



A 20-year-old man who works in a bar, Dire Dawa, Ethiopia © Nathalie Bertrams/GAGE 2024

How can adolescent and youth capabilities be supported in crises contexts? Evidence from urban Ethiopia

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Introduction

At just past the halfway point to the deadline for achieving the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), only 15% of the goals are on track to meet their targets (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA), 2023). Given that many countries in the Global South have large adolescent and youth populations, including Ethiopia where 32% of the population are aged 10-24 years old (UNFPA, 2024), understanding how best to support young people's capabilities is essential for getting the SDGs back on track. Adolescents in Ethiopia have been living through recurrent and interconnected crises during the course of GAGE's longitudinal research. In 2018 and 2019, ethnic tensions and conflict along the Somali–Oromia border displaced large numbers of people (the number of internally displaced people in Ethiopia rose from 258,000 in 2016 to 2.1 million by the end of 2018) (Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC), 2024). Continual ethnic tensions and political unrest in Dire Dawa and Batu caused violent clashes within schools, universities and workplaces in 2019. In 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic caused further disruptions to young people's lives – not least the closure of schools for seven months due to lockdowns. The pandemic has resulted in a number of economic and social implications including increased domestic responsibilities for girls, increased household economic vulnerabilities including a shift to more informal work and widening educational inequalities (Harris et al., 2021). The start of the pandemic was

shortly followed by conflict in Tigray region, which spread to neighbouring Afar and Amhara regions in 2021, significantly disrupting young people’s access to education (Jones et al., 2022) (see Figure 1).

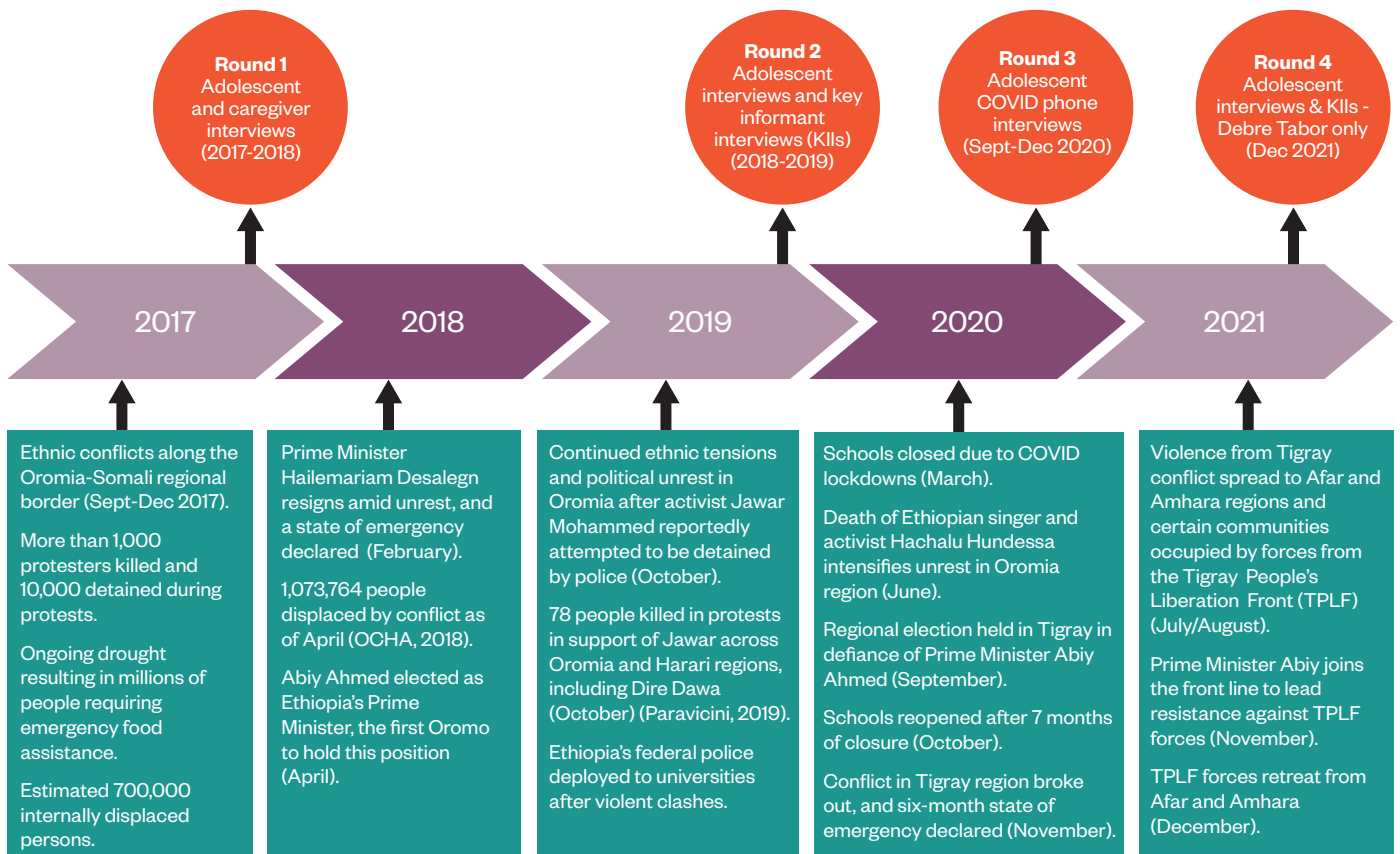
These crises have also led to increasing youth mobility due to both forced displacement and migration. Urbanisation in Ethiopia has increased rapidly (albeit from a relatively low rate) by around 5% each year (World Bank, 2018). Migration from rural to urban areas has intensified due to increasing landlessness, and decreasing productivity in agriculture driven by climate change (Holden and Bezu, 2013; Bezu and Holden, 2014; Abeje, 2021; Bouteska et al., 2024). However, growing urban populations and demand for jobs has not been met with adequate supply, resulting in high youth unemployment rates in urban areas, especially in Dire Dawa (at 20.8% in 2021 – the second highest rate after the capital, Addis Ababa) (Ethiopian Statistics Service (ESS), 2021).

