5% in 2005 to 8% in 2021.

Unemployment rate among the youth differs across gender and residence patterns. Young women in Ethiopia face significantly higher unemployment rates compared to young men (28.1% vs. 14.4%) (Wolday et.al. 2018). Youth unemployment is also a bigger challenge in urban areas compared to rural areas, at a rate of 25.3% in 2018 (UN, 2020). Young Lives report (2013) showed that "unemployment is typically not an option in rural areas", where agriculture is the main livelihood. While job opportunities in the commerce and industrial sectors have risen in recent years, the agricultural sector employs the majority (68%) of workers (CSA, 2020). However, in rural areas, the country is experiencing fragmentation of farmland, landlessness, land acquisition for industrial agriculture, and limited alternative to non-agricultural income generation, threaten the future of rural livelihoods. These factors could lead to increased internal and international migration (IOM, 2017, Adugna, 2019). This shows the vulnerability of the agricultural sector despite employing the majority of workers. There is also the potential for this sector to struggle in the future, potentially

leading to job losses and migration. This creates a precarious situation where many people rely on agriculture for work and the sector itself faces challenges that could threaten those jobs.

The rapid rise of the labour supply is the most distinctive feature of Ethiopia's labour market. Because of the young-dominant demographic composition, the labour force is rising significantly. In fact, due to agriculture's absorption capacity and lack of decent job opportunities and labour market improvements, a large number of the youth are unemployed or underemployed, idle, or engaged in seasonal labour migration. These difficulties are perceived differently by young women and men both in urban and rural areas owing to gender and other systemic disparities. Women, who are deprived of decent work are frequently concentrated in the informal sector, facing an even more challenging situation (Schmidt and Woldeyes, 2019).

Unemployment rates in Ethiopia are highest for the age group 20-24 years old (25% in 2018) and for urban young women (Ulanda, 2018). The estimated underemployment rate of 25% exemplifies this, as the labour market has not increased sufficiently to provide new jobs (Schmidt and Woldeyes, 2019). The labour market in Ethiopia is experiencing strong demographic pressure as every year there is more than 2 million youth enter the labour force. Evidently, there is a clear disparity between labor force growth (on the supply side) and potential job creation (on the demand side).

Educational attainment is another crucial factor for the low employment rate of youth, who are less likely to pursue their education beyond primary education. According to USAID's situational analysis of youth in Ethiopia (2018), the country has the highest primary school dropout rate compared to other African countries (more than 80% in rural areas). Failure to pass national examinations to pursue education in upper-secondary schools and universities is thus another challenge for the Ethiopian youth where formal education is believed to improve knowledge and skills that are required in the job market (USAID 2018). Literacy of the youth is considered low in the country; at a rate of 72.75% in 2017.¹ This is attributed to many

¹ <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1261335/youth-litera->

factors, including distance to school, poverty and low household income, limited supply of school materials, lack of qualified teachers, child marriage, and migration (USAID, 2018). In the meantime, the education system in Ethiopia is reported to be of poor quality and misaligned from the interests of young people, which leads to withdrawal of the youth from formal education. For this reason, more young women and men are engaged in the informal sector (all economic activities that falls outside formal regulations, including employment, production and sale) to earn their livings. Again, income-generating activities that young women and men engage in are highly gendered, and only a few young women can establish viable businesses (Crivello et al., 2021).

Further to the challenges, the COVID-19 pandemic, ongoing inter-ethnic conflicts and the violent war in Northern Ethiopia, which resulted in school closures, disrupted learning, hampered mobility and endangered the well-being and futures of the youth in general (Mekonnen and Tedla, 2022). Limited opportunities for civic engagement across all regions, lack of employment opportunities, the social, economic and political marginalization of youth and the 'immaterial' education system have caused frustration among the youth, thus their increasing involvement in conflict (USAID, 2018). The youth have been participating in disputes nationwide and are more inclined to engage in risky and destructive behavior (Mehari, Tewolde and Christian, 2017) in the past few years. The implications of youth frustration impact their health, as well as the health of their families, communities, and the country as a whole.

Theorizing youth aspirations and resilience

Conceptually, youth aspiration is built on the approach and measurement of its components under the definition as 'a strong desire to achieve something high or great'. (Huijsmans et. al, 2021). Accordingly, we understood the concept to apply as a desire to achieve a socially acceptable goal in Ethiopia. Researchers Kasser and Ryan (1996) developed aspiration measurements to include intrinsic factors, including personal growth, community service, and intellectual growth, and extrinsic factors involving economic success, acceptance, fame, power, and health as life achievements (Pretorius, 2018). A widely shared conceptualization

of aspiration revolves around the desired self, involving ideal goals and prospects (Liang and Zuexi, 2020). Our research views these prongs as comprehensive potential alternatives for youth lives in line with the enrichment of aspirations, including future self. Relatedly, we emphasize aspects of hope, expectations, and dreams in our analysis as unwavering and pragmatic aspirations together with realistic plans. We adopted criteria for aspiration in youth life within their social environments based on their present experiences and under the influence of social and economic structures (Hart, 2016). Combining these approaches within the above framework we base our analysis on the premises as life of Ethiopian youth taking place in social institutions, including family, friends, networks, education, employment, government and other related entities. We map these components to understand how they are regulated by norms, values and positions. Integrating youth equation through understanding youthhood and youth informality, we analyze aspirations in perceptions of good life, interests and attitudes, and paths chosen to succeed.

While aspirations provide a lens onto potential change in youth lives, resilience is the greatest tool for how these people endure. Resilience promotes agency on the part of the youth in dealing with and coping with crises. Nonetheless, conceptualizing resilience has been difficult due to the absence of a common theory applicable in all contexts, making it particularly challenging to measure it (Ungar et al. 2008). Despite its complexities, researchers have retained resilience as a critical concept in understanding youth experiences through risk and protective factors (Windle and Bennett, 2011). These factors differ for youth in different contexts, even for males and females in the same setting. The youth may demonstrate resilience and adaptability, a closely related concept, in one domain but not another (Camfield, 2012). Literature on youth resilience in Ethiopia is thin and limited to small-scale methodological approaches. In our research, acknowledging its complexity and considering our aim to shed light on intervention needs, we endeavoured to gain a broad understanding of youth resilience using a range of protective mechanisms across the domains that contribute to resilience. We analyze strength by examining both intrinsic and extrinsic protective factors among the youth (Windle and Bennett, 2011). Following the model of Lerner et al. (2005), we shed light on these

factors in relation to individual, family, school, and community factors in line with signs and complexities of resilience, capacities involving access to resources, networking and youth decision-making. We further attempted to understand how the youth build resilience through relationships, sense of purpose and belongingness, the local environment and other prongs.

The above-described theorization of aspirations and resilience served as the rationale for meeting our research objectives and was the basis for structuring the sections of the report. We have addressed the abovementioned issues with varied depth in consideration of priorities set by the research team.

Methods and data analytic frameworks

Our survey collected data on five variables to generate gendered information that identifies urban and rural contexts. Each of these dimensions were addressed using a set of questions organized under each making up the tools for data collection. Data was gathered through qualitative and quantitative methods. We produced evidence on core variables: (1) youthhood, (2) aspirations, (3) adaptability and resilience, (4) policy environment, and (5) Relevance to Mastercard Foundation (MCF) programs. We took measure to generating evidence on youthhood taking it context-specific and influenced by the perception of young women and men and that of their peers. We gathered information on the self-understanding of youthhood, perception of good life, aspirations, and resilience and how this has been a challenge or opportunity in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Research Question and Design

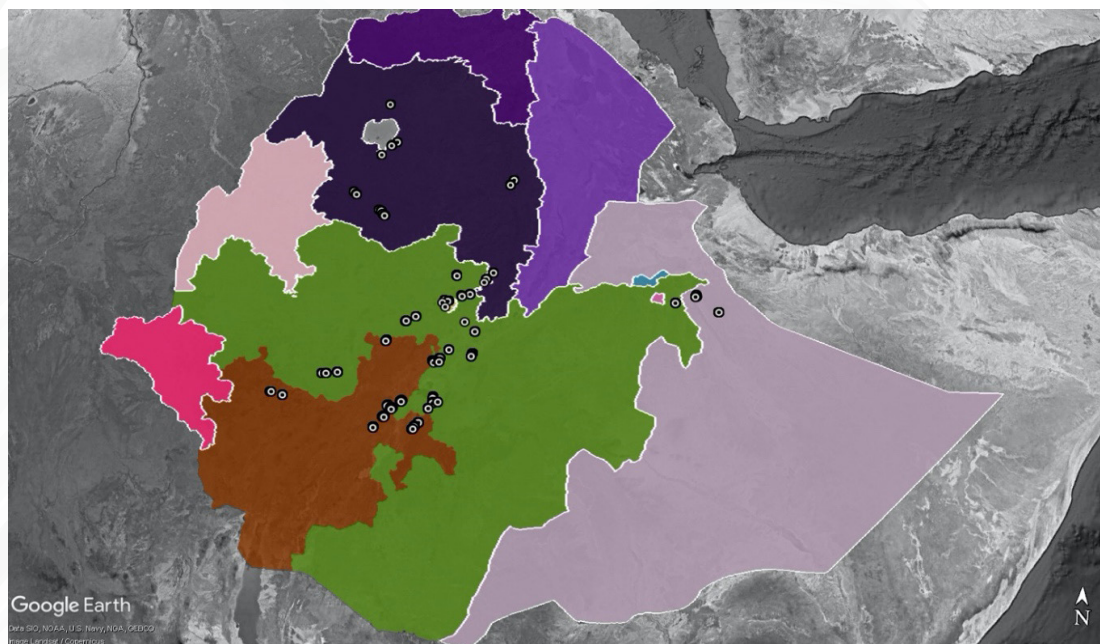
The overarching question is What are young women and men's aspirations and what adaptability and resilience strategies are employed in the pursuit of these aspirations especially in the face of militating policy, the COVID-19 pandemic and other challenging environments? This is broken down into groups of questions that consider first, the concept of youth and youthhood; secondly, the significance of the enabling environment through the lens of job circumstances, perception of good life, and challenges aligned with norms and values; thirdly, aspiration of the youth in the state of future orientation; fourthly, resilience

as understood by the youth; and finally bringing these areas together, to identify paths to sustainability, which will lead into the project's approach to impact. The methodological design involves a careful sequencing of quantitative and qualitative approaches. We collected a bulk of empirical data using a mix of methods which provided us with detailed cross-sectional understanding of youth aspirations and resilience responding to our research question.

Quantitative data

A baseline randomized survey was used to ensure that questions were comprehensible and incorporated relevant local context. We conducted the survey using tablets and the source SurveyCTO software. The questionnaire comprised core sections where 1,555 subjects participated in multiple woredas across seven regions of Ethiopia, including Oromia, Amhara, SNNPR, Southwest, Sidamo, Somalia, and Addis Ababa. We maintained the spread of interview data points at the zone and woreda levels, capturing geographical heterogeneity (See figure 1).

Figure 1: Geographical spread of interview data points (Developed by the researchers)



The selection of respondents within households was stratified by sex to ensure a gender balance and to understand the gendered variations of the variables. The proportion of male and female youth respondents was approximately the same, with 50.3% male respondents and 49.7% female survey participants.

We also maintained age distribution within the defined youth age-range of 15-29. Based on the study's objective, all survey respondents were 15 to 29 years old. Of the total study participants, 44.7% were between the age group of 15 – 20 years. The remaining 34% and 21.3% were in the age groups of 21 – 25 and 26 – 29 years, respectively.

Among the surveyed participants, 76% were from rural areas while 24% from urban areas. The educational status of respondents revealed that 40.1% completed primary education, 41.3% have completed secondary school, 3.1% were diploma certified, 6.8% had BA/BSc degree, 4.9% were postgraduates, 0.6% had certificate level, and 3.1% had no formal education. Regarding employment status, 47% were employed or in their own businesses, while 53% were not employed.

The analysis showed that out of 1,578, 57.6% were never married, and 30.9% were married. 8.9% lived together but were unmarried, 0.9% were separated, 0.3% were widowed, and 1.3% were divorced.

Table 1. Socio-demographic Background of Participants

Variable	Category	Percentage (%)
Sex	Male	50.3
	Female	49.7
Age	15-20	44.7
	21-25	34.0
	26-29	21.3
Location	Rural	76.0
	Urban	24.0

Education	Primary	40.1
	Secondary	41.3
	Diploma	3.1
	BA/BSc	6.8
	Postgraduate	4.9
	Certificate	0.6
	No formal	3.1
Employment	Employed/Self-employed	47.0
	Unemployed	53.0
Marital Status	Never married	57.6
	Married	30.9
	Living together	8.9
	Separated	0.9
	Widowed	0.3
	Divorced	1.3

Sampling Strategy

The multi-stage cluster sampling technique was employed due to its suitability for studying large, geographically dispersed populations. This approach was chosen to ensure the national representativeness of the data and enable comparability across regions. The sampling process began with the selection of regions, followed by woredas, kebeles, and ultimately households, based on the country's administrative divisions. In Addis Ababa, sub-cities were selected, while in other regions, kebeles served as the lowest administrative units, with households sampled accordingly.

