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Alia Weston

OCAD University, Canada

Miguel Imas

Kingston University, UK

Jennifer Manning

Technological University Dublin, jennifer.manning@tudublin.ie

Paul Donnelly

Technological University Dublin, paul.donnelly@tudublin.ie

Kudzayi Ngwerume

Mu'unze Social Enterprise, Harare, Zimbabwe

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Un(der)employed youth: From precariousness to resilience

Juventud sub(des)empleada: De lo precario a la resiliencia

Alia Weston^{1*}, J. Miguel Imas², Jen Manning³, Paul Donnelly³, Kudzayi Ngwerume⁴

1 OCAD University, Toronto, Canada

2 Kingston University, London, United Kingdom

3 Technological University Dublin, Ireland

4 Mu'unze Social Enterprise, Harare, Zimbabwe

*aweston@faculty.ocadu.ca

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we explore the experiences of Irish and Zimbabwean youth who live and work in precarious economic conditions. We study these youths' experiences in a manner that traverses contexts under the question: How do un(der)employed youth in the Global South and Global North enact resilience and agency while navigating economic precarity? The paper builds on youth literature from both the Global North and Global South, emphasizing socio-economic precarity, youth agency, and resilience. We collected our data from interviews conducted in Ireland and Zimbabwe. Methodologically, the paper follows a postcolonial narrative approach to study these experiences. Our findings show that, in the 21st Century, youth in Ireland (from the Global North) and Zimbabwe (from the Global South) have distinct lived experiences of economic precarity. Our findings also show that when applying a postcolonial gaze, these youths' experiences are not as clear-cut or distinct as the literature suggests. We conclude warning against unrealistic (neo)colonial comparisons between youth from Global North and South, which create stereotyped assumptions that (mis)inform policy and support interventions created in response to perceived challenges.

Keywords: marginalised youth; postcolonial; precariousness; social resilience; underemployed youth; unemployed youth; youth agency

RESUMEN

En este artículo se explora las experiencias de jóvenes irlandeses y zimbabuenses que trabajan en condiciones precarias. Sus experiencias fueron estudiadas a través de sus contextos bajo la pregunta: ¿Cómo jóvenes no empleados en el Sur y Norte Global resiliencia y agencia mientras navegan por la precariedad económica? El artículo se basa en literatura sobre juventud del Norte y del Sur Global, enfatizando la precariedad socio-económica, agencia, y resiliencia, y entrevistas realizadas en Irlanda y Zimbabue, bajo un enfoque narrativo poscolonial. Los hallazgos muestran que, en el siglo XXI, los jóvenes en Irlanda (del Norte Global) y Zimbabue (del Sur Global) viven distintas precariedades económicas. Del mismo modo, al aplicar una mirada poscolonial se descubre que las experiencias de estos jóvenes no son tan claras o distintas como sugiere la literatura. Se concluye que las comparaciones poco realistas (neo) coloniales entre los jóvenes del Norte y del Sur Global, crean suposiciones y estereotipos que (mal)informan la política y apoyan intervenciones creadas en respuesta a los desafíos percibidos.

Palabras clave: agencia juventud; juventud desempleada; juventud marginada; juventud subempleada; postcolonialidad; precariedad; resiliencia social

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In 2015, the United Nations identified that 1.2 billion of the world's population were youth, with approximately 85 per cent of these living in the "developing" world (United Nations, 2015). We define youth as the transition between dependent (child) and independent (adult) (Durham, 2000), where young people navigate and create their own fluid identities (in schools, churches, work, organisations, and so forth) (Christiansen et al., 2006; Van Dijk et al., 2011). This can be according to experiences of local rites and passages (Abbink, 2005), or shared social conditions like access to resources and job security (Dator, 2009).

Youth are one of the most vulnerable groups in the labour market and suffer from precarity in both the Global North and Global South (ILO, 2005; Marcus, & Gavrilovic, 2010). They face many challenges including lack of employment, lack of quality work, and a lack of education. For example, youth are more likely to be in intermittent unemployment, unintentional part-time work, and poorly remunerated labour (Prause, & Dooley, 1997), and are 1.5 times more likely to be in involuntary part-time employment than employed adults (United Nations, 2018). There have also been changes in the type and quality of work, and, in some parts of the world, youth are so poor they are not able to access the required level of education to enter the workforce (United Nations, 2018). The latter illustrates that 'pre-requirements' for employment are a challenge since it is not given that a young person will automatically be employed.

In this paper, we examine the experiences of youth who live and work in precarious economic conditions. We take up the call to examine youths' experiences in a manner that traverses contexts, and ask the question: How do un(der)employed youth in the Global South and Global North enact resilience and agency while navigating economic precarity? In answering our question, we structured our paper as follows. First, we examine the literature on youth, highlighting the impacts of socio-economic precarity, and the literature on youth resilience and agency to understand how they navigate experiences of crisis. We then explain our postcolonial perspective and narrative methodology to illustrate how we conducted our research with youths in Ireland and Zimbabwe.