Young people have had to navigate these disruptions as they transition through a complex life stage that is characterised by rapid social, psychological and biological changes (UNICEF, 2011; Viner et al., 2015). Adolescence and early adulthood are also times when young people are moving through and entering into key institutions such as school and work, developing skills and opportunities that can have long-lasting effects on their lives. In the face of

crises and adversity, young people in Ethiopia have shown significant resilience and ability to adapt to challenging circumstances (Johnson and West, 2022). However, for some young people, these disruptions can significantly alter their future trajectories (Jones et al., 2021; Jones et al., 2022) and can also decrease their aspirations for higher education (Presler-Marshall et al., 2024).

GAGE research draws on the capability approach, which was first conceptualised by Sen (1979; 1985; 2004), and further developed by a range of scholars (Nussbaum, 2000; Ibrahim, 2006; Robeyns, 2016). The capability approach asks the central question: are individuals able to live in ways that are valuable to them. A person’s freedom to ‘do and be’ in ways that they deem valuable are termed their ‘capabilities’ (for example, being able to be well nourished, educated or free from violence), and achieving these capabilities is termed ‘functionings’. Nussbaum (2000) further differentiates capabilities into basic capabilities (the building blocks needed for more advanced capabilities), internal capabilities (more developed internal competencies), and combined capabilities (both internal competency and an enabling environment, so that an individual has full freedom to function in a certain way). This policy brief identifies the factors that can support young people’s capabilities in the context of interconnected crises. It looks both at how

Figure 1: Timeline of key events and data collection in Ethiopia, 2017-2021



young people's internal capabilities can be developed and protected during crises, as well as how governments and service providers can promote enabling environments that allow young people to realise their capabilities. We focus on education and economic empowerment-related capabilities, but also touch on the impacts of young people's experiences of crises on their psychosocial well-being, reflecting the view that education is both a central capability and an important approach for developing a range of other capabilities (Sen, 1999; Walker, 2006). This policy brief will be accompanied by a forthcoming journal article, using this data to explore school to work transitions.

Methods

This brief draws on qualitative longitudinal data collected with 91 participants, 32 adolescents (aged 12–19 years during the first round of interviews), 24 caregivers and 35 key informants from three diverse urban regions of Ethiopia (Debre Tabor, South Gondar zone, Amhara region; Batu, East Shewa zone, Oromia region; and Dire Dawa City Administration, which sits near the Somali- Oromia regional border) (see Table 1 for an overview of the sample.) Data was collected over a four-year period (2017–2021), using in-depth individual interviews. There were three rounds (R1–R3) in all research locations, and a further round of data collection in Debre Tabor (R4) to explore the impacts of the recent Tigray conflict (see Figure 1). Given that a central component of the United Nations Agenda 2030 is to 'leave no one behind', this sample includes a diverse range of marginalised adolescents such as those that married as children, those who are out of school and in paid work, and those with disabilities.

We have drawn on Thomson and Holland's (2003) 'across and within participant' approach to analyse individual trajectories, exploring the factors that either help support or hinder young people's capabilities during the interconnected crises of the past four years. We also looked across our sample to explore similarities and differences between different sub-groups based on gender, location and disability status (see Devonald and Jones, 2023, for a description of the analytical approach used for this paper).

Table 1: Mixed-methods research sites

Location	Adolescents							Caregivers	Key informants
	Male	Female	In school R1	In school R2	Ever married	Has a disability	In paid work		
Batu	5	6	10	9	0	3	7	11	12
Dire Dawa	4	6	6	3	2	3	4	7	8
Debre Tabor	5	6	10	9	2	2	1	6	15
Total	14	18	26	21	4	8	12	24	35

Key findings

Through our longitudinal approach, we have identified the main components that support young people's educational and economic empowerment-related capabilities during their transitions through school and work. These were either identified through exploring the factors that currently support or hinder those transitions, or through recommendations from young people themselves on what they need to support their capabilities, now and in the future.

