

## Original Research

**Youth, “waithood,” and social change: Sport, mentoring, and empowerment in Sub-Saharan Africa****Mark Wagstaff<sup>1</sup>, Andrew Parker<sup>2</sup>**<sup>1</sup> University of Gloucestershire, UK<sup>2</sup> Ridley Hall Theological College, UK*Corresponding author email: andrewparkerconsultingltd@gmail.com***ABSTRACT**

The transition from youth to adulthood in African nations has changed markedly in recent years. Social and economic challenges often lead to the creation of a disengaged and alienated generation struggling to participate actively in society. Drawing on the personalized accounts of a group of youth leaders experiencing such conditions, this paper presents empirical findings from a small-scale qualitative study of one Sport for Development and Peace (SDP) initiative that, through various community-based projects, aims to provide personal, social, and educational support for young people in Mzuzu, a city in northern Malawi. The paper seeks to uncover some of the reasons behind youth disengagement within this particular context and explores how empowerment-based mentoring is used by youth leaders to bring about change in the lives of the young people with whom they work. The paper concludes that amid the wider tensions and anxieties of youth transition in sub-Saharan Africa, strategic and intentional relationship building (through mentoring) can provide a catalyst for personal development, intergenerational connection, and social change.

**INTRODUCTION**

It is widely accepted that the transition from youth to adulthood in African nations has changed markedly in recent years with the disappearance of traditional cultural

pathways such as marriage, education, and other symbolic rituals and customs (Dhillon and Yousef, 2007; Singerman, 2007). Processes of modernization and globalization have meant that young people increasingly migrate to urban centers for schooling and/or employment, while at the same time social and economic policies imposed by financial institutions from the global north have reduced the power of African states to control their own economies (Hondwana, 2013). As a result, trade barriers that once protected local communities have been abolished, and shortcomings in local governance and leadership have done little to shore up wider infrastructural frailties (Manji 1998; Manji, 2011). These factors have negatively impacted access to jobs and related skills leaving many young people feeling socially marginalized, disengaged, and powerless (Chinguta et al., 2005; DeJaeghere and Baxter, 2014).

This paper presents empirical findings from a small-scale qualitative study of one Sport for Development and Peace (SDP) initiative—Sporting Nations—a venture based in the United Kingdom that, through various community projects, aims to provide educational support for young people in Mzuzu, a city in northern Malawi. The paper seeks to uncover some of the reasons behind youth disengagement within this particular context and explores how empowerment-based mentoring might be used to bring about change in the lives of disenfranchised youth.

SDP initiatives have long featured on Africa’s cultural

landscape and have attracted a significant amount of attention. In his critical account of SDP initiatives between 2000 and 2010, Mwaanga (2010) scrutinizes the philosophical underpinnings and subsequent leadership approaches commonly deployed by such initiatives and draws attention to the pitfalls in play. His enquiry reveals that during this period many projects were under-funded and poorly planned and coordinated. Both Giulianotti (2011) and Hartmann and Kwauk (2011) characterize many of these initiatives as using top-down approaches, often implemented by agents from the global north in a way that reinforces inequalities (see also Giulianotti et al., 2019; Lindsey, 2017). Further studies of global SDP projects have questioned the pedagogical approaches (including mentoring) used in such initiatives. This paper locates mentoring as a specific mechanism by which to engage and empower young people.

### YOUTH, “WAITHOOD,” AND MENTORING IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

Social categories have been increasingly utilized to identify youth as an area of particular interest in recent African-based research (De Boeck & Hondwana, 2005). The concept of “waithood” is a prominent example. As a means of articulating youth experience, waithood was first conceptualized by Dhillon and Yousef (2007) and Singerman (2007) and has been further developed by Hondwana (2013), who describes it as a “portmanteau term” portraying “the period of suspension between childhood and adulthood, in which young people are unable to find employment, get married, and establish their own families” (p. 4). Hondwana (2013) goes on to note the disappearance of traditional transitions to adulthood in many African countries that, she argues, have “gradually been eroded by urbanization, modernization and globalization, as youths increasingly migrate to urban centres for schooling or employment” (p. 23). This process of “erosion,” appears to have been caused by a convergence of factors including social and economic policies imposed by financial institutions from the global north that have reduced the power of African states to control their own economies. As a result, trade barriers designed to protect local producers have been abolished, and poor local governance and self-serving leadership styles have added complexities and challenges (see Manji, 1998; Manji, 2011). These factors have resulted in high unemployment and severe limitations on the ability of youth to attain opportunities normally associated with adulthood, including access to education and career pathways. Such processes have left many young people feeling socially marginalized and powerless (see Chinguta et al., 2005; DeJaeghere & Baxter, 2014).