Rather than comparing youth in the Global North and Global South with each others' frames of reference, we used a postcolonial approach to understand their distinct experiences relative to their own contexts. We then present our findings to show how precarity and agency are experienced by youth in these very different socio-cultural contexts. We close with a discussion and conclusions of what economic precarity and agency mean

for the youth in Ireland and Zimbabwe, and the implications of our findings for marginalised youth in the current global work context. Our research is important because some of our findings were not what we expected, and this leads us to be even more wary of the problematic consequences that occur when stereotyped assumptions about youth are used to (mis)inform policy and support interventions created in response to perceived challenges.

Precarious youth

In the Global North, the context of work has changed radically in the 21st Century, especially after the Global Financial Crisis of 2008, which led to a depressed labour context (Gill, & Pratt, 2008). The millennial generation, born between 1982 and 2004, encompasses youth currently graduating into an insecure work context. Socio-economic factors have shifted to such an extent that they face significantly less job security, both temporally and financially, than previous generations. For instance, they have significant (student) debt, are less likely to afford a home, and one in five are likely to face poverty (Hobbes, 2017).

Historically, insecure labour was associated with low paid, under-skilled workers; however, challenges in the contemporary economy have led to youth in affluent societies becoming marginalized workers (Gill, & Pratt, 2008). Challenges include increased casual work, which translates into a lack of secure, regular employment (Halleröd, et. al., 2015), and employers viewing benefits and professional development as unnecessary (Van Buren, 2003). Young entrepreneurs, motivated by autonomy, 'coolness', and flexibility of casual work are more likely to accept poor treatment as a normal part of career-building (Neff, et al., 2005).

Challenges in the Global South are significantly different. A main feature in many countries is the disruption of local contexts through colonisation. This has led to youth lacking important socialisation experiences and being disconnected from social capital and local knowledge (Abbink, 2005). New forms of colonialism are inherent in economic structures. For instance, different types of economic restructuring have led to increased economic volatility, limited job generation, reduced government employment, and limited private sector jobs (Jeffrey, 2008). In Africa, ongoing economic and political instability, and a severe lack of resources and public services, has led to competition for resources. Another issue is the HIV/AIDS pandemic, which has altered family structures and contributed to a growing youth population (Van Riel, & Salama, 2019). Additional issues arise in countries where populations are largely comprised of youth, but corresponding policies are not tailored to the

experiences of youth (Sommers, 2011). These factors have led to youth experiencing multiple forms of marginalization like exclusion from the political sphere, lack of employment, lack of education, and lack of leisure opportunities (Diouf, 2003). Youth, thus, find themselves in precarious labour contexts.

To support youth in dire socio-economic circumstances, a trend has emerged of powerful institutions, like development agencies and private corporations, supporting youth empowerment interventions through philanthropy. Corporations like the Ford Foundation and Coca Cola are supporting marginalised youth in starting new businesses and positioning entrepreneurship as a solution to economic precarity (Sukarieh, & Tunnock, 2015). Abbink (2005) highlights that youth can find allies in global networks and (foreign) NGOs, but challenges the assumption that industrialised societies and corporations offer the solution. A concern is that programs focus on individualistic skills training and frame unemployment as a problem or deficit of young people and the education system, without acknowledging the root causes of crisis (Sukarieh, & Tunnock, 2015).

Another critique is that program formats have limited impact on participants because they overlook the contextual realities of youths or their communities (Mgumia, 2017; Portes, & Landolt, 2000). These critiques largely apply to the Global South, where young people are excluded from decision-making about their participation in these programs. This perpetuates a neo-colonial saviour attitude that dictates how problems should be solved (e.g., Sircar, & Dutta, 2011). For instance, entrepreneurship programs may not be relevant to youth who aspire to work in salaried employment. Equally, youth with challenging family circumstances may not have access to business start-up capital. The reality of empowerment interventions is they potentially offer support, but do so in a way that negates agency and the root causes of socio-economic crisis.

Despite promises of growth and prosperity made by globalization, the literature tells a story of youth in despair. Socio-economic crisis and political turmoil have stifled youths' prospects in the Global South and Global North (Choudhry et al., 2012).

Youth agency and socio-economic possibilities

Despite challenging conditions, youth have found ways to resist marginalization (Schiffrin, & Kircher-Allen 2012) by subverting their challenges and asserting cultural agency (Fairweather, 2006). Youth agency -the ability to engage proactively in response to oppressive structures- depends on factors such as varying levels of education, employment options, and family support (Lloyd, 2005).

Likewise, agency differs depending on the youth and their context (Jeffrey, 2012), ranging from economic agency and hustling (e.g., Mains, 2007; Roitman, 2004), to social movements and political mobilization (e.g., García-Lorenzo, et. al., 2014; Honwana, & De Boeck, 2005).