The study population is youth aged between 15 and 29 years in Ethiopia, based on the Ethiopian National Youth Policy of 2004. This study targeted young women and men across seven regions of Ethiopia. The total population of this study include 25,541,415 young men and women aged 15 to 29 based on the 2021 Ethiopian Statistical report of labor force and migration survey.

$$n' = \frac{n}{1 + \frac{z^2 \times \hat{p}(1-\hat{p})}{\epsilon^2 N}}$$

The sample size is calculated using the RAO soft sample size calculator, where the confidence level is 95%, a margin of error of 2.5% and a population size of 25,541,415 from all the selected regions. RAO soft sample size calculator is based on the following:

Where:

z is the z score

ϵ is the margin of error

N is the population size

\hat{p} is the population proportion

The sample size estimate using the above calculator was 1,537, and an additional 1% (n=15) of the sample size was added to account for the non-response rate. The estimated sample size for the study was 1,552, distributed proportionally among the selected regions.

Table 2. Sampling Size Distribution

Region	Population	Pop. proportion	Sample size distribution (n=1,552)	Rural	Urban
Oromia	9,874,973	38.7%	600	470 (79%)	125 (21%)
Amhara	6,423,638	25.1%	390	294 (76%)	93 (24%)
SNNPR	4,286,453	16.8%	260	204 (79%)	54 (21%)
Southwest	760,845	3.0%	46	48 (80%)	12 (20%)
Sidama	1,426,275	5.6%	87	68 (79%)	18 (21%)
Somalia	1,575,551	6.2%	96	79 (83%)	16 (17%)
Addis Ababa	1,193,680	4.7%	73	-	72 (100%)
Total	25,541,415		1,552	1162 %	390

1.1.1. Qualitative data

Qualitative data collection followed a sequential explanatory approach, complementing our quantitative data. This method involved collecting qualitative data simultaneously with quantitative data, with selected cases from the quantitative data chosen to provide deeper insights into specific areas of interest. These were sequenced in the research process to follow the survey and allow further investigation of any patterns emerging from the initial analysis. We used purposive sampling strategy to identify and select respondents with a sample size primarily considering saturation and other aspects including logistics and feasibility. Interviews were unstructured oral histories, exploring all elements of the concept of youth and youthhood, youth aspirations, and resilience. In total, we worked with fifty-two (52) participants using two qualitative methods: Focus Group Discussions and Key Informant Interviews. Focus Group Discussions (FGD) participants were selected reflecting heterogeneity in terms of living condition, gender, family structure, parental economic status, and other markers. Our Focus Group method offered a more balanced and 'argued-upon' view on issues than can be provided by the survey. Our team facilitated the discussions where an issue would be raised, and members of the group given the opportunity to enter conversation with each other. Further, we used participatory techniques and energizers to encourage participants to engage in conversations. Our role helped to get the discussion going for ideas, attitudes and experiences to come out naturally. FGD of 21 groups comprising six to eight participants were conduct-

ed taking between 50 to 180 minutes. There was a deliberate effort to ensure that gender and disability was observed in Focus Group Discussions (FGD) holding separate FGD sessions for males and females, and people with disability to delve into issues that concern them as separate entities.

Correspondingly, semi-structured interviews with 25 key informants believed to have knowledge on the subject under inquiry took between 30 to 70 minutes. These were arranged in conjunction with the Utafiti Sera inception workshop held in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, in March 2021, several of whom were involved in the interviews. The Utafiti Sera inception workshop was thus one of the data collection methods used in the research. A checklist of key items was developed for interviewing key informants at national, regional, and woreda levels, whose duties cover involvement in youth programs or providing insights into relations between the youth and government. Stakeholders, including government officials in different capacities, youth associations/federations, CSOs, INGOS, Ministries at the federal level, and advocacy groups, were included in the key informant interviews. We found data saturated with the above number of interviews with key informants, which allowed the team to decide that the information was sufficient.

Sampling Strategy

Key Informant and FGD participants were selected using purposive and snowball sampling techniques based on criteria of knowledge, relevance of their daily work to the theme of this research, experience, and willingness to participate in the study. A total of 28 key informants were interviewed across all the seven regions included in this study. On the other hand, 25 FGDs, comprising 8 to 12 participants, were conducted in the seven regions.

Table 3: List of Key informants

Source of KIIs	Key Informants	#KIIs
Federal Level	Ministry of Labor and Skills Ministry of Education Ministry of Women and Social Affairs Ministry of Urban and Infrastructural Development	4
	Un Women YMCA YWCA	3
	Youth Federation Youth Association	2
	New Bright Community Development (CSO) Youth advocates (3)	4
	Policy and research institutes (GAGE)	1
	Regional Level	Regional Bureau of Women and social affairs Regional Youth association
Total		28

Table 4: List of FGD participants

Regional level (7 regions)	3 FGDS per region	1 male only 1 female only 1 mixed (Female & Male)
Federal level	Special group FGDs	4 PWDS
Total		FGDs

Research ethics

The entire research work was guided by clear, conventional scientific, ethical procedures while keeping in mind some county-specific ethical concerns. To this effect, ethical clearance was obtained from the Ethiopian Society of Sociologists, Social Workers, and Anthropologists (ESSWA) after submitting the research proposal and protocols in the initial phase of our research journey. A formal letter of support was also received from Addis Ababa University to conduct the data collection in selected study areas. Before the interview, informed consent was obtained from all respon-

dents/informants. The informed consent included ethical components regarding the objectives and content of the study, privacy and data security, voluntary participation, the right to refuse or skip any questions without consequences, and the source to follow up regarding complaints or further information on the study. Verbal/written informed consent was obtained from each survey respondent and KIIs and FGD participants. Further, we retained the confidentiality and anonymity standards using pseudonyms throughout the qualitative analysis in the report. Recognizing that research is ‘two-way,’ we took caution to inform respondents of their participation to make them feel a sense of

ownership and involvement in the data collection process. Greater two-way feedback processes paid off, resulting in lower attrition rates. Moreover, culturally sensitive and unacceptable questions were removed, which we established during the pilot --testing of the tools.

1.1.2. **Data analysis**

Information gathered through the aforementioned methods was triangulated to reveal reality and respond to the research question. Data obtained through the survey method was statistically analyzed using SPSS data analysis software packages, the results of which were analyzed, summarized, and presented in multiple statistical forms. The statistical outputs are presented in the form of figures, frequency tables and charts. We performed descriptive statistics together with higher-level relationship analysis using predictors. The results from the survey were disaggregated by various socio-economic and demographic indicators.

Qualitative information was examined thematically, emphasising information interpretation, classification and link-making. The audio-recorded data was first transcribed, translated, and noted on paper, making it ready for analysis. Information from field notes was processed, followed by coding and categorizing using NVIVO to generate a reasonable number of themes to interpret. We carefully analyzed relationships between identified themes and categories, mainly based on the information gathered through observation, which helped develop narratives and case stories. Finally, interpretation was conducted based on the identified themes/categories. To ensure the scientific rigour of the data (credibility, dependability, and transferability), we used constant comparison throughout the data analysis process with various verification processes such as negative case analysis, constant comparison, and triangulation by data sources. Consequently, rigorous quantitative and qualitative information was analyzed based on the views and insights of participants. Essentially, we used Gender Analytical Frameworks (GAFs) to capture gender differences and take on an intersectional approach.

KEY FINDINGS

Youth and Youthhood: Perceptions of the young and community

Though the term “youth” is a biological age category, unanimity was not realized among study participants as to what youth and youthhood entail. For some, it is the time between childhood and adulthood, involving physical growth, psychological maturation, and social and economic independence. For some others, youth is understood in relation to expected social roles, obligations, and fulfillments of various socially marked expectations depending on specific cultural and socio-economic environments. It also implies certain rights and duties, social responsibilities, individual drive to achieve independence, moral and social expectations, rites of passage, and experiences different from those of adults and children.

Our findings from KII and FGD revealed that youth and the transition to youthhood have a variety of meanings in various cultural contexts. For example, in some cultures such as Oromiya, SN-NPR, and Somali, undergoing circumcision, which takes event between the ages of 10 and 15 years, was seen as a sign that someone is ready to take on the responsibilities of adulthood. Getting married was also cited as an important attribute of youthhood. Focus group participants stated that several factors, such as achieving financial independence, leaving the parental home, and beginning a family, can determine a person’s attainment of youth. Both young men and women participants believed that being young is a crucial period characterized by self-assurance, accountability, improvement, a refreshed sense of purpose, thinking beyond oneself, and feeling responsible for family, the community and the country.

On the other hand, we found study participants who believe that youth is not a biological age category but a state of mind. They described such a state of mind as you are only as young as you feel, and that age is just a number. A male focus group participant resonated with these thoughts and said that:

“I believe that youth is a time of exploration, learning, and personal growth regardless of your actual age because people tend to learn and grow from their experiences,

regardless of their age” (Male FGD, 21, Hawassa).

Further, several participants in the focus groups described youth as a social construct than a biological age specification. The importance of understanding youth experience in terms of their lived realities rather than simply relying on the traditional markers of age emerged emphasized in the discussions. Narratives in our interviews underscored that the youth and the community see youth and/or youthhood as a stage that comes with special opportunities and challenges, such as going to school, getting a job, making independent decisions and facing the consequences, and forming close relationships with people who necessarily are not in one’s immediate family.

We asked how the youth and the community perceive the characteristics of a proper and good young person to recognize and understand the role of social expectations aligned with norms and values. We found that what it entails to become a ‘good young man’ or a ‘good young woman’ is explained in terms of the existing norms deciding on the appropriate and acceptable behaviour for men and women in that community. Participants in the women’s focus group discussions qualified as a ‘good young man’ based on what they should abstain from. While recognition was given to good characteristics, many participants focused on bad habits that a “young man” should avoid. They conversely shared the idea of a “good young man” as one who does not cheat, consume alcohol, smoke cigarettes, use drugs, gamble, or act inappropriately, deviating from the standards and values of his community. This came out in women FGD participants in all the sites of the research. Correspondingly, both young men and women appreciated a “good young man” with desirable qualities such as being business-minded, creative, an entrepreneur, capable, responsible, reasonable, a hard worker, one who is always willing to learn new skills, productive, actively participate in solving community problems, being a model for others in his achievement, and has a keen interest in participating in community activities. Some of these characteristics also apply to perceptions of a ‘good woman’. In a few instances, in a male-only FGD in Hawassa region, some participants mentioned that a ‘good

young man' is committed and determined to his religion.

On the other hand, while we found few accounts of characterizing 'a good woman' as one who shares some of the attributes given to a good man, discussions were more round-up on a woman's responsibility as a caregiver. We found remarkably consistent responses in studying participants' judgement of 'a good woman' in both men's and women's FGDs. Though we have observed minor variations between urban and rural contexts, a 'good young woman' is typically described by her knowledge and skills in performing care and domestic chores. Having emotional control, being a good mother, sister, being a good cook, being trustworthy and honest, adhering to her family's and elders' rules, and showing respect for her neighbours and other people are all characters of a "good young woman."

While numerical age is key to understanding youth and youthhood, our results confirm that it cannot be taken as the sole factor in determining what it entails. The notion of youth and youthhood is often shaped by perceptions of both the youth themselves and the community in which they live. Socioeconomic positionality, gender, ethnicity, and geographic location impact how different cultures and communities perceive youth and the transition into youthhood. The prominence of norms and values, culture, and relationships strongly emerged as essential factors determining youth and youthhood in different societies. According to the interviews with women, stereotypes and assumptions from social values, norms, and culture have shaped society's expectations of them, impacting their self-perception. More importantly, youth is a concept that directly relates to how youth identities are formed and viewed.

A hopeful road to success and Good Life: Aspirations of young women and men

1.1.3. Defining Success

The Positive Youth Development literature explains success within the concept of thriving, which is 'the growth of attributes that mark a flourishing, healthy young person ... competence, confidence, character, connection and caring (Lerner, von Eye, et al. 2009. p. 568). The term success was subjective to personal interpretation in

our study. Different attributes were cited by participants on the definition and perception of success, while some attributes were shared by most. Though phrased differently, success is associated with economic empowerment and financial independence for many. It is managing one's own life, being independent from others' support, and engaging in work/ business. It is also becoming self-sufficient and securing a decent source of income. Another attribute that came out in our study on success and/or good life is reaching one's own plan or achievement of goals and aspirations.

"I would say I am successful when I achieve my goals and make my mother proud by getting a job and living while taking care of my mother. Success is when I accomplish my goals and repay my parents for what they did for me. That is when I'll say God has made me successful" (Female FGD, Addis Ababa)

"People set goals in their life depending on where they are now. For example, if you ask students in school about what they want to become in the future, some would say they want to become a doctor, and others would say they want to become an engineer, manager, pilot, or scientist. So, the first thing these youth have as a plan is to finish their education and start a decent job and start earning money. Secondly, once they have grown, they plan to help out their family, and thirdly, they think of serving their country. A good young person outlines a plan like this." (Male PWD, Addis Ababa)

"I believe becoming self-reliant in all walks of lives and boosting my confidence is my aspiration. Further, most youth have long desire to engage in voluntary services in order to help the weak and needy sections of the population both in times of peace and during crisis" (Male FGD, Adama)

Results indicate that success also refers to meeting one's own needs and interests. Participants shared that success or a good life is achieved through hard work at a young age, developing saving habits, and properly managing one's own lifestyle. One is perceived to be successful if he/she is engaged in productive work, creating opportunities for others, enjoying an improved lifestyle,

and is independent in meeting one's own needs. Notwithstanding actual circumstances, satisfaction with one's achievement could also indicate success. Competence in knowledge and skills was also mentioned as an indicator of success, mainly about financial security and social capital.