Over the same period there has been a more widespread rise in the use of mentoring across social, political, cultural, and economic contexts in order to bolster the identities of young people (see Aitken, 2014; Dubois et al., 2011; Dubois & Karcher, 2014a; Tolan et al., 2013). That said, these developments have not always been informed by best practice or clarity of definition (Colley, 2002; Clutterbuck, 2014) and this, in turn, has resulted in an ever-widening repertoire of mentor skills. Dubois and Karcher (2014b) have challenged conventional definitions of mentoring that focus exclusively on the characteristics of the mentor and their relationship with mentees proposing instead an altogether more differentiated view of youth mentoring that encompasses “governmental, political/policy, dimensions, organizational interventions within specific youth communities” (p. 4). In this way, Dubois and Karcher (2014b) argue that mentoring should not be seen in isolation from wider cultural practices.

When considering the youth mentoring process in Malawi, a further level of complexity is involved since within this context, “youth” is a highly contested term. For example, Hondwana (2013) notes that a wide age range is encompassed in definitions of youth within sub-Saharan Africa and suggests that those definitions based purely on biological maturation do not do justice to the relational, cultural, and social phenomena that influence the way that the concept is experienced and interpreted. In turn, she notes how the influence of social media has increased frustrations among young people in relation to their awareness of the limitations of their social and economic circumstances in comparison to those in other countries. These factors often interrelate to negatively influence mentoring relationships by presenting mentors with challenges around managing the life course expectations of mentees.

One form of mentoring relationship that has emerged as particularly effective with young people facing potentially disempowering circumstances (i.e., exclusion from education, and/or unemployment and homelessness) is informal (or natural) mentoring (see Greeson et al., 2015). According to James et al. (2015), informal mentoring offers all of the traditional benefits associated with formal mentorship (i.e., access to broader networks of personal support and accountability and increased social capital) but does not require specific goal setting, long-term commitment, or hierarchical position. Self-nomination (i.e., the selection of a mentor by the mentee from their wider network) is identified by Thompson et al. (2016) as a key component of these natural mentoring relationships (see also Schwartz et al., 2013; Spencer et al., 2016). Indeed, these relationships may have already been established, and

as a consequence of their organic formation, the bond between mentor and mentee may well be stronger and more enduring as a result. According to Dang and Miller (2013), the support made available through such relationships makes natural mentoring attractive to homeless youth, since their socially marginalized status increases the possibility of isolation and related challenges. Greeson et al. (2015) indicate the particular benefits of informal/natural mentoring for young people who struggle to develop healthy connections with others and may, in some cases, have experienced caregiver maltreatment. The unique qualities required to compensate for past negative life-course events include sustained, close and meaningful relationships that are characteristic of informal mentoring approaches (see Meltzer et al., 2018; Pryce, 2012; Spencer et al., 2010).

### Youth Mentoring and Empowerment

As we have seen, a combination of socio-economic factors has contributed to the emergence of the waithood generation in sub-Saharan Africa. This generation struggles to gain adult status and, with this, the socially recognized personal value that accompanies adulthood in the spheres of work, education, and politics (Blatterer, 2010). According to Hondwana (2013), young people in waithood often feel rejected and overlooked by their elders and are presented with few, if any, opportunities to express their views. In her survey of literature from selected African countries, Kang'ethe (2014) claims that in many of these patriarchal societies, youth are treated in a condescending way. This attitude can have a detrimental impact on the assertiveness, confidence, autonomy, and future aspirations of young people, and this, in turn, may inhibit citizenship participation (Donald & Clacherty 2005). Amid such circumstances, it is not uncommon for parents to simply view young people as “agents of economic production,” an approach that often results in youth being sent out to work to provide for wider familial needs and, as a consequence, foregoing personal development opportunities via educational pathways.

Hondwana (2013) suggests that as a result of these wider circumstances, it is common for young people to become politically disillusioned and isolated to the extent that they do not exercise their right to vote. In turn, they feel that governments fail to respond even to their basic needs let alone their longer-term aspirations. In addition, many young people are frustrated by widespread corruption in politics and commerce, sensing that politicians seek to gain votes through manipulation, promising change without the intention of fulfilling their obligations. Likewise, young people discern a lack of good leadership and role models

(Hondwana, 2013. Dawson (2014) argues that in Johannesburg and across South Africa, youth who have borne the brunt of the job and housing crisis have more recently been associated with militant protests subsequently being portrayed as dangerous, militant, and angry.

It has been argued that empathy, trust, and rapport building are central to the establishment of relationships in mentoring (Garvey, 2016), and such practices can be especially significant in youth mentoring scenarios (see DuBois & Karcher, 2014a, 2014b; Rhodes & DuBois, 2008). However, it seems that the waithood generation struggle to trust those in positions of authority. Indeed, it would be fair to assume that young people may well hesitate to seek mentoring from a generation by whom they feel manipulated and neglected. Thus, it is perhaps not surprising that there is relatively little research evidence of youth mentoring for empowerment in sub-Saharan Africa. The low status of youth coupled with large numbers of people caught betwixt and between youth and adulthood (and the tensions therein) are not ideal social conditions in which to promote the growth of adult-initiated youth interactions. Though youth mentoring should not be conceived of exclusively in terms of an adult-to-youth relationship, the escalating conflict between generations would seem to severely restrict potential for mentoring of any kind (Karcher, 2014).