The relationship between youth education and employment possibilities asserts varied agency. Jeffrey (2008) identified three categories of youth according to levels of social mobility and self-actualisation. First, affluent youth educated in elite institutions who progress directly into secure employment in business or professions. Second, poor youth in the Global South who engage in manual labour because they lack secondary education. Third, less affluent youth who complete secondary school but are unable to find secure, salaried work. The latter category conceptualises youth as a liminal space in modern society for those that have not gained the accepted/advertised status in society (Smith, 2011). Thus, education can be viewed as a form of social capital that provides youth with access to employment opportunities.

Youth also use social capital in their communities and relationships (Anderson et al., 2007) to resist unemployment. Van Riel and Salama (2019) show how youth enhance their social relationships by using physical locations to build networks and show their availability for work. In Southern Europe, youth actualised their social capital by engaging in collective forms of community management and co-operativism to resist unemployment during economic crisis (García-Lorenzo et. al., 2014). Beck (1992) debates the propensity of Western youth to collectively engage in social or political expression, arguing that, as society has become more individualized, youth have poorly developed social networks and do not engage collectively. However, as highlighted by the Southern European example, researchers find youth across the globe enacting agency by mobilizing and engaging in protest against their circumstances (Sukarieh, & Tunnock, 2008).

Scholars have also emphasized examples of youth agency through entrepreneurship, highlighting that young people, even children, are entrepreneurs. Across different parts of the world, youth are creatively shrewd in actualising economic agency (Jeffrey, 2012). Youth agency has been identified as resourcefulness through tactics (Honwana, & De Boeck, 2005; Vigh, 2006), and thoughtful strategies (Swanson, 2009). For example, Abdullah (2002) highlights the creative pursuits of *rarray* boys in the informal economy of Sierra Leone who actualise cultural resilience by working as artisans and hawkers. Swanson (2009) noted how street children used mischief and humour while begging to actualise economic

opportunities from social networks in Ecuador's informal economy. Equally, Thieme (2010) demonstrates how unemployed poor youth in Kenyan informal settlements used waste as a currency to shrewdly "turnahustle" and create livelihood strategies for themselves. Thieme (2010) contrasts the view that these youths can be seen as having no option, or as dynamic, barefoot, self-made entrepreneurs who engage in indigenous entrepreneurial activities.

Method

Postcolonial perspective and narrative methodology

We collected data about the experiences of marginalised youth in Zimbabwe and Ireland. We applied a postcolonial perspective to understand the experiences of economically marginalised youth who live in these two very different parts of the world (Comaroff, & Comaroff 2012; Philipps, 2018) As pointed out in the literature, a stringent separation of youths' experiences in 'developing' and 'developed' contexts has resulted in a problematic, (neo)colonial division, where youth in the Global South are 'othered', and found inadequate, when compared through unrealistic frames of reference that apply to youth in the Global North. These unequal comparisons lead to romanticism and clichés of backwardness (Nieuwenhuys, 2013). For example, urban black and Latino youth (males) have been stereotyped as criminal deviants (Cammarota 2004), while the European media depicts youth refugees as a 'risk' for European society (Gray, & Franck, 2019).

Postcolonial thinking challenges the way we 'know' about *others*, who are usually compared and analysed through a Eurocentric view (Grosfoguel, 2011). It rejects this unequal comparison, which leads to stereotyped depictions, and offers an analysis that accounts for multiple and varied marginal positions (Nieuwenhuys, 2013; Philipps 2018). In the case of our research, we reject stereotyped assumptions about work, such as, how some segments of society are stigmatized as economically "unproductive" (Wacquant, 2008). Therefore, from a postcolonial perspective, rather than comparing youth against each other's social contexts, we have examined how youth have different experiences in relation to their own socio-cultural contexts of crisis.

The literature shows that in the Global North and Global South, youth experience socio-economic crisis in very different ways. Similarly, Zimbabwe and Ireland have different frames of reference for economic crisis. The post-2008 economic crisis experienced in Ireland was precipitated by the failings of global capitalism (Whelan,

2014), and had a disproportionate impact on young people (Kelly et al., 2014). The Zimbabwean economic crisis, ongoing since 2000, is directly linked to historical events of colonisation, and neoliberal economic restructuring in the 1990s (Dansereau, 2003). However, in both contexts, youth are disenfranchised relative to their own social contexts. Thus, apart from surface level similarities of economic crisis, and unemployment/underemployment, we show that youth have very different socio-economic realities and agency.

Participants

In Zimbabwe, we interviewed 10 youth who were unemployed or underemployed and had completed some high school education. The majority were youth from an informal settlement called Hatcliffe Extension, a marginal community with limited access to resources, located near Harare, the capital. One youth was a street artist from the city centre. The interviews were conducted in 2015 in connection with a business workshop that the youth had voiced (in 2014) they wanted to be able to engage in. This workshop was run in collaboration with Mu'unze, a local social enterprise that empowers artisans to access economic opportunities, and financial services firm Old Mutual. The research was conducted in Shona and English, with the Shona translations being executed by Kudzayi Ngwerume.