“As I observe from my society and looking at my friends, their goal is to be rich by doing what so ever.” (Female FGD, Sidama)

“When I see the youth in my locality, employment is the main aspiration. The youth sitting on the streets and chewing Khat is not against the concept of work. Rather, they chew Khat and sit in their homes because of a lack of employment opportunities. No one would spend their time that way if there were jobs and opportunities. But we could not get job opportunities. We have tried a lot. For instance, I had a job before COVID-19. During the outbreak of COVID-19, my employers laid me off from my job because they said that business is not working out for them.” (Male FGD, Addis Ababa)

On the other hand, student participants perceive success as related to their educational pursuits. Specifically, learning, graduating and getting

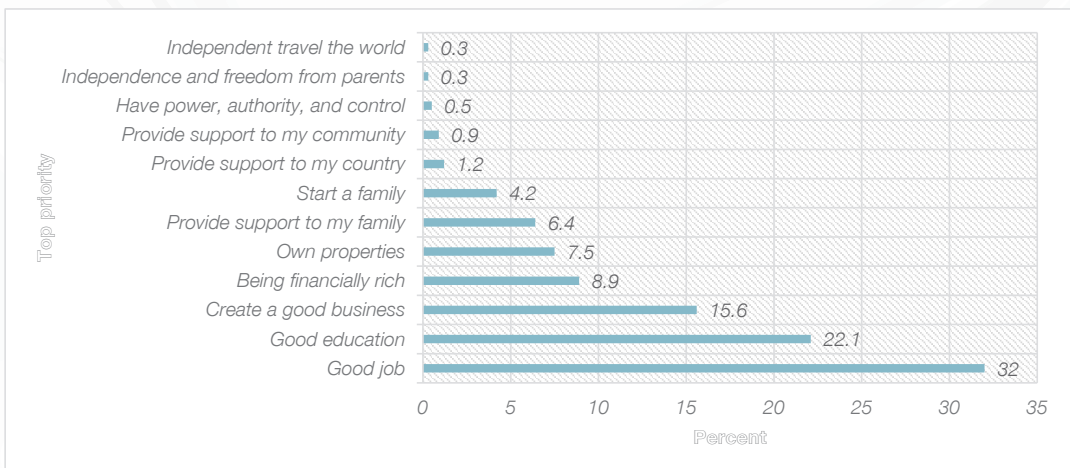
employment for self-sufficiency and economic independence to shape one's own livelihood were mentioned by student participants as attributes of success. They further explained how success can be achieved by properly attending and completing school to become economically self-sufficient and independent.

“My aspiration is to become a physician, and I don't want to fail now. I want to benefit my community by serving through my profession. If you ask my friends in our school what is their aspiration is they will tell you that they want to be a doctor. If you ask females, they tell you that they want to have a happy marriage and life.” (Female FGD, Somali)

We found that the perception of a good life is associated with health and the ability to cater to one's own family. All these understandings and definitions of success by participants are consistent with the literature and mirror the thriving constructs of Lerner von Eye et al. (2009).

Results of our survey confirmed our qualitative findings as a majority of young participants (32%) consider a good job as the priority in success, followed by good education (22.1%), creating a good business (15.6%), being financially rich (8.9%) and owning a property (7.5%) as their top five priority (See figure 2).

Figure 2: Top Success priority



We identified gendered differences in the perception of success and good life. Female participants in our study stated that success is related to getting married and creating one's own family at the 'right age'; the 'right age' differs in context. While the prongs of being independent or self-sufficient were part of young women's definition of success and good life, we have observed that young women seek acceptance by meeting social expectations of success. Comparably, we found in our survey that compared to men, women put starting a family (50.7%) and good education (55.9%) as success at the top of the priority pyramid. On the other hand, for young men, independent travel to the world, providing support to own country, power, authority and control, independence and freedom from parents, owning properties, providing support to the community and family, creating good business, being financially rich, and good job are important attributes of success (See figure 3).

Table 5: Top Success priority by Gender

Life Goal	Female (N=725)	Female Proportion	Male (N=827)	Male Proportion
Good education	55.90%	0.559	44.10%	0.441
Start a family	50.70%	0.507	49.30%	0.493
Good job	50.70%	0.507	49.30%	0.493
Being financially rich	48.90%	0.489	51.10%	0.511
Create a good business	48.20%	0.482	51.80%	0.518
Provide support to family	48.50%	0.485	51.50%	0.515
Provide support to community	46.20%	0.462	53.80%	0.538
Own properties	44.50%	0.445	55.50%	0.555
Independence and freedom from parents	40%	0.4	60%	0.6
Have power, authority, and control	37.50%	0.375	62.50%	0.625
Provide support to my country	26.30%	0.263	73.70%	0.737
Independent travel the world	0%	0	100%	1

The data on life goals reveals distinct differences in priorities between males and females when considering the distribution of responses within each gender group. For females, a higher emphasis is placed on good education, with 55.9% prioritizing this goal, suggesting that academic achievement is a critical aspiration. Additionally, starting a family and having a good job are equally top priorities, each being valued by 50.7% of respondents. This indicates a significant focus on both traditional family roles and career-oriented ambitions. Financial security is also crucial, with 48.9% of females valuing being financially rich and 48.5% emphasizing the importance of supporting their family, shows the importance of economic stability and familial responsibilities.

Moreover, 48.2% of females express interest in creating a good business, reflecting entrepreneurial aspirations, while 46.2% prioritize supporting the community, indicating a balanced concern for

social involvement. Property ownership is significant for 44.5% of females, highlighting a desire for personal assets and security. However, fewer respondents prioritize having power, authority, and control (37.5%) or supporting their country (26.3%), suggesting that political and social power, as well as national support, are less critical compared to personal and familial goals. Notably, independent travel holds no importance for females, with 0% indicating interest, which could reflect cultural or safety concerns, or a lack of resources.

For males, the data indicates a different set of priorities. The most important life goals for males are providing support to their country (73.7%) and having power, authority, and control (62.5%). This highlights a strong emphasis on national support and personal authority, suggesting that males prioritize leadership roles and patriotic duties. Independence and freedom from parents are also highly valued by 60% of males, reflecting a strong

desire for personal autonomy. Good education is prioritized by 55.9% of males, indicating that educational attainment is also a significant goal.

Owning properties is important to 55.5% of males, showing a concern for asset accumulation and long-term security. Providing support to the community is valued by 53.8% of males, indicating a considerable interest in social responsibility. Financial security goals such as creating a good business (51.8%), being financially rich (51.1%), and providing support to family (51.5%) are moderately important, underscoring the value placed on entrepreneurship and family support. In contrast, starting a family and having a good job, each prioritized by 49.3% of males, are relatively less important compared to other goals. The goal of independent travel stands out as the most valued life goal for males, with 100% prioritizing it, suggesting a universal desire for travel and global exploration, likely driven by a sense of adventure or pursuit of new experiences. Overall, the analysis reveals distinct gender-specific priorities: females emphasize education, family, and career goals, while males prioritize national support, personal authority, and independence.

The community's definitions of a successful life for a young person also align with youth perceptions. Accordingly, completing general education, graduating from university, getting a decent job, getting married and establishing a family, and accumulating assets (such as land, house, and car) are considered elements of a successful life. These understandings are often imposed on the youth by older family members.

The first and most important thing is the identification of their interest and goals. Now, the most critical problem is that we often identify their interests, but in reality, we impose our interests on the youth. That means we often define our livelihood by observing/ comparing with the wealthier in our neighbourhood. We often put our interests in relation to others than seeking to find what we really want. If he has a car or sends his/ her children to a better school than you, you want to have the same, but you may face difficulty in getting there because you cannot afford these things as he does. This may be disappointing for you, despising your life. (KII with Youth Federation, South West)

A common assumption observed, however, was the definition of success in relation to aspiration. Participants agreed that one is said to have a successful or good life if he/she fulfils their aspirations and goals; success in life is engaging in work that aligns with one's innate interest. This brings us to the issue of what the youth aspire to.

While it changes depending on gender, age, economic status, educational background, and other identities, participants largely have aspirations that relate to economic independence and education. With the current inflation in the country and scarcity of employment opportunities, the youth aspire to become financially independent through 'profitable' self-employment, most preferably in the trade and service sector.

“The community believes that professionals like doctors are successful. But I don't think we can be successful with education. You can be more successful with business because you can make a lot of money. So, my aspiration is to become a businessman. In this city hotel business, shops and construction material shops makes you a more successful business man. Nowadays, people are more turning to business rather than education.” Male, Bahirdar (Urban)

Our survey results attest to this interest of the youth in business as 47.1% of the youth respondents reported to prefer self-employment while 18.5% prioritized employment. Further, from those who have shown interest in self-employment, 38% of them stated that they would like to run small-scale businesses, while 17.9% anticipate engaging in agribusiness.

Table 6: Preferred sector by the youth

Business	Frequency	Percent
Small scale Trading	448	38.0
Agri-Business	211	17.9
Beauty, fashion, cosmetics	110	9.3
Construction related	83	7.0
Financial service	72	6.1
Others	60	5.1
ICT/Cyber related	55	4.7
Automotive/Transport	53	4.5
Farming	44	3.7
Small café/coffee shop	27	2.3
Handicraft maker	17	1.4
Total	1,180	100.0

As mentioned above, our participants underlined that pursuing education to secure decent jobs is an important aspiration. Obtaining a university degree dominates among participants (47.4%) as indicative of their education aspirations. Despite recent changing attitudes, Ethiopia's youth consider education as the only path to secure employment in government offices. In the past, youth interviewed said that office jobs and government positions were highly respected. Traditionally, young people across different regions and cultures aspired to secure white-collar jobs or government work, which was seen as both prestigious and fulfilling. Informants indicated a strong societal preference for white-collar jobs and government employment. However, this perspective may have shifted in recent times.

The increasing number of unemployed university graduates impacted youth interest in formal education and gave precedence to skill training on successful business or to find a desired job. In line with this, 23.5% of our survey participants are interested in technical and vocational training, while 15.7% are interested in agri-based training. Male FGD participants in Dawro zone supported this tendency of the current youth by stating that young women and men no longer consider the importance of education for success owing to the absence of job opportunities for the educated. They are concerned that educated youth widely remain unemployed and become a burden for their families.

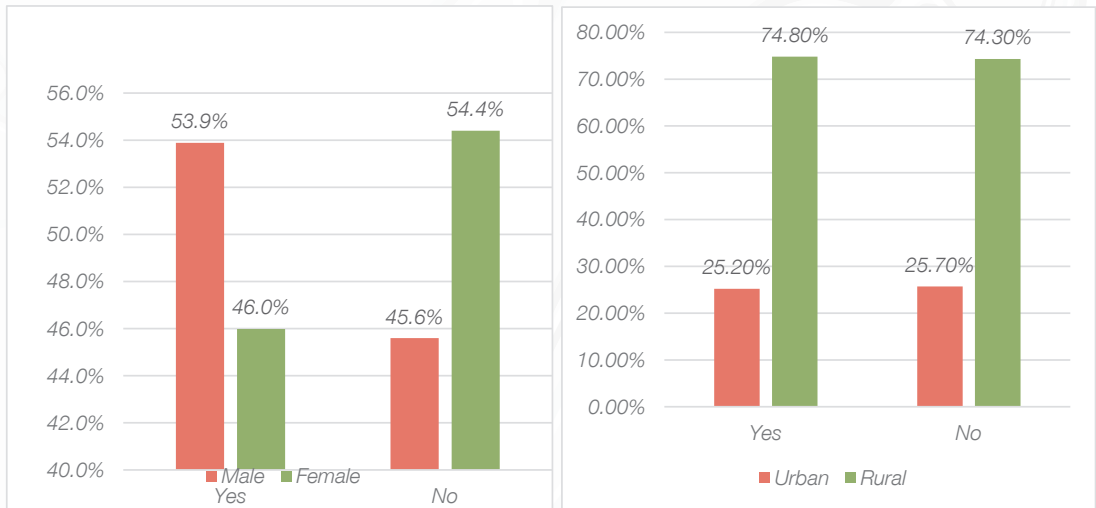
I now believe that taking some five days of training in construction can the youth with important construction skills rather than spending five years in engineering studies. Completing primary and secondary education can be sufficient to equip one with general knowledge, including literacy and numeracy (male fgd participant, addis ababa).

