

Responding to the perspectives of urban youth

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SUMMARY: Youth make up around one-quarter of the world's population. But the challenges they face are given relatively little attention. They are often portrayed as the problem – the unemployed, disaffected, irresponsible generation, a “ticking time bomb” likely to explode, spreading violence and chaos. Or they can be seen as victims – of HIV, violence and sexual abuse; of discrimination, unemployment and exploitation. They can also be viewed as a repository of knowledge, energy and vision, which must be tapped to solve the world's problems. More effort is needed to go beyond these stereotypes, to listen to and support the efforts of young people to find opportunities, develop livelihoods, shape the settlements in which they live, and engage as citizens with adults and with local governments.

I. INTRODUCTION

The challenges facing urban youth are emerging as one of the most important global development issues. High levels of unemployment, health problems (especially around HIV/AIDS in many nations), social marginalization and exclusion from local governance are all issues that undermine the potential of young people and the stability of their communities. We have remarkably few effective precedents on how to address these concerns. The papers on youth in the last two issues of *Environment and Urbanization* make some important contributions.

There are some powerful narratives shaping the discourse around youth. On the one hand, they are seen as the problem – the unemployed, disaffected, irresponsible generation, a “ticking time bomb”, the ugly “bulge” that is likely to burst, spreading violence and chaos.⁽¹⁾ On the other hand, young people, and young women in particular, are seen as victims – of HIV, violence and sexual abuse; of discrimination, unemployment and exploitation. Yet another perspective is a vision of youth as the answer, a repository of knowledge, energy and vision that has only to be tapped to solve the world's problems.⁽²⁾ These narratives, contradictory and simplistic as they are, influence how young people are responded to, often with disappointing results. The papers on youth in the October 2010 and April 2011 issues of *Environment and Urbanization* (listed on the back page) offer a more nuanced middle ground, an area that needs to be explored if the complex realities facing urban youth are to be effectively addressed.

II. THE DEMOGRAPHICS OF URBAN YOUTH

One commonly debated question is the definition of youth. Formal categories refer to 15–24-year olds, but also to 15–29-year olds. Marc Sommers, writing about youth in urban Africa,⁽³⁾ speaks of 10–24-year olds. He points out that many young people under the age of 15 work, live independently and deal daily with adult issues. More than one-third of urban girls aged between 10 and 14 in 10 sample countries in sub-Saharan Africa live without either parent.⁽⁴⁾ Youth concerns often apply equally to a much younger age group than that officially classified as youth.

Adulthood is another moving target. Some 17-year olds, married, with children, would be unlikely to think of themselves as “youth”. But on the other hand, many 29-year olds have been unable to achieve the status of adulthood because they cannot find the kind of steady employment that would allow them to marry.⁽⁵⁾ They remain on the fringes of the adult world. The African Youth Charter, perhaps in response to this reality, defines youth as those aged between 15 and 35. Richard Mabala argues that this definition is just one more factor that conspires to keep young people in a sort of social limbo.⁽⁶⁾

The global population is now the youngest in history. Half of the world is under the age of 25 and about one person in four falls into the 15–24-year old group. This percentage is higher in low-income

1. See, for instance, Urdal, Hendrik and Kristian Hoelscher (2009), “Urban youth bulges and social disorder: an empirical study of Asian and sub-Saharan African cities”, Working Paper 5110, The World Bank Africa Region, Post-conflict and Social Development Unit, Washington DC, 26 pages. The working hypotheses for this study were that “...large urban youth bulges are associated with higher levels of urban social disorder” and “...the lower the prospects for employment, the greater the effect of large urban youth bulges on urban social disorder.” Interestingly, these hypotheses were disproven by the study.

2. These and other stereotypes are discussed in Richard Mabala's paper on “Youth and ‘the hood’: livelihoods and neighbourhoods” listed on the back page.

3. See the paper by Marc Sommers listed on the back page.

4. Cited by Mabala, Richard (2006), “From HIV prevention to HIV protection; addressing the vulnerability of girls and young women in urban areas”, *Environment and Urbanization* Vol 18, No 2, October, pages 407–432.

