

RURAL YOUTH, EDUCATION AND AGRICULTURE

*An Exploration of Youth Aspirations and Government Policy in
Ethiopia*

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Abstract

There appears to be a paradox in Ethiopia. On the one hand, the country's development policy emphasises the central role of the agricultural sector and the need of cultivating a new generation of young, literate, and capable farmers who can embrace new technologies and methods in order to transform the sector. On the other, this commitment on the side of the state to ensure the majority of rural youth become the new generation of literate and capable farmers appears to be counter to the aspirations of the majority of rural youth who are aspiring to life outside of farming. However, the question of how and why education influences the aspirations of rural youth and the implication of this to the future of farming in relation to the country's agricultural led industrialization policy have not been adequately explored. Based on a qualitative study of four categories of rural youth (students in primary school, students in high school, high school graduates and drop outs, and young farmers) this study investigates the hopes, aspirations and imagined futures of rural youth in one farming community in the Amhara region of Ethiopia.

The findings of the study suggest a strong link between education and aspirations but the link is more dynamic than previous studies seem to indicate. The state of being in school significantly opens up the imaginations of young people as to what is considered possible and achievable and is therefore of more importance in the construction of aspirations and imagined futures. The general modernizing influence of education, the influence of the media, and the strong state-lead modernization discourse are also important factors which shape and influence aspirations and imagined futures. The study also investigates the choice and process of becoming a farmer and the factors that facilitate or hinder this. While the process of becoming a farmer is relatively simple for those who have never attended school and comes as part of the rural transition from childhood to adulthood, this transition is becoming increasingly difficult for youth who return to their villages after completing high school. The increasing profitability of farming also seems to be leading to established farmers and an emerging group of farmer investors taking a greater foothold on farming resulting in the exclusion of young people who are finding it increasingly difficult to access farm land, thereby casting serious doubt on the government's commitment and ability to realize its stated objective of cultivating a new generation of capable farmers. The study also finds the process of entry in to farming to be more complicated for young women, especially those who have been to school, than for young men.

List of Acronyms

ADB – African Development Bank

ADLI - Agricultural Development Led Industrialization

CSA - Central Statistical Agency [of Ethiopia]

FDRE – Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia

GDP – Gross Domestic Product

GTP – Growth and transformation Plan

IDS – Institute of Development Studies, Sussex

MDGs - Millennium Development Goals

MOA – Ministry of Agriculture

MOE - Ministry of Education

MOFED - Ministry Of Finance and Economic Development

MOI - Ministry of Information [],

TVET – Technical and Vocational Education and Training

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I

INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background

Like many other countries in sub-Saharan Africa, Ethiopia has a predominantly young population much of which resides in rural areas. According to the last national population census, children under the ages of 15 makeup nearly half (45 %) of the total population and a whopping 88.5% of them is growing up in rural areas where the primary means of livelihood is agriculture, often small scale family farming (Central Statistical Agency of Ethiopia [CSA], 2010). Although more than half the population still remains illiterate, school enrollment has increased significantly in the last decade. The net enrollment rate for the first cycle of primary school has reached 92.2% for the 2011/12 school year (Ministry Of Education [MOE], 2012). While not all children who start school proceed to secondary and tertiary level education, enrollment in the later two has also shown a slight increase in the last five years. According to the Ministry of education, there has been a 17.1% annual growth in enrolment for higher education, and a 4.1 % growth for secondary education in the last five years (MOE, 2012).

The growth in primary school enrollments is nothing short of staggering considering where the country was only two decades ago. According to some reports, the country has achieved a 500 percent growth in primary school enrollment since 1994¹. When seen in light of the fact that about 83 percent of the general population and more than 88.5 percent of the under 15 population resides in rural areas, this means that an ever increasing number of rural children are now growing up with in the school system. This expansion in education is in line with the country's commitment of achieving the second of the MDGs. It is also in line with other developmental goals set by the country such as raising a new generation of literate farmers in order to transform the agricultural sector.

This expansion in education at all levels is likely to have significant implications to the future of many young people as well as to the development objectives of the country. Ethiopian society is largely agrarian and small scale family farming is the principal means of livelihood

¹ <http://www.irinnews.org/Report/90498/ETHIOPIA-GHANA-MDG-success-stories>

for more than three quarters of the population (CSA, 2010). As such, agriculture is the main means of employment and a major contributor to the national economy; contributing to 42% of the national GDP in 2009/10 fiscal year (Ministry Of Finance and Economic Development [MOFED], 2011) and accounting for slightly more than 80% of all employments in 2005 (CSA, 2006b). The agricultural sector is also at the center of the current government's Agricultural Development Led Industrialization policy (ADLI); a policy that has been in place for nearly two decades. As more and more young people join the school system and traverse to upper grades, their interest in agriculture and farming is likely to dwindle. This poses a critical challenge to the government's stated goal of cultivating a new generation of literate farmers and transforming the agricultural sector.

The government considers ensuring the continued participation of young people in the agricultural sector to be of vital importance for two main reasons. First, it fears that an uncontrolled influx of young people from rural areas to urban centers will likely overwhelm the urban economy which doesn't have enough capacity to absorb such an influx. Hence it proposes that as much as up to 70% of the rural youth and children currently attending school have to be contained where they are and be prepared to pursue a life in agriculture (Ministry of Information [MOI], 2002b). Second, and perhaps more importantly, it considers the rural young and especially the educated rural youth to be vital to the transformation of the agricultural sector it seeks. It considers the older generation of farmers to be either unwilling or incapable of acquiring and implementing the technical skills necessary to bring about such a transformation. Thus, it argues, the transformation can only be realized if educated youth are at the fore front; paving the way (MOI, 2002b).

However, there seems to be a significant gap between the government's intended path for the rural youth and the aspirations of rural youth themselves. As more and more rural young people come in to contact with what they see as a "modern way of life" through the school system and the media, they may aspire to life styles that are beyond what a rural agricultural life can offer. There is already some evidence in the literature which shows that rural children and youth see life as a farmer to be extremely hard, tiring, unrewarding, backward, and, in some cases, even degrading. But given the predominantly agrarian nature of the economy, the limited penetration of higher education, as well as the fact that more than three quarters of the population is rural; the majority of rural children and youth are likely to end

up becoming farmers either through choice or necessity². It is in this context that this study aims to explore the aspirations and imagined futures of rural youth, the factors that shape them, and the implications they have to government policy.

1.2. Statement of the Problem

The issue of young people's aspirations in rural contexts in connection with agriculture and education is one that has been touched upon by previous research. A recent special issue of the IDS Bulletin for example explores the issue of young people and agriculture in Africa in some detail³. As Sumberg, Anyidoho, Leavy, te Lintelo, and Wellard (2012) remark in their introduction to this special issue, "the problem of young people and agriculture is [often] framed from a perspective of either 'youth in peril' or 'agriculture in peril' " (p2). Listing a host of factors that push young people out of agriculture or pull them to urban centers is an all too familiar feature of the literature surrounding this "peril" approach (Sumberg et al., 2012).

Despite previous research, the question of how education influences the aspirations of rural youth and the implication of this to the future of farming in relation to government policy have not been adequately explored in the Ethiopian context. This need for further research in the area can hardly be over stated considering the issues at stake; the future of farming as well as the future lives of young rural people. It is to this need that the current study hopes to contribute, even though moderately. Specifically, it investigate the hopes, aspirations and imagined futures of rural youth, both in and out of school, how they are formed and shaped, how they relate to farming, and how gender and gender relations interplay with and affect these hopes and aspirations.