Drawing on ideas derived from community psychology (CP) (see Nelson & Prillentein, 2010) and positive youth development (PYD) (see Larson, 2006), Laing et al. (2013) propose a move toward social transformative objectives for youth mentoring, suggesting the use of the youth-adult partnership model). According to Benson (2003), the PYD approach is a reaction against deficit models of intervention starting from the premise that all young people have assets and the capacity to change. Here the focus is on building on the strengths of the young mentee with the mentor aiming to identify existing qualities. PYD mentoring also involves the recognition of “shared strengths” so that there is mutual benefit, for example, with other young people in the mentee’s community (Lerner, 2004). These shared strengths are often referred to as “developmental assets” (Benson et al., 2006). By improving these natural competencies, this approach aims to prepare young people to be active participants in civil society. Kang'ethe (2014) endorses this perspective and delineates a range of areas in which youth in sub-Saharan Africa have strengths that are not possessed by the older generation. These include active growing minds that enable them to adapt to new technological developments (which, in turn, enable them to be more globally aware) and an increased awareness of and open-ness to geographical mobility (i.e.,

their ability to move to find new economic opportunities). As Hondwana (2013) notes,

*Young people in waithood are not passively waiting for their lives to change. They know that existing socio economic systems have no place for them and are actively engaged in finding solutions to their problems by seizing any possible openings and trying to make something of their lives. (p. 87)*

For young people in challenging situations, informal/natural mentoring in sporting contexts has been shown to offer beneficial outcomes (see Morgan & Parker, 2017; Morgan et al., 2019; Parker et al., 2018; Parker et al., 2019).<sup>1</sup> In the United States, Greeson et al. (2015), point to the way in which those who had been let down by their biological parents experienced a rebuilding of trust because of the faithful attributes of natural mentors with young people reporting that the “family like” love, affection, and security provided by these relationships created a sense of permanence. This was especially so if time was given for the relationship to mature. Dang and Miller (2013) state that similar views have been expressed by homeless youth, many of whom find it easier to disclose private feelings to natural mentors than to anyone else. As a result, natural mentoring relationships may confer particular benefits for homeless youth populations given that they lack the adult and community support available to their “housed” peers. Others have reported assistance with mental health issues and an increased sense of social connectedness as a result of informal or natural mentoring (see Dang and Miller, 2013; Rew, 2008).

## RESEARCH CONTEXT

As noted above, the empirical findings featured here are drawn from a Sport for Development and Peace (SDP) initiative called “Sporting Nations,” which is financed and structured around a shared learning dialogue between community stakeholders and SDP project coordinators in Malawi and students and staff from a provincial university in the United Kingdom. Originally conceived in 2009 as a result of a link between the university and a faith-based organization in Malawi, the project is delivered via annual, month-long (May-June) visits to Mzuzu (the capital of the country’s northern region), where practical, sports-based workshops and mentoring are delivered and facilitated by team of UK-based students and staff (project workers) to engage and empower youth leaders (aged 18-30) in their work with local young people (who they mentor). Workshops are structured around the delivery of sports familiar to and popular among Malawian youth such as soccer, tennis, netball, and volleyball and are delivered at a

recreational level at the University of Mzuzu and various schools and public sports venues. Project workers lead the delivery of workshops with the aim of demonstrating a range of teaching and coaching methods to youth leaders who observe and co-lead thereby gaining experience in the use of these methods. The aims of the project are two-fold: (1) to provide personal, social, and educational support for these youth leaders in relation to their engagement and mentoring of young people in their own communities, and (2) to provide additional training for these leaders in how to use sport as a relational starting point for a range of educational activities, including community development and gender awareness and the teaching of entrepreneurial and leadership skills to the young men and women with whom they work. Youth leaders use sport as a way of engaging with young people socially and educationally in different catchment areas of Mzuzu. These young people are 8-20 years old and range from the comparatively affluent (i.e., those still living with birth parents and who are in mainstream education) to those experiencing significant life challenges (e.g., extreme poverty, parental neglect, educational exclusion, and street vending).

At the same time, the project provides work placement and professional development opportunities for the university students concerned, all of whom are self-funded and recruited from undergraduate academic courses (at the host university) in related disciplinary areas, (i.e., sport development, sport studies, sport education). The academic staff involved in the organization and delivery of the project are drawn from these disciplinary areas as well as wider disciplines (i.e., youth work, social work) and all have established relationships with key agencies (faith-based and otherwise) and stakeholders in Mzuzu and beyond. In turn, staff work closely year round with project coordinators in order to provide personal support through on-going dialogue and to maintain alignment between the overall aims of the project and the specific needs of each of the communities in which it is embedded. While the involvement of traditional stakeholder groups (i.e., chiefs, church leaders, educators, and families) is central to this on-going dialogue, this paper focuses specifically on data gathered with youth leaders in order to facilitate their (often unheard and undocumented) voices in relation to their experiences of working with disenfranchised young people.