In Ireland, we interviewed 15 youth, across 2012 and 2013, who identified as unemployed or underemployed. The youth, who had completed higher education to either an undergraduate or masters level at Dublin Institute of Technology (now Technological University Dublin), were all looking for jobs or in sub-par employment.

Ethical considerations

In both Zimbabwe and Ireland, we followed accepted principles of research ethics, including voluntary participation, respecting participants throughout, obtaining informed consent and permission to audio record interviews, minimising the risk of harm to participants, protecting participants' anonymity and confidentiality, avoiding the use of deceptive practices, and giving participants the right to withdraw from the research (Vanclay, et al, 2013). In keeping with these principles, we have anonymised participants' names using a three-letter identifier.

Instruments

Following our postcolonial perspective, we employed a dialogical format to our interviews, whereby, pre-conceived categories or styles of questioning avoided (Imas and Weston, 2012), to enable participants to speak about their own experiences in an unguided way. In

Zimbabwe, oral communication and personal interaction are culturally valued forms of interaction (Vambe, 2001). Ireland similarly has a distinct tradition of orality, and narratives are an equally important form of cultural engagement (Harvey, 1992). Thus, a conversational approach, about the broad categories highlighted above, enabled the youth to feel comfortable and engaged. With the youths' consent, we recorded the interviews to ensure direct recollection of their narratives.

Data collection and analysis

We used a narrative methodology (e.g., Essers, & Tedmanson, 2014) for our data collection and analysis. As narrative methodology uses the narrative, or oral story, as a valued form of cultural communication (Riessmann 2008), we collected conversational narratives from participants as our research data. Narrative data enabled us to understand Zimbabwean and Irish youths' experiences of socio-economic crisis and agency from their own perspectives and social contexts. Like Essers and Tedmanson (2014), we analysed the youths' narratives to highlight the very different ways that they experienced socio-economic crisis, rather than comparing them against one another. In each context we analysed the themes that emerged from the youths' narratives in relation to the broad topics that we conversed about with them. The topics were: socio-economic experience of youth and their challenges; entrepreneurship and work; and responses to crisis.

We report the findings in a similar format and highlight the themes that emerged as expressed by the youth in their narratives. The emergent themes were expressed slightly differently to the broad topics and show the youths' distinct experiences in relation to their challenges, their attitudes to work or entrepreneurship, and their inclination to engage in socially purposeful activities.

Results

Crisis and agency in work in Zimbabwe and Ireland

In this section, we analyse the experiences of marginalised youth in Zimbabwe and Ireland. Here we analyse how un(der)employed youth are disenfranchised because they have not reached the socially expected practices of work, relative to their own social contexts. In both contexts, work is an unrequited promise and the youth find themselves in working relationships and aspirations that are self-driven. However, approaches differ according to the context. In Zimbabwe, youth are simultaneously far more precarious and entrepreneurial than expected, while in Ireland, youth are absorbed with

finding work that is fulfilling and directly related to their education. Surprisingly youth did not necessarily express concern or define themselves as precarious workers. Despite their experiences of socio-economic crisis, they also expressed their agency in different ways.

Zimbabwe: Youth experiences in ongoing crisis

We turn, first, to analysing the experiences of Zimbabwean youth. We explore their precarious conditions and employment challenges, as well as the enterprising opportunities they create for themselves, and their hopes for the future. Their narratives show that there is a world of possibility in precarity, which they take advantage of because this is what they know. Additionally, while entrepreneurship is critiqued as an individualistic, neocolonial endeavour, youth do not necessarily engage in this way. To them, entrepreneurship is a tool that can be used for any purpose. They are also much more socially invested than the literature presents.

Socio-economic experiences of youth and their challenges

Crisis is a chronic condition in the lives of young people in Zimbabwe. These youths are marginalized with few resources and opportunities, living in a "forgotten corner of the earth" as noted by BRV. Our participants were vocal that they face many challenges precipitated by the economic situation in the country. Finance was a main concern as they did not have enough resources to start or advance initiatives. HNR, who makes wire arts and crafts, explained: I've been making these [arts and craft]. I didn't have any capital, so I've just been doing something for survival. There were also limited basic resources, like electricity, that made business challenging:

'This community, where most of the participants are coming from, there is no electricity, so it will be very difficult for them to access the internet [...] and that's why I travel almost every day to the nearby community to access internet' (MRB)

A further disadvantage was a lack of trust, as youth were viewed as inexperienced. Equally, limited education also held some youth back. In addition to formal education, a concurrent issue was limited access to business knowledge. EPH astutely pointed out:

'The challenges are on capital and also on the know-how of how to run the business, how to handle finance, especially if you were an entrepreneur you need to know how to prepare your financial accounts, how to manage the money too, so it's another challenge because you can have capital but if you don't have the know-how on how to manage the money, it's still a challenge. So, you

need to have that education first, then you can have the capital to start the business' (EPH)