1.3. General Objective

This study aims to explore the future hopes and aspirations of rural youth, the forces which shape them, and the implications this has in the context of a rural farming community in Ethiopia.

² According to the most recent figures for example, net enrolment ratio for high school (grades 9-12) drops down to 11% from 62% for elementary school (grades 1-8). Ethiopian Welfare /Monitoring Survey 2011, Summary report . http://www.csa.gov.et/docs/wms_summary_report.pdf

³ IDS Bulletin, November 2012, Volume 43, Issue 6 - Special Issue: Young People and Agriculture in Africa <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/idsb.2012.43.issue-6/issuetoc>

1.4. Research Questions

Specifically, the study will pose and attempt to explore the following questions:

- i. What are the future hopes and aspirations of rural youth?
- ii. What factors and forces influence and shape these hopes and aspirations?
- iii. What place does farming occupy in the aspirations and imagined futures of rural youth?
- iv. How does gender influence and interact with all of the above?

1.5. Organization of the Thesis

This thesis is organized in to eight chapters. In chapter two, I present a conceptual discussion of aspirations where I wrestle with the nature, meaning and implication of aspirations as well as what it means to aspire. This discussion will inform and guide the presentation and discussion of the empirical data in chapters six and seven as well as the arguments made in the concluding chapter. Chapter three presents a review of the existing literature on the aspiration of young people, the influence of education and the relationship between the aspirations of rural youth and farming. Apart from a few references otherwise, I have largely limited the review to the Ethiopian context due mainly to the focus of the study. In chapter four, I discuss the policy context surrounding the issue of young people and agriculture. The chapter also discusses change and continuity in the rural agricultural way of life from secondary material and insights gained during field work. Chapter six contains the bulk of the empirical material and deals with the link between education and aspirations. I present and discuss the aspirations and imagined futures of in and out of school youth, their relation to and perception of farming, the factors that influence their aspirations and imagined futures, as well as the implication of these. Chapter seven deals with the process of becoming a farmer and explores this from the point of view of those who have become farmers and those who are contemplating about entry to farming. The chapter discusses the factors that facilitate or complicate entry in to farming as well as aspirations and imagined futures post entry in to farming. The concluding chapter, chapter eight, returns to the concept of aspirations discussed in chapter two in light of the empirical discussion and presents the core findings of the thesis.

II

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. Conceptualizing Aspirations – the nature, meaning and implication of aspirations

As straight forward as it may seem at first, the answer to the question “what are aspirations?” quickly gives rise to a host of other questions. What aspirations mean, how they are formed, how they are expressed, what they tell us about the nature of the lives of the aspirers, and the factors that contribute to the formation as well as continual evolution of aspirations through life are just some of these questions which arise from such an enquiry. Furlong and Biggart (1999) state that there were two main theoretical approaches to the study of occupational aspirations up until the 1980s; *developmental approaches* where career and occupational aspirations were mainly understood to be an outgrowth occupational 'choice' whereby individuals seek careers which are compatible with their self concepts; and *opportunity structure approaches* which shift the focus from individual choice to structure and look at the occupational opportunities individuals have in a given context with the assumption that few individuals get the opportunity to fulfill their aspirations (p.22).

More recent approaches, however, combine both elements to represent a more dynamic relationship between individual aspirations and opportunity structures. One such approach is given by Armstrong and Crombie (2000) who suggest two processes through which occupational aspirations are formed; circumscription and compromise. In this approach individuals are seen as forming their aspirations within the limits of a “zone of acceptable alternatives” (circumscription). But even from this set of alternatives, individuals have to narrow down their aspirations to the more realistic choices in such a way that previously held aspirations are substituted for new but more realistic ones in a process of continual compromise.

In a policy brief to the Future Agriculture Consortium, Leavy and Smith (2010) argue that “Aspirations are personal and dynamic. They are formed and develop in response to different environments and circumstances. Aspirations tend to begin to be formed early in childhood and they are modified in light of new experiences, choices and information, including an individual’s awareness of their own abilities and the opportunities open to them” (p.2).

Although this seems to indicate that they view aspirations as personal, they list a host of factors, most of which are social, which can influence individual aspirations. These include social class, socio-economic status and income; perceptions of academic ability; social norms, customs and expectations; social embeddedness (degree to which behaviour is influenced by and embedded in the relational, institutional and cultural contexts of a society); gender, gender stereotypes and gender relations; and status or prestige associated with different occupations. They conclude that '[b]oth the environment close to the individual and wider society therefore influence the formation of aspirations' (Leavy & Smith, 2010, p.3). This is as good a starting point as any but such a conceptualization still leaves a lot of important questions unanswered regarding the nature and, more importantly, implication of aspirations.

Aspirations can be, and quite often are, about much more than just occupations. They are also about ideas of the good life, about family, religion and much more; all of which are often expressed in the context of uncertainty. It is therefore important to look in to aspects of aspirations that go beyond the occupational. And it is equally important to focus on not just the constituents of aspirations but also how they are constructed, framed, and expressed in relation to time and space. When understood in this broader sense; aspirations can be vague, uncertain, transient and temporal, especially for young people. Hence, it is not only important but also inevitable that our conception of aspirations go beyond their occupational aspect which has dominated the study of aspirations for far too long. Fortunately, such a broader conceptualization of aspirations is emerging strongly in the literature since the early 2000s.

Brannen and Nilsen (2002) for example introduced (and later vigorously defended, see Brannen and Nilsen 2007) the issue of differing time frames in to the study of the aspirations of young people and suggest three models of thinking about the future employed by young people. First is 'the extended present' whereby young people attempt to extend the present and keep the future at bay by emphasizing present options, possibilities and constraints. Second is an adaptive approach to what is perceived as an uncertain future which emphasizes shaping the future in consecutive short steps, making the necessary series of progressive adaptations as the future is encountered step by step and bit by bit. This second approach, while relatively more concrete in its conception of the future in relation to the first, still emphasizes a sense of experimentation and trying out different things as the unknown future is wrestled with one move at a time. The third approach emphasizes a sense of certainty and

predictability. The focus here is on achieving long-term goals which are clear and considered achievable as long as they were worked for hard. As such, the expression of aspirations includes temporal and spatial elements about when, where and how one wants to live out their lives in the future. And the extent to which this future is considered imminent or at bay can be significantly different from one group to another as Brannen and Nilsen showed.

The way aspirations are expressed in relation to time and space as well as the broader social context in which they are formed and shaped is an important and integral element to the study of aspirations. Two distinct but interrelated levels of analysis can be drawn at this stage. First, our analysis can focus on the expression of aspirations and what can be inferred from this. For example, one can question what aspirations are expressed, how they are expressed, and what these expressed aspirations tell us by themselves. Second, one can focus more on the social context in which aspirations are formed and shaped and investigate the structural and contextual factors that facilitate, hinder or otherwise influence the formation, evolution and outcome of aspirations.

2.2. The Capability Approach and the “capacity to aspire”

It is simply an understatement to say that the capabilities approach represents a very wide framework that can be of some use to a broad range of subjects across the spectrum of the social sciences, humanities, economics and law. Crocker and Robeyns (2009) in their introduction to the capability approach duly note that it has been employed “in a wide range of fields, most prominently in development studies and policymaking, welfare economics, social policy, and social and political philosophy” both in narrower and broader ways (p.60). This broad spectrum of use by itself is proof of the analytical power and flexibility the capability approach brings. But the fact that the framework has been so widely used for everything under the sun makes understanding it a tasking affair at times. It is not my intention to delve in to a detailed presentation of the capability approach since my focus is rather limited to a discussion of how the approach can be a useful means of conceptualizing aspirations. But a basic presentation of the core elements of the framework is inevitably unavoidable.