Building internal capabilities

Role models

The capability to aspire has been highlighted as an important capability in its own right, as well as being essential for developing and fostering other capabilities, and has been linked to capabilities such as hope, autonomy and voice (Walker, 2006; Hart, 2016). We found that role models play a key part in shaping adolescents' education and work aspirations. The majority of participants have future work aspirations that are linked to family members, peers or members of the community who are successful in a particular profession, which they take inspiration from. A 17-year-old girl from Batu explained:

My aunt's husband is a very smart attorney. When I see him, I get encouraged to become an attorney and that was also the reason I joined the social science stream. (Round 1)

Another 16-year-old girl from Debre Tabor who aspires to be a fashion designer said:

Yes, I have [a role model]. She is a designer and trainer in Addis Ababa. I like her creative works. She is a hard worker and her designs are with local materials. I heard her when she was talking on the TV. (Round 1)

Fostering positive aspirations is particularly important for more marginalised groups such as women, girls, and young people with disabilities, in order to address 'adaptive preferences' and to widen the scope of what individuals have reason to value and believe they can achieve (Walker, 2006;

Hart, 2016). We can see how important it is – both for girls and young women and for young people with disabilities – to have role models in the community. A 17-year-old girl from Dire Dawa, who aspires to set up her own business, described how:

When I go to buy coffee I pass by a construction material shop, I like their business. The owner of the shop is a woman, I tell her I want to be like her. She encourages me ... I like what she does in her shop, she orders male workers and supervises them ... She works independently. (Round 1)

A 16-year-old girl from Debre Tabor who has a visual disability described the impact of meeting and speaking to other people with disabilities in her community who are working successfully, at an event organised by her church:

I want to be a civil servant, employed in government offices, because I am no different from or inferior to others ... I know people who work in the justice bureau, town administration and in a college, they come to the church and tell us that we can succeed just like them. They motivate us to work hard and think of the future. (Round 1)

Despite these clear benefits of positive role models in the community, negative role models can conversely have a detrimental effect on young people's aspirations, especially due to high youth unemployment rates for graduates. The father of a 15-year-old boy from Debre Tabor described the negative impact his oldest son has had on his youngest son's educational aspirations:

For my youngest son, he is losing hope by looking at his older brother who says there is no use of learning. He graduated and still didn't get a job so my children are now careless about education. The youngest asks me if it is going to be better if he learns something technical but I always tell him to learn up to what is possible at least to degree level. (Round 1)

During the most recent round of interviews the younger son was still in education, but his aspirations had been further impacted by the Tigray conflict, and he was even more uncertain about his future.

Throughout the interviews, young people's aspirations changed frequently and only a few individuals maintained the same aspirations across the four years. Many participants' aspirations had become more uncertain or shifted to seemingly more realistic options, especially in

the context of ongoing instability. This was more evident in Debre Tabor during the recent conflict, where educational aspirations declined due to insecurity. This was particularly seen among boys, whose aspirations often shifted from education towards helping the war effort. A 19-year-old young man from Debre Tabor explained:

Joining universities outside our region was risky for the past few years because of the security issues. Currently, many students consider that failing is better than passing and joining universities in other regions ... No one knows about the next few years, I might even join the war. I can't have a long-time plan as long as the war continues. (Round 4)

As that example shows, young people's decisions about higher education are also shaped by recurrent conflicts. Many young people highlighted that they now want to go to a university close to their home, due to violence between different ethnic groups occurring within universities, with some deciding not to go at all (or being prevented from going by their families) when placed in a university outside their home region¹.

Although it is important that adolescents and young people develop high aspirations, those aspirations mean very little without an enabling environment that helps them to achieve their aspirations and especially peace, security and freedom of movement. For many participants, the frequent disruptions, instability and high youth unemployment rates have made it very difficult to achieve their aspirations. Having personal contacts was identified as key; of the few respondents that were working successfully in a profession, many had been supported to do so through family connections, as one 20-year-old young woman from Batau, working as an electrician, described: *'My sister's husband, who is an electrician there [place of work], helped me get a job there. He is a boss in the organisation'* (Round 2).

Skills development

Developing the skills that young people need to achieve their aspirations can help foster the capabilities required for their future and further cement their career aspirations. Our findings suggest that extra-curricular activities in school, at work and in the community have been instrumental in building some young people's skills and this can have especially positive impacts on girls. Adolescent girls described the impact of girls' clubs (many of which have changed to become gender clubs to include both boys and

¹ Students are allocated to universities and courses through a Ministry of Education placement system on a competitive basis, determined by their secondary school leaving examination results. Due to resource constraints, the current system means that many students are placed in universities and course that were not their preference. Wealthy families often decide to send their children to private colleges or universities if the government places them in universities that they do not want their children to attend due to safety and security issues.

girls) and civic education classes on improving their self-confidence, awareness of gender equality, and in fostering voice and participation. For example, the same 20-year-old woman referred to in the previous quote, currently studying economics at university and working as an electrician in a male-dominated workplace, described the benefits of being involved in a girls' club when she was at school:

We discussed about women rights ... It benefits me, it helps me to have self-confidence. In my workplace, all the electricians are men, I am the only female. That has not affected me – I believe that I am equal with them. I feel that I am equal in any place. (Round 2)

As well as fostering skills that are beneficial for their working lives, school clubs (such as a school parliament²) can also offer opportunities for adolescents to improve their situation by raising current issues, as a 17-year-old boy from Dire Dawa explained:

We have raised issues and demanded the renovation of the school wall, window and doors to be refurnished. All the school students have the same thinking, and the school principals accepted this and acted on it. (Round 1)

These skills were also important during times of crisis, and young people used these skills to support others in their community during the Covid-19 pandemic and the Tigray conflict. As a key informant from Batu explained: *'At the initial stage, the youth organised themselves voluntarily. They started their awareness creation task. They educated the people... They assisted the Covid Committee'* (Round 3).