Some youth had gained access to aid intervention programs, but were critical of the impact. Edline felt these programs led to donor dependency and diminished people's independence, while Flint referred to the poor design of programs:

'The well-wishers will be having limited funding so the type of training that we receive is not very intensive... [compared to] training from a polytechnic. We'd gain more knowledge, [...] so when it comes to working with the newly acquired skills we may not be that good because we won't have trained for long enough. [...] They should be given the skill, such as business management, before they even have the working tools' (FLN)

Flint also thought participants should have agency in choosing the training they needed because he observed many young people participating because they were getting something for free. The youths' experiences of crisis are evident in these examples. They openly discuss their struggles and express the severity of hardships they face. But they also discussed their ambitions to run businesses or access support and were vocal about the program formats they thought would be most effective. It is apparent that the crisis does not hold them back, and they think and act beyond their circumstances.

Entrepreneurship and work

The economic crisis has led to a lack of employment in the formal sector and there is no social assistance. Because there are few jobs, and they are either unemployed or underemployed, youth are forced to be entrepreneurs. In the interviews, participants appeared to prefer to start their own businesses. Though this may seem like an obvious choice since there are not many jobs to be found, it is still a distinct choice. These examples that follow show entrepreneurship to be a space of agency; youth have very few resources, but still do something rather than wait for a job. Here we find that a different idea of entrepreneurship emerges as an alternative to crisis.

Participants discuss a range of business activities that they engage in. These include T-shirt printing, handmade wire crafts, construction, and selling cellphones. For instance, although MRT recently had to close his business, he had successfully run a cellphone business for four years. He explained that prior to this, he had been employed by a company and had managed to save enough to start his business. He was inspired by his uncle who had been a role model to him running a business as a mechanic, and, with the help of some friends, he found

table space in a market-place within a mall. He explained his business strategy:

'I was with a passion, because I know that with technology, the technology is advancing, especially with cellphones. As we can see right here in Zimbabwe, in 1998, we don't have WhatsApp or Facebook. So, right now, I can see that people are doing banking through cellphones and communicating. [...] A letter would take one week to reach the destination. But, with cellphones, you can communicate right there with the people from Australia, so that inspires me to get into business and I know that the business will operate in the long run because we will have much more advanced phones and people will always buy because we are moving with technology' (MRT)

This example illustrates that MRT is an astute businessperson who clearly understood social change and what his customers want. However, he had to close his business because the economic situation in the country worsened, and he ate into his savings. Meanwhile, FLT explained that, with limited education, he had few options and was able to start a business after receiving support from a donor training agency:

'I continued with the training until we registered the business. That's when I started doing my carpentry. [...] I believe that with the young people that I trained, if we were to get enough capital we could actually expand the business to become a company' (FLT)

Most youth talked about businesses they had run or aspired to start. Some discussed taking a formal job to fundraise for their business. These examples highlight the youths' willingness to be entrepreneurs, engaging in work as a survival strategy, despite the crisis and hardship.

Another aspect of business involved youth taking on multiple opportunities. EPH explained that the critical thinking he gained in his history and divinity classes at school that inspired him to engage in many business strategies. CLR, who aspired to sell poultry, or be an airhostess, considered herself creative because "you cannot rely on one thing". HNR, an accomplished businessperson, sells handmade arts and crafts made from recycled materials outside a gated community market. He explains:

'I [make] handmade things. Postcards with metal designs. Flags and countries with beads and wire. Candle (holders). I also do music and go to Book Café sometimes to do dance hall music. [...] [No one taught me about business], I just ended up. I was living in the street and I used to collect old, dirty wire like this, and I used to make some crafts' (HNR)

However, HNR talks about survival as the formula for running his business because he has to look for other opportunities when he cannot sell all his wares: “Sometimes you don’t even sell anything. You can’t sell any. You don’t sell every day. But, sometimes you don’t sell anything so sometimes you end up looking after cars in the street”.

These examples speak to creativity in adversity, where the youth create their own options despite their limitations. In contrast, one youth said he did not consider informal workers to be entrepreneurs or successful in business because they were unregistered and did ‘deals’. He also did not feel equipped in this area because entrepreneurship had not been ‘cultivated’ in him. This latter comment is a contrast because this youth appears to align with the stereotypical Western view that those in precarious conditions are unworthy as entrepreneurs.

Responses to crisis: Social business and social purpose

There are clear examples of a social response to crisis, where youth look to support their community, even in very small ways. EDL shared her initiative to “empower the girl child”. The idea emerged through her endeavours to sell Islamic wear and inspire self-empowerment in young women. She and a group of women arranged an event for young women because “every girl has a right to learn. Every girl has a right to do business. Every girl has a right to do anything [like doctors, or nurses]”. FLT explained that he “donates” his carpentry skills to train other youth because he loves his community and had been helped in the same way. MRT “sponsor[ed] a football team in [his] rural home” with supplies. SVR aspired to be a role model and support others with jobs because this would produce ripple effects in her community.