Crocker and Robeyns (2009) provide a concise introduction to the capability approach by, as they put it, “[putting] aside the diverse ways in which the capability approach has been applied and implemented” (p.60). At the heart of the capability approach are the two

concepts of well-being and agency “as two distinguishable, but equally important and interdependent aspects of human life, each of which should be taken into account in our understanding of how individuals and groups are doing” (p.61). These two concepts then give rise to further ones such as functionings, capabilities, and capability sets. Capabilities denote a person’s ability to do actions, to be in or reach states of being that one has reason to value. Functionings represent achieved outcomes; the beings and doings individuals actually achieve (Walker & Unterhalter, 2007 p.4; Hart, 2012 p.30; Aasen, 2011, p.35). The range of capabilities an individual has is in turn reflected by their “capability set” which can be conceived as consisting of the alternative functionings that one can choose from. As Walker & Unterhalter (2007) helpfully point out, “The difference between a capability and functioning is one between an opportunity to achieve and the actual achievement, between potential and outcome” (p.4).

As Crocker and Robeyns (2009) put it:

A person’s well-being, for Sen, consists not only of his or her current states and activities (functionings), which may include the activity of choosing, but also of the person’s freedom or real opportunities to function in ways alternative to his or her current functioning. Sen designates these real opportunities or freedoms for functioning as “capabilities.” According to the capability approach, the ends of well-being, justice, and development should be conceptualized, *inter alia*, in terms of people’s capabilities to function, that is, their effective opportunities to undertake the actions and activities they want to engage in, and to be whom they want to be (p.63).

As I have stated earlier, it is not my intention here to dive in to the intricate details of the capability approach. Perhaps the most important element of the capability approach as it relates to aspirations is contained in the last sentence of the above quoted text; peoples’ effective opportunities to undertake the actions and activities they want to engage in, and to be whom they want to be. What does this mean? Peoples’ opportunities to be whom they want to be are of course closely related to the concept of the opportunity structure that I have discussed earlier and “whom they want to be” are found in the expressed, and sometimes unexpressed, aspirations of individuals. The question then becomes do aspirations tell us anything about the capabilities of individual aspirers and their agency and freedom. And it is here that the concept of “the capability to aspire” as a meta-capability becomes handy. Hart

(2012) argues that “understanding the nature of aspiring tells us more comprehensively about the freedom an individual has to develop capabilities and to choose to pursue a future they have reason to value” (p.94). Following the traditions of the Capabilities Approach, Hart sees aspirations as constituting a part of the functionings and capability set of individuals.

On one hand, aspiring can be seen as a functioning or in other words as a state of being or doing. In this sense, the process of aspiring can be constructed as an active endeavour undertaken through abstract thinking and developed further through verbal, written or other forms of creative and physical expression. However, the freedom and possibility of aspiring can also be viewed as a capability which individuals may enjoy to differing degrees. In this sense we can look at an individual’s capability to aspire as a freedom in its own right and as a gateway to enabling further future capabilities and functionings. This is a significant point because if an individual has limited opportunities to develop their aspirations freely, through external expression as well as unfettered private thoughts, then their freedom in choosing ways of being and doing (well-being and agency achievement) they have reason to value in the future is likely to be compromised (Hart, 2012, p.94).

Hart draws an important distinction between the capability to aspire and the functioning of aspiring. She argues that “[t]he constraints young people face mean at times they are not free to aspire although they may still have a limited range of aspirations” (p. 95). “Thus” Hart (2012) points out, “Sen’s conceptualization of an individual’s ‘ capability set ’ is partially determined by what I have termed an individual’s ‘ aspiration set ’ and for this reason the capability to aspire can be viewed as a meta-capability” (p.95).

To my knowledge, this is a novel and fascinating use of the capabilities approach to the study of aspirations; and one I wish to return to later in light of the empirical evidence towards the end of this thesis. By treating aspirations as a *meta-capability* which reflect or approximate a person’s capability set and freedom; I attempt to examine to what extent government policy, social norms (such as the ones governing gender relations) and values (such as the ones attached to education, farming and non farming professions) facilitate or hinder the capabilities of young people to imagine the possibility of becoming what they have reason to value. I will also consider the very action of aspiring as a functioning and investigate how this functioning differs across age, gender and educational level.

2.3. Aspirations and Imaginations

Although I have discussed the nature, meaning and implication of aspirations at some length in the beginning of this chapter, one more important aspect of aspirations remains. Appaduri (2004) notes that “aspirations form parts of wider ethical and metaphysical ideas which derive from larger cultural norms. Aspirations are never simply individual ... [t]hey are always formed in interaction and in the thick of social life” (p.67). While noting that the cultural nature of aspirations may make them different from one cultural context to another, Appaduri argues that they nevertheless have a commonality at their root in so far as they are “part of some sort of system of ideas which locates them in a larger map of local ideas and beliefs about: life and death, the nature of worldly possessions, the significance of material assets over social relations, the relative illusion of social permanence for a society, the value of peace or warfare” and so on (p.68).

Appaduri warns that “aspirations to the good life tend to quickly dissolve into more densely local ideas about marriage, work, leisure, convenience, respectability, friendship, health, and virtue. More narrow still, these intermediate norms often stay beneath the surface and emerge only as specific wants and choices: for this piece of land or that, for that marriage connection or another one, for this job in the bureaucracy as opposed to that job overseas, for this pair of shoes over that pair of trousers” (p.68). He advises this breakdown may lead one to see the specific want expressed in the form of aspiration and not the larger system of ideas that lies beneath.

I have discussed earlier that aspirations can often be more closer to ideals than concrete plans about the future, and more so for young people as shown by such studies as those of youth in Tunisia (Heggli et al, 2013) where youth have been found to aspire to glamorous futures which the authors considered were well out of their reach. But such studies do tell us something about the nature of aspirations among children and young people. To aspire is, in a way, to imagine – to see oneself occupying a specific place in society in terms of time and space. This act of imagination is in turn dependent upon the possibilities of, for a lack of a better term, ‘being’ that one is aware of. In today’s globalized world; the possible ways of imagining one’s place in the future can take many forms and shapes. The possibilities may not be endless, and more so for youth growing up in a rural village in one small corner of a developing country such as Ethiopia, but they are more numerous than they have never been before. Even in the remotest corners of the world; the media, the modernist school system,

and other tentacles of the globalized world are reaching young minds and influencing their images of the future and of their place in it. The increasingly one way flow of ideas about the 'good life' is likely to bring to light new possibilities of being for young people. As Appaduri noted as far back as 1996 "...electronic mediation and mass migration mark the world of the present not as technically new forces but as ones that seem to impel (and sometimes compel) the work of the imagination" (Appaduri, 1996, p.4).

The concept of 'the imagination' has however attracted some fierce criticism in recent times as a conflated, hegemonic, instrumentalist, and romanticized conception which has replaced culture as the magic term in anthropology (Sneath, Holbaard & Peterson, 2009). I will not go in to what the imagination represents, but only see it in the most simplest of terms as it relates to my study of aspirations. My hope in introducing such a problematic term is in so far as it helps in my discussion of aspirations as expressions of imagined futures. To aspire for some things and not others is to imagine oneself occupying a certain space in relation to others. And this imagination can, and often is, affected by the possible set of spaces that one is aware of. It is in opening up this imagination that factors such as the media, education, and other 'agents' of globalization can be considered crucial to understanding aspirations. But this is more of an experiment in thought than a concrete conceptual framework at this stage. While this experimentation may not bear much fruit, it is my hope that it will go some way in answering the question *what exactly are young people telling us when they tell us about their aspirations?* Uncertainty is an inherent quality of aspirations for young people. But the interplay between the forces of modernity that open up the imagination thereby influencing aspirations and limited possibilities for the realization of aspirations adds more to the uncertain nature of aspirations. The gap between aspirations and real opportunities for their realization can become so wide as to suggest such aspirations can sometimes be fairytale like romanticization of the future. And here is where the question regarding what aspiration are and what they are not becomes even more pressing. The imagination can perhaps be conceived of as occupying the far end of a continuum between real expectations and imagined futures with aspirations dwelling in between. But this is something I will return to in the last chapter of the thesis.