Considering this, tvet colleges provide short- and long-term training for the youth, offering skills that are not part of formal education. They recognize wider gaps between higher education and the labor market in terms of skills and competences. As also mentioned by participants earlier, graduates lack employability skills such as communication, entrepreneurship, computer, and leadership skills, which tvet colleges and other short-term trainings provide. However, according to a key informant at the ministry of urban and infrastructural development, access to skills training is inadequate for the youth to be offered based on their interests and needs.

Apart from economic and education aspirations, we found that the youth also have socio-cultural aspirations, including marriage and migration. Young women and men aspire to marriage and take it to have an important place in their future selves. This is shown in the survey data, as

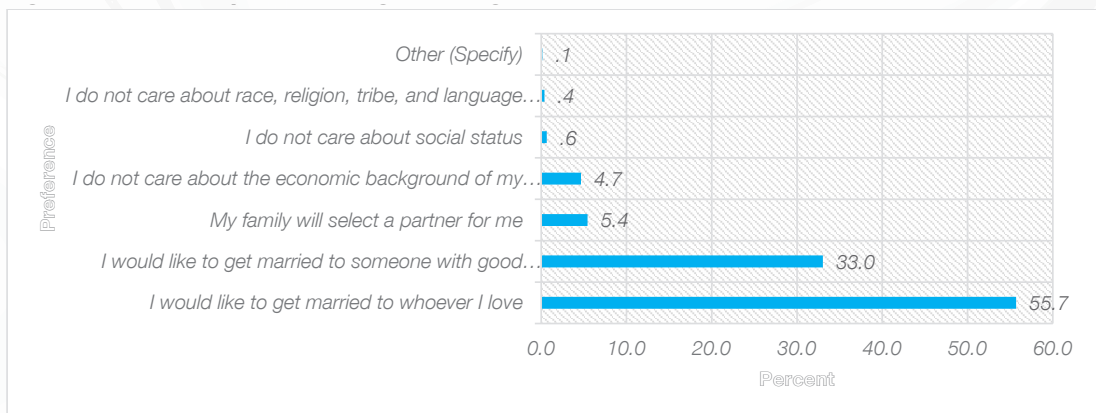
71% of participants stated marriage is part of their future plans. The percentage of young women who have stated marriage as their aspiration is higher than (54%) that of young men (46%) (See figure 4). Similarly, we observed variations based on residence as youth residing in rural areas (74%) are found to have marriage aspirations more than those living in urban areas (26%) (see figure 4). We probed to understand what constitutes a 'preferred marriageable age', which was vaguely described by study participants and left for interpretation by the individual.

Figure 3: Marriage aspiration by gender and urban-rural context



With regard to preference for spouses, over 55.7% of the youth would like to get married to whoever they love, while 33.7% would like to get married to someone with good socio-economic status (See Figure 5). Thus, our findings suggest that marriage aspiration is chosen as a path to realize economic aspirations.

Figure 4: How the youth envisage marriage



Another critical issue that emerged in our findings is migration aspiration. Our survey results show that the majority of the youth (42.2%) would like to stay where they are currently living in five years, while 36.3% would like to move to a bigger city in their own country. We found that only 16% would like to migrate internationally. Reasons for migration of the youth were employment (75.3%) and education (17.0%). This was pointed out with greater emphasis, particularly in SNNPR, Sidama, and the Southwest regional states, where participants mentioned migration as their fundamental aspiration. Excerpts from young men's FGD read as:

“The youth achieve a good life when they leave their localities and start a business somewhere. The first criterion for change in life is leaving your own birthplace. Some youth aspire to work and change in their own country; others want to migrate elsewhere (Male FGD, South Western Region).

“We want to live abroad. Our mind is set on working overseas even without knowing whether it is good or bad out there. The youth think about how to make enough money to live a comfortable life for the rest of their lives as well as their family.” (Male FGD, Somali).

We found that the sense of responsibility of supporting family is a prior motive behind migration of the youth, particularly that of young women.

1.1.4. **Dignified and Fulfilling Work**

According to the Ministry of Labor and Skills, there are five work sectors, both formal and informal, in which the youth are mainly engaged. These include industry, manufacturing, construction, trade, and service sectors. Trade and service sectors create the most job opportunities for the growing demand among the young population. Our findings align with this, as 56.2% of survey participants preferred trading as a livelihood path. In this sector and other available job opportunities, young men have exposure to self-employment or employment because of stronger social networks, freedom of movement, and access to information.

Across gender and residence, and in all sectors, youth aspire for dignified and fulfilling work. Dignified and fulfilling work is an expansion of the decent work concept, which ILO defines as ‘involving work opportunities that are productive and delivers a fair income, security in the workplace and social protection for all, better prospects for personal development and social integration, freedom for people to express their concerns, organize and participate in the decisions that affect their lives and equality of opportunity and treatment for all women and men.’ (ILO, 2008). While variations in what constitutes a dignified and fulfilling job were observed in the interviews we held in our study, we have observed congruence with ILO’s construct.

According to the informants interviewed, white-collar jobs and employment in government

offices were considered dignified in the past. Most youth used to see white collar job or employment in government organizations as dignified and rewarding work across all areas because government employment is highly appreciated in all communities, despite geographic and cultural variations.

“Until recently, families in our community typically assumed that their children would work in the white-collar sector. Most of them only want their children to work for the government because they think people cannot lead better lives by engaging in other occupations. The youth understand what dignified work implies about their own lives and their society. Therefore, what the youth learn from their family and the community clearly influences how they define what constitutes respectable employment. We all grow by being told that white-collar work like medicine, piloting, management, and engineering is given a higher place, so such works are seen as dignified work by the members of society. Works other than this are not given much attention in relation to income and respect” (FGD, Female, Addis Ababa)

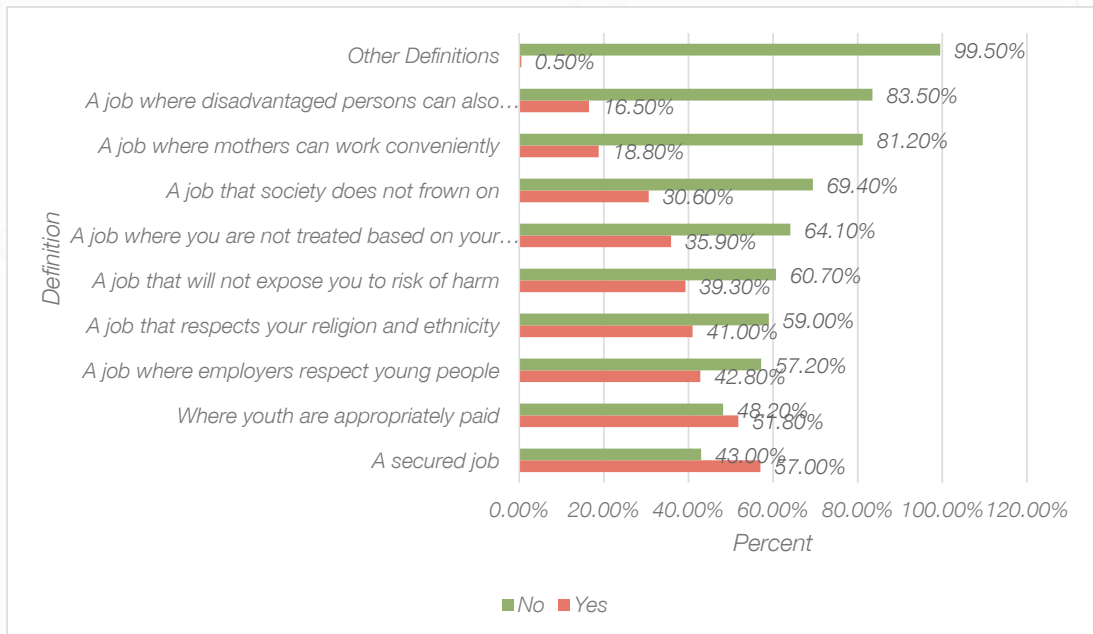
Nonetheless, we observed a shift in this trend as our young FGD participants defined dignified jobs mainly in relation to income, a conducive work environment, and violence-free settings where there are appropriate measures against gender, ethnic, and religion-based violence. Equal pay, unbiased promotion, availability of benefits, room for free expression of ideas and appeal to key decision makers and accountability are among the attributes of fulfilling work. Participants also added that the ability to create employment opportunities for others and thus contribute to the community and the country is also defined as dignified or fulfilling work.

“Dignified work is the work that enables the youth to become self-sufficient, create employment opportunities for others and help their families.” (Female, KII, youth federation vice-president, Bonga)

Results from our survey are consistent with the above as the majority (57%) defined a dignified job as ‘a secured job’, while 51% described it as a job that pays well. Others defined it as a job where employers respect the youth (42.8%), a job

that respects their religion and ethnicity (41%) and a job that does not expose them to risks (39%) (See Figure 6).

Figure 5: Definition of a Dignified Job



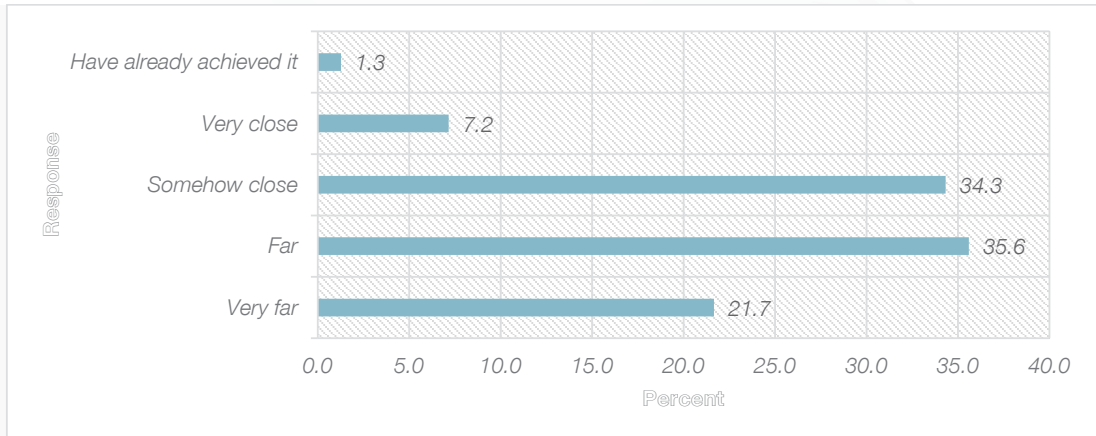
Another important point that came out as an attribute of dignified and fulfilling work is engaging in the field of study from which one has graduated. The youth claim that they are productive if they find a job aligned with their field of study. Complementing this, 36.2% of our survey participants indicated that they are influenced by their interest in the field when deciding what kind of job they want to acquire. Another way of understanding dignified work was revealed to be the level of employees' satisfaction and prospect for career development aligning with the individual's interest. The youth have left their employment and opened their own businesses to pursue their interests. A key informant explained this as:

A young man is now in the business of shoe making. He was a teacher and left his previous profession to join his current business. He told us he bought a minibus with the money he saved from his shoe-making business. He lives in a decent house and enjoys a better life. Leaving

the teaching profession to engage in the shoe-making business requires courage, but was a good decision on his part (KII participant, Ministry of education).

Based on these findings, we infer that what is considered dignified and fulfilling work for one person may not necessarily work for another; it is a subjective understanding. Another perspective that is underscored in our findings is that the concept of 'successful' and 'dignified' work is not synonymous. One common issue in our findings was the lack of knowledge and skills to achieve the abovementioned aspirations among the youth. A key informant from the Youth Association in Adama noted that: *"only very few youth can respond to the complex processes of achieving their aspiration to arrive at enjoying a better life having dignified work"*. Our survey showed that 57.3% feel they are not yet close to living a successful life. The analysis showed that 34.3% stated they are somehow close, while 7.2% feel very close. A very low percentage (1.3%) of those who have already achieved what they envision as a successful life was recorded (see Figure 7).

Figure 6: Closeness to Successful Life



Some of the obstacles to realising a successful life, again the focus remaining on economic aspiration, are lack of money and adequate skills and education. Over 91.1% of the participants consider lack of money (poverty) as a major constraint. In addition, the lack of educational qualifications and relevant technical skills to be engaged in those dignified and fulfilling professions were mentioned as significant problems in our qualitative data. Participants also pointed out a number of factors that contribute to not securing a decent job, including inadequate education and low skill levels, limited employment networks and job fairs, absence of minimum wage policy, the mismatch between educational preparation and available occupations, job seeker attitudes, fear of taking business risks among most youth and inadequate organizational integration.

According to a key informant from the Ministry of Urban and Infrastructure Development, youth working in formal or informal jobs do not receive training tailored to their requirements and interests. Although there are opportunities for education and training, the approaches taken are inadequate. This could hinder the youth from succeeding in their work fields or finding decent jobs. Even educated youth indicated they are struggling to find professions they deem dignified and fulfilling because their education did not equip them with the core skills required for employment.