An area that the youth responded strongly to was education. Although most did not complete formal high school, they saw immense value in education and had ambitions to start educational initiatives because they wanted to mentor others and share knowledge and skills they had gained through other experiences. BRV stated, “Education is power. Education I will live with it. Money I will spend”. EDL, who has completed education to a higher level, expressed that her “bigger dream is to actually own a school where I will be doing career guidance, teaching business”. BRV and MRB discussed their initiative, called ‘Breakthrough Zimbabwe’, which they had established to support education in the community. MRB explained:

‘I am in a process together with a few individuals who are also a part of this. We are trying to acquire land to

build a school. We have all the people who are willing to help us build a school’ (MRB)

He also talked about MOOCS as an option for accessing educational materials. Both BRV and MRB were specific that this was an educational project and not a business. BRV followed up that they had managed to purchase some log cabins and had a plan:

‘We have a vision in our community. We are not educational enough, so we don’t want that to repeat [and] our young brother[s] to fall into the same pit as us. I want to start an informal school, because right now we don’t have a formal school in our community’ (BRV)

These gestures and aspirations may not be considered grand enough to be social enterprises by some. However, they are immense considering these youths’ circumstances. They give examples of socially oriented business activities clearly support the community and other youth.

Ireland: Youth experiences in the global crisis in Europe

The Irish youth were absorbed with finding work that was fulfilling and directly related to their education. This is a result of an inevitable contemporary expectation (supported by global objectives like the Millennium Development Goals) that youth should receive an education that supports them in participating in the workforce. Having graduated with the relevant skills and qualifications, the expected reward is fulfilling, stable employment. However, the contemporary work context has shifted so significantly that youth can no longer expect to receive this.

Most surprisingly in this data, the majority of youth are not interested, or do not feel in an optimal position, to start a business. They were more interested in obtaining fulfilling work in an area of their interest, even if this meant waiting a lengthy time to obtain a job, taking an unpaid/poorly paid internship, or emigrating. Equally, most youth who were interviewed were largely not motivated to protest against their precarious conditions because they did not feel that the issues directly applied to them and did not feel that it would make a difference to do so.

Socio-economic experience of youth and their challenges

There have been drastic changes in the Irish youths’ lives. They and their families have been hard hit by the crisis in ways they never expected. For example, RCH expressed that before the crisis he was “Happy-go-lucky, care-free, [with] no thought of the consequences of actions”, but, since then, things had changed. He found that people plan more in advance and cannot participate because

things are too expensive.

Youth also experienced many people losing their jobs, with companies going into liquidation. This resulted in people leaving the country to look for jobs elsewhere or living on the dole. There is also the sense that people are being more careful with finances. A number of youth explained that life is at a standstill. They felt stalled, stuck in a rut, and in a “time warp” (CTH) as a “lost generation” (WLM). SRH explained that she had to move back home because it was “tough to live on one hundred euro a week”. This highlights social issues like dependency on social welfare, and there were comments about scamming the welfare system.

Other issues youth faced were related to low self-worth from job rejections, as well as embarrassment and stigma about being unemployed and on welfare, although the fact that many people from different walks of life also had this experience somewhat lessened the stigma. On the work front, an unexpected topic that youth expressed was abuse. CTH explained that employers are “just abusing people like, you know, and people are working longer hours, and if you complain, tough luck they’ll get someone else in, you know”. GRN was hired for a full-time job after an unpaid internship, but she left because the owner did not pay the employees. She felt “ripped-off” and the experience severely affected her confidence.

The youth commented significantly on the ways that people in Irish society responded to the crisis. There was a clear contrast between youth in the interview cohort who talked about Irish people behaving passively toward economic crisis, while others talked about hope and optimism in Irish culture. For example, the view of some young people was that the situation was not going to change because the ‘Irish’ response is “more passive”, and a number of them commented that the Irish people took it “lying down”. Some did not want to focus on the issues at all and expressed apathy towards the constant negativity. In contrast, others comment on an Irish attitude of optimism. This was expressed as the Irish having a great capacity for hope and positivity. For instance, CNR stated that “we have a great capacity for hope [...] I think there has to be some opportunity there to negate some of the more severe outcomes of the economic crisis”.

Work and entrepreneurship

When it comes to work, Irish youth want fulfilling, meaningful employment. They expressed frustrations about navigating boredom and taking up sub-par work, as well as not receiving work for which they were qualified. For example, SNN was underemployed in a full-time job, but aspired to do something he was passionate about: “I

don’t know if I’ll stick around too much longer [because] if you don’t really enjoy something, it’s not worth doing”.