2.4. Aspiring as a performative act

In way of concluding this chapter, I want to return to the question of what aspirations tell and do not tell us. It is possible that aspirations can be literal and have been treated as such in

much of the literature. But it is also quite possible that expressed aspirations could signify no more than an attempt, on the side of those who are being asked, to engage with the immediate task of forming a socially acceptable response. St Clair and Benjamin (2011) raise this in the following quote and what they have to say has profound implications to our understanding of what aspirations are.

When young people are asked what they want to do when they are older (one of the most common approaches to capturing aspirations) their response reflects a framework of influences including their social position, their perceptions of the opportunities open to them and, very importantly, the fact that they are being asked what their aspirations are by a particular person in a particular setting. *In essence we suggest that there are no 'true' aspirations, simply responses that young people find effective to utter in particular situations* [emphasis mine] (p.504).

St Clair and Benjamin however caution against the view that aspirations are trivial or insignificant, only that one needs to be cautious as to what they represent. They note that aspirations can reflect the cognitive and social resources available to young people when they formulate their response. By taking in to account Sten's (1962) conception of language as a performative act which achieves social ends beyond communication and Giddens' (1993) concept of structuration, they suggest a *performative model of aspirations*. Seen in this manner, expressed aspirations become speech utterances that are specific to the context of the interview and the social and structural milieu surrounding it. The focus shifts from how aspirations are formed and whether or not they are achievable to why they were expressed in the manner they were and what purpose this may serve as an act of and by itself.

This model is clearly quite challenging and immensely complicates analyzing aspirations. While it does not negate the other modes of conceptualizing aspirations that I have presented thus far, it engages with and challenges them by pointing out aspirations are, before anything else, acts in their own right. St Clair and Benjamin (2011) stress that this model serves to illustrate the idea that 'aspirations can serve more than one purpose, and are constructed by individuals to serve those purposes', and in doing so, it adds considerable depth to the concept. It also helps in dealing with one of the more central dilemmas in studying the aspirations of young people; the validity of aspirations and whether or not young people's

aspirations should be taken at face value. What this model presents is an opportunity to do away with that question all together.

III

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

3.1. Introduction

Research in the area of youth and aspirations has spiked in the last decade. But as in many other topics, the literature on youth aspirations tends to be overwhelmingly western centric. Nevertheless, there exists a substantial amount of literature relating to Ethiopian youth. What is more, two ongoing research projects (one on the future of farming based in the Institute of Development Studies⁴ at Sussex, and another on well-being and young lives based in the Department of International Development at the University of Oxford⁵) are still adding to the available literature in the Ethiopian context.

There is also a significant (and still growing) body of literature on the aspirations of young people in the current contexts of globalization and late-modernity which underlines how the aspirations of children and youth are being influenced by forces of globalization. Although much of this body of literature is not specifically about Ethiopian youth, there is little doubt (as some authors such as Mains, 2012 have shown) that children and youth in Ethiopia are also growing up in an increasingly globalized and connected world and are, therefore, likely to be affected by the same challenges that globalization presents to children and youth elsewhere. More specific to Ethiopian children and youth, there is a substantial amount of literature which draws attention to the role played by education and the school system in raising aspiration among school children. There is also an emerging theme in recent studies on farming and youth which deals with youth aspirations in the context of agrarian communities and relates this with the broader crisis in African agriculture.

3.2. Youth and Aspirations in the era of globalization

There appears to be a general consensus that the lives of children and young people have changed considerably in the post-modern globalized world we live in today (Lloyd, 2005). Although youth has always been largely understood as the transitional period in between childhood and adulthood, this transition has become increasingly difficult and lengthy in

⁴ <http://www.future-agricultures.org/>

⁵ <http://www.younglives.org.uk/>

recent times (Lloyd, 2005; Mains, 2007). Youth and the transition to adulthood feature opportunities, constraints and uncertainties (Heggli, Haukanes & Tjomsland, 2013). In the era of globalization, the process of becoming which is at the heart of youth is increasingly being stretched as young people continually struggle to find a pace between what they want to be and what they can become. Some authors have noted the urgency of addressing the effect of global forces which are altering the passage into adulthood due to the changing demographic profile of many developing countries whose population is predominantly young (Lloyd 2005, p.17). Improvements in health, rapid urbanization, increasing school enrollments and educational attainments, as well increasing opportunities for physical mobility and access to information and communication promise young people in today's developing world unprecedented opportunities that have not been there for the generations before them (Lloyd 2005, p.18).

Studies of young people's aspirations in the context of globalization and the process of modernity are very few in the Ethiopian case but what has been done so far demonstrates how young people are finding it increasingly difficult to go through the transition to young adulthood. In his study of 20 unemployed urban youth in Jimma, Mains (2012) brings home many of the contradictions of being young in this age. "Youth" he notes, "are perceived as both being hopeless and possessing unprecedented aspirations. These conditions are mutually constitutive rather than contradictory. It is partially the elevated ambitions of young men that cause hopelessness" (2012, p.3). He states that education, access to the media, and narratives of modernization have worked together to raise the aspirations of young high school graduates in the face of extremely limited opportunities for the actual realization of their aspirations. He notes that this is not peculiar to Ethiopian urban youth and is part of an emerging trend among young people in most of the Global South. "In a context characterized by both economic decline and increasing access to education and international media, this peculiar combination of hopelessness and lofty goals is common among much of the world's growing population of youth" he observes (p.3).

Mains argues that the gap between unemployment and youth aspirations has been exacerbated by the spread of formal education which generates high expectations among youth and their parents. Many young people go through formal education with the expectation that they will find high-paying or at least high-status white-collar positions after completing their education. "When these jobs are unavailable", he states, "young people

often choose to remain unemployed rather than take on low-status and low-paying positions”. He notes that in Ethiopia, unemployment rates are actually highest among those who have completed secondary education (p.4). He argues that the high aspirations young people hold and the limited opportunities they have to realize their aspirations have extended the period in which young men exist as neither child nor adult. His work investigates this extended period of neither child nor adulthood within which young men struggle to carve a new place for themselves in their societies. Borrowing from a local expression, he asks “what happens when hope is cut?”; what happens when young people are unable to attain their desires for the future? (p.4). One of the more interesting aspects of Main’s study is how he sees education. “Although for some youth, education certainly is a means to an economic end”, he notes, “for most it is a way of reconstructing narratives of hope”; in a way, it is a means of trying to keep hope alive even when “hope is cut” (Mains 2012, p.159).