5. See the papers by Marc Sommers and by Sylvia Chant and Alice Evans listed on the back page.

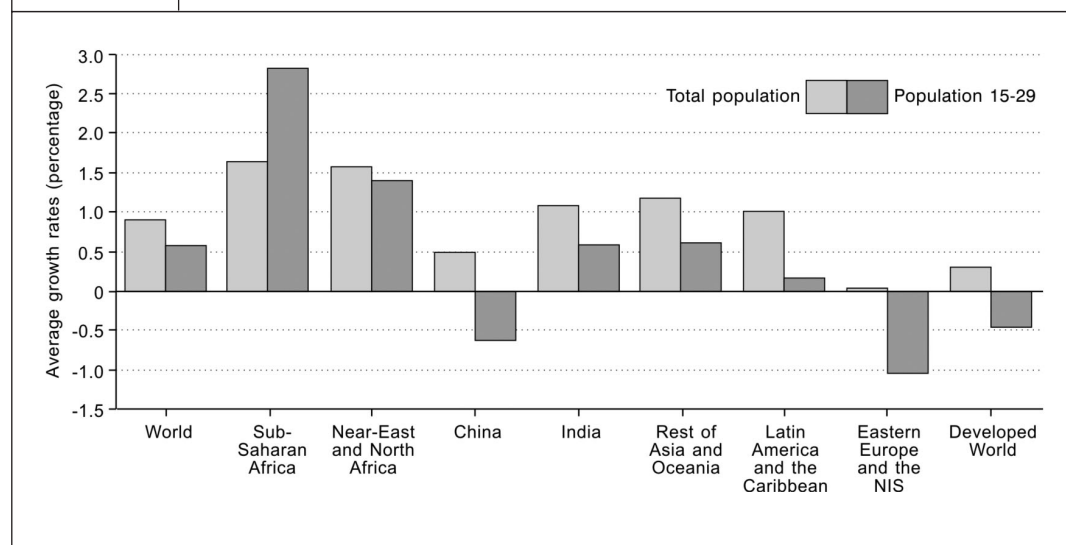
6. See the paper by Richard Mabala listed on the back page.

7. Banknote, A, S Singh, V Woog and D Wulf (2004), *Risk and Protection: Youth and HIV/AIDS in Sub-Saharan Africa*, Alan Guttmacher Institute, New York, 37 pages.

countries, and higher in urban than in rural areas. In much of sub-Saharan Africa, for instance, a higher proportion of the urban population is now composed of 15–19-year olds than is true of rural areas, because of the very large number of young people who migrate from rural to urban areas.⁽⁷⁾

Most of the papers on youth published in recent issues of *Environment and Urbanization* are from Africa. This is more than a coincidence. A general decline in fertility rates will be reflected in decreasing numbers of young people globally over coming years, but this decline is not expected in sub-Saharan Africa for a while. Here, the youth population is expected to grow more rapidly over the next 20 years than the population as a whole. The levels of youth-focused awareness and concern are understandably high in Africa, and it is not surprising that most of the papers submitted addressed the situation of African youth.

FIGURE 1: Change in population in the 15–29-year old age group and in total population by region 2002–2025



SOURCE: Adapted from US Census Bureau (2002), "Global population profile 2002", International Programmes Centre, international data base and unpublished tables.

Gender is as important a distinction here as age. The experience of young men and young women can be very different. When we speak of "youth", young women do not usually come to mind. Many young women lose access to the programmes and opportunities made available to "youth" once they have children – in sub-Saharan Africa a status that applies to probably more than half of women under the age of 24.⁽⁸⁾ Their patterns of migration are different, and the economic opportunities available to them tend to be far more limited – and often more dangerous, as they are more likely to end up in hidden occupations such as domestic labour. Because of their narrower range of choices and negotiating power, they are more likely to have to rely on sexual exchange as a means of survival, as reflected in their considerably higher rates of HIV.⁽⁹⁾ (Despite the scale of the scourge for young people, we received no submissions on this critical topic.)

III. YOUNG PEOPLE ON THE MOVE

According to the 2006 *State of the World Population* report published by the UN Population Fund (UNFPA), young people aged between 15 and 29 make up half the total international migration flow. The same pattern tends to be true of internal rural–urban migration. Young people are the "active agents" in the transformation to a predominantly urban world, and many young migrants are very young indeed.⁽¹⁰⁾ They come to the city for a variety of reasons. Some are sent by their families to supplement household incomes. Some leave because they see no future at home. They leave looking for work and for education. Many of the youngest leave home because of neglect and abuse.⁽¹¹⁾ Research in Ethiopia shows that 25 per cent of girls in "slum" areas in Addis Ababa had migrated because of the threat of forced marriage.⁽¹²⁾

But young people are also drawn to cities by the promise of stimulation, the allure of modernity, the chance to be part of a changing world away from the constraints of their home villages. While research on migration and livelihood strategies has generally used households as the unit of observation, attention to age and gender brings a more nuanced understanding of the trends and realities.⁽¹³⁾ Case studies from Mali, Nigeria, Tanzania and Vietnam show that the number of young

8. See the paper by Richard Mabala listed on the back page.

9. van Donk, Mirjam (2006), "Positive urban futures in sub-Saharan Africa: HIV/AIDS and the need for ABC (a broader conceptualization)", *Environment and Urbanization* Vol 18, No 1, April, pages 155–176; also, see reference 4.