Boredom was expressed by youth in unsatisfactory jobs and when applying for jobs they had little interest in or qualification for. There was an interesting tension in the data where a number of youth chose between being on welfare or taking up poorly remunerated work to gain fulfillment. Some chose unpaid internships because it would enable them to work in the area they were qualified for, as RCH explains: “[The] unpaid internship lost me my social welfare rights [...] I was financially better off on social welfare than I am now, although I do feel much more productive and better about myself because I’m doing something”. A few chose to continue their education, even though there was no guarantee of employment.

A related theme is around youths’ expectations of gaining work right away in their area of qualification, as DNL explained: “I don’t think when anybody goes into college to do a Business and Law Degree that they want to come out and say that they’re going to stack shelves in a local supermarket”. Other views were about the expectation of employment given the time and effort graduates invested in education: “If someone’s gone to college, done well, proven themselves [...] they should be fairly happy and secure that that job will always be there for them” (SBH).

The Irish youth clearly saw value in their education, viewing it as social capital that would lead them to fulfilling opportunities. They saw their education as leading to jobs and were willing to wait for the right job, no matter their circumstances. They also saw their education as affording them opportunity through emigration, which for many at the time was the only way they felt they could get fulfilling, paid work and escape austerity. Indeed, emigration has typically been a safety valve during times of economic crisis in Ireland and some quarter of a million people, predominantly youth, left the country in the wake of the global financial crisis (Jones, 2015). Many youths had friends who had already found work in a range of destinations, including the UK, Dubai, China, Australia, the US and Canada.

The main reason for emigration was the lack of job security and it seemed like the only option for young people. SNN already had a visa to Canada and explained: “There are a couple of different visas which are possible to get at my age and with my experience and with the work I can go in to”. His example illustrates the power of his education in actualising this opportunity for him. There were only two youth who preferred not to emigrate. They saw value in becoming more educated

and staying to work in the country.

In the Irish cohort, there appeared to be very little actualisation of the entrepreneurial path. Although there was little action, a number were excited about starting a business because they felt it would be rewarding. However, they had hesitations and concerns. GRN felt she did not have the motivation and that it was guaranteed to flop because of the economy. Some had thought about it a great deal, but did not feel equipped with finances or ideas. For some, entrepreneurship was considered a lower option for people without degrees, as RBT explained: “You need a degree for anything, [and] if you don’t have a degree, I mean, you have to really start up your own business really”.

This view of jobs being associated with business is further emphasised by SRH, whose brother started his own business after gaining an apprenticeship in plumbing. In contrast, only one youth, WLM, had started running business activities to “*creatively play the game in order to get by*”. WLM, who had studied art at college and ran gigs on the side, felt that creatives were better equipped to run businesses because they expected to struggle and create their own jobs. He was the only youth who expressed this kind of creative hustle and appeared adept at being able to spot opportunities in the market. Given the earlier sentiments about Irish hope and opportunity in crisis, it was surprising that only one young person appeared to employ this attitude by running a business. This reflects a tension between opportunity and adversity for Irish youth. Perhaps the reason for not engaging in entrepreneurial activities is that Irish youth still have relatively more options and more consistent social support, but at the same time feel vulnerable with limited prospects.

Responses to crisis: Social purpose and protest

The Irish data illustrated that response to crisis centred around protest. However, while the youth were aware of protests, they did not engage in protest themselves. Some expressed that they did not have time, while others were not interested. One expressed that others had encouraged him because he had experience in a union, but he “[didn’t] want to deal with all the wankers” (WLM).

There were clear responses that the youth did not think protesting would make a difference to their precarious conditions. However, some were enthusiastic to see others using their voices. A key reason for not participating was the youth did not identify with the current political issues and reasons for the economic crisis in society, as RBT highlighted: “It’s something that I wouldn’t [get involved in] unless it was, maybe something [...] I felt that strongly about to go out and do it”. A

number of youth had participated in other protests against education cuts while in college:

‘Obviously, I would have taken part in the protest for keeping the fees down at college. [...] I am passionate about Ireland and I do want to see other people moving forward because that’s the way, the only way a country moves forward is with education. [...] I definitely wanted to be part of it because I wanted to say, well, I do have a voice’ (GRN)

A difference with these protests and the current ones was the youth identified with the issues. Additionally, while they were non-responsive to the current situation, a few did raise points about successful interventions. One expressed that being unemployed gave her time to volunteer. Although it was not a direct result of the crisis, it did show she supported social initiatives. Another youth discussed the national protest in response to a household water tax, explaining that people who participated did so because it directly affected them, and this was a route to bringing about change.

These responses imply that Irish youth are more inclined to engage in socially motivated projects when they can see the direct relevance for themselves. It may also be explained by the underlying level of social support in society. Meanwhile, for Zimbabwean youth, as noted in the discussion above, support can be seen in the interactions of family and friend networks and the welfare system.