3.3. Education and Aspirations

But Mains is not the only one who is keen to point out the influence education has on the aspirations of young people in Ethiopia. Tafere (2010), Abebe (2008), as well as Tafere and Woldehanna (2012) have underlined the seemingly crucial role of education in elevating the aspirations of children and young people in Ethiopia. Nor is the influence of education in raising aspirations peculiar to youth in Ethiopia. For example, Anyidoho, Leavy, and Asenso-Okyere (2012) in their study of the 107 young people in 12 cocoa farming communities in Ghana find a strong link between formal education and aspiration. Among studies of Ethiopian youth, Abebe (2008) explores the tension between young people’s daily lives and their future wishes based on a qualitative study involving 46 children between the ages of 11 – 17 in two rural kebeles of the Gedeo district in Southern Ethiopia. His results, derived from interviews, focus group discussions and story writing, reveal that nearly all of the participants of the study wished to complete at least secondary schooling while a “substantial number of others” desired to pursue higher education to earn a living in urban areas and through paid jobs (p.12). He also finds out that out-of school children viewed their inability to attend formal education as a serious drawback in their lives.

Abebe (2008) shows that the view that education leads to success was widely shared by children and their parents. Out of the 46 children and youth who participated in the study, almost half wished to be employed in what he categorizes as “service-oriented sectors” which included a range of occupations such as journalist, singer; teaching, accountancy, secretarial

work, pilot, nurse/doctor, administration, politics, military service and religious leader/pastor. In contrast, only 4.3 % the children wanted to remain and work in rural areas through agriculture; and another 13% desired “vocational careers” in their respective rural areas (p.13). Although he doesn’t go in to further details to elaborate on it, the fact that all of the children who desired an agricultural life were all male is an interesting finding. In addition to their primary aspirations, Abebe also finds out that many of the children had secondary or alternative aspirations in case their primary aspirations failed to materialize. He finds important gender differences here as well. While many girls aspired to be active in trade and commerce, boys emphasized the relevance of vocational skills such as driving cars and motor mechanics. Abebe argues that these ‘alternative aspirations’ illustrate how children set more realistic goals in their lives and attempt to harmonize their aspirations with their experiences in the face of changing life contexts and opportunities (p.16).

But Abebe also notes that this attempt at harmonization is rarely successful and that most young people are likely to end up stranded in between their primary and secondary aspirations; unable to achieve neither. On the one hand serious financial and structural obstacles mean most children will be unlikely to pursue their education to higher levels and secure a paid job in a modern economy. On the other, the education they receive at primary and secondary school levels has hardly any relevance to a non-professional agricultural or vocational work. Abebe (2008) notes:

Lack of financial inputs and vocational training seriously hinder them from engaging in work-related mobility, however. In such circumstances, education offers neither more benefits to children nor helps them to fulfil their life aspirations. Instead, it serves as a push factor that directs them into the informal economy because of its restricted potential in providing adequate preparation for future life. This is readily apparent when the delivery of relevant education is further compromised due to the mismatches between formal schooling and the knowledge young people need in order to derive livelihoods in their local environment (p.16).

In the end, he concludes, many children growing up in rural areas in a school context go through an educational system with inherent ambiguities. What children learn at home and in the wider community, as part of their participation in economic and socio-cultural reproduction, is not furthered by education in schools; nor does school education prepare

children for livelihood opportunities within their own local contexts. As a result, he concludes, most young people are likely to end up being trapped in between “disparate worlds” (p.18).

Despite the State’s macro-economic policy focus on ‘agriculture-led rural development’ and the rhetoric of ‘student-centred’ and ‘problemsolving’ approaches, post-socialism education in Ethiopia is witnessing a huge gap between ‘intended curricula’ and ‘implemented curricula’, with the former mainly geared towards preparing pupils for urban employment based on the (failed) ideals of modernization (p.22).

On the one hand, schools raise children’s expectations of a future life with modern high status jobs and living in urban areas. On the other, children who finish secondary schools have a very limited chance of either proceeding to higher education or obtaining employment in the modern labour market. As a consequence, Abebe points out, “a worrying trend in the ‘deskilling’ of young people is emerging as a result of the increasing discontinuity between what children have learned in schools and the opportunities they will have as adults” (Abebe 2008: p.23)

Aasen (2011) in her study of young girls in Mekele also finds that girls who are still in school have higher aspirations than those who have dropped out of school. While girls who are still in school place a high value in education and envisage a professional occupation, those who have left school after primary or lower secondary levels anticipated careers as small scale business women (p.78). Although both groups of girls valued education highly, Aasen observes that they seem to have different needs and aspirations in education. Mjaaland(2013) also discusses how young girls and boys in Tigray imagine a better future through their education. In the stories school children wrote regarding their view on education and their future lives, Mjaaland observes that there appears to be a common theme of belief in education for a better future both for oneself and for one’s family and country. The belief that ‘all is possible through education’, she remarks, is at the centre of many of the stories young girls and boys composed regarding their future (p.145). While young girls and boys attending school saw themselves continuing to university and aspired for professional jobs, those who have been unable to attend school perceived their lives to have been lessened and devalued due to their lack of education (pp.144 – 153). As opposed to the optimism that those in

school had about their futures, women who were married early or were unable to attend school saw their lives (present and future?) as being ‘inferior’ and ‘useless’ for lack of education (p.153). Lack of education, her un educated informants perceived, was holding them back from progress and achieving a better life, and in some cases leading them to be excluded from administrative positions they felt they should have earned on account of their role during the armed struggle (pp.154 – 155).

Mjaaland (2013) also notes that although there were rare exceptions, most of the participants in her research, both boys and girls, perceive education as their way out of a rural life and a means of securing professional jobs in urban areas (p.158). She notes the contradictions inherent in the role of education in creating young people with such expectations and the capacity of the non-agricultural sector for employing secondary school graduates. Citing Negash (2006, 2010) Mjaaland (2013) remarks that there appears to be an over production of highschool graduates who find themselves unemployed and unemployable (p. 157) and observes:

In spite of a significant momentum in education in the Tigrayan context and in Ethiopia in general, accommodating female and male youth with increasing levels of education in to the economy is not as straightforward as the forward-moving development discourse might suggest (p.158).

Tafere (2010) and Tafere and Woldehanna (2012) similarly point out the effect of education in raising the aspirations of children. Tafere and Woldehanna (2012) find out that most rural children who were in school have “high aspirations” including occupations such as pilot, doctor (physician), university lecturer, engineer, lawyer and scientist or “other non-agricultural’ occupations such as being civil servant, nurse, shopkeeper, singer, sportsperson, domestic worker, laborer and driver (p.5). In an earlier publication of a similar work Tafere (2010) also documents how aspirations develop and change over time among school children in two urban and three rural communities in Ethiopia. Drawing from longitudinal data from the Young Lives research project⁶, Tafere observes that

⁶ Young Lives (<http://www.younglives.org.uk>) is an international study of childhood poverty following the changing lives of 12,000 children in Ethiopia, India, Peru and Vietnam over 15 years.

[A]s they grew older, children tended to change their initial aspirations. For example, when they were 8 years old the most popular job was teaching (about 42 per cent) but this figure dropped sharply after four years to less than 20 per cent. This would suggest that children had learnt what the more high-status occupations were. At an earlier age no child mentioned any prospective occupations such as engineer, scientist, lawyer, lecturer or civil servant. After four years, they dropped ambitions like becoming housewives or soldiers. For example, a large number of them (17 per cent) have realised that being a civil servant is an occupation that they could aspire to when they were 12, but never knew about when they were 8 years old. Understanding of what is best but also what is achievable comes through experience and age. The longitudinal data reveal that some children have dropped their initial aspirations perhaps because they have learnt that they could not be achieved” (p.8)

Tafere (2010) argues that the aspirations of school children seem to reach their highest pick between the ages of 8 and 12 during which most dropped their earlier and relatively lower aspirations of becoming school teachers and replaced them with higher aspirations such as becoming doctors. After the age of 14, he observes that aspirations tend to decline progressively with age unless accompanied by positive school performances. While those doing well at school maintain their high levels of aspirations, those who did not do as well as they would have liked or dropped out of school entirely seem to drop their earlier aspirations for lesser ones. Tafere seems to attribute this change to poverty and the growing realization on the part of the children that their aspirations were too optimistic:

There are many reasons why they are unlikely to achieve their childhood aspirations. Poverty, policy contexts and location, however, emerged strongly. Initial aspirations suggest that children from poor families perceived few impediments to aspiring to the highest achievements. But poverty visibly impacted on their school achievements, directly influenced them to alter or drop their initial ambitions. So the conclusion is that poverty rarely impacts on the initial aspirations of children but rather forces alterations at a later stage. As discussed above, poor school performance causes the alteration of early ambitions and poor children who drop out because of poverty correspondingly reduce their aspirations (p.17).

