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Exploring positive liberty and life skills for youth employment

Positive liberty and the case of life skills programming in Ethiopia

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Abstract

This paper seeks to analyze the role of life skills education and its impact on the employment of youth. Researchers and practitioners agree that life skills education is an effective way to fight youth unemployment, but not enough is known about the working elements of life skills programs. We will analyze the topic by exploring practical experiences with life skills training in a project to fight youth unemployment in Ethiopia, and connect this to the research on the effectiveness of the methodology that is used in this life skills training. Following this, we will explore in which manner life skills education serves as a measure to fight youth unemployment as to enable exploration of their positive liberty. Positive liberty pertains to the human desire to be the master of their own life, be moved by their own reasons and not be affected by the outside factors. The paper zooms out and discusses the political context in which the life skills program is implementing, pointing out the paradox of promoting positive liberty with life skills education, within a program that focusses on influencing the decisions people make on migration (restricting positive liberty). Balancing the different motives of the stakeholders in life skills education, which is illustrated by using the concept of positive liberty, is key for impactful implementation of life skills programs. While analyzing the working elements of life skills education, contextualization is pointed out as one of the main working elements of life skills programming. Moreover, if young people are put in the centre of program development, contextualization has the potential to tackle the contradiction of political motives in programming and enabling the positive liberty of young people.

Key words: *youth employment, life skills, vocational education, Ethiopia, positive liberty*

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Introduction

Currently, the world is dealing with the largest cohort of youth that are transitioning into adulthood; more than 1.2 billion (Bernhardt, et al. 2014). In Ethiopia, the number of young people under 30 are estimated at 75% (Ethiopia Job Commission, 2019). The opportunities for young people to have a successful transition into adulthood, find a decent job and sustain their livelihood are often low. The current COVID-19 health crisis only increases the challenges young people face. Despite great progress in education, there is a gap between the skills that are required on the labour market, and the skills that young people have.

This shows the need of understanding the different ways that can increase the opportunities of young people in their participation in the labour market. An important part of increasing the employment opportunities is provision of quality education that focusses on teaching skills that are needed on the job-market. Interventions on the side of quality training and education should be integrated with approaches of job creation in order to successfully tackle the youth employment challenge (Filmer & Fox, 2014; Kiiru & Barasa, 2020).

This paper specifically focuses on the ways life skills programs can support the opportunities of young people on the labour market, by focusing on learnings from the life skills program under the SINCE project in Ethiopia, implemented by Edukans from 2018 to 2020. Research and practitioners agree on the importance of training young people in life skills to fight youth unemployment (Waigango & Mwangi, 2018), but not enough is known on what specific elements make life skills training successful. Therefore, we build on literature and expert interviews held to generate insights into the working elements of the life skills program of Edukans. In addition, we build on qualitative data collected during the lifetime of the SINCE project.

After understanding how life skills programming can be most successful, we will discuss the importance of balancing the different motives of stakeholders during implementation of life skills programming. We do this by connecting the life skills programming to the concept of positive liberty; being the master of your own life, without being influenced by outside factors (Berlin, 2019). Life skills education can be viewed as a pedagogical approach that aims to increase the positive liberty of young people. Moreover, employment is also seen as a key aspect in shaping positive liberty in the transitional phase into adulthood (Vrando & Rao, 2011). We will zoom out and discuss how the concepts of positive and negative liberty can also help us to shed a new light on understanding the tension between the political and the humanitarian, and the paradoxical role of life skills in this process. Finally, all comes together in the conclusion, and the different levels of impactful life skills programming become clear.