10. See the paper by Marc Sommers listed on the back page.

11. See the paper by Richard Mabala listed on the back page.

12. See the paper by Richard Mabala listed on the back page.

13. See the paper by Cecilia Tacoli and Richard Mabala listed on the back page.

14. See the paper by Cecilia Tacoli and Richard Mabala listed on the back page.

15. See the paper by Cecilia Tacoli and Richard Mabala listed on the back page.

16. See the paper by Marc Sommers listed on the back page.

17. See the paper by Marc Sommers listed on the back page.

18. ILO (2006), *Global Employment Trends for Youth*, International Labour Office, Geneva, 58 pages.

19. ILO (2010), *Global Employment Trends*, International Labour Office, Geneva, 82 pages.

20. See the paper by Jorgelina Hardoy, Guadalupe Sierra and Andrea Tammarazio with Gabriela Ledesma, Lucas Ledesma and Carolina García listed on the back page.

21. See the paper by Marc Sommers listed on the back page.

22. See the paper by Marc Sommers listed on the back page.

23. See the paper by Cecilia Tacoli and Richard Mabala listed on the back page.

24. See the paper by Tatiana Thieme listed on the back page.

25. See the paper by Aquila Ismail listed on the back page.

26. Hasan, Arif (2006), "Orangi Pilot Project; the expansion of work beyond Orangi and the mapping of informal settlements and infrastructure", *Environment and Urbanization* Vol 18, No 2, October, pages 451–480.

people migrating – young women in particular – has increased substantially, a function of economic realities but to an even greater degree a function of "...socio-cultural transformations that underpin the changing aspirations of both young men and women."⁽¹⁴⁾ Young people may face considerable pressure and even danger when they reach the city, but even the likelihood of extremely exploitative work can still be seen as preferable to the lack of options they experience at home in the context of rigid and discriminatory power relations.

These country studies show different patterns of migration for young men and young women. In both Nigeria and Vietnam, young women are likely to go further afield and to stay away longer; and young men find work in nearby towns and return for harvest. In all four case study countries, remittances are the most important source of family income, yet their worth is underestimated or dismissed almost everywhere, a reflection of the struggle for power and authority in changing household and community relations.⁽¹⁵⁾

There are still widespread assumptions on the part of governments and development agencies that it would be preferable to keep these huge tides of young people at home in the villages. Worldwide, there are policies and programmes to discourage migration to the city and even to take young people back to their rural homes. But rural investments by aid agencies have failed for the most part to lure young people back home; even very targeted efforts to "repatriate" jobless young urbanites have proven to be embarrassing failures.⁽¹⁶⁾ Difficult as it may be to gain a toehold in the city for young migrants, who end up in ever more crowded and deteriorating informal settlements, this is where the action is, where the possibilities are, where life is modern and fast paced and anything is possible: "Understanding why youth are in cities, and how they strive to survive and hopefully succeed there, is essential to engaging successfully with them and providing them with effective support."⁽¹⁷⁾

IV. EMPLOYMENT

A major challenge for young people in urban areas is finding adequately paid work. Total global unemployment rates in 2009 were higher than at any time in recent years. Worldwide, the youth unemployment rate (those actively seeking work) was estimated by ILO in 2006 to be three times that of adults.⁽¹⁸⁾ This proportion has changed little since then, but between 2008 and 2009 the world experienced the largest increase in absolute numbers of unemployed youth in at least 10 years.⁽¹⁹⁾ For instance, almost one-quarter of young people in Argentina aged between 15 and 29 neither work nor study, and they represent 60 per cent of the total unemployed.⁽²⁰⁾ But accurate figures are difficult to establish, and unemployment rates do not begin to tell the whole story. They overlook the large number of discouraged young people who aren't even looking for work anymore, and the even larger numbers who work long hours for little pay and no security.