However, opportunities to participate in these types of clubs become more scarce as adolescents get older, as there are fewer such opportunities at secondary schools. A 16-year-old girl from Debre Tabor explained: *'Many school clubs are not found in secondary schools. Most secondary school students do not participate in school clubs'* (Round 4). Girls also had more limited involvement in volunteering and extra-curricular activities outside school, due to their high unpaid work burdens at home and mobility restrictions linked to discriminatory gender norms. One 18-year-old young woman from Batu who was out of school at the time of the interview but aspired to be a nurse, explained that:

We were working in the Red Cross before. We were giving voluntary service at the Red Cross. I went there after school. Then the family reprimanded me. I have to work at home after school, so I stopped going there. I have to help my parents. (Round 1)

Direct and indirect consequences of conflict also preclude adolescents' involvement in activities, due to displacement (and limited ability and desire to participate in new schools) and the direct risks of violence in certain areas. For example, a 17-year-old boy from Dire Dawa, who aspired to be a professional athlete but had left his training due to conflict in his home area, described how: *'There is no place of training now ... I quit my training because of the conflict'* (Round 2).

Due to high and rising youth unemployment rates, young people are increasingly valuing work-related skills and want to diversify their skills beyond education, as a 17-year-old boy from Batu explained:

I had started [to work] on my own initiation. You should not only expect education as the only career path. You have to diversify your opportunity. So, if I fail in my education, I may opt for this skill to survive on it. (Round 2)

Some participants viewed technical and vocational education and training (TVET) as important for gaining key skills needed for their working lives. However, it was still undervalued by others (particularly parents) when compared to completing university. Some young people also highlighted that there were fewer opportunities available for females (due to greater opportunities in male-dominated industries), and that some TVET courses did not provide the key skills they needed for their preferred profession and were not sufficiently linked to market opportunities. It was also noted that there was a lack of information on the available options for TVET, especially for people who have been displaced. This was highlighted by an 18-year-old young woman living in Dire Dawa who was displaced from Somali region and lacked her school transcripts required to enrol in further education opportunities:

Respondent: *I wanted to learn accounting so I asked what was required of me. They told me I need my transcripts. Then they said I need to pay 400 or 500 birr for the monthly fee. Until we get that money, I am staying at home. I have not registered yet.*

Interviewer: *Have you tried government institutions such as TVET?*

Respondent: *Is it for free?*

Interviewer: *You do not know about TVET?*

Respondent: *No. I am new to Dire Dawa. So I do not know much about the city. When everyone from school went to register at [name of private college], I went with them.*

2 School parliaments in the Ethiopian context are school-based structures working closely with teachers, head teachers and local administration to ensure that the rights of adolescents and young people are protected and aim to increase the roles of young people in decision making and leadership positions.

Mental health support

As well as supporting young people to gain key skills needed for their future working lives, extra-curricular activities also provide them with psychological relief, especially when they are living in a context of conflict and crisis. For example, a 21-year-old young woman highlighted the positive impact of Taekwondo classes on her mental health during the Tigray conflict, which spread to Debre Tabor:

It is my sister who motivated me to join the [Taekwondo] class. During summer time, I didn't go out from the house and I started to feel stressed. My interpersonal relationships were endangered a lot. I even hated to see my friends and colleagues. Then my sister motivated me to start the training to make my brain more active. Then I started at the end of July. The training is very important for me. (Round 4)

However, the conflict in Debre Tabor has had a severe impact on adolescents' and young people's mental health, such that specialised and tailored mental health services are now needed to respond to these impacts. Key informants highlighted a lack of psychological support services to deal with these demands, as a health care worker explained:

Health care professionals have been doing these activities [providing psychosocial support] but real professions who are responsible to give psychosocial support are needed to really understand and address the issue. Skilled professionals are important. I think things will be better if we implement these. (Round 4)

External enabling environments

As well as fostering internal capabilities such as aspirations, self-confidence and agency, it is important to ensure that the social, political and economic conditions are sufficient to enable young people to achieve their valued ways of 'being and doing'.

Social support

Social support, from family, peers and the wider community, was identified as key to supporting young people's current and future educational capabilities, both in terms of encouraging them to stay in school (which can have positive impacts on a range of other capabilities) and their ability to learn. Most parents were supportive of their children's education and encouraged their children to stay in school, often making financial sacrifices so that their children could attend higher quality private schools. Although parental support is included here as part of the external enabling environment, parents also play a key role in fostering their children's internal capabilities, through supporting them with learning. Some parents described following their children's education closely, helping them with homework

and playing close attention to their attendance. The mother of an adolescent boy from Batu described how:

I follow up each and every one of his activities ... Their father has been asking him all days at his tea break. He used to ask the school whether our son attends class actively and ask them if there is any problem with him. (Round 1)

Her son also highlighted how this has positively impacted his learning: 'Both my father and mother help me. They explain a topic I do not understand' (Round 2).

Although most parents were supportive of their children's education, some parents took a less hands-on approach, and this was often linked to the parents' own limited educational background or due to challenges such as poverty. Where parents felt they were unable to support their children's learning, older siblings often played a key role in helping younger siblings with their school work. The father of a boy from Debre Tabor explained: 'Even though I don't know what they are learning about, I assign my oldest daughter to control the others' (Round 1).