Youth employment

Creating employment opportunities for young people stands increasingly on top of the humanitarian and donor agenda. With the growing young population and a huge number of young people transitioning into adulthood; creating decent employment opportunities is crucial. Different approaches towards creating more employment opportunities are taken. Public-private partnerships, programs focussing on creating more jobs, work-based learning programs, and programs focussing on strengthening the TVET systems are aiming to strengthen the opportunities for young people on the job market. It is not just about creating job opportunities or closing the skills gap, it is also the quality of the job that matters (Quack & Flynn, 2019). The importance of decent jobs that match the aspirations of young people, and the involvement of youth to create a deep understanding of the choices that young people make within the different contexts are two important findings of the ongoing Boosting Decent Employment for Africa's Youth' research initiative (Kazimierczuk, 2020). The context-specific constraints in obtaining decent jobs and the disadvantaged position of young women are also crucial to consider (Quack & Flynn, 2019).

The literature distinguishes between supply- and demand- side interventions (Ismail & Mujuru, 2020). Supply-side interventions focus on improving the technical and soft skills of young people, and assume there is a gap on the side of the skills of young people. The demand-side focusses on the demand for young people's labour, assuming that there is a lack of (decent) job opportunities. Interventions on the demand-side focus on creating more job opportunities, or job matching. Public private partnerships are examples of demand-side interventions, while training interventions in TVET's are supply side interventions. As Filmer and Fox (2014) point out in their research on youth employment in Sub-Saharan Africa: a balanced approach focussed on building skills, increasing demands for labour and raising productivity is needed. Thus, an approach that focusses both on the demand- and the supply side is considered most effective (Filmer & Fox, 2014; Ismail & Mujuru, 2020, Kiiru & Barasa, 2020). Life skills can be considered as a program focussing on the supply-side of the youth employment challenge.

Life skills

Life Skills is generally defined as the teaching that equips individuals with appropriate knowledge on risk taking behaviours and develop skills such as communication, assertiveness, self-awareness, decision-making (Nasheeda, Abdullah, Kraus, & Ahmed, 2019). The World Health Organization (WHO) describes life skills education as "facilitating the development of psychosocial skills that are required to deal with the demands and challenges of everyday life. It includes the application of life skills in the

context of specific risk situations where children and adolescents need to be empowered to promote and protect their rights (WHO, 1999 p.1) Fundamentally, it is about learning and building a breadth of competencies, including cognitive, emotional and interpersonal skills (Kwauk, 2017). Life skills programs often have a specific focus or departure point, depending on the specific context of the program. Life skills programs focussed on adolescents often include topics related to Sexual and Reproductive Health Rights (SRHR). The inclusion of SRHR increases gender equality and the (sexual) health and well-being of young people.

The teaching of life skills is important in every context as effective and appropriate utilization of the skills influences the way youth feel about themselves, their relation to others and can enhance overall productivity, self-esteem and self-confidence. It also contributes to adaptive, positive behavior that enables the individual to meet the demands and challenges of everyday life effectively. Life skills can also be a means of empowerment by providing young people with tools for problem solving and managing emotions. Empowerment is a set of measures designed to increase self-determination and autonomy (Ozmete, 2008). Life skills can thus be seen as a way to increase the agency of young people.

Life skills are crucial for everybody, but become especially valuable in situations of adversity – because vulnerable youth can build resilience and be better equipped to deal with challenges they face. In addition, life skills are needed to maintain and keep a job, and to have a successful career. Therefore, life skills training aims to contribute to the gap between educational systems and the demand of the job market – and therefore fighting youth unemployment.

Evidence of the importance of life skills in combatting youth employment can be found in different research (for example: Avezdo, et al., 2013; Baraki & Kemenae, 2013; Ibaran, 2014; Singh & Jaykuhmar, 2019). Baraki and Kemenae (2013), who evaluated the TVET structures and components in Ethiopia, recommend the extension of life skills development to combat the high rate of youth unemployment. Ibaran et al (2014) evaluated the impact of increasing the component of life skills in a program for youth employment and saw a significant impact on the employment opportunities for men, and a general increase of the quality of employment. Kiiri and Barasa (2020) underline again the importance of not solely focussing on the supply-side of the employment challenge, but also on the demand-side: an integrated approach. We depart from the understanding that life skills are a crucial part of integrated interventions focussed on the gendered needs of young people on both the demand- and supply side of the employment challenge.