The formal figures are often most discouraging in urban areas. Formal sector growth rates cannot begin to keep up with urban population growth, and generally only a small percentage of the working population has formal sector jobs.⁽²¹⁾ Why then do young people continue to move into cities? Most of the youth-related papers listed on the back page address this concern in one way or another and describe the range of informal, irregular and often illegal economic activities that permeate every facet of urban life. Work may be insecure and highly competitive, but for those with ingenuity and staying power there are opportunities that do not exist in the villages. These opportunities may only yield "small-small" money or bartered items, but there is always the possibility of finding something: "Youth can...claim new turf and identities for themselves in the emerging context of city life. When they enter the city, the anonymity provides the opportunity for many to reinvent themselves, sometimes repeatedly."⁽²²⁾ Interviews with young people highlight the increasing diversity of their livelihood strategies.⁽²³⁾

Much of this work, for young men especially, is entrepreneurial. One example is the young waste management entrepreneurs in Nairobi's Mathare Valley, who are involved in a "corporate-community partnership". They provide professional cleaning services to community residents, using SC Johnson cleaning products, and deal with cleaning and maintaining shared toilets that are otherwise often in deplorable condition. In some areas they also take on garbage collection and plastics recycling. This is as much a form of political mobilization as a livelihoods solution, a way of contesting the failure of the state to step-up in the area of basic services.⁽²⁴⁾ These kinds of solutions challenge the boundaries between formal and informal work, and allow a market-based initiative to become an alternative political platform for low-income urban youth through which they assert their right to the city.

Certainly, young men and women need encouragement and support in starting their own initiatives. One interesting case study here is on the setting up of the Technical Training Resource Centre (TTTC)⁽²⁵⁾ in Karachi. This makes it clear how important the support of the Orangi Pilot Project-Research and Training Institute⁽²⁶⁾ was in galvanizing the vision of the young trainee and making it possible for him to train other young people in skills critical to upgrading the quality of the housing and infrastructure provision in the *katchi abadis* (informal settlements) in Karachi. There

27. See the paper by Jack Makau listed on the back page.

28. See the paper by Marc Sommers listed on the back page.

29. See the paper by Jorgelina Hardoy, Guadalupe Sierra and Andrea Tammarazio with Gabriela Ledesma, Lucas Ledesma and Carolina García listed on the back page.

30. See the paper by Jorgelina Hardoy, Guadalupe Sierra and Andrea Tammarazio with Gabriela Ledesma, Lucas Ledesma and Carolina García listed on the back page.

31. See Karanja, Irene (2010), "An enumeration and mapping of informal settlements in Kisumu, Kenya, implemented by their inhabitants", *Environment and Urbanization* Vol 22, No 1, April, pages 217–239; also Weru, Jane (2004), "Community federations and city upgrading: the work of Pamoja Trust and Muungano in Kenya", *Environment and Urbanization* Vol 16, No 1, April, pages 47–62.

32. See the paper by Camilo Darsie de Souza and Sabine de Jesus Ferraz Faller listed on the back page.

33. See the paper by Sylvia Chant and Alice Evans listed on the back page.

34. See the paper by Sylvia Chant and Alice Evans listed on the back page.

35. See the paper by Sylvia Chant and Alice Evans listed on the back page.

is also the example of the support provided by the adult members of the Kenyan Homeless People's Federation in allowing the young people in their communities to find productive ways of pursuing their own separate objectives.⁽²⁷⁾

V. THE MARGINALIZATION OF YOUNG PEOPLE

It is odd to speak of "marginalization" when referring to young people, who are actually a demographic majority in many cities. But they struggle to survive on the fringes of society, cut off from most of the benefits of the city, which draws all the while from their vitality and energy.⁽²⁸⁾ Their marginalization can be imposed not only by the larger system but even by the responses of neighbours and family. In Barrio San Jorge, a small informal settlement in Buenos Aires, this marginalization has a very spatial expression. Young people are known as the *pibes de la esquina* ("kids of the corner") because they hang out on street corners with their friends. Because of the associations with drug-dealing and gang activities, assumptions are made about *la esquina*.⁽²⁹⁾ But in neighbourhoods where people do not have homes large enough for social gatherings and where there are no alternative public spaces, this kind of hanging out is not unique to youth. Yet it is only young people who are seen as a threat. This spatially expressed marginalization becomes a source of identity for young people – a way of expressing their solidarity with one another but also their wariness and even hostility towards people from outside the neighbourhood, even young people from nearby neighbourhoods like their own. Physical distinctions between neighbourhoods, often merely an accident of history, become a kind of self-imposed isolation. The one exception in Barrio San Jorge is the annual *murga*, a carnival cum competition where teams from different neighbourhoods display their skills through costumes, music and acrobatic dance: "With the murga..." says one young woman, "...you leave the barrio and show other people that you can do other things, that you are not useless; it is a way to express yourself with the body, with art."⁽³⁰⁾