## METHODOLOGY AND METHOD

The research was driven by a constructionist ontology and interpretive epistemology with the aim of eliciting the subjective interpretations of the everyday lives of youth leaders in relation to their participation in and experiences of the various elements of the Sporting Nations project

(Bryman, 2015). The empirical findings presented are drawn from a wider research study that sought to investigate the impact of mentoring on the development of youth leadership across the community locations where the project is delivered. This wider investigation represented a longer-term (three-year) monitoring and evaluation process that sought to assess the extent to which the project had been successful in its overall aims. Data for this wider investigation were generated via a range of methods comprising semistructured interviews, focus groups, observations of Sporting Nations activities and workshops, and informal conversations with project respondents, participants, and stakeholders. The data on display here are taken from a selection of one-to-one semistructured interviews with the three project coordinators who have oversight of the organization and delivery of the initiative across the various regions of Mzuzu, and focus group interviews (n=4) with youth leaders who attended workshops run by the UK-based project workers. The three project coordinators also took part in the focus groups. These interviews have been chosen because they were specifically designed to explore issues surrounding youth mentoring. Each of the project coordinators were known to the UK project workers, as were a selection of the youth leader interviewees who had been project participants in previous years. Although the three project coordinators were known to many of the youth leaders involved in the overall project, they worked specifically with (and mentored) only those from their particular region.

### Sampling Procedure

The sample for one-to-one interviews was self-selecting given that all three project coordinators took part in the study. Youth leader focus group participants were purposively selected from the wider population of youth leaders involved in the Sporting Nations project. Each of the four focus groups comprised eight members, and this number included the project coordinators, one of whom attended the first two groups, the other two attending the latter two groups. Hence, the total number of respondents who took part in the featured interviews and focus groups was 29. Sampling took into account age, gender, and socioeconomic status in order to obtain a wide variety of perspectives from the respondent cohort (Braun & Clarke, 2014). Group membership was composed in such a way that it provided a balance between diversity and similarity to ensure the generation of stimulating and supportive dialogue (Brown, 1995; Sparkes & Smith, 2014). Focus groups were mixed gender but only two participants were female, and this sense of disproportionality reflected the overall complexion of the project in terms of youth leader respondents. There was an awareness that some focus

groups contained a mixture of project coordinators and their youth leader mentees and that this might potentially inhibit open discussion. However, having considered the dynamics of the two groups and the established working relationships that existed between them, the decision was taken to bring together both participant cohorts, and this facilitated a series of highly open and constructive discussions. In terms of socioeconomic background, all three project coordinators were in their late 20s to early 30s and may be described as moving toward or holding middle-class status having successfully completed degree level qualifications (i.e., at Bible college or other higher education establishments) either within Malawi or elsewhere in Africa. Two could be viewed as still in or emerging from waithood since they were not yet married or financially secure. The other coordinator worked for an international agency and was married and could therefore be viewed as possessing “adult” status. Youth leader participants were all aged 18-30 and this group included some young people who might be described as marginalized and/or at risk, i.e., they find themselves excluded from the societal mainstream (including social support services) and have limited control over their life chances and resources.

### Data Collection

Data were collected between June 2012 and June 2015 by the first author, who was a full-time member of staff at the host university. Ethical approval for the study was granted by the research ethics committee of the same institution and prior consent for data collection was gained by way of scheduled (in situ) face-to-face meetings with community stakeholders and individual respondents. Interviews and focus group lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and were audio-recorded and transcribed in full. Variations in interview timing were solely due to the availability of respondents. Mentoring was a vital part of each of the community projects, and this had been fostered since the inception of the initiative. The study sought to investigate the different forms that mentoring took and the impact that these had both on youth leaders themselves and on the young people with whom they worked.

Interview discussions followed a predetermined schedule or guide comprising a number of open-ended questions that explored respondent experiences of leading their respective projects and associated activities (Smith & Sparkes, 2016). Focus group discussions developed the commonly occurring themes raised by interview participants in order to explore these in more detail and on a collective basis. These discussions centered on the relationship between the types of mentoring that had emerged within the context of project work and how effective these had been in empowering the

young people concerned. The aim was to allow youth leaders to narrate their own journeys into and through SDP work. Such insights were key to understanding the distinctive philosophy and structure of each community project and the personal motivations and approaches in play. Crucially, these narratives helped to uncover the extent to which mentoring empowered youth leaders to bring about social change for other young people. In sum, interviews aimed to help young leaders present their views on the future place of mentoring within their communities.