Methodology

This paper builds on the data that has been collected during ongoing monitoring and evaluation of the SINCE Amhara project in Ethiopia, and data collected during the master thesis of Ismail (2020) on the working elements of life skills education.

The SINCE Amhara and Oromia projects in Ethiopia are focussed on creating employment opportunities for young people. The programs, funded by the European Union fall under the “Stemming Irregular Migration in North and Central Ethiopia” (SINCE) Action. The program is being implemented in five different areas. In the SINCE Amhara lot, Edukans played the role of consortium lead, and in the SINCE Oromia lot, Edukans was implementing partner. In both projects, Edukans oversaw the implementation and development of the life skills program in TVET’s. The general aim of the projects is to reduce irregular migration from the target areas, and provide employment opportunities for returnees and potential migrants. The program focusses on both the supply and demand side of tackling the youth employment challenge: working in public-private partnerships, working on decent job opportunities, and working on skill-building of young people with TVET’s. The life skills program was part of the capacity building of trainers and TVET’s, and aimed to equip the students with the right life skills to prepare them to find and maintain a job. In each area, 1500 students in the age of 18 to 30 took part in the program and followed a short-term technical and vocational training. The technical and vocational training was supported by the life skills modules, 20 modules of 70 minutes, based on the needs assessment and collaborative development and adaption. The modules focus on building knowledge, skills, and a positive attitude in the areas of self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, responsible decision making, and sexual and reproductive health rights.

During the SINCE Amhara and SINCE Oromia projects, data was collected during and after training moments (four different occasions of training over a period of two years). A total of 16 trainers from five TVET’s participated in these trainings in the Amhara region. A total of 20 trainers of 6 TVET’s participated in the Oromia region. Data was collected during focus group discussions, and by evaluation meetings during the training. Because the design of the life skills program had a collaborative approach, the content of the life skills training was increasingly shaped and adjusted during the training meetings with TVET trainers. In addition, scheduled monitoring and evaluation visits that were part of the project added to the data used for this paper. The TVET’s were also visited and life skills lessons were observed during the period of the project.

The research of Ismail used a qualitative analysis by combining two complementary methods: literature study and in-depth interviews with experts. The literature study on the potential working elements, aimed at the elements of the Process-theory. Process-theory largely impacts program

effectiveness in various ways relating to the general (pre)conditions and practical aspects but also accurate and apt delivery of the message (Rossi, Lipsey, & Henry, 2018). 'Experts' are defined as those who possess knowledge which is not accessible to anybody in the field of action under study (Meuser & Nagel, 2009). The interviews were held with the designers, contributors and executors of the life skills program within the organization as well as from partner-organizations that partake in this process or NGO's that have similar life skills programs abroad.

What works in life skills programs?

While the importance of life skills is clear, due to a lack of evidence-based research, little is known about which specific components of life skills education create positive impact, and about the experiences of life skills education in the eyes of learners and teachers (Nasheeda et al., 2019). Research in different contexts identifies the most important working elements pertaining to the execution, preparation and conditions of life skills education: infusion in policy, contextualization, the involvement of community and precise planning (Sancassiani et al., 2015; Tuttle et al., 2006; Smith et al., 2014; WHO, 2001). These working elements will be connected to the evaluation of life skills implementation within the SINCE program.

The importance of life skills is underlined by an evaluation of the life skills program of SINCE Amhara, by van Dijk (2019) who evaluated the experiences of trainees, graduates and employers with life skills. *"They are more hopeful for their future due to their life skills and they think it will help them to get employed. Trainees expected to gain more knowledge about life skills for the future and they expected that LST will change and improve their lives, and that it will help them in preventing themselves of addiction and migration."* (Van Dijk, 2019. P . 18). Van Dijk (2019) shows in her conclusions also the view of the employers, the view of the demand-side: *"You can see a clear difference between those who did follow LST and those who did not. They can see differences in motivation, self-confidence, punctuality, assertiveness and being vibrant."* (Van Dijk, 2019. P. 18). Building on this, we will explore the different elements of the perceived success of the life skills program.