I believe I didn't get the type of job I wanted because the employers required experience. However, I believe that public and private organizations should allow less experienced employees to gain new

knowledge and abilities. (FGD Female, Bonga)

The study finds that the major barriers for youth to achieve their desired jobs include lack of job opportunities, low-quality education and training, lack of a culture of respect to work, limited business ideas, limited technological advancement, and lack of initial capital to start a business, law entrepreneurship skills, lack of interest and motivation among the youth to start a business, and lack of workplace. Few youth could secure well-paying jobs that matched their education and training. There may not be enough work opportunities for the youth in their field of study when it comes to job opportunities in private and public organizations, which has been imposing challenges to get dignified and fulfilling work. On the other hand, key informants from government offices think that youth attitudes towards specific jobs and lack of entrepreneurial culture contribute to the problem.

The youth also assert that working in their fields of study would make them more productive. However, the limited available occupations do not match the expectations of the youth who have graduated. Among key barriers to securing the desired work are increasing corruption, limited employment networks and job fairs, mismatch of labour market needs, lack of minimum wage policy for labour and contractual employment, and fear of taking business risks. The lack of necessary support and the lack of role model entrepreneurs to empower youth are also mentioned as major barriers.

To secure fulfilling work, everyone requires a little start-up capital or financing. It is a reality that most youth struggle since no one has ever shown them how to start a business. For instance, youth can observe those who start from nothing and end up being millionaires. Such people, however, are reluctant to divulge their insights or strategies for success (FGD, Female, Sodo).

The challenges of dignified work are interconnected with social and economic institutions and policies that have an impact on individuals' working lives and labour market institutions. Hence, the journey to a dignified job is determined by sex, age, ethnicity, educational level and training, social status, and disability. For instance, the youth who finish their education and come from socioeconomically privileged families have an easier transition from school to employment than those who are economically disadvantaged. Young women, in particular, mentioned that they face some obstacles to getting dignified and fulfilling employment due to lack of experience, lack of skills, discriminatory attitudes on their role in the workplace, and prejudiced views towards their position in the workplace. Hence, young women are still discouraged from beginning their own enterprises because of social and cultural barriers.

“Being young and female can pose additional challenges because young women typically face larger obstacles to secure dignified and fulfilling work (FGD, Female, Hawassa).

Disability is mentioned as one of the variables that adversely affects access to good employment. According to disabled FGD participants, some of the most significant barriers to youth with disabilities getting decent jobs are unequal access to education and training, discriminatory attitudes, and a lack of an enabling environment:

“Because no one believes that disabled individuals can perform duties exactly like able-bodied persons, it is difficult to get decent and fulfilling work” (Disabled FGD participant, male Tercha).

Ethnic discrimination and favouritism are obstacles one can encounter in many areas of Ethiopia based on their ethnic identity. Male FGD participants in Addis Ababa identified corruption,

ethnic chauvinism, inadequate funding for start-ups, lack of transparency, and lack of justice as the major obstacles to success in the workplace. On top of this, the available limited fund is released for selected youth with blood relations or some kind of link with higher officials.

“The primary obstacle, in my opinion, to getting your dream job is discrimination based on ethnic background. For instance, if you apply for a professional position at a certain office, the bureau head would ask you to which clan you belong to and will make hiring decisions based on how likely give priority to a candidate who comes from his ethnic group”

In many study sites, obtaining formal education and training is cited as a key component of a successful transfer to desirable employment. The youth claim that knowledge and skills acquired through education help youth identify their talents and areas of jobs and business. Most youth believe that education equips youth with skills that help them achieve their job aspirations. On the contrary, Male FGD participants in the Dawro zone said that the lack of employment opportunities for educated youth causes some young men and women to doubt the value of education for running a successful business or obtaining desired occupations.

“Educated youth widely remain unemployed and become a burden for families. The increasing number of ‘educated unemployed’ has reduced the interests of the youth towards education and training for successful business or to find a desired job.” (FGD, male, Tarcha).

Similarly, male and female FGD Participants in Wolaita said that recently, the community began to look at making some businesses alternatives to education for livelihoods due to growing urbanization and human necessities. For instance, nowadays, many families believe that buying motors and Bajaj for their children is a better alternative to enrolling them in school.

The journey to a decent and fulfilling job in most communities involves not only transitioning from colleges/ universities to employment but also from various other circumstances, such as unemployment to self-employment or from private to cooperatives from informal to formal economic

sectors. Correspondingly, KII participants from the Ministry of Labor and Skill explain that Ethiopia's access to education and skill training has increased over the last ten years. However, education and skills training do not consider the needs of the labour market.

Data obtained from KII and FGD participants also shows that few youth successfully transition from school to the labour market; data from USAID report (2018:1) substantiate this claim by stating higher educational institutions "are not changing the outcomes for young people, as many youth are graduated but unemployed." There are wider gaps between higher education and the labour market in terms of skills and competences. Most graduates lack employability skills like communication, entrepreneurship, computer, and leadership skills. It also emphasises the importance of education and skill development in assisting the youth in securing respectable and rewarding employment. However, this is only true if these initiatives are based on youth needs and talents, are geared at addressing genuine skill gaps in employees, and are more practice-oriented than theoretical.

Our findings suggest that developing life skills, entrepreneurship skills, adaptability skills, and communication skills, among other things, are seemingly important to support the youth to achieve their aspirations. Further, hard work and economic support through access to credit/loans, active participation in social institutions like *Ikub*, skill training, and provision of working space are prerequisites for achieving economic aspiration and success.

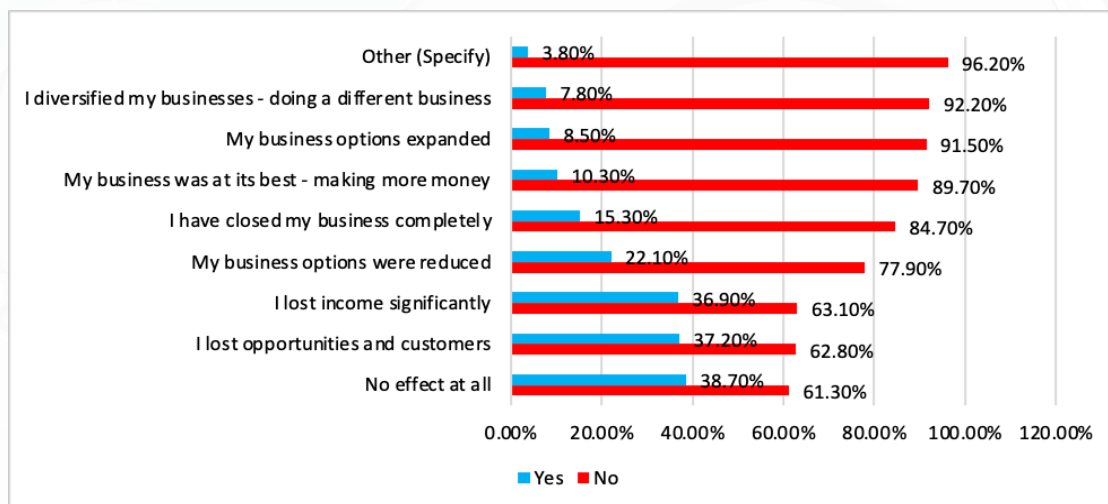
COVID-19 in the eyes of the youth: Challenges and Opportunities

The prevailing impact many of our participants have highlighted is the economic hardship that followed the Covid-19 pandemic. According to Samuel (2021), it was estimated that 2.5 million employment opportunities were at risk and that the income loss of workers and self-employed is likely to be very significant-disproportionately affecting women, youth and vulnerable communities. Among the employed youth, job insecurity was evident in all sites visited in this study during the pandemic; many have lost their jobs. This was more visible and common among contractual employees, where many youth engage. Correspondingly, many self-employed youth have lost their

income significantly while others had to shut their businesses (See figure 8).

Statistically, a number of youth were observed to have been affected, with 36.9% losing their income significantly while 15.3% closing their businesses altogether. Our survey results further indicated that 37.2% lost opportunities and customers, and 22.10% had reduced business options. The COVID-19 effect is more visible among small and micro enterprises, which are mainly predominantly owned by youth and more by young women. Small businesses in the service sector were also highly impacted by the pandemic and the restrictions that followed that lessened the number of customers. In addition, businesses in the informal sector, such as selling food and drinks on the streets, shoe shining boxes, and lotteries, were no longer options for the youth as before the pandemic because of the restriction on physical contact. The impact was further exacerbated by the inoperative savings and credit associations and informal financial service providers (such as *Iqub* and *Idir*), which used to provide financial support for small businesses.

Figure 7: Impact of COVID-19 on businesses



There were limited to no job opportunities for the youth on the lookout for a job. A large number of youth who have lost their jobs went back 'home', becoming dependent and seeking support from their families.

In this relation, according to participants, the impact of COVID-19 pandemic was not easy on their psycho-social well-being during and after. Many reflected that fear was the overriding feeling they experienced as they were unsure whether they had a job or a school to return to after the pandemic ends and the restrictions are lifted. Feelings of insecurity about the future, fear of getting infected with the virus, staying at home for an indefinite period, financial constraints related to the pandemic, and the increasing inflation rate in the country emerged as reasons many felt anxious. While these reactions are universal to a larger degree, we observed some level of urban-rural disparity in the interviews where fear of the disease and wearying of social relations were more challenging for youth residing in rural areas than the economic hardships emphasized by youth living in the urban spaces.

Participants conversely agreed that the transportation ban, closure of offices, shortage of supplies and absence of basic services exacerbated the fear and insecurity many felt during the lockdown issued following the pandemic. Further, fear of exposure to the disease, growing trauma and negative rumours circulating through social media and among the community are attributed to de-socialization. A key informant from Addis Ababa noted that:

It was a time when all people returned and spent most of their time at home. We were stressed and frustrated, forced to spend the whole day at home. Children were not playing with their friends as they used to. Children and the youth were isolated from friends and schools and spent their time social media platforms. The youth were made to rely on social media to forget the new events in their lives. (KII with Youth Association)

In some of the discussions, it came out that the outbreak brought frustration and feelings of hopelessness among the youth. Closure of schools at all levels and uncertainty on when things are going back to normal have led to an upsurge in school dropouts, early marriage for girls, substance addiction, increased domestic burdens, especially on girls, and sexual and physical violence. This and the shutting down of entertainment venues for the youth during the pandemic resulted in depression and boredom among youth.

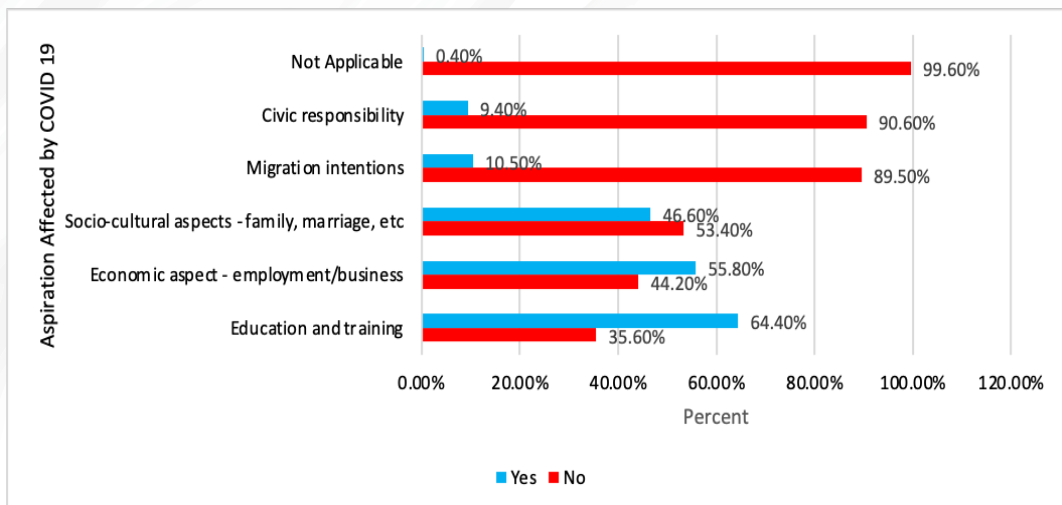
We are at the age of wanting fun and entertainment, traveling around, chatting with different people, and doing our best to change our lives. It is the age we need to be socially and economically actively engaged. And yet, we were unable to do so because of Covid. We were tied to home, unable to go outside and meet our friends as we used to. It was all gloomy. The future was gloomy. There was nothing to hope for. And because of that, many of our friends

ended up depressed. Here in Adama, it became common for the youth to get into substance addiction to get over boredom and depression. What else can they do? You can't blame them. (Female FGD, Adama)

Due to home quarantines and mobility restrictions that were mandatory initially for two weeks and extended by many for months, youth vulnerability to addiction (drugs, cigarettes, khat, alcohol and social media) was aggravated, as expressed by the FGD with young women. Social networking and support groups, including informal institutions such as *Iqub* and *Idir*, were interrupted by limited or no in-person interactions. The pandemic kept

young women and men from their plans and future aspirations. Over 64% of the youth who participated in the survey stated that COVID-19 has impacted their future aspirations. Consequently, their inspiration to learn, work and commit was reported to have changed due to the pandemic. As results of the survey show, over 64% of the youth stated that COVID-19 has affected their education aspirations, followed by 55.8% whose economic aspirations were in shortfall. Other aspects of youth life, including their sociocultural state, migration intentions, and civic responsibilities, were also affected but to a far lesser extent, as shown in the figure below (See figure 9).