Notwithstanding the issues of methodological rigor that have been raised in relation to processes of respondent validation or member checking (see Smith & McGannon, 2018; Tracy, 2010), in accordance with conventional practice, project participants were offered the opportunity to reflect on interview and focus group discussions. To this end, two collective meetings were held in person between the first author and respondents once data collection was complete. At the first of these meetings the preliminary research findings were summarized and presented diagrammatically. At the second (several days later), respondents were given the opportunity to discuss the findings in more detail having had time to reflect on the initial summary. In addition, in the summer of 2018, some nine months after completing the research, the first author returned to Mzuzu for a four-day visit in order to provide an opportunity for participants and community stakeholders to further discuss the findings of the study, which were provided beforehand in written form. Nine people attended this half-day meeting, which was specifically arranged to generate feedback from those involved in the project thereby providing an opportunity for data triangulation. Attendees validated the accuracy of the findings and added a number of new perspectives in terms of analysis, such as the prevalence of youth alienation within families (especially the way in which traditional forms of fathering exacerbated existing tensions between adults and youths on account of fathers having a tendency to be emotionally distant, authoritarian, and judgmental); the need for structural change to enhance youth empowerment; and the need for greater political awareness among young people (especially their understanding of the country's constitution and national youth policy). Future implications for the project were also discussed, and these included the need to strengthen and extend existing networks between and across the regional delivery sites involved in the project (especially a greater commitment to sharing knowledge around key themes such as mentoring, empowerment, and leadership development); and the establishment of a youth-led resource center for shared learning with the aim of extending this learning to other community agencies. In addition, the first author made himself available for further

conversations about the research and, as a consequence, extended meetings took place with two key stakeholders. Though somewhat inconclusive, such practices may be seen as a genuine attempt to achieve what Smith and McGannon (2018) have described as the ethical reframing of member checking processes.

### Data Analysis

Data analysis was deployed in line with the conventions of qualitative research through a process of open, axial, and selective coding and the formation of a conceptual framework that facilitated the presentation of participant experiences from their own perspective (Bryman, 2015; Robson & McCartan, 2016). Data were analyzed in four stages by the first author. First, transcripts were read in full to gain an overview of the data. Second, each transcript was individually coded in line with key concepts in the extant literature (i.e., "youth empowerment") and indexed, whereby a capturing of the different aspects of participant experience took place. Third, these experiences were then categorized into a number of overarching topics broadly relating to issues concerning youth, relationships, and social transformation. The final stage of analysis involved the formal organization of these topics into three generic themes (for data management purposes) by further exploring the key issues around participant experience and framing these experiences within the context of existing conceptual debate (differentiated by respondents). These themes comprised: (1) alienation and constraint, (2) mentoring approaches and experiences, and (3) sport, empowerment, and social change. To a large extent, the latter two themes emerged as specific responses to the challenges and problems highlighted by the first. The following section presents a detailed analysis of these themes, which incorporates transcript extracts from participants. In the interests of anonymity, pseudonyms have been used where necessary.

## RESULTS AND THEMES

### Alienation and Constraint

One of the issues that dominated the highly demanding cultural context in which youth leaders lived and worked was that they had limited opportunities to share their experiences of working with young people. As we have seen, tensions between generations are characteristic of the sub-Saharan region, and one of the key discussion points for youth leaders was how this rift between generations adversely affected mentoring aimed at empowering youth. Lionel, for example, reflected on how he had experienced hostility from a group of young people from Masasa, a slum

district of Mzuzu and an area with significant social problems:

*It is not easy working with this tribe. . . . If you're not careful they can beat you up. That's who they are. They can shout, they can fight and they can do what[so]ever because . . . we are looking to [at] somebody who has got no value [in relation to society] because some of these streets kids they have already given up on life . . . they don't care. So mentoring such kinds of people it has been a very hard time.*

Here Lionel points to a hopelessness and deep disillusionment on the part of young people in question. Conversely, Leonardo (another youth leader) expressed the view that it was possible for adults to misread the aggression of this group:

*You can mistake aggression for confidence. All kids that come from this vulnerable situation develop a very . . . thick skin as a mode of defence, so they are aggressive, they are up to go and alert. But, realistically speaking, it is a wound that has just formed a thick scar on top of it.*

Notwithstanding the generalized nature of Leonardo's comments, what he alludes to here is that the aggression of these young people simply serves to hide feelings of profound insecurity. These life views are consistent with the findings of Hondwana (2013) about the waithood generation. She writes of those caught in this liminal state that "they lead a precarious existence; their efforts are centered on trying to survive each day" (p. 3).