Recognition of the consequences of young people's marginalization stimulated the formation of Mwamko wa Vijana in Nairobi, a youth network that is the offspring of the Kenyan Homeless People's Federation. During a routine federation enumeration (described in papers in previous issues⁽³¹⁾), three young men in the community died – one from suicide, one from AIDS, one from a stabbing. Kimani Joseph, a programme officer supporting the enumeration, recognized how little was happening here for young people and began to organize football tournaments and other activities. Very quickly, the young people themselves took active charge of a range of activities, including such employment options as waste collection and washing lorries. They also become involved in mentoring community children in a wide range of activities. These young people, formerly self-acknowledged delinquents, rapidly became very popular with community mothers.

A paper on deaf youth in Porto Alegre, Brazil, makes it clear that marginalization is not just a function of poverty or ethnic inequality.⁽³²⁾ For many of these young deaf Brazilians, public spaces and services are extremely difficult to negotiate; even when they go to places in groups they are often made to feel like intruders, giving rise to an almost inadvertent segregation. Research on the degree and the implications of exclusion for probably 100 million young people with disabilities globally is extremely sparse, and more accounts are needed.

VI. SEXUALITY, SOCIAL STATUS AND RESPECT

A study from the Gambia contributes to the growing literature on the strategic use of sexual relations to address economic constraints.⁽³³⁾ For many young men and women in urban areas, poverty can have a complex effect on how young love is negotiated. In sub-Saharan Africa (and elsewhere) in the context of high unemployment and tight resources, it is widely acknowledged that sexual exchange can be a way to supplement livelihoods – or can at least be driven by material as well as affective factors. The Eurocentric tendency is to set the material and the emotional in opposition to each other, stigmatizing the material motives and failing to recognize the complex interrelationships of these aspects.⁽³⁴⁾ This is not simply a matter of prostitution – straight sex-for-money – but a more complex issue of "transactional sex", a term coined precisely to distinguish these exchanges from traditional prostitution. This can be seen in the Gambia in the relationships between young urban men and older female tourists. These young men face both a shortage of decently paid work and difficulties in attracting committed life partners in the absence of steady employment. Relationships with older foreign women offer sex, companionship and affection as well as the potential for overseas migration – or at least temporary financial support. The affection is by no means the least of it – young men speak of the fact that these women like them for themselves, not for the gifts they purchase or for their potential as long-term providers. Young Gambian women, in the context of ubiquitous poverty, are far more complex partners to deal with.⁽³⁵⁾

A crucial aspect of both employment and sexuality is the issue of social status and respect. A repeated theme in these papers is the very real threat of failing to achieve adult status. Social respect

36. See the paper by Sylvia Chant and Alice Evans listed on the back page.

37. See the paper by Marc Sommers listed on the back page.

38. See the paper by Sylvia Chant and Alice Evans listed on the back page.

39. See the paper by Marc Sommers listed on the back page.

40. See the paper by Sylvia Chant and Alice Evans listed on the back page.

41. See the paper by Sylvia Chant and Alice Evans listed on the back page.

42. See the paper by Jorgelina Hardoy, Guadalupe Sierra and Andrea Tammarazio with Gabriela Ledesma, Lucas Ledesma and Carolina García listed on the back page.

43. See the paper by Jorgelina Hardoy, Guadalupe Sierra and Andrea Tammarazio with Gabriela Ledesma, Lucas Ledesma and Carolina García listed on the back page.

44. See the paper by Richard Mabala listed on the back page.

45. See the paper by Richard Mabala listed on the back page.

46. See the paper by Jack Makau listed on the back page.

47. See the paper by Tatiana Thieme listed on the back page.

48. See the paper by Marc Sommers listed on the back page.

49. See the paper by Jorgelina Hardoy, Guadalupe Sierra and Andrea Tammarazio with Gabriela Ledesma, Lucas Ledesma and Carolina García listed on the back page.

for young men is contingent on their capacity to provide for their kin.⁽³⁶⁾ It also means having a house, a wife and children.⁽³⁷⁾ Adult status for women is also contingent on marriage. But finding a marriage partner for a male means being able to provide; and for a woman, it means finding a man who can provide. In the context of high unemployment, this means that both marriage and adulthood are put off until later and later in life. For many men in the Gambia it may not happen until the age of 40 or later.⁽³⁸⁾ There is also the shame of being a perpetual “youthman” – someone who may have fathered children but who is unable to provide for them; a youth who has gone to the city but has failed to return with the expected wealth.⁽³⁹⁾ For young women, for whom the economic opportunities are even scarcer, it may mean transactional sex or prostitution, with the high associated risk of HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases.