One of the key elements of a successful life skills program is the capacity of the trainers. Shriver and Buffet (2017) point out the importance of the social and emotional dimension of the relationship between trainers and their learners. The TVET trainers were engaged from the start of the program, and aided the adaption and review of content. They were also trained on the same life skills the students would be trained on. This aided also the process of contextualization. As many of the TVET trainers themselves are also young people (under the age of 30), the topics resonated with them. The importance of this life skills training for trainers is pointed out by Desta, a TVET trainer in SINCE

Amhara: *“Life skills did not only change my students, it also changed me.”*. This was also shown by one of the other young male trainers, who, after his colleague taught the training on gender roles, lectured everyone on how he learned the importance of gender equality and how he was going to reflect this in working on equal responsibilities in his own household. The training methodology of peer-to-peer-teaching, where the TVET trainers go through all the topics by teaching them to each other, was pointed out by the trainers as one of the enabling factors for this impact. Making the training methodology a key element for successful rollout of the program. The two examples aim to show that not only the capacity of trainers to train is increased, their ‘life skills’ are also build.

One of the main working elements to improve and sustain the impact of the life skills program relates to process of infusion (Smith et al., 2004). Infusion refers to the process of integrating objectives and activities of a program in such a manner that it is spread throughout the curriculum of general education. For this to work, the program needs to be embedded in policies and to be recognized by (local) governments. As the life skills program was part of a short term training trajectory targeting specific young people over the course of two years, the sustainability of the life skills program is not automatically secured. In a workshop with different stakeholders (TVET deans, local government officials), it was mentioned that training on life skills, or orientation on life skills, should target a wider audience (including all stakeholders, and employers, to increase support for the life skills program). In addition, a plan for institutionalizing the life skills training was made together with the TVET trainers, but this plan has not been rolled out during the lifetime of the project, due to the new challenges of COVID-19. Based on this, it is recommended that future project development plans include the infusion of life skills programs, and a plan for sustainable institutionalization of quality improvements in educational institutions should be part of the programming from the start.

Another key element for successful life skills education is the process of contextualization, which ideally departs from the perspective of young people. It is important to avoid the deficit approach, i.e. the underlying assumption that the targeted youth are deficient in some regards that need to be fortified. The deficit narrative is an issue, because of its apparent disregard of local ideas and practices, which often leads to a one dimensional and overgeneralized approach. In order to ensure contextualization, the program needs to be built on the needs and priorities of its beneficiaries and aligned with local practices and ideas (Van Esch & De Haan, 2017). In the SINCE program this was done by needs-assessments, monitoring and evaluation, and co-creating of the life skills curriculum. However, the young people can be more at the center of this process and meaningful youth participation can be improved.

Furthermore, research has also shown that an essential factor to achieve optimal impact for Life Skills program is the embedding of a multicomponent approach, which ties with parents and the community, contributes to a positive outcome. From both the ecological as well as the systemic point

of view, it can be concluded that when life skills programs are combined with creating environmental support, as well as reinforcement from family members, professionals, other important community members and local media; there is an increased likelihood that participants will adapt desired change in behavior and strengthening of competencies (Sancassiani et al., 2015). This multicomponent approach of including the community in the life skills programming has not sufficiently been used within the life skills program of SINCE. While connections with employers, and government institutions were sufficiently made, connections with the wider community can be improved in future programming.