When it came to the general perceptions of younger people on the part of the older generation, this resentment and hostility was perceived to be two sided. Boniface summarized a shared conception when he said, "I think young people are generally viewed as rebellious and disorderly." He related this as a conflict between the generations and implied that this may affect the willingness of elders to become mentors:

*Much [of] the problem is the conflict . . . in the sense that the older generation blames the younger generation for bad behavior, and the younger generation has some blame over this. But I think there is a need for mentoring on the part of the older generation they should lead but we don't have these people because when I talk to the older generation they tell me about how bad the younger generation are.*

This idea of the generations being in conflict echoes the findings of Muna et al. (2014) in Kenya with reference to the political arena in which younger people have begun to

openly challenge the monopoly of leadership and power traditionally held by the older generation. The notion of generational conflict also appears in the work of Dawson (2014) where young people in Johannesburg protest because of the lack of opportunities available to them and are thus perceived by the older generation as "militant." Negative perceptions of youth also applied in Mzuzu and other parts of Malawi where, according to Boniface, youth were often perceived as "badly behaved, rebellious, and disorderly." In other words, youth were seen as defiantly opposing the more powerful older generation and were consequently labeled as deviant. In a similar way, the perceived hostility toward young people in this generational conflict can also be read as a sign of insecurity, and even fear, on the part of elders. According to Leonardo, this insecurity and fear of young people permeated every level of Malawian society:

*I have been involved in the youth in politics, church, sports, and even youth government; there is only one word for it, fear. The community is afraid of the youth. Why? We have a generation which has got profound talent, skill, so when the youth are younger they . . . simply say, "Ah, get rid of them, get them out of the way so they don't disturb our programmes, keep them somewhere keep them busy."*

In the eyes of both Boniface and Leonardo, such intergenerational dynamics had resulted in a limitation of the involvement of young people at different levels of Malawian society. According to Hondwana (2013), this lack of status and trust is a common feature of waithood. She found that many of the young people she interviewed in different nations throughout Africa felt that they were not valued by elders, not taken seriously, not listened to. Similarly, Kang'ethe (2014) draws attention to the condescending attitude that can exist toward young people in patriarchal societies within the sub-Saharan region that can serve to stifle youth aspirations.

Given the lack of trust between youth and adult generations, it is perhaps not surprising that young people do not actively seek older mentors. Such proactive approaches to mentoring would require confidence and self-esteem on the part of the young people concerned and a willingness to engage on the part of the older generation. This situation creates social conditions unfavorable to mentoring—elders are reluctant to pass on power and knowledge to those they fear will take away their security and material advantage. Younger and older people each show signs of oppression, including insecurity, fatalism, and self-deprecation. How then, we might ask, was mentoring perceived by young people and how might it be used to reverse some of the signs of multilevel oppression prevalent in Malawian

society?

### Mentoring Approaches and Experiences

As we have seen, social context can have a significant impact on how mentoring is defined and enacted. Throughout the research, there was a unanimous view among respondents that mentoring was important and valuable. Leonardo summed up the frustration felt both by project coordinators and youth leaders that, on the one hand youth mentoring was rare (because of the factors described), while on the other it had a vital role to play in the future of Malawi and its young people:

*If you ask me, mentorship is the missing link today. Malawi is in chaos right now because of the absence of mentorship. . . . We have brilliant young people that are going to die to their potential if we don't mentor them; the transition from the elderly leaving room to the young in Malawi is costing us everything.*

Leonardo's notion of "the elderly leaving room to the young" accurately echoes that of waithood. In this sense, all of the participants highlighted the importance of informality as a characteristic of mentoring. Discussions centered on the value of informal mentoring as a particularly effective response to the social and personal context of young people in Mzuzu. This line of thought was introduced by Gift, a young leader who had been mentored by a more mature leader (in the same focus group):

*That age gap needs to be closed. For me to tell you about myself there needs to be that friendship that (the leader) gave me . . . the relationship that we built. It's a relationship that helped me, that is to bring out myself, he is ageless. There are mentors but they want to do it in a formal way.*

The formal approach to mentoring described here is similar to the model criticized by Piper and Piper (1999). In such approaches, the young mentee is expected to take on a passive role with the focus of the relationship being on a modification of behavior according to a "socially prescribed blue print" (Becker, 1991, p. 127). This approach might also be aligned with the functionalist style of mentoring, which according to Brockbank and McGill (2006) is hierarchical and focuses on retaining the status quo (as defined by the organization or service involved). This can also lead to the reproduction of social inequalities.

The idea that informal rather than formal mentoring meets the needs of youth was endorsed by all of the younger respondents. They felt that such a style could enable older

mentors to address the perceived social inequality between generations. As the discussion continued, a clearer picture of the benefits of the informal approach began to emerge. Liz (a youth leader) picked up this theme by emphasizing the closeness made possible by informal mentoring relationships, which, in her view, encouraged openness about the feelings and aims of the young person concerned. She continued by describing the particular interpersonal qualities demonstrated by an older woman in charge of a residential setting, who acted as a mentor to a younger female resident who was struggling with suicidal thoughts:

*At first the . . . girl could not open up to the older woman but then the older woman started to be open with her. As a result of this approach the girl started talking. The mistress [older woman] became informal in the way she was talking and so as soon as this happened the girl started being open to her; she told her all that was happening. . . . So without dropping to her level and being informal, I think she would not have been open to her.*

Liz uses an interesting phrase here—"dropping to her level"—which implies a deliberate choice on the part of the mentor to equalize the power relationship. Liz also emphasizes the significance of "closeness" made possible through "openness," which in turn implies a bond of mutual trust.