Figure 8: Aspirations among the youth affected by COVID-19



For many youth interviewed, they shared that the pandemic 'wasted' their productive age by enforcing home-stay and extending their time in school. Further, interest in pursuing education has sharply declined after the pandemic because of school closures, low school attendance and as a result, failure to pass national examinations, short and tight schedules (semesters), postponed university graduation and other related factors. A female FGD participant described the impact of the pandemic on students as follows:

The outbreak complicated many things regarding budget; we missed cost-sharing budgets for more than a year. I was not personally thinking of returning to campus again. I planned for plan B because I believe life is not just about education. The pandemic made me think about an alternative life path. Initially, plan B was

part of my life plan after completion of my first degree. The pandemic consumed our age. As most employment vacancies are posted in June, the pandemic postponed our graduation and made us miss opportunities to compete for these jobs. We were made to graduate in September, so we had to wait for June to apply for job posts. This made us miss an additional year of employment. We also lost some of our relatives who died of Covid. (Mixed FGD, Bonga)

In all this, our findings show that the impact of the pandemic was gendered. In the FGDs conducted with young men, emphasis was given to job insecurity and restriction on mobility as challenges faced during the pandemic. Meanwhile, young women in most sites stressed school closures and dropouts, early marriage, unplanned/unwanted pregnancy, domestic abuse and violence, and in-

creased household chores as the ill effects of COVID-19. While women were more burdened with household chores, taking care of all family members who stayed at home, the impact on men was reported to be mainly economic challenge, being unable to provide for the family. Exceptionally, in the urban areas of the South West region, participants noted that husbands helped with household chores during the pandemic and thus were able to share better and understand the burden that, under normal events, falls on women. Notwithstanding the heavy burden of housework, in some regions, many spoke about how young women were somehow shielded from contracting the disease as they were staying home at all times.

Conversely, People with Disabilities (PWDs) felt the effect of the pandemic was only worse than others, as the rule of maintaining physical distance blocked the support they get from friends, neighbours, community, and even family members. Stigmatization of PWDs, especially those visually and physically impaired, was visible and felt by participants with disabilities. The closure of institutions that provided safe spaces before the outbreak, as shown in the quote below, had an impact on the well-being of youth with disabilities.

It was a difficult time for me since I couldn't go outside. I'm a musician, which you might find surprising. As a musician, I had to go outside to practice and meet others who write and receive my songs. But I couldn't since I was restricted to leave home and go outside. I'm outgoing; staying

home for six months was such a depressing time for me. It was a hard time. Especially for people with disabilities like me, when we go outside, we need other people's help to cross the road and directions. So, we usually walk holding other people's hands or things. People were not willing to help us for fear of getting the virus. We also had to be extra careful not to get the virus. I was worried that my family might get the virus because of me. It was a really sad time for me. Since we mostly hold hands with others, I was worried that I might get the virus or that I might give the virus to other people. [...] In our community, we had an association for the blind. But because of Covid, the association closed. It made me really sad to see all the blind people outside the association. They printed books for blind people and helped us in many aspects before COVID-19. Its main purpose was to help us interact with people. Now that it's closed, we cannot meet each other to chat and discuss common issues. (FGD with youth with disabilities, Addis Ababa)

Another vulnerable group identified in the study was young women and men living on the street. These youth group lacked the provision of basic needs and protective measures, making them the most vulnerable to the pandemic and victims of its consequences.

Resilience as a response to hardships

Youth resilience is reflected in their commitment to change and improvement. Other aspects that characterize resilience are their positive self-image, emotional regulation, positive thinking, spirituality, and self-confidence. These aspects of the youth were explored in the study as intrinsic factors. Key informants and FGD participants emphasized that keeping a positive outlook through anticipating change, preparing for it, and having an optimistic perspective on the future are important aspects of life. It was indicated that youth resilience is particularly crucial during times of crisis, such as the COVID-19 outbreak, conflicts, natural disasters, and unemployment. The more resilient youth are, the better they can overcome stress, worry, and uncertainty, which can quickly overwhelm individuals and negatively affect their well-being and productivity. According to participants in our group discussions, resilient people exhibit characteristics that include sustaining relationships with others, taking daily care of themselves, redefining obstacles, and building problem-solving skills by acting to change one's circumstances.

The following quotes echoed this perspective:

In my opinion, when we are resilient, we do not ignore or avoid the problems we face rather, we are able to face them with the courage and confidence we need to overcome them (FGD Male, Bonga)

In order to cope with challenges and

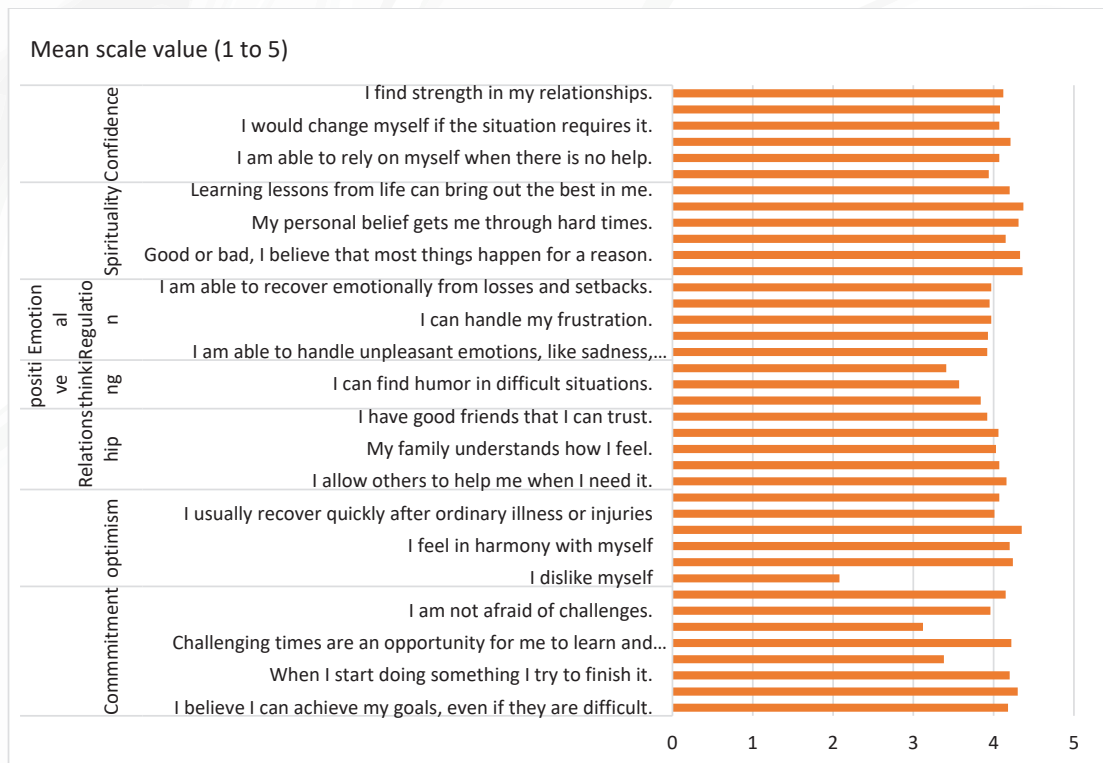
crises in our lives, we often need to avoid being stuck in negative thinking or feeling helpless that comes with hardship and adversity. (FGD Female, Hawassa)

Our study determined how the youth have shown resilience throughout the COVID-19 pandemic by engaging in civic activism, alternative business activities, and social innovation. The youth took advantage of the quarantine to further their hobbies or interests, bond with family and friends, and volunteer to help the elderly and socially isolated. Our data showed that the youth we spoke to developed resilience and problem-solving abilities because of the support they had received. Young men and women stated that friends, teachers, community, religious leaders, and family are essential resources, which are important protective factors when navigating difficult conditions and overcoming challenges. Hence, by providing

emotional and practical support, as well as a safe space for the youth to process their feelings, these interactions as extrinsic factors were found to enhance resilience.

Participants mentioned how talking and venting to trustworthy others helped them resolve challenges and identify potential solutions. On the other hand, peer relationships could turn into risk factors as much as they can be protective factors. Considering this, various elements are associated with such interactions and poor resilience, including unfavourable peer pressure and a lack of familial support. We triangulated qualitative responses with rating questions for the different characteristics that determine the resilience of the youth. We looked at commitment, optimism, relationships, positive thinking, emotional regulation, spirituality, and self-confidence. The results of our survey in these domains are shown in Figure 10.

Figure 9: Mean response scale value of resilience indicator questions



A summary of the mean score of respondents on a five-point Likert scale for multiple indicator questions for each of the resilience characteristics categories is given in the figure above. Our survey results show that respondents revealed more than an agreement (scale score ≥ 4) to the indicator questions, indicating that they have gravitated to being more resilient. These results concur with our qualitative findings, where participants agreed that keeping a positive outlook through anticipating change, sustain-

ing relationships, taking care of oneself, redefining obstacles, and building problem-solving skills by acting to change one's circumstances are some of their personalities showing their resilience, as signs of resilience, the youth engaging in civic activism, alternative business activities, spirituality and social innovation. Therefore, it can be inferred that the youth in Ethiopia perceive themselves to be resilient. However, their self-evaluation also shows a gap for improvement regarding their resilience, particularly concerning commitment and positive thinking.

In line with this, further disaggregation of respondents' self-evaluation of resilience by gender, marital status, and place of residence, interesting differences were observed. Concerning commitment, results found statistically significant differences between the two sexes to the indicator domain "I am not afraid of challenges", where young men show more resilience by responding to the affirmative more than young women (see Annex 1). Statistical differences were also observed in three of the eight indicator domains when disaggregated by rural-urban divide, where the youth in urban areas were more resilient in the domains 'belief in achieving goals', 'belief in challenging times are opportunities', and 'belief in improvement by hard work' than those in rural areas (See Annex 2).

Similarly, looking at the indicator domains for optimism, we find a statistically significant difference between the youth residing in rural and urban areas for two out of six domains, where the youth from urban areas showed more optimism, acceptance of self, and feeling of pride (see Annex 3). We also observed a difference between male and female self-evaluation of resilience concerning the relationship dimension in that young men rely on trustable friends more than young women (see Annex 4). We find a statistically significant difference across the board for the emotional regulation dimension of resilience, as young women are more emotionally affected than young men (see Annex 5). A statistically significant difference was obtained for the relationship dimension for the indicator statement "I can handle my frustration" when respondents were disaggregated by rural-urban divide instead (see Annex 6). The youth's spirituality showed a statistically significant difference when compared between rural and urban residents. Urban respondents had greater self-evaluation and dependence on their spirituality compared to their rural counterparts (See Annex 7).

These results provide useful insights into the importance of recognizing nuances in the youth's resilience, particularly variations in gender and residence. Incubation of policies and programs that are developed to promote resilience should note these variations in better tailoring them to the needs of specific targets.

As we strive to understand the issue of COVID-19 in line with the attributes of resilience, we found that it was not ascribed to only imposing economic, social and psychological challenges on young women and men; it also came out in our study that the pandemic has brought opportunities for the youth. Participants talked about how they were engaged in voluntary activities, raising funds to help the 'needy' with basic provisions, educating others about the disease, cleaning their surroundings, and others. For many, the pandemic came with the opportunity to be viewed positively by their community and provided a sense of becoming part of the solution. This goes on the other side of society's labelling of the youth as 'troublesome', 'problematic', 'insensitive', and 'uncultured'.

Though primarily related to the economic turmoil, 10.3% of the youth in the survey had their businesses at their best, making more money. Those working in the transportation and health sectors had gained more demand in the labour force. Participants also mentioned that the pandemic has created a new work culture trend among the youth. Many youth have been reported to have left employment and engaged in self-employment, encouraging innovations. The insecurity that threatened many during the pandemic has also brought with it good tidings, resulting in the youth's establishment of small businesses, particularly those engaging in online marketing. The virtual world became a platform for the youth in the urban spaces to exploit opportunities that arose during and post covid.

The time we spent on social media and on our phones paid off. It is during the pandemic that many youth started making money using TikTok, YouTube and Telegram. Before, it was a platform we used to waste idle time and for enjoyment purposes only. Now, we are making money out of it while still having fun. The entertainment industry, for instance, was not open to many talented youth. You need connections and networks to get into the business. But now, all you

need is talent and some followers. Once you get popular on social media, you get other gigs, such as on movies or advertisements. This all happened because we had idle time during the pandemic. (FGD with male youth in Addis Ababa)

The youth interviewed in this research repeatedly mentioned social media as a form of alternative entertainment and a source of income. However, for some, the use of social media was also seen as one form of addiction that gets in the way of youth's aspirations and diverts focus on the future. Our study also revealed that the pandemic encouraged group engagements, creating establishments with friends or like-minded people. Participants stated that it pushed the youth to become creative in entrepreneurship, such as making homemade products like fashionable face masks, perfumed sanitisers, soap, food, clothes, and jewellery, and using the online platform for marketing and promotion.