Lastly, a more practical recommendation for life skills program is the planning. Research found that the lack of rigorous and precise planning that is common for LSP in developing countries is appointed as the cause of this discredit. Beside a scrupulous planning in the design and implementation of LSP, program-evaluation and follow up are equally as vital. Therefore, systematic planning and implementation is critical for effective and sustainable programming. Examples of finalizing this are implementing participant feedback, long-term monitoring and evaluation reviews (Tuttle et al., 2006; WHO, 2001).

After discussing the main learnings of the life skills programs, we will now dive into the paradox of providing life skills education for young people to increase their positive liberty, and agency, while the project is aimed at influencing the decisions of the same young people.

Positive liberty and empowering youth

On top of the aforementioned working elements of life skills education, and the learning from that we can draw from the evaluation of the life skills program in Ethiopia, it is also crucial to look at the (political) context in which life skills programs are implemented. As mentioned before, the general aim of the project is to reduce irregular migration from the target areas, by providing employment opportunities for returnees and potential migrants. The aim of the project is thus to influence the decisions young people make (deciding to migrate), which can be seen as a way of restricting people's choices; restricting liberty. This contradicts with the idea of life skills as a program that empowers young people's agency, and equips youth to make their own choices. We will dive deeper into this contradiction by looking at the concept of positive liberty.

Positive liberty pertains to the human desire to be the master of their own life, be moved by their own reasons and not be affected by outside factors. Berlin (2017) made the distinction between positive and negative liberty: positive liberty is linked to personal agency and freedom, while negative liberty is linked to the absence constraints and obstacles. The right balance of positive and negative

liberty is needed for the successful development of young people: personal agency and freedom and absence of constraints are both crucial. Examples of negative liberty are freedom of speech, freedom of religion, the freedom to act. Positive liberty is personal agency, which is needed to act within the framework of negative liberties. In education, there is often more attention for negative liberty though the Winter (2013) argues there should be attention for both. Life skills education can be viewed as a pedagogical approach that aims to increase the positive liberty of young people. Employment is also seen as a key aspect in shaping positive liberty in the transitional phase into adulthood (Vrando & Rao, 2011). Life skills is an educational perspective which promotes positive liberty by empowering young people to use their own agency, which also helps to fight youth unemployment. Positive liberty can thus be linked to both employment, and to life skills education.

Empowering young people's positive liberty by life skills programming is seen within the SINCE program, where youth mentioned their increase of confidence, improved image about themselves and hopes about their futures: all enabling factors to practice positive liberty. This is in line with research of Ibarra (2014) and Avezdo, et al. (2013), who also identify improved confidence and positive hopes and aspirations as outcomes linked to the life skills programs.

De Winter (2013) argues that if young people do not experience enough positive liberty, the negative liberty excesses and young people can go against every rule of society (the obstacles are removed by themselves). Irregular migration can be seen as one way of excessing in negative liberty, because there is no space for young people to practice their positive liberty. In this sense, increasing the positive liberty of people, could thus influence their decision of migration (though the nuance should be made that (irregular) migration can also be a last resort - not as preferred decision- and therewith not so much an act of agency).

While connecting life skills education to the concept of positive liberty, we can identify a paradox. Life skills in itself tries to empower young people to have more agency and positive liberty. While on the other hand, the aim of the SINCE project is to influence the decisions young people make about their lives and irregular migration, a political motive. Influencing the decisions of people, is in itself a restriction of positive liberty. While creating education and employment opportunities could be seen as creating more negative liberty (taking away the obstacles to find a job). Where the life skills methodology and program in itself thus try to increase the positive and negative liberty of young people, the overall aim of the project is to influence this liberty with a political motive.