The informality outlined by Liz provided an opportunity for the relationship between more and less mature people to equalize. This in turn provided the possibility for empathy on the part of the mentor and self-disclosure on the part of the mentee resulting from growing levels of trust. Such mentoring also provided the opportunity for mentees to feel valued and to glean a sense of hope in oppressive circumstances. Significantly, this approach was seen to be in stark contrast to the mentoring and general interaction that typically occurred between the generations. The levels of trust possible in such relationships provided mentors with the opportunity to challenge and confront mentees when appropriate (see Clutterbuck, 2014). Hence, informal mentoring was not restricted to supportive approaches but included intentional elements (Lewis, 2009). This challenge may also include the transfer of power from mentor to mentee, which required humility on the part of the mentor and provided the backdrop for younger people to act more responsibly.

The accent on humility here is contrary to the deficit-focused approach, which seems to prevail in many levels of Malawian society and shows itself in the willingness of the youth leaders to adopt a position of vulnerability with young people. These relationships had taken time to



develop, but with increasing confidence and trust, young people were beginning to follow the example of their leaders by engaging in mentoring themselves. This was seen by youth leaders as the emergence of generational connection through mentoring and was perceived by them as a potential way to overcome intergenerational conflict and as a mechanism for empowerment and social change.

### Sport, Empowerment, and Social Change

We have seen how counter-cultural styles of mentoring were adopted by some youth leaders and that these had the potential to facilitate increased communication between generations. But to what extent did sport act as a facilitation mechanism for mentoring to take place for the empowerment of young people? Boniface provided insight into such issues during individual interview:

*So we have been working with the sports young people [young people who are interested in sports]. The idea is to use sport to teach mentoring, business, and a lot more things including social issues that affect the young people. Generally, we have seen an improvement because I remember when we first started, it was discouraging. You would not want to go ahead with the projects; but we have witnessed tremendous fruits and . . . personally I have seen some young people growing from just being beneficiaries, to actually going now to benefit the rest of the young people.*

Lionel reported similar events in the challenging district of Masasa:

*So we find that sports to them is life. . . . So we put a [development] programme inside sports like education, social support, and civic education. We do sexual protection, HIV/AIDS, and child rights. Things like this can only be carried by sports and with the mentoring programme approach.*

As well as explaining moral principles, James, a young leader from a community tennis project, outlined how the positive occupation of vulnerable young people (from Masasa) on the tennis court had the potential to prevent more destructive immoral and self-harming behaviors in other contexts:

*If the guys [are] involved in immoral behavior, we try to change [them] by using [their] time on the court instead of time in drinking or smoking or whatever, and bring them on the court so that they should make a change.*

The above transcript extracts indicate that sport is seen by

these young leaders as a way to distract youth from self-destructive behaviors, which is one of the rationales commonly put forward in relation to SDP projects (see Mwaanga, 2010). The attractive quality of sport is especially evident in Lionel's comment "sport to them is life" and therefore, by implication, sport is seen as a powerful way to draw youth together and into other (diversionary) activities.

A further theme which subsequently emerged from interview discussions was the implicit recognition that sport, in and of itself, was not sufficient to assist young people developmentally. Instead, a robust strategic and longer-term approach was required to enable such projects to bear fruit in areas like talent development, business, social support, education, and civic engagement (see Hartman, 2003). Throughout the research process, youth leaders routinely reported that sport provided a helpful starting point for the development of mentoring relationships with young people in their communities. This resulted in what was perceived by these leaders as positive social change. Similarly, focus group participants repeatedly referred to the significance of "partnership" within the community to achieve change through mentoring. For them, the starting point for such partnership working was often with the parents of the young people who were engaged in their projects. Sharon saw this as a vital connection:

*You can start working with the kids, but you must keep in mind where these children are coming from. So we should monitor the development of the children but we should not just get carried away with mentoring [children]. . . . We can use the same mentorship to work with the parents . . . where these children are coming from.*

The participative enterprises, outlined by Lionel, resemble the critical SDP approaches proposed by Spaaij and Jeanes (2012) and Hartman and Kwauk (2011) who call for a curriculum focused on the significant themes and concerns of disempowered people. Likewise, Lionel's descriptions conform fully to the "bottom up" SDP community development philosophy called for by Jeanes and Magee (2011). This carefully considered approach to partnership and advocacy aims to give voice to otherwise disempowered youth. This is fostered through a process of mentoring aimed at ensuring that the voices of young people are presented to (local) government in the hope that someone listens. In the same way that oppression can operate at different levels, respondent experiences seemed to point to a reversal of such patterns, whereby empowerment and social change was stimulated from one-to-one encounters.