Correspondingly, what was mentioned in several interviews is the advantage the pandemic brought for the youth to get close to their families with more time to chat and play with members and engage in familial activities at home. In the Somali region, for instance, young women mentioned that educated mothers took advantage of the pandemic to closely monitor their children in terms of their studies, nurture, and overall well-being. Some feel the pandemic allowed them to develop and work on their spiritual and religious lives. Religion was a coping strategy for some and, more deeply, a means of justification for the capability of resistance to the pandemic in some regions such as Somali, where it was largely believed that COVID-19 affected only non-Muslims. At the same time, religion and spiritual life provided a shield and sense of safety for others.

Many were seeking comfort in religion during this time. I have seen many of my friends going to church to pray because they were unsure what else could work then. I have also learned a lot about my religion during this time. My family and I strictly observed the end of the Lent season by attending church, which was not the case before. I did not have time to do that before COVID-19. (Mixed FGD, Adama)

Narratives underscored how the pandemic

helped the youth to look inward and make changes in their lives, focusing on setting up alternative goals to adapt to similar situations, saving money for emergencies, staying healthy, performing physical exercise and a healthy diet, and having a wider perspective of life. A male FGD participant expressed how COVID-19 changed his views on his health in the excerpt:

I started to frequently check my blood pressure, sugar level, and other health issues after COVID-19. I started to care for my health much more than before. My views on selfcare and health care have radically changed. I learned the importance of regular health status checkups. COVID-19 has made me fear death more than I feared before (Male FGD participant Sidama).

Similarly, a female participant in a mixed FGD in South West Region explained how COVID changed her views about herself as:

The pandemic made me value my life. I understood the value of my life and existence because COVID was all about breathing. I understood the value of my breath. So, it made me give due attention to my life. I also understood the importance of plan B during the outbreak in similar situations. I felt the need to have more than one plan in our lives because previously, we had only joined a university for education. We hope to graduate and get employed if possible or get married when it is necessary. So it hit me then that if I lost my education, I would have nothing because I am expected to get a job and help my family after graduation. Plan B is important to secure and improve life, but education alone is not enough. It also made me realize that I must care for the individuals I love. It has changed my views on my social, economic and spiritual life. COVID-19 made me stronger in everything (Mixed FGD, Bonga).

On the other hand, participants also agreed that the youth did not take full advantage of the many opportunities the pandemic provided them. To tap into these opportunities and alleviate the challenges, the collaboration and effort of stakeholders such as youth associations, government units, and NGOs engaged in various activities that work with the youth during and after the pandem-

ic is crucial. Using the youth as means to create awareness, volunteering to help the most vulnerable, raising funds, and other activities were common in these efforts. In the post-COVID period, some form of government support was available for the youth to recover from business losses. In coordination with micro-finance institutions, the office of job creation provided the youth with workplaces/sheds and supported unemployed graduates of higher institutions to participate in various business activities per their specialization in sectors like urban roads and building constructions. For instance, the Somali Labour and Skills Bureau provided technical and vocational training for the youth in collaboration with the ILO and built an employment facilitation centre to create jobs for the youth.

NGOs working with the youth also provided support, mainly related to skills training and financial support. YWCA in Addis Ababa is a good example of this, as it has built libraries and safe spaces for young women to spend time together and share ideas during coffee ceremonies during the pandemic. The post-COVID era has shown an increased reporting of sexual abuse, which resulted in the opening of a hotline, *'telela'*, for girls to report violence.

Adaptability

Adaptability is “the ability to be creative and flexible in the face of new situations” (Caroline 2016). The youth have demonstrated multiple adaptability strategies to navigate the terrible effects that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on their life. Though many study participants do not refer explicitly to the concept of adaptability, they indi-

cated some specific elements they employed to adapt to the broad and specific challenges of covid 19 and its ramifications. However, the experience of adaptability of the youth depends on their own specific circumstances. For instance, women who participated in the focus group discussion at Wolaita Sodo explained how the “lockdown” imposed by COVID-19 negatively impacted their capacity to sustain themselves and achieve their educational aspirations.

Similarly, some revealed that they had relocated their business and diversified their sources of income, while others took advantage of different business opportunities made available by the pandemic, such as selling facemasks and hand sanitizer. It is also indicated that the youth used the quarantine to reconnect with family and friends and advance a hobby or interest to reduce anxiety and stress. In addition, religion and spirituality have been repeatedly mentioned to be a strong coping mechanism in the face of major life stressors through the pandemic period.

Our study looked at the adaptability of the youth using indicator statements to measure its level as perceived by participants. As reported in Table 5 below, agreement with the indicator statements was measured on a five-point Likert scale. Results show that they averagely rated all the aspects of responsibility at four and above, implying that they agreed and strongly agreed with all the aspects of the youth’s adaptability. Hence, the youth in Ethiopia are inclined to self-assess themselves as more adaptable to changing economic and social conditions, recognizing their capacity. The adaptability of the youth appears to be consistent across gender and geographic divides.

Table 7: Youth adaptability

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
I am able to think through a number of possible options to assist me in a new situation.	1577	4.08	0.649
I am able to devise a new way of getting out of challenges	1577	4.09	0.713
I am able to adjust my thinking or expectations to assist me in a new situation.	1577	4.1	0.698
I am able to seek out new information, helpful people, or useful resources to deal with new situations effectively.	1577	4.1	0.657
In uncertain situations, I am able to develop new ways of going about things (e.g., a different way of asking questions or finding information) to help me	1577	4.09	0.683
To assist me in a new situation, I can change how I do things.	1577	4.1	0.644

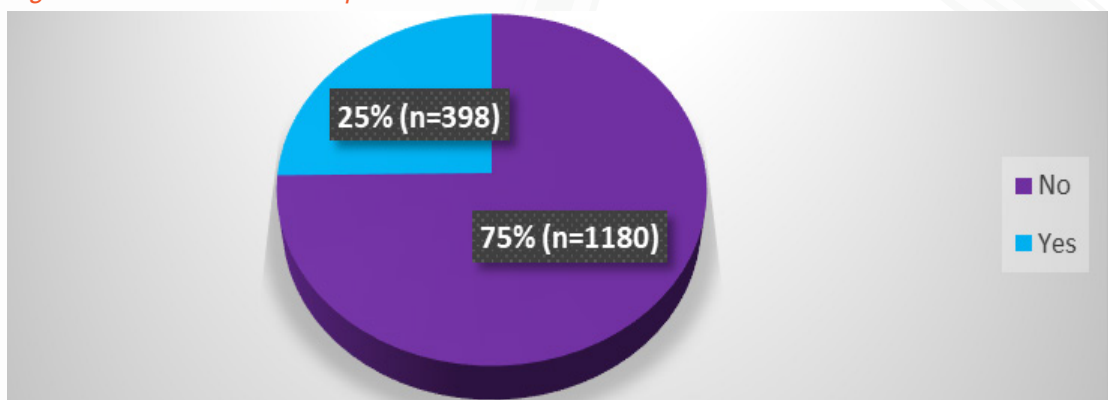
I am able to reduce negative emotions (e.g., fear) to help me deal with uncertain situations.	1577	4.1	0.68
When uncertainty arises, I am able to minimize frustration or irritation so I can deal with it best.	1577	4.01	0.673

The Enabling Environment: Required and Available Resources

Social and structural level analysis of the enabling environment considers factors that have an impact on the youth's future. We focused on factors related to resources that are required and available to the youth that can influence opportunities and aspirations. The youth aspire to start their own businesses, create job opportunities for themselves and others, and have the freedom to make their own decisions and shape their own destiny relying on existing resources. Access to resources, such as education, skills training, networks and information, plays a significant role in shaping the perceptions of current and future jobs among the youth. Similarly, the ability to pursue self-employment or entrepreneurship to achieve financial independence and autonomy is also influenced by the available resources needed and a supportive environment.

Young women and men are increasingly concerned about the realization of having stable work opportunities, entrepreneurial abilities, and essential life skills. Participants talked about their lack of essential business and life skills to become entrepreneurs, start their own businesses, and lead better lives to help their future. Quality education that provides the youth with technical, vocational, core employability, and entrepreneurship skills were cited as the most important among others. Communication, teamwork, problem-solving, and critical thinking were mentioned.

Figure 10: Current ownership of business



Despite the fact that majority of us have degrees from different colleges, most of us lack entrepreneurial skills, awareness of what it takes to start a business, and access to available business development service (Female FGD, Bonga).

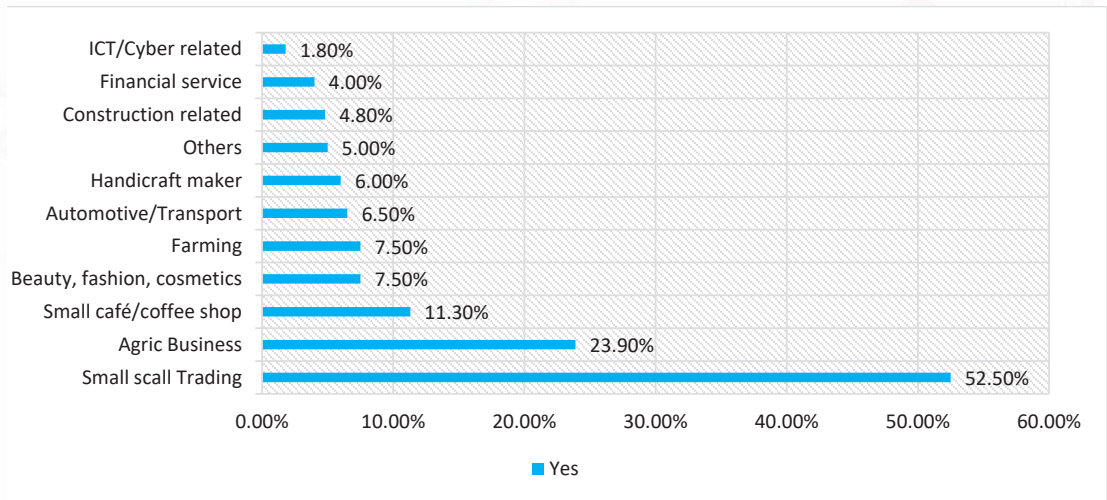
Our educational system lacks skill-focused education and training. It only emphasizes theoretical information rather than learning activities supporting student creativity. Indigenous knowledge is likewise marginalized in the educational system. It prevents students from learning about their environment (Mixed FGD, Sodo)

We need life skills training, entrepreneurship skills, adaptability skills, computer skills and communication skills to advance our abilities and lead better lives in the future (Male FGD, Sodo)

In line with this, the youth in urban areas commonly mentioned that digital and entrepreneurial skills are important in enabling the youth to leverage technology for learning, innovation, and income generation, yet these are in very short supply. These concerns are embraced by the results of the nationwide survey, which revealed only 25% of survey participants reported running a business (see Figure 11) despite a desire sought by many more.

From this aspect, it is important to observe the percentage distribution of the type of business sector the youth are currently engaged in. Thus, a considerable number of those who are engaged in self-owned businesses were primarily in small-scale trading (52.5%) followed by agribusiness (23.9%) (See figure 12). Participation in more financially rewarding businesses such as financial services (4%), ICT-related businesses (1.8%), or construction (4.8%) are found to be very low.

Figure 11: Type of business by sector



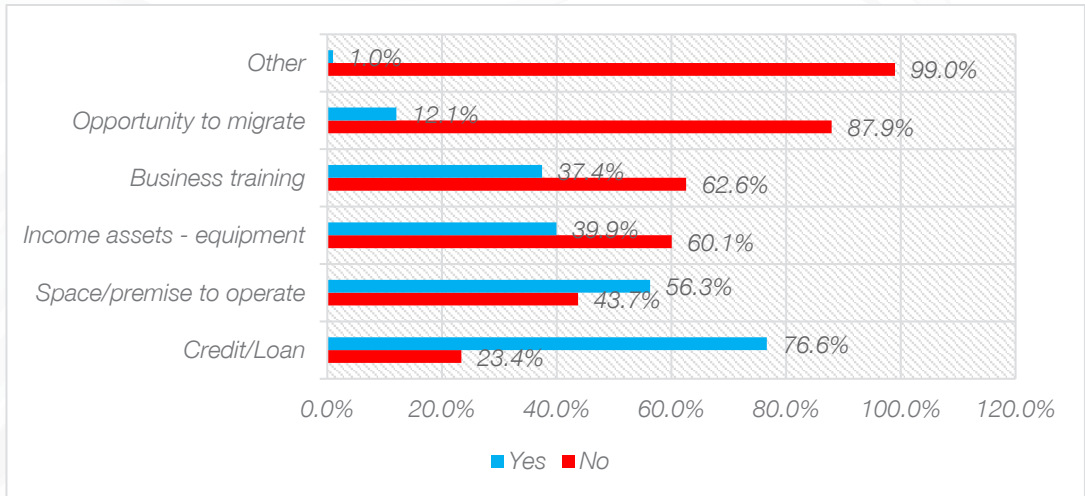
Relatedly, key informants in government stakeholders agree that despite efforts to address some of the most pressing issues facing the youth, their needs and interests are not adequately addressed. Moreover, the government’s capability to promote livelihood opportunities for the youth at zonal and woreda levels is limited, and efforts are insufficiently integrated, leading to a fragmented approach. Government units have little to no budget to facilitate logistics and lack the expertise to implement quality programs for the youth to create livelihood opportunities. Respondents from government and non-government organizations mentioned that there are several youth related policies, programs, packages, and activities that have been initiated by various stakeholders to build on, mostly involving the formation of livelihood groups for the youth, entrepreneurship, activities and linking livelihood groups with micro-finance institutions and saving and credit schemes. Yet, most of these activities appear to be uncoordinated as they are cascaded down to lower community levels. Experts from NGOs and key informants from Youth Federation offices added that the government does not realize the need to involve the youth in all its activities, including policy formulation and decision-making. Inclusive approaches can assist in the effective implementation of policies and programs meant to be for the youth.