The contradiction of the motives on the intersection of the political and humanitarian agendas becomes problematic if it influences the implementation of the project in a negative way. One example of such an intersection can be seen if we zoom into one of the aspects of the life skills program:

responsible decision making. In the life skills program, youth are encouraged to make 'responsible decisions', based on their own values in life and ethical consideration. Thus, the life skills program aims to empower young people with the means and capacity to make responsible decisions. However, the same argument of empowering youth to make responsible decisions is used in discussions with the donor organization; and in this context mentioned as a tool to influence the youth. The donor already has in mind what the 'responsible decisions' *ought to be*: it would be responsible not to migrate. In line with influencing the responsible decisions, returnees were invited as guest speakers to tell about their bad experiences with (irregular) migration to discourage the young people prone to migrating. This was done to influence the youth (who are prone to migrate) to make the 'responsible decision' not to follow in the footsteps of the returnees. Without getting into the discussion whether such a visit of a returnee to the classroom will influence the lives of young people in a positive or negative way, the motive of the visit is clear: influence the decision of young people about (irregular) migration. Therewith, restricting positive liberty. It should be noted here, that in the research of Van Dijk (2019) it was the youth themselves who mentioned: "*It [the life skills program] will improve life because it will help in preventing from migration and addiction and it will help to get employed.*" (Van Dijk, 2019, p. 17). If it is youth who decide with their *own agency* that they do not want to migrate – or that (irregular) migration would be a last resort, it would be an act of positive liberty. On the other hand, if youth are influenced to make a certain decision; it can be viewed as a restriction of this liberty.

Conclusions

Researchers and practitioners agree that life skills have a positive impact on youth employment (Waigango & Mwangi, 2018), and we have shown that life skills and employment can be seen as ways of practicing positive liberty. However, the humanitarian can never be seen as separate from the political. The contradiction of the different (political) motives of the donor organization (who identifies the overall aim of the project), the beneficiaries (the young people who are empowered), and the implementing organizations (Edukans, who want to improve the quality of life of young people) need to be well understood in order not to disrupt the positive impact of the life skills program. It is crucial to balance the different motives, on the one hand trying to influence decisions and therewith restricting positive liberty, while on the other hand implementing a program to empower youth with life skills that try to increase the positive liberty of youth.

While the reasons for life skills education and its positive impact on youth employment are clear, we have also pointed out key aspects that make life skills programs effective. Departing from the argument that life skills programming should be part of an integrated approach based on the (gendered) needs of young people focussed on both the demand- and supply side. We have identified

trainers as key actors in successful life skills programming. Moreover, we have shown that the life skills training can also positively impact the personal development of the life skills trainers. The program needs to be embedded into the local context, this *infusion*, whereby the local government and stakeholders support the institutionalization of life skills in the educational curriculum is crucial (Smith et al., 2004). We have also pointed this out as one of the lessons learned from the SINCE program in Ethiopia. The importance of rigorous planning for successful programming was pointed out as a main working element for successful life skills programming, and rigorous planning in the process of making life skills sustainable is one of the learnings from the life skills project in Ethiopia. In addition, the environmental approach, that includes the community and family of young people, is also proven to increase the effectiveness of life skills programs (Sancassiani et al., 2015). Including the community in this multicomponent approach is something that can be improved in future life skills programming.

Finally, contextualization is a key working element (Van Esch & De Haan, 2017; Boler & Aggleton, 2005). We have seen the positive impact of contextualization in the SINCE project, because the trainers were shaping the content of the life skills training. However contextualization does also mean young people should be at the centre in the process, identifying their own needs. Thus, the beneficiaries of the program should not be seen as passive victims of their situations; but as young people who act with their own agency: who practice their positive liberty. The empowerment of positive liberty of youth can become an outcome of the life skills program, if meaningful youth participation is encouraged more. This view of contextualization underlines the idea that life skills education is a way to empower youth to practice positive liberty. Moreover, the contradictory intersection of the political agenda and the humanitarian intervention of life skills will become irrelevant for successful implementation, if the humanitarian intervention always builds on the needs and priorities of the beneficiaries. Hence, by taking the perspectives of the trainee as a departure point and by encouraging meaningful youth participation; the contradiction of life skills and the political motive to restrict positive liberty can be tackled.

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