He concludes by observing that while initial aspirations tend to transcend any structural constraints, aspirations declined over time for most children. Nevertheless, his study illustrates the instrumental role played by education and the school system in shaping their earlier high level aspirations as well as how almost all children view their education as their primary means of achieving their aspirations.

3.4. Youth, Agriculture and Aspirations

Closely related to the influence of education on aspirations, there is also an apparent consensus in the literature which suggests rural youth in Ethiopia tend to have little or no aspiration related to farming and agriculture. As some authors have noted, this appears to be the case for youth in much of sub-Saharan Africa as well. White (2012, p.11), for example, notes that that young people in Africa are increasingly reluctant to pursue agriculture-based livelihoods due to a combination of factors including the deskilling of rural youth, the downgrading of farming and rural life, the chronic government neglect of small-scale agriculture and rural infrastructure, and the problems that young rural people increasingly have in getting access to land while still young.

In the Ethiopian context, there is a seemingly unanimous picture in the literature which points to young people's lack of interest in farming related occupations, especially where formal schooling is involved. Tafere and Woldehanna (2012) observe that "the overall aspiration among children to be farmers is very low" with few children wanting to be engaged in occupations similar to their parents" (pp.5- 6). Tadele and Gella (2012) similarly find that young boys and girls currently attending school were more inclined to view farming either as a dead end or a last resort rather than something to aspire to (p.36). Although they found a few children who saw a future in farming as a second best option if their education failed to lead anywhere, they observe that school students had a generally negative attitude to the possibility of going into agriculture in the future and note that this negative attitude towards farming was even more strongly expressed among girls than boys (p.37). The lack of farming related aspirations also seems to be shared by parents as well. Tafere and Woldehanna (2012) as well as Tadele and Gella (2012) find farming parents do not want their children to inherit their occupation. They note that parental attitudes to farming may have influenced that of their children and Tadele and Gella (2012) remark that it is "therefore unsurprising that young people are turning against agriculture since aspirations of the young are framed within

the implicit and explicit expectations placed upon them by family and kinship networks” (p.39). Abebe (2008) also notes that his findings indicate neither boys nor girls “valorise the rural, which equates with farming and lack of opportunities for social mobility” (p.16). He goes on to remark that despite their negative views to the rural and agricultural way of life, very few children who wish to secure ‘modern jobs’ actually succeed in doing so given the current challenges of securing college diplomas; and ultimately, substantial numbers of children and young people only have opportunities in agriculture-related employment.

Both Tafere and Woldehanna (2012) as well as Abebe (2008) stress the fact that rural children are aspiring for occupations that are not visible or available within their communities. Where they differ is in their interpretation of what this signifies. Tafere and Woldehanna see this as a manifestation of the influence parents have on the aspirations of children. They argue that the failure of farming to ensure even food security and to provide basic needs has pushed farmers to wish for their children non-farming occupations. Abebe on the other hand sees it as indicative of the influence of a school system that has inherited too much from modernization thought and is divorced from the local realities within which children live their daily lives.

The fact that there is by and large an apparent lack of interest among children and the young towards farming makes Tafere and Woldehanna go as far as asking if farming is an outcome of failed aspirations for rural youth in Ethiopia.

The evidence also shows that rural youth are ending up being farmer despite their aspirations. When their childhood aspirations fail mainly because they couldn’t achieve their educational goals, they end up being farmers. We can consequently conclude that ‘farming’ is an outcome of failed aspirations (Tafere & Woldehanna 2012, p.12) .

Tadele and Gella (2012) similarly observe that young people rarely draw aspirations from farming and conclude “Despite recent productivity improvements, the prevailing attitude among many young people is that agriculture is backward, demanding and even demeaning – especially for those who have gone through years of education with higher hopes and expectations” (p. 41)

3.5. Rural urban and gendered differences in aspirations

Although much of the literature does not dwell on rural urban and gendered differences in aspiration, there are a few indications that rurality as well as gender do influence aspirations. Tafere and Woldehanna indicate that although being a farmer was rarely an aspiration for both boys and girls, the desire of becoming a farmer decreased even more among girls as they grow older (2012, p.6). Tadele and Gella (2012) similarly note that girls were less likely to view farming as a possible future than boys. Rural – urban differences have also been found in some studies. Camfield and Tafere (2009), in their study of children’s conception of well-being, for example find that there were significant differences between children from rural and urban communities. While over 80% of children in urban areas anticipate that they will go to university, the equivalent figure in rural areas was 63% (p.127). They also reports that a lesser proportion of rural children reported education as an explanation for some one’s ascent through what they call “the ladder of life” than urban children. But they nevertheless stress that, despite these differences, most children saw education as an important instrument of securing a better future and question “whether education, which all respondents viewed as a symbol of a better future, can fulfill its promise as the ‘means for accessing social mobility’” (Camfield & Tafere, 2009, p.132).

3.6. Gaps in the literature and contributions of this study

A review of the existing literature seems to bring out the following three common themes, the latter two of which are of particular importance in the case of Ethiopia. First is the increasingly difficult and lengthy transition to adulthood. The individual biographies of young people today are being intersected with very diverse and broad social processes such that their transition in to adulthood is not only being delayed but also taking a variety of trajectories with numerous positions along the way. Second there is strong evidence, at least in literature that deals with Ethiopian youth which links formal education with high levels of aspirations. Children and youth go through and come out of their schooling with expectations that are simply not being matched by opportunities for their realization. This mismatch between high aspirations and limited opportunities is further complicating the transition from childhood to young adulthood. Third, and related to the above, is the fact that rural young people and especially those who are still in their schooling days exhibit aspirations that have very little to do with or are at times even antagonistic to the rural and agricultural life they are a part of.

But the existing literature is also lacking in many respects. First, there is an acute lack of studies relating globalization and youth aspirations in the Ethiopian context and Mains' study of urban youth in Jimma (2007, 2012) remains, to my knowledge, the only one of its kind in that area. Although Mains study marks a significant step forward in the right direction, it only represents urban youth, and mainly relatively privileged males. As such, there is an acute need to further explore the interaction between youth aspirations and globalization. Although it may not address this gap in the literature with the level of detail it certainly merits, this study will touch upon the issue of globalization and modernity and the influences it has on the aspirations of rural youth and in so doing will contribute to the limited literature even if only slightly. But it does address some of the other gaps in the existing literature more exhaustively. Although there has been an explosion of interest in recent years in the study of youth aspirations in relation to agriculture, the number and depth of studies still remains shallow in light of the importance of the topic. The evidence so far also appears to point to one direction in so far as farming is seen as a last resort among youth and education is seen as raising aspirations to an unrealistic high. This consensus is perhaps a result of the fact that the topic has not been researched exhaustively. In relation to farming and youth aspirations, the few studies that have been done so far deal with youth in farming communities threatened by food insecurity and land shortage. One of the main reasons for my interest in the topic in fact came from a curiosity to see if the same or similar views would be found among youth in relatively well off farming communities where farming does not necessarily involve or imply a continuous struggle for survival. In as far as it deals with youth in a farming community that has historically been well known for producing surplus and where farming can present a modest if not lucrative means of livelihood, this study adds significantly to the diversity of the existing literature and it is my hope that it will go to some distance to question the validity of the consensus that seems to exist in the literature. This study also addresses the issue of gender and gendered differences among youth aspirations to a greater degree than has thus far been done. By including a diverse range of participants from primary school children to youth who have completed high school and young as well as older farmers, this study also adds further to the diversity of views and a broader analysis of aspirations.