In rare cases, parents were actively discouraging their children's education, which can have impacts on those young people's future educational aspirations and negatively impact their psychosocial well-being. This attitude was influenced by the recurrent crises in Ethiopia, with some parents perceiving limited returns and benefits of education given high unemployment rates. For example, one adolescent boy from Debre Tabor was encouraged by his father to leave school and join the army, as his father increasingly became more negative about his son's education. This seemed to be particularly influenced by the conflict in Debre Tabor and the need to be seen as contributing to the country through joining the army. This contributed to tensions in the household, feelings of hopelessness, and even led to substance abuse issues. In the absence of a supportive parent, the boy's siblings played a key role in encouraging him to stay in education, as he explained:

I argued with my family. I use to feel things because my friends have jobs but I was sitting home. My friends already have jobs so my family insult me. I started addictions like drinking. When my family insult me I went drinking. He [the father] tells me that education is not useful and that I will not find a job ... My father pushes me to join the war. He will tell me that I have no use sitting here so I should go there, do something and make history ... They [siblings] tell me that it's fine and not to listen to him. I accept their advice. (Round 4)

Crises and shocks can also make it more difficult for some parents to support their children, as they themselves have

to deal with an increasingly challenging situation for the family and household. For example, one 16-year-old girl from Dire Dawa, whose father had actively supported her to re-enrol in education after displacement, when asked how her parents would support her future education, replied: *'There is nothing they are thinking for me currently because they are also they are also facing difficulties'* (Round 1).

For adolescents with disabilities, family support is vital for their education – for example, helping them to travel to and from school and supporting them with school work. However, in order to access schools suitable for their needs, adolescents with disabilities from rural areas often live away from their family in urban centres, leaving them isolated from their familial networks. A 12-year-old girl from Debre Tabor with a visual disability explained:

My cousin was here because of his study and I was not comfortable when I was living in the countryside, so he told me about this place and the school. He helped me get into this place and they allow me to continue my education. (Round 2)

For adolescents with disabilities who are living away from their family networks, support from peers or community members can be essential. The majority of adolescents with disabilities in this sample described their peers helping them with school work and the challenges they face due to their disability, as a 17-year-old boy explained: *'There is shortage of books. I have only some books and I need more ... I have received books, then my friend reads for me'* (Round 1). However, during the Covid-19 pandemic, accessing support from friends was more challenging due to social distancing procedures in school. For example, one 21-year-old young woman with a visual disability, whose friends help her with braille at school, explained how, during the pandemic, she had to sit alone and so had no help: *'There is no benefit sitting alone. We can support each other if there is something we couldn't understand'* (Round 3).

Peer support is also important for adolescents without disabilities, who described studying with their friends and being encouraged by their peers to do well in school, as well as relying on their friends for psychosocial support. This is especially true during times of crises. Young people highlighted important sources of support from their peers and the community in light of the recent conflict in Debre Tabor, as a 21-year-old young woman from Debre Tabor explained:

I have friends at the workplace and we have discussed about the conflict situation, our army's advances, sharing our fears, and also reassuring each other. We have also discussed about our country's peace and security. (Round 4)

Teachers can also provide essential support, encouraging young people to continue with their education, and giving them practical advice. An 18-year-old young man from Dire Dawa described the support he had received from one of his teachers:

I used to prepare food for my sisters and also go to the market since my mother couldn't move around much because of her sickness. The teacher knew I always wanted to learn and he used to give me advice, since he understands my situation. (Round 2)

As mentioned earlier, female teachers play particularly key roles through gender clubs, helping girls with a number of key issues such as managing their menstruation and addressing harmful gender norms. A number of adolescents highlighted that teachers were especially important in providing psychosocial support during the conflict in Debre Tabor. One 15-year-old girl explained: *'They told us not to be afraid and our country continues. They said Ethiopia is ours always'* (Round 4).

Financial support and start-up capital

Positive social support can only help young people to a certain extent. Many of the young people interviewed described leaving their education against their parents' wishes, due to the pressure they felt to help support the household financially. Young people described facing increasing economic challenges, due to the various crises. An 18-year-old young woman from Batu explained:

I have to work and support my family, so I dropped out of school ... I told them that I want to work. They were reprimanding me, but they are suffering. They want me to attend school, but I want to work. If I helped her by working, my mother will not work while she is sick. I want to help her. (Round 2)

In these situations, financial support from the government, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) or private donors is essential to keep adolescents in school.

Financial support is especially important for adolescents with disabilities, especially for those who are living alone, having moved from rural areas to access schools. Access to resources such as a mobile phone were highlighted as a key turning point for adolescents with disabilities, to aid their learning. A 20-year-old young woman with a visual disability explained:

I did not have a phone until October. It is when SOS [NGO organisation] supported me that I have a mobile phone. I am also using it for recording teachers' lectures in the classroom. I only worry if SOS interrupts the support. If I can't get the support, I will not have anything to eat.



I worry for that. I would also interrupt my education if there is no support. (Round 4)

The same was also true for adolescents without disabilities, especially in the context of the pandemic. Some adolescents who lost access to mobile phones (due to financial difficulties or displacement) highlighted the impact this had on their ability to learn. A 16-year-old girl, who now lives in Dire Dawa and lost her phone during displacement highlighted: *'There is an application our teacher sends to mobile phones and tells us to do assignments and upload the answers there. Since I do not have a phone I cannot do everything the teacher tells us to do. It also contributes to poor school performance'*.