In the Gambia, because a desirable marriage can be hard to arrange there is increasing acceptance of premarital dating (a source, among other things, of economic opportunities for the family), but this is expected to be discreet.⁽⁴⁰⁾ Despite the public shaming that young women in particular risk if such dating becomes known, the reality is that practical young people often engage in multiple relationships, almost as an investment, while looking for “the one”. Gift-giving is an established practice to sweeten the deal and take the edge off the risk involved. A suitor’s affections and intentions are often gauged by the value of the gifts and favours – be they clothing or mobile phone credit. Accepting gifts, however, can feed the expectation of sexual exchange.⁽⁴¹⁾

VII. RESPONSES TO YOUNG PEOPLE

Productive engagement with urban young people to improve their circumstances can be a challenge. Staff at IIED–América Latina, which has long worked in informal settlements in Buenos Aires, provide a self-critical account of their various efforts with youth, most of which they feel have ended in failure.⁽⁴²⁾ But they set the bar very high. These projects, undertaken over the years as sidelines to their more basic community development thrust, would not be described as failures by most people, and they have included a number of innovative and lively events: a local history project, a soccer team, vegetable gardens, the design and management of the upgrading of a local plaza. They point, however, to frequent discouragement, to the young people’s low threshold for frustration and to the fact that these projects have all lapsed over time. Sustained funding has always been a problem; IIED–AL chases what is available in the short term and undertakes projects on a volunteer basis without expertise in these areas. Meanwhile, the young people who are involved become frustrated by how long things take; whatever interest they initially had can fade quickly. Staff fault themselves for failing to spark sufficient enthusiasm and for the absence of a sustained, active presence on the part of young people in the affairs of their community. In discussions with some of the current youth in the community, they begin to tease out the lessons they have learned over the years.⁽⁴³⁾

These lessons are echoed in reports of other initiatives, which stress the limited value of one-off projects and the need for system-wide policy change, for empowering grassroots efforts, for networking and building on existing structures and initiatives within neighbourhoods, be they religious organizations or sports clubs: “*There are large numbers of well-intentioned programmes with or for young people...but since many of them run parallel to the existing community and societal structures rather than being situated within them, they only have an effect for as long as they last.*”⁽⁴⁴⁾ Most of the opportunities made available for the participation of youth – bodies such as youth parliaments and youth councils – tend to be reserved for the youth of the elite and rarely serve as an entry point to decision-making for those in poverty.⁽⁴⁵⁾ The involvement of federation youth in Kenya (described above) in these bodies was unusual enough to be seen almost as party crashing.⁽⁴⁶⁾

What needs to be emphasized above all is the importance of responding to the priorities and practical needs that young people themselves identify – which might for instance include day care for young women with children, the kind of need that is too seldom identified as a youth concern. There are numerous examples of the energy and insights of young people, whether they are exploring new kinds of entrepreneurial partnerships in Nairobi,⁽⁴⁷⁾ capitalizing on the endless complexity of personal relationships in Bamako,⁽⁴⁸⁾ or advising an NGO on productive approaches to youth issues in Buenos Aires.⁽⁴⁹⁾ But this energy can be difficult to access when interventions, even with the best intentions, make assumptions about what young people should be interested in, where they should live and how they should be spending their time.

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Looking for the one(s): young love and urban poverty in the Gambia – *Sylvia Chant and Alice Evans*

Learning from young people and from our own experiences in Barrio San Jorge – *Jorgelina Hardoy, Guadalupe Sierra and Andrea Tammarazio, with Gabriela Ledesma, Lucas Ledesma and Carolina García*

Exploring mobility and migration in the context of rural–urban linkages: why gender and generation matter – *Cecilia Tacoli and Richard Mabala*

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The Technical Training Resource Centre (TTRC): building community architects – *Aquila Ismail*

Deaf youth and cultural negotiation in Porto Alegre, Brazil – *Camilo Darsie de Souza and Sabine de Jesus Ferraz Faller*
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