This study also challenges the existing literature in relation to how aspirations have thus far been conceptualized. The literature, or more specifically the literature on youth aspirations in Ethiopia, is lacking when it comes to a critical look on aspirations themselves. Aspirations

are rarely well defined or conceptualized and are used with all their inherent ambiguities. The focus of analysis thus far mainly focuses on whether and why young people have high and low aspirations. Apart from Mains work, most of the literature fails to engage with what purpose aspirations serve. By taking a more performative view of aspirations as discussed in the previous chapter, this study also adds to the depth of the literature. It is my belief that the strong link between high aspirations and education which is ominously present in the existing literature will be better understood from such an analysis which goes beyond asking whether the aspirations of youth are unrealistic given their place in the opportunity structure. Although the question surrounding the distinction between aspirations and expectations, dreams and reality is a legitimate one, it often fails to produce a better understanding of aspirations and what purposes they might serve. The act of aspiring, irrespective of what is aspired for, is itself a legitimate topic of study which is often missing in the literature.

IV

RESEARCH METHODS AND CONTEXT

4.1. Introduction

Since this study aims to explore how rural young people view their future, how their aspirations are formed and reformed in interaction with local, national, and global forces, as well as what purpose these aspirations serve; I have decided to adopt a qualitative approach as it appears best suited for the purpose. But this choice was made also due in part to the differing knowledge claims inherent in quantitative and qualitative methods (Creswell, 2009; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000), as well as my own prior experience with, and preference for, qualitative research methods. I take a social constructivist approach whereby, As Creswell (2009) states, “[t]he goal of research is to rely as much as possible on the participants views of the situation being studied” (p.9). In such an approach, “the questions become broad and general so that the participants can construct the meaning of a situation, a meaning typically forged in discussions or interactions with other persons”. I will return to the particular methods used in this study later after a discussion of the research context since this also, although to a lesser degree, had an influence on my choice of methods.

4.2. Site Selection

Three main factors were taken in to account in the site selection process; *Language, accessibility, and land scarcity*. From the start, I had determined that the research site should be reasonably accessible in both physical as well as language terms. This was necessary to ensure that the research would be carried out within the time frame of three months and also to avoid complications that would inevitably arise due to the use of translators if I was unable to speak the language. As such, the research site had to be one where Amharic, my own native language, is either the principal language or, at the very least, widely spoken as a second language. And the site also needed to be located in a reasonably accessible part of the country since I would rely on public transportation.

I had reason to believe that land scarcity was likely to be a major factor in influencing the attitudes of young people towards a potential future in agriculture. Indeed, previous research that I had been involved in has shown that the availability of agricultural land and young people’s access to such land is among the most important factors that influence their attitudes to a future life of farming (Tadele & Gella, 2012). Although it would be quite difficult to find

a site where land scarcity is not an issue at all as agricultural land is increasingly becoming scarce in Ethiopia, it was determined that the research site should ideally be one where land scarcity is not so severe as to rule out any possibility of a future in agriculture for young people.

With these three factors in mind, I set out to explore potential research sites in the latter half of June 2012. Having grown up in the East Gojjam Zone of the Amhara region, and being intimately familiar with most of the region, I started exploring potential sites for the study as this would be ideal in terms of linguistic, geographical and social accessibility. I therefore contacted the Zone Agricultural and Rural Development Office and held background interviews with key personnel. Having explained the purpose of the study and the site selection criteria, I came to learn that one of the wereda⁷s of the Zone, Debre Elias wereda, was a particularly fitting candidate. With a letter of introduction from the Zone Administration, I then went to the wereda and held background interviews with the head of the wereda agriculture and rural development office and the head of the wereda land and natural resources management office. These interviews revealed that two rural kebeles in the wereda, Guai and Abesheb, were particularly suited to the purpose of the study. I ruled out Abesheb as it was too close to the wereda capital, the town of Debre Elias, and therefore may not properly reflect the views of rural youth. Guai, on the other hand, was more interesting since it was far out to the boarder of the region and land holding were unusually less fragmented. The fact that Guai was also among the most surplus producing kebeles in the region also weighed to its selection as a more fitting site. But there were also practical reasons, such as the fact that I could find a place to stay at in Guai, which in the end also influenced the selection process.

Guai (ጻይ) is a rural kebele (ቀበሌ) located towards western borders of the Debre Elyiyas wereda. It is located in the north western part of Ethiopia about 70 kilometers west of Debre Markos which is the largest town in the region and capital of the East Gojjam Administrative Zone. The kebele itself comprises of about 20 small rural hamlets (called goṭə /ጎጥ in the Amharic language) and one additional market and administrative center in the middle. According to data from the 2007 census, the kebele has a total population of 8,688 (4,324 M,

⁷ A wereda is the third level administrative division in Ethiopia below the regional state and the zone administration and just above the kebele which is the lowest administrative unit.

4,364 F) in 2,010 households residing in 1,968 housing units (CSA, nd, p.980)⁸. The market and administrative center is on its way of becoming a small rural town but is currently referred to as a *nus ketema* /ንዑስ ከተማ, meaning it has not yet met the official criteria to be classified as a town although local authorities estimate that as much as 3000 people may be residing in the small-town, well in excess of the 2000 base line required for classification as a town. For the sake of convenience, and for lack of a better term, I will refer to it as small town although this does not fully capture the meaning of the Amharic term nus/ንዑስ. The small town features a primary school, a health centre, and a host of local administration facilities including various branches of the kebele administration, the agricultural extension office, as the farmer's cooperative office and a local branch of the Amhara Saving and Credit Association.

As is the case with other parts of the central Ethiopian highlands, mixed agriculture with a mix of seasonal rain fed cereal farming and animal husbandry is the main means of livelihood for the majority of the people in the kebele. Local kebele officials estimate that up to 98% of households practice mixed farming involving cereal production mixed with animal husbandry and some elements of trading in cereals and livestock. But unlike most parts of the central highlands, land holdings in Guai are, relatively speaking, more consolidated with typical household holdings of between 10 -13 gemeds of land, approximately between 2 – 3 hectares⁹. Although this may appear to be small as compared to other sub-saharan countries, such land holdings are relatively large in the case of Ethiopia where nearly 56% of farming households hold no more than a single hectares of land and less than 12 percent own between 2 – 5 hectares (Rahmato 2008, p.306). This relatively large size of land holdings together with the high fertility of the land has lead to the kebele's recognition as a well known surplus producer. In fact, the seasonal dirt road that links Guai with the wereda town of Debre Elias

⁸ Unpublished reports of the 2007 census data available from the website of the Central Statistical Agency of Ethiopia; available at http://www.csa.gov.et/index.php?option=com_rubberdoc&view=doc&id=266&format=raw&Itemid=521 (accessed 24 April, 2013)

⁹ Figures from interview with local kebele officials . kebele officials estimate that about 90 % of households would fall with in category although there are a few cases where households holding as much 26 gemeds of land have been registered.

was built mainly to facilitate access for trucks and lorries which make frequent trips to the kebele to transport grains and cereals.