Despite the importance of financial support, young people (including those who have been displaced) generally received very limited support from government. Many highlighted a lack of social protection, limited awareness of how to register, fears of registration fees, problems with corruption, and interruptions to support during the recent conflict in Debre Tabor. A 23-year-old married young woman explained that: *'After the conflict, the safety net aid stopped completely and currently there is no safety net food assistance'* (Round 4). In the absence of formal financial support, young people rely on others in their social network for support, including older siblings (many of whom pay for their younger siblings' university fees), and in one example employers. A 20-year-old young woman from Dire Dawa who has been working as a domestic worker described the support she received when her employer left Ethiopia for over a year to visit family:

'The women that employed me, she went to Djibouti. As a result, my mother and I are living in the house. She sends money monthly. She also sends additional food

such as spaghetti monthly. She supports me without me working for her. She has told me to take care the house until she returns. She has also agreed to provide the startup capital [for a potato business]' (Round 2).

However, this external support can be volatile, and influenced by crises, and in the next round of data collection, her employer was unable to return and due to her own financial difficulties from the Covid-19 pandemic, unable to continue to offer her support. In addition, community financial support was especially important in Debre Tabor during the recent conflict, as a 16-year-old girl noted: *'The community was supporting them [internally displaced people]. There were contributions at school. Sharing clothes and food with them was a common practice'* (Round 4).

We found that for many young people, throughout the four-year research period, their aspirations shifted from more standard occupations (such as doctors or engineers) towards self-employment (such as owning their own business). The majority of these aspirations were for small trade businesses, particularly selling food items or owning shops. However, some young people had vague aspirations to own a business but without specification of the type. School closures during COVID-19 lockdowns also brought opportunities to start a business, to help support the household and to keep busy during lockdown. A 16-year-old boy stated: *'I started [selling books] after the outbreak of the virus. There was no available business at my disposal. I just started rather than sitting idle'* (Round 3).

Many working adolescents and youth highlighted a lack of start-up capital as a key challenge. In 2017, Ethiopia's Youth Revolving Fund (YRF) was introduced in response to youth-led anti-governmental protests. This loan scheme

was introduced for those aged 18–34 years, with lower levels of collateral needed and longer grace periods and duration of repayment.

However, many young people noted that they could not get a loan due to the collateral needed (10% of the total loan amount), while others expressed justifiable concerns over not being able to pay back loans. A 23-year-old young woman, from Dire Dawa who was unemployed during the most recent interview, explained:

There is no such opportunity. I had a plan to get a loan from the kebele [lowest level administrative unit], but they wouldn't be willing to give a loan. I need to get some kind of assets as collateral to get access to a loan. (Round 3)

Key informants also highlighted other challenges with the YRF, including high staff turnover, lack of leadership, lack of incentives to collect the disbursed money, and lack of awareness from young people that the money has to be paid back. A key informant from the Office of Labour and Social from Oromia explained that:

The problem is the leadership does not have the commitment to collect the disbursed money. Secondly there is problem of reshuffling of the leaders. When a new leader comes for the post, they will take time to adapt to the operations in that office. All such problems aggregated for the failure of the revolving fund. The other problem is that debtors assume the money is a government fund for the poor as a donation, and do not want to repay it. The main problem is negligence to collect the money. (Round 2)

Global crises such as the Covid-19 pandemic can also further impact governmental budgets for loan schemes and job creation activities, as a key informant from Batu explained:

Organisations that are working in the area of job creation are not active like before [Covid-19]. They were organising poor people and the unemployed in a group and helping them to create jobs. Those organisations are not working actively. There are NGOs that were working in the area of job creation. Now they are complaining as they are not getting money from funding agencies. There are huge gaps in those areas. (Round 3)

Some young women reported that they were able to save through community-based savings groups ('equbs'), as an 18-year-old young woman from Dire Dawa noted:

A year ago, I started an equb with four other friends in our neighbourhood. We used to save up money. I saved 1,500 birr to buy a mobile phone. It is with this saving that I helped my mom start selling khat³. (Round 2)

However, others highlighted a lack of support from the government to organise in groups, and so turned to organising themselves independently. Our findings suggested that this can sometimes present challenges due to a lack of formalisation and requires high levels of trust between members. An 18-year-old young man from Batu noted that:

We went there and asked them to organise us. But they turned a deaf ear on us. We were unable to raise the start-up money and we just decided to work in a group ... Even though it has not been licensed, we have a committee. There is a mature person who would not cheat us, who receives the money for us. Then, we take our money and go home. (Round 2)

Participants who had already set up their own business highlighted that they did not have the financial capacity to grow the business and increase their profits, as an 18-year-old young woman from Debre Tabor explained:

If I could store more grains and if I could buy at the right time, when the price is lower, I would have earned better profit. It needs more money to earn more profit – I can see that others can earn more, as they do have enough money to run the business. (Round 2)

This lack of financial support can have wider impacts on young people's capabilities. For example, one 18-year-old young woman from Batu described setting up a business during Covid-19 to help support the household financially when her father lost his income due to political violence. However, she had to sell her phone to do so, which had implications for her ability to keep up with school work, as she described:

My younger sister decided to sell fried potato. I sold my phone and we bought a chips machine, we are working and getting some money ... It is better to do business than spending time idle, we are supporting family. (Round 3)

Educational materials like handouts and assignments were sent via Telegram but I haven't had access because I haven't had mobile phone. I used to share materials from friends and they showed me how to download. I had to go to the internet café to access it and I used to get late while submitting assignments. (Round 3)