## CONCLUSIONS

The aim of this paper has been to investigate the reasons behind youth disengagement and marginalization in the city of Mzuzu in northern Malawi and to explore how one SDP initiative used empowerment-based mentoring in an attempt to bring about change in the lives of young people. In particular, the paper has sought to uncover how specific mentoring approaches might serve to overcome deeply embedded social tensions and anxieties by encouraging the (re)establishment of intergenerational trust and respect.

Findings demonstrate that the frustrations expressed by young people in Mzuzu appear to be part of a wider phenomenon affecting youth across the sub-Saharan region of Africa. This is encapsulated by the notion of the waithood generation—young people bereft of the personal, social, and educational resources to attain traditional cultural markers ascribed to adulthood. This, in turn, has deep and socially divisive consequences, since young people facing such constraints feel increasingly resentful toward an older generation who they perceive to hold power. Simultaneously, elders are inclined to look down on a younger generation they often see as dangerous and militant. This results in a cycle of fear, mistrust, resentment, and intergenerational conflict, which is damaging to a society already battling to survive in a globalized and increasingly competitive world (Hondwana, 2013).

These findings also point to practical ways in which youth leaders might seek to address the challenges faced by the waithood generation. The significance of sport in engaging and drawing young people together was recognized by respondents. However, rather than sporting participation being the catalyst for the individual empowerment of young people, it was the mentoring relationships developed alongside sport that appeared to be most effective. In this sense, sport fulfilled an important backstage role in the development of mentor-mentee relations, acting as a point of common ground and/or shared experience around which these relationships could be initiated and established (see also Albright et al., 2017). Mentoring was widely recognized by respondents as well-suited to the needs of young people in the delicate transitional stage of waithood. This is because such relationships provided the opportunity for personal and social development (among other things). This was felt to be the case particularly if an informal and flexible approach was used to meet the diverse needs of the young people concerned.

Informal mentoring (flowing from a natural rapport established through sport) was perceived to be a particularly helpful way to support young people. In contrast to the

deficit-focused, authoritarian approaches typically adopted with youth within this context, the most effective mentors made themselves vulnerable with (and equal to) the young people who they sought to support. Another perceived advantage of informal mentoring was that it could take place during sports and related pursuits. The depth of rapport and quality of trust established through such natural interactions also made it possible for mentors to confront mentees without creating resentment and alienation. This, in turn, appeared to promote opportunities for self-evaluation and critical thinking among young people.

All of the youth leaders involved in the research agreed that this counter-cultural approach to mentoring held the key for wider social change within different spheres of influence from individual, family, small group, and community, to regional and national levels. This approach took into account the interdependence of parents and youth. Hence, direct support was provided for parents in their care-taking role, and this made it more likely that youth would remain in school. In this way, the project attempted to address some of the root causes of the problems that young people faced in their communities. Young people were subsequently supported to take their concerns into wider social spheres via community forums that involved various civic leaders. That said, many of the mentoring practices highlighted were only partially formed, and further research is required to refine and consolidate these models and to explore their potential.

Alongside these findings, the authors acknowledge the following limitations of this study. First, the majority of respondents were practitioners from low-income socioeconomic backgrounds, while UK-based project workers (both staff and students) came from more affluent circumstances. Hence, there was the potential for this disparity to hinder relational dynamics. However, the project had been running for several years prior to the present data being collected, and academic staff enjoyed well-established relationships with project coordinators and community stakeholders, which facilitated a level of trust and credibility in relation to student project workers.

Second, a shortcoming of projects of this nature is that they often function around a romanticization of the role and impact of sport. Indeed, some have argued that claims surrounding the transformative potential of sport have been exaggerated (see Hartmann & Kwauk, 2011; Coalter, 2013, 2015). In this sense, it is generally accepted that the provision of such activities is not enough to prevent the occurrence of social problems but that they can be used in community settings to generate positive change in young people to the extent that they may even alleviate criminal

and/or antisocial behavior (see Parker et al., 2019). In contrast, the project workers and respondents in this study demonstrated an awareness that, in and of itself, sport is not sufficient to assist young people, but that in addition, there is need for robust, strategic, long-term programs to support youth education and development.

Finally, and relatedly, we are aware of the limitations of this research in terms of the extent to which conclusions might be drawn about the overall impact of sport on social change. We recognize that the findings presented are contextually specific and emanate from a single, locally based project. Though part of a longer-term evaluation, we are also aware that these findings are based upon the interpretations of two authors who have been directly involved in the inception and delivery of the project concerned and who hold a vested interest in its success and sustainability. Needless to say, all of these issues should be taken into account by the reader.

## NOTE

1. For more on client-centered empowerment models of mentoring or life coaching amid the challenges of “embedded power structures,” see Brockbank and McGill’s (2006) notion of “evolutionary mentoring.”

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