Discussion and conclusions

We used a postcolonial perspective to examine the experiences of youth in Ireland and Zimbabwe to understand more fully the wider experiences of youth across diverse social contexts. Our approach is important because it subverts the dominance of youth research in ‘developed’ contexts and goes beyond the stereotypical clichés that emerge when people in the Global South are found inadequate when compared through unrealistic frames of reference applicable to the Global North. We rejected this unequal comparison offering an analysis that accounts for multiple and varied marginal positions across different contexts (Nieuwenhuys, 2013). Therefore, our aim was not to compare, or find generalised experiences of, the Zimbabwean and Irish, but to acknowledge their distinct experiences in relation to overarching issues of economic precarity and agency. In a global context, and both these countries, secure employment is not a given, and youth are disenfranchised because they have limited opportunities. Thus, in this paper, we questioned the ways that work is framed in

relation to these issues by conversing with un(der)employed youth to understand how they navigate the unrequited promise of work.

The most surprising finding in the Irish context was that, on the whole, the youth were not interested in being, or feel optimally positioned to be, entrepreneurial. This was surprising because the literature suggested that young entrepreneurs graduating into an insecure labour context in the Global North (Gill, & Pratt, 2008) are increasingly involved in casual labour despite the challenges posed (Neff et al., 2005). Instead, the Irish youth were looking for work that directly related to their education. The literature certainly expressed agency in education (i.e., Smith, 2011), but Irish youth were fixated on the expectation of fulfilling employment even if it meant waiting a lengthy time, taking internships, or emigrating to access the job they wanted. They were willing to take risks, but not entrepreneurial ones.

Equally, the Irish data illustrated a response to crisis through protest, though most youth did not engage in it. The literature did highlight a debate about individualistic Western youths' propensity to engage in political expression (Beck, 1992), but youths' responses were more nuanced in the data. Some were aware of successful interventions but did not protest because they could not see how the issues applied to them and did not think it would create change. This seems to say more about their understanding of the economic and political context than about individualism.

The most surprising finding in the Zimbabwean narrative is that youth are simultaneously far more precarious and entrepreneurial than expected. Like the literature, youth expressed multiple types of marginalisation including limited resources, public services, education, and employment (Diouf, 2003). However, despite limited resources, they expressed many possibilities, especially around entrepreneurial opportunities. The Zimbabwean youths' narratives show that, while entrepreneurship is critiqued in the literature as an individualistic, neocolonial endeavour (i.e., Sukarieh, & Tunnock, 2015), youth do not necessarily see it, or engage, in this way.

While the youth agreed with the issues of not being consulted about their experiences and wants (i.e., Sircar, & Dutta, 2011), they expressed entrepreneurial possibility in precarity. To them, entrepreneurship is a tool that can be used for any purpose, and they were distinctly choosing to actualise this space of agency rather than wait for a job. However, we found a different type of entrepreneurship emerging as an alternative to crisis. It was more socially oriented than the literature presents,

akin to collective community management and co-operativism (García-Lorenzo et. al., 2014).

The literature showed that in the 21st Century economic precarity is experienced by youth globally, and that experiences of youth are distinct in the Global North and Global South. However, when applying a postcolonial perspective to understand the work experiences and agency of youth in economic precarity, we can find their experiences are not as clear-cut or distinct as the literature suggests. This research is important because we have cautioned against a (neo)colonial comparison where youth of the Global South are unrealistically compared, often as inferior, to youth in the Global North. Given our findings, this leads us to be even more wary of the problematic consequences that occur when stereotyped assumptions about youth are used to (mis)inform policy and support interventions created in response to perceived challenges. The issues are not only relevant for youth, but any marginal group that has been impacted by experiences of colonisation. We urge future researchers to further explore these issues.

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About the authors/ Sobre los autores:

Alia Weston, PhD, Kingston University, UK. Alia is an Associate Professor of Creative and Business Enterprise at OCAD University. She has an expertise in business management and design. Her research is focused on critically examining how creativity and business contribute to positive social change.

J. Miguel Imas, PhD, London School of Economics and Political Science, UK. J. M. Imas lectures at Kingston University and holds a visiting scholar position at University of Bologna, Buenos Aires. His research focuses on the areas of organisational critical management and organisation studies, and he explores the creativity and entrepreneurship of marginal communities and organisations.

Jen Manning, PhD, TU Dublin, Ireland. Jen is a lecturer at TU Dublin. Her research employs a decolonial feminist lens to explore colonialism, patriarchy and capitalism in management and organisation studies. Her work explores alternative ways of working by integrating voices, lives and experiences of marginalised Global South women into mainstream discourse.

Paul Donnelly PhD, University of Massachusetts, Amherst, USA. Paul is Professor of Management and Organisation Studies at Technological University Dublin and is an Independent Expert on Ireland's National Economic and Social Council.

Kudzayi Ngwerume, EMA, ESCP Europe Business School. Kudzayi is the founder of Mu'unze a social enterprise that collaborates with under-resourced women-led communities to access international design markets. A social impact enthusiast, her current focus is on creative content strategy and harnessing the power of communities and co-creation to achieve positive impact.