3 The leaves of a plant, which are chewed (or drunk as an infusion) as a stimulant and grown as a cash crop.

Flexible school and work landscapes

Our research also shows that many adolescents in Ethiopia are moving flexibly through school and work, in non-linear ways, often combining the two and using paid work to help fund their education. In some cases, they leave school (for a variety of reasons but mainly due to illness or work) and aim to return at a later point. A number of young people highlighted that unrest and risk of violence also play a key role in them leaving school as a 19-year-old young man from Dire Dawa explained: *'It is because of security problem in our town [that I left school]. I was learning too far from my home and I feared going to school. There was a conflict between adolescents.'*

The ability of schools to accommodate adolescents' flexible trajectories and missed schooling was key to allowing adolescents to return to school subsequently. Some respondents highlighted a lack of flexibility within schools, resulting in them leaving school permanently. The examples below describe two contrasting experiences:

One day I went to the kebele to attend a seminar ... I found out that it is only when you get educated that you will change your life. So I thought to myself that I should change my life, then I returned to school. Then I went to school and told them about my problem and my desire to attend school and they accepted me without any precondition. They accepted me without even asking me to bring my guardians. I am attending school now. (Round 1, a 17-year-old boy from Dire Dawa, who left school for 2 years and then returned).

I wanted to return [to school]. I told them that I lost the [registration] paper, but the director refused to accept

me. He said 'You left on your own and we have nothing to do with that.' So finally I quit school. (Round 2, a 20-year-old young woman from Dire Dawa, who left school at age 15).

For adolescent girls who are married and have children, returning to school is more challenging. Although many such girls who are out of school want to return or enrol in night school, it is very challenging to do so due to safety concerns when attending night school (which were heightened during political unrest in Dire Dawa) or due to unpaid work responsibilities. When asked whether she attends night school, an 18-year-old young woman from Dire Dawa responded:

My parents do not allow me to go out at night. And it is better to get enrolled in the regular class. A neighbour of mine suggested starting evening class and later transferring to regular class. But my family was not happy with that. Maybe it is because of the unrest. Roads are usually blocked. There is a curfew. No one goes out of the house after 9pm. (Round 2)

A few participants also highlighted the need for more flexible jobs (such as half-day work) to allow adolescents to work alongside their education, a key difference between rural contexts, where part time work is more available. An 18-year-old young woman from Batu explained:

I dropped out of school this year. I started to work ... and work and school never go together. I dropped out of school ... I will not drop out of school once I go back to school. I may look for any job opportunity that I can do for half a day while I am attending school. (Round 2)



A 22-year-old woman who has a coffee business, Dire Dawa, Ethiopia © Nathalie Bertrams/GAGE 2024

Supportive institutions

While our findings have identified the key supports needed to keep young people in school and to assist them to enter the workforce on the premise that schools and workplaces can help build young people's capabilities, these institutions can also be sites of harm and capability deprivation (Unterhalter, 2003; Raynor, 2007). Schools are not always a place of adequate learning, and there is a high rate of failure at national examinations in Ethiopia, especially in recent years (in 2023, 97% of students who took their grade 12 exam did not pass) (Tiruneh and Molla, 2024). Young people highlighted the significant impact of the poor quality of their teachers on their competency in certain subjects. A 19-year-old young woman from Dire Dawa noted that:

Maths was my subject. I aced it in elementary school ... Little did I know teachers have a big impact on your desire for school. From that year on, I could not understand math. He [teacher] had no knowledge. He is a person who has given up on life. He does not explain the lessons for us. (Round 2)

Adolescents with disabilities highlighted challenges when new teachers were less supportive of their needs. They also faced challenges when moving from special needs education to larger, mainstream mixed classrooms, often alongside much younger classmates. A 17-year-old girl from Debre Tabor with a visually disability described her experience:

The last one [headteacher] used to follow up on us. He used to ask us about our problems every now and then. He even came to our class and asked us about how our teachers are doing as well, but the new principal doesn't do all that ... The teachers cared for us a lot once we were mixed with the regular [students without disabilities] but the problem is that most of the students are little kids so they're always shouting. That's hard for us. There are at least 50–60 students per class now and they're loud, and it's hard to catch up. (Round 2)

Participants also reported large differences between the quality of education at public and private schools, as a father from Dire Dawa explained:

Most of the students and parents, including me, want to send our children to private schools if we can afford the payment. The quality of private schools is better than that of the government [schools]. (Round 1)

Quality of education and the ability of students to learn has been impacted by constant disruptions due to school closures during the Covid-19 pandemic and conflicts within communities, which were often mirrored within schools and

universities. These frequent disruptions to education were highlighted by an 18-year-old young man from Batu: *'There was a conflict in a recent time and our school is forefront ... my school is the first to break out and engage in riots'* (Round 2). Another 16-year-old boy from Dire Dawa noted the impact these disruptions had on his ability to learn: *'I did not study better because there was conflict when I was in grade 8'* (Round 2). During the recent conflict in Debre Tabor, young people's ability to learn and concentrate on their education was severely impacted due to the stress of the conflict, fears for their family members who had joined the war, and the repeated disruptions to their schooling. A 19-year-old young man explained:

First the schools were closed after corona[virus] and then after restarting education, the war interrupted our education again. It was very difficult to think straight during that time. We took the exam without the [required] mentality for taking exams. (Round 4)

We also found that adolescents faced risks of violations of their bodily integrity at school. For boys, this was largely due to high rates of corporal punishment in schools (mainly for younger adolescents), while girls faced the risk of sexual harassment on the way to school, and sometimes even from teachers. A 16-year-old girl from Batu explained: *'Some teachers ask girl students for a relationship and deduct their marks if she refuses to accept'* (Round 1).