Respondents from government offices reported that they have the manpower and skills in training and facilitation to implement youth-related policies and programs. On the other hand, it was also consistently mentioned that many of these offices still face challenges in providing support to the youth. These offices working on and with youth issues lack the skills and knowledge to support the youth’s livelihood development, micro-finance, or entrepreneurship programs. While some offices are engaged in a few employment activities for the youth, they are not part of the larger strategy on youth related development policy. What is more, different offices from different sectors overlap in the implementation of the same programs. Such incoherence in efforts results in poor implementation and unnecessary waste of resources. This calls for a collaborative approach between the stakeholders to revitalise development efforts for the youth.

In addition to the absence or limited availability of training and coaching on employability and enterprising skills, the youth find financing constraints to start a business, maintain an existing business, or expand their business to be important concerns. For example, survey results show that most youth participants (76.6%) stated they need credit or a loan to start a successful business. Other constraints included physical premises for their

business operation (56.3%), income or assets (39.9%), and business training (37.4%) (See figure 13) as cited in the FGDs.

Figure 12: Current need to make business successful



Our study found that access to resources and opportunities is shaped by gender norms, roles, and expectations. Cultural norms and expectations dictate certain roles and responsibilities for men and women. These norms shape perceptions and stereotypic values of what types of jobs are considered appropriate or acceptable for each sex. Young women FGD participants in Hawassa underlined that certain industries or sectors such as construction, manufacturing and agriculture are perceived to be more appropriate for men, while others in the service industries like hospitality or domestic work are seen to be suitable for women. This creates occupational segregation and gender-based discrimination in the labour market, with young women facing barriers in accessing certain types of employment opportunities and being relegated to lower-paying and low-skilled jobs.

Additionally, socio-economic background, education level, and cultural norms were mentioned as influencing youth's preference and access to available resources. Youth from economically disadvantaged backgrounds may often prioritize finding any job that can provide immediate income to support themselves and their families, regardless of the nature of the job or its prospects for growth. On the other hand, the youth from more privileged backgrounds may have higher expectations of finding employment that aligns with their social status and show reluctance to take up jobs perceived as low-paying. Further, the importance of psychosocial support and life skills to empower

the youth in overcoming stress, emotions, relationships problems, and conflicts, as well as in developing positive beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors was reflected in the discussions.

Our findings suggest that less attention given to the enabling environment, particularly in line with the lack of accessible resources, impacts the motivation and personal determination of the youth to engage in life-changing endeavours. The youth noted that access to skills, financial resources and a friendly enabling environment are constraints that hinder them from growing. Young women feel these challenges are more due to gender roles, norms, and expectations. Women often shy away from assuming or looking for positions or seizing opportunities that are left for the other gender, which otherwise may have been used as ladders for their growth and path to decision-making positions. The significance of these findings is that the equitableness of the enabling environment, as voiced by the youth can encourage them address their concerns and re-evaluate important decisions that can help shift the youth self-defeating internal processes.

POLICY: DOING IT RIGHT

With the aim to address challenges faced by the youth, the Ethiopian government has launched a number of youth-specific policies, strategies, packages, and programs including the National Youth Policy NYP (2004), the National Youth Development Package for Rural Youth (2006), the National Employment Policy and Strategy of Ethiopia (2009), the Rural Job Opportunity Creation Strategy (2017), the Youth Revolving Fund (2017), the Growth and Transformation Plan II, the National Technical & Vocational Education & Training (TVET) Strategy, the Civic Engagement Police 2019 and the Education Sector Development Program (ESDP V) among others.

Evidence from our study shows that the youth aspire to success and have the capacity to be resilient to crisis. On the other hand, our study also found that youth are vulnerable to socio-economic, cultural, health, and other problems that they come to face due to challenging circumstances. While the above policies and instruments are useful resources in building the future of Ethiopian youth, much remains to be done as they are insufficient or have not adequately addressed the dynamic reality of the youth in the country. The policies lack alignment with the needs and aspirations of the youth, which is constantly changing due to a complex set of factors such as COVID-19. Regardless of the change, the policies fail to revise their priorities and target areas to enhance the quality of life for the youth. While several policy initiatives have been put in place, they are far from addressing the reality of unemployment of the youth, which is directly related to the incongruence of focus and youth's capacities/wants. On the other hand, disparities between the focus of policies and potential engagement of the youth create a huge gap between the supply and demand of the produced labour force, resulting in frustrated and confused youth. It is, therefore important to consider where our policies fail to meet their goals, the way they are implemented, and/or the context in which they are placed.

Our study identified numerous barriers and opportunities in line with the youth's development issues, particularly focusing on aspiration and resilience, which range from individual and intrinsic factors to extrinsic factors involving the surrounding environment. We have also identified risk and protective factors related to youth's resilience and adaptability for further policy consideration. It was

revealed that existing policies and strategies/programs are far from catering for Ethiopian youth's aspirations and recognizing their resilience. The challenges in achieving youth's development are embedded within the absence of inclusivity of their voices in developing policies and programs and the prevailing inequalities and inequities that these policies and programs fail to address adequately.

In recent years, the voices of the youth are well heard but better awareness must be created targeting them, proper attention needs to be given and there should be financial support across all structures of the government bodies. Policies formulated at the national level should include youth needs and aspirations, focusing on job creation, entrepreneurship and provision of financial facilities and services. At the national and regional level, we have well-articulated youth policies. Nonetheless, there have been problems in implementing these policies. Thus, timely follow-up and allocated budget should be available to execute them on the ground. The issues of the youth should be mainstreamed and seen as part of the government's agenda, and in such a way, they will become a potential force of development. (KII with youth association, Adama)

We have also observed how traditional social norms, particularly gender roles and norms, retain more weight than formal legislation. Our findings further reveal what the youth aspire to and the resilience capacity that supports them in effectively reaching their goals. In order to fulfil young women's and men's aspirations, the role of stakeholders, including policy decision-makers, should therefore start by including the youth's voices. Policy and development interventions should be aligned to the concerns and needs of the youth, which can only be addressed by the youth themselves. Consensus among stakeholders on views that bring concrete change to Ethiopian youth is important. Accountability, representativeness of the youth (including the diversity within groups), and a bottom-up approach were emphasized by our youth participants as a way to change the current policy environment.

CONCLUSIONS

Our study explored youth's aspirations and strategies used to build resilience and to support the realization of their goals and aspirations. We found that the youth in all regions remain positive about their future despite the multiple challenges they face, including the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. Changes are observed among the youth, and their aspirations result from their experiences during the pandemic and instability in the country. Findings show that young Ethiopian women and men perceive themselves and identify the ability to adapt to current situations and find ways to overcome challenges successfully. For instance, our study revealed that social media has been a major part of the lives of the youth during and after the pandemic in creating safe spaces, entertainment, and economic opportunities. We also found that the youth took some of the challenges they were confronted with due to the pandemic as opportunities to build on their inner strength and extrinsic factors.

Ethiopian young women and men identified their aspirations as more economic and educational, specifically inclined to businesses rather than employment. They also defined their success as being economically empowered and financially independent. In line with education, TVET training has gained significant interest from the youth, although formal education dominates the highest proportion. The youth have identified their skill needs, particularly entrepreneurial, communication and other soft skills, as important elements in achieving their aspirations.

Barriers were also identified in our study as related to resources and opportunities that need to be considered by decision-makers. The youth take these barriers as core explanations for their failure to succeed. Facilitators of resilience, on the other hand, included support from family and friends, social media, school teachers, and other community members. We looked at the pattern in which these aspects of resilience appear both as protective and, on some occasions, risk factors and found intersections. The youth recognize their strength in commitment, self-image, and positive outlook for self as protective factors. They give credit to their resilience, personal agency, hard work and effort to overcome obstacles they face, particularly in the era of COVID-19 – 19 and follow their aspirations for advancement.

Finally, while we recognize a degree of heterogeneity among the regions, it was significant that the typology remained to be youth representing themselves as optimistic, outgoing and active regardless of their challenges. Looking at key pointers, our findings contribute to challenging and changing the narrative of the youth as destructive and ill-motivated, seeking shortcuts to success. It clearly came out in our study that the youth are also very eager to discuss and share their opinions about the issues that matter to their life.

The country has devised policies and strategies for promoting development of the youth. However, as far as achieving it on the ground, vulnerability of the youth is still a concern. There is a need for policy and strategy developed based on the inclusivity of youth's voices and their reality. This can be done in line with youth engaging in indoctrinating inclusivity into all stakeholders. Regarding participation, the youth feel that little has been done for them by the government, development partners, organizations, and the community. Regardless of regional or socioeconomic diversity, the youth who took part in our study highlighted that their voices should be heard and considered in development policies and plans if change is what we seek as a society.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Creating an environment that enhances the youth's success:** One major aspect that can either encourage or impede development is how supportive they feel toward their relatives, friends, and larger social networks. A greater foundation of support for youth's participation in various activities can be built by paying attention to both formal and informal variables in the environment in which youth's employment initiatives are positioned, such as societal norms, rules, and legislation.
- **Bridge the gaps between the supply and demand sides of the labour market to improve employment rates:** The youth need to be active in policy-making to bridge the gap between policy and implementation. Insufficient involvement of the youth in developing policies and programs may result in skill mismatches and reduce their benefits, particularly for vulnerable and excluded youth groups. The involvement of youth can take many forms, including information sharing through discussion, joint decision-making, and co-management. The type and degree of engagement determine how much the youth's voices are heard.
- **Recognizing youth's diversity to enhance development programs:** The youth are not homogeneous. They are different in terms of Gender, age, background (rural vs. urban), socioeconomic situation, ethnicity, talent and other socioeconomic and environmental factors. Employment programs for the youth should, therefore, consider this variability when designing, implementing, and assessing their interventions to customize them to the diverse needs of the youth. These programs should, at minimum, consider gender issues and highlight the unique challenges that young women face when looking for various services. In line with the above, the study forwards the following recommendations that are aligned with the specific stakeholders.

Recommendations		Stakeholders
Government		
Policy considerations	Identify sectors of the economy that aligns to the interests of the youth Youth-oriented entrepreneurial policies and strategies must reconsider the types of entrepreneurial efforts and support that can meet the needs and interests of the youth. Create an entrepreneur-friendly environment that will allow the youth to enter the workforce.	Ministry of Labor and Skills and Ministry of Youth and Sports in collaboration with CSOs and NGOs working on youth

Partnership and inclusion	<p>Create partnerships with diverse businesses, CSOs, universities, youth-led initiatives and other stakeholders to support and establish entrepreneurship initiatives.</p> <p>Create a platform that ensures the inclusion of the diverse groups of youth in policies and strategies to enhance the positive personal development of the youth and the country.</p> <p>Also ensure development programs for youth consider the diversified aspects of the youth like gender, age, background, socioeconomic situation, ethnicity, and marginalized groups, including those with disabilities, impoverished, and minorities. Customize programs in line with socioeconomic and environmental factors that affect the needs of the youth.</p>	Ministry of Labor and Skills and Ministry of Youth and Sports
COVID-19 Interventions	Support young entrepreneurs and businesses against economic challenges that may be caused by various challenges and crises such as COVID-19 and disasters through tax relief for certain period of time, provision of work spaces and market linkage.	Ministry of Labor and Skills, Ministry of Revenue
Monitoring	Proper and continuous monitoring and tracking of the different packages and programs that support and promote entrepreneurship for the youth.	Ministry of Youth and Sports and Ministry of Labor and Skills
Universities and Training Institutions		
Change in curriculum	<p>Re-orient the education and training systems to meet the knowledge, competencies, skills, innovation, and creativity required to match the employment market needs.</p> <p>Integrate comprehensive entrepreneurship education into the national curriculum at all levels to provide the youth with different competencies, including technical, non-cognitive and life skills and entrepreneurial behaviours</p>	Ministry of Education, Universities, TVET Institutions
The Youth		
	Active involvement in policy-making to bridge the gap between policy and implementation. Insufficient involvement of the youth in developing policies and programs may result in skill mismatches and reduce their benefits, particularly for vulnerable and excluded groups of youth. The involvement of the youth can take many forms, including information sharing through discussion, joint decision-making, and co-management. The type and degree of engagement determine how much youth voices are heard.	Youth Advocates, Young leaders, Youth Associations

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