Some young people also faced health and bodily integrity risks at their workplaces, especially those working in farms and factories, including in the floriculture industry in Batu and food and beverage production in Dire Dawa (due to exposure to chemicals and risk of sexual harassment and abuse from factory managers or other employees). An 18-year-old young woman from Batu described how:

Everybody that works here complains of sickness. No one is healthy, since the workers stand for a long time ... There are some supervisors that reprimand you. For example, when you are assigned in a packing area, there are expected targets that you need to achieve. If you do not meet that, they reprimand you. (Round 2)

However, despite the known health risks, many young people are driven to work in these factories, especially due to a lack of other options, in part due to recurrent conflict or a lack of other employment opportunities. An 18-year-old girl from Batu highlighted that:

Many people that were working in the hotel become jobless after the hotel got burned and destroyed. Many jobless people are going to [company name]. It became helpful for jobless people these days. (Round 3)

Conclusions and implications for policy and programming

This policy brief has highlighted how adolescents' internal capabilities can be strengthened and how their external enabling environments can foster positive conditions for them to realise their capabilities. However, as the situation of adolescents and young people in Ethiopia illustrates, a worsening economic and social situation (due to constant interrelated crises) can severely disrupt their trajectories and present major challenges to young people's ability to attain their aspirations. Our research suggests the following priorities for policy and programming:

Increase opportunities for paid work

- Expand opportunities for good-quality, part-time, age-suitable paid work for younger adolescents that can be easily combined with school.
- For older adolescents and youth ensure that those who are already working are supported through legal and social protections, especially those working in factories and flower farming. Local government authorities should ensure that employers comply with labour laws.

Strengthen school systems that enhance young people's capabilities

- Expand school clubs throughout secondary schools, to continue to build young people's capabilities and include specific school clubs for older adolescents that focus on developing the key skills required for work, ensuring that those skills are aligned with current labour market opportunities.
- Expand access to gender clubs and the focus of these clubs, working with both adolescent boys and girls to shift gender norms, including those that may limit girls' and boys' educational and work trajectories and focusing on developing skills such as leadership, participation and confidence among girls as well as boys.
- Provide guidance to parents how they can best support their children's schooling, through Parent-Teacher-Student Associations and NGO initiatives, both practically (through helping with homework or reducing their workloads) and emotionally (by supporting and encouraging their children to stay in school), including creating awareness among parents on the value of TVET.
- Focus on improving quality of teaching, through investing in teacher training focused on increasing competency across subject areas and on alternative discipline strategies, strengthening legal actions against teachers who use corporal punishment in schools. This should include specialised training on disability-friendly teaching approaches for those with specific needs.

- Improve learning outcomes by reducing classroom sizes, through expanding school buildings and providing students with tutorial support after disruptions to their education.
- Invest in peace building curricula in schools and universities in order to help rebuild social cohesion between different ethnic groups and prevent further outbreaks of violence and allow students to have more freedom to choose which universities they go to.
- Facilitate free governmental education in the evenings (including transportation) to allow those adolescents and youth that have left school (and are unable to return) to continue their education.
- Create education and awareness sessions with local role models, through NGOs, especially those from marginalised backgrounds, including women and those with disabilities, with practical discussions and mentoring on how they have achieved their aspirations.
- Facilitate skills training for out-of-school young people, both hard skills and soft skills, such as developing self-confidence, communication skills and leadership skills (especially for young women) to help them engage in income-generating activities.
- Strengthen skills training through TVET, and ensure that TVET courses are aligned with the current job market to facilitate smooth transitions into work.

Increase financial security

- Scale up provision of shock-responsive social protection, including Ethiopia's Urban Productive Safety Net Programme (PSNP), with regularly updated registration lists to account for households that are newly categorised as poor. Consider implementing an age-sensitive cash-plus component to the PSNP aimed at supporting transitions into healthy and productive adulthood, such as economic empowerment training, mentoring and support groups (adapted from Tanzania's Productive Social Safety Nets) (Tanzania Adolescent Cash Plus Evaluation Team, 2020).
- Expand education stipends for young people with disabilities, including access to essential technological devices to aid learning (such as phones or tablets).
- Facilitate loan and credit services for those who want to be self-employed, offering lower collateral and longer repayment times. Couple this with entrepreneurship and business courses to ensure that young people are able to grow their businesses, including linking young people with successful business owners in the community for mentorship.

Support young people's psychosocial well-being

- Expand age- and gender-sensitive individual and group-based mental health and psychosocial support, providing access to specialised professionals (including increased recruitment and training of mental health professionals at the local level) for young people and their families, to address increasing household tensions and trauma due to the current crises.
- Train school counsellors in psychological first aid and organise mental health sessions that address wider topics linked to psychosocial well-being, such as alcohol or drug misuse, and the impact of unemployment on mental health.



Circus group in Dire Dawa, Ethiopia © Nathalie Bertrams/GAGE 2024

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