Picture 1: Views of the open air market at the center of Guai

4.3. Entry to the field

The first two weeks in the field were, as one might expect, more or less uneventful. Getting hold of the kebele administration officials and getting the go ahead clearance itself took more than a week. I was also a very unfamiliar face in a small community of people who were intimately familiar with one another. Curious faces and glances followed me wherever I went and I felt that jumping straight to interviews under such circumstances will be counterproductive. As a result I spent most of the first two weeks of field work frequenting the tea houses and market places and striking up conversations whenever I can. As I became a regular face in the small market center which serves the surrounding small hamlets of the kebele, the curious and examining looks that I used to draw seemed to be replaced by a friendly smile, or a slight nod of the head that marked recognition, and of course indifference at times. For me, this marked the transition from preparation for field work to actual field work which lasted from early July to the end of August 2012.

4.4. Methods of Data Collection

Interviews

Interviews, and mainly group interviews, constituted the main method of data collection. I have opted to use the term *group interviews* rather than the more frequently used *focus group discussion* in line with Parker and Tritter (2006) who point out fundamental differences between the two, chief among which is the role of the researcher. Whereas “in group interviews the researcher adopts an ‘investigative’ role: asking questions, controlling the dynamics of group discussion, often engaging in dialogue with specific participants [...] [i]n focus groups the dynamics are different. Here, the researcher plays the role of ‘facilitator’ or ‘moderator’; that is, facilitator/moderator of group discussion between participants, not between her/himself and the participants” (pp.25-26).

Interviews (both group and individual) were held with four categories of participants; young students aged 14 – 17 who were in upper primary school, students aged 16 – 21 who were in high school or preparatory school, young high school drop outs and high school graduates aged 19 – 24, and young farmers aged 23 - 29. The decision to focus on the above four categories of participants was made with the hope that the interviews will reveal not only how the hopes and aspirations of each group are formed, reformed and influenced but also how they change along with the wider socio-economic and other circumstances that

individuals find themselves in along their life course. In the absence of any possibilities for a longitudinal study due to time constraints, this appeared to be the second best way of documenting how and why aspiration and hopes change in the life course of young people and the transition from childhood to adulthood.

Group interviews

In school youth

Young rural boys and girls who were still in school were the main focus of the study. This group of participants was further divided in to two sub-categories, those in upper primary school and those in high school. Since the study targeted students who were 14 or older, this meant that only students who were in grades 7 and above were to be considered for the interviews. But finding students in sufficient number was a challenge since schools were closed at the time of the field work. Although summer school was open on an informal basis where by university students, who were themselves on vacation, were teaching primary school students, the classes seemed to rarely go beyond six or seven students during most days of the week. Most students were far too busy with agricultural work to come to school. Student attendance seemed to go significantly higher during religious holidays during which farm work was forbidden and it was during these days that upper primary school students in grades 7 and 8 were recruited from those who were attending summer school at the time. A total of 18 upper primary school students were interviewed in three group interview sessions.

Since there was no high school in the kebele, high school students were recruited through snow balling methods after I was introduced to one student. A total of nine high school students were interviewed in two group interview sessions. The interviews with this category of participants were based on a structured interview guide developed with the aim of exploring the future hopes and aspirations of young students and their plans for the future. The interviews also covered topics such as factors that shape and influence the aspirations and hopes of participants and their experiences of their current lives in light of their future hopes and dreams. All of the group interviews as well as the two follow up individual interviews held with this category of participants were conducted in empty class rooms inside the premises of the primary school at Guai as the school provided a neutral and more private venue for the interviews .

Out of school youth

Out of school youth comprising those who have completed high school but have failed to pursue their studies further or those who have dropped out of high school were also interviewed. Since this category of participants were neither attending school nor engaged in other work of a permanent nature, the group interviews were aimed at exploring how their aspirations and hopes have changed over time and what effect completing or dropping out of high school has had on their aspirations. Fourteen out of school youth were interviewed in two group interview sessions which were also held at the premises of the primary school.

Young farmers

Along with in and out of school youth, young farmers were also a central focus of the study. This category of participants were composed of young people who have already entered in to agriculture as their main means of livelihood. The focus of the interviews with this category of participants was at exploring the factors that lead them to adopt agriculture as their livelihood with the intention of identifying factors that facilitate or hinder entry in to agriculture. A total of 21 young farmers were interviewed from this category of respondents. The participants were recruited with the help of the local kebele administration from young farmer's cooperatives and the interviews took place in a secluded office in the premises of the kebele administration office.

Individual Interviews

In addition to the group interviews, a few individual interviews were held with selected participants of the group interviews to explore issues of interest in greater detail. These interviews were, although unstructured, very focused on specific issues identified during the group interview sessions. Individual interviews were held with two female high school students and two male young farmers. Five unstructured interviews were also held with local level government officials (2 at the kebele level and 3 at the wereda level). These interviews were mainly aimed at gaining appropriate contextual information and to clarify some issues that appeared vague or uncertain from the information gained through the group interviews. In order to ensure that these later interviews served this purpose appropriately, they were conducted towards the end of the field work after all other interviews were completed.

All interviews, except two of the interviews with local level government officials and two of the individual interviews with the high school girls were recorded after the consent of the participants involved had been obtained. A recorder was not used in the case of the two interviews held with the local level officials as they appeared hesitant to give their consent and, in the case of the high school girls, as the recorder appeared to have a disruptive role in the flow of the conversation. Most interviews lasted from 40 to 60 minutes and were held in neutral venues which provided reasonable privacy and with no other third parties present.

Essays

Twenty four boys and girls, all in primary school, aged 14 - 16 (9 girls and 13 boys) were also asked to write essays on 4 topics related to their role models, future aspirations, and future lives. While these essays were at first intended to be supplementary to the interviews, they proved to be more useful than I had intended them to be since the group interviews with young students in upper primary school proved to be somewhat limited in terms of the depth of responses elicited. This was in part due to the intense social pressure placed on young people and children which dictates that they should listen rather than talk in the presence of their elders. The fact that these students addressed me as “*Gashe*” [sir or teacher depending on context] throughout showed that they could not, despite my efforts, relate to me as their equal. The essays seemed to be far more effective in removing this power imbalance. And in order to ensure that students feel at ease, they were asked to write the essays in their spare time at home and take as much as two to three days for the purpose.

Observations and informal conversations

Some of the most insightful and revealing instances of the field work occurred during informal conversations held with people during my stay in the field. I frequented the tea and *areqe*¹⁰ houses in the local market which served both as conversation hot spots as well as entertainment centers. People were often more straight forward and at ease during these informal settings than even the most successful of my formally planned interview sessions. Frequenting the tea houses also gave me some insight in to what types of electronic media and entertainment programming is consumed and by whom. The bus journeys to the nearest town I took once per week in order to restock my drinking water supply also presented

¹⁰ Areqe is a popular home brewed alcoholic drink often served in the tea-houses

another opportunity to strike up informal conversations. These journeys which lasted for about one to two hours often brought me in to contact with farmers, traders, and merchants I wouldn't have met otherwise. Conversations were often initiated by people sitting near me and I only had to show my interest for the conversations to thrive. Although I never started with a full disclosure of who I was and what I was doing, queries and questions would lead me to do so not long in to the conversations.

Secondary data and text analysis

Government policy documents and strategies related to young people and agriculture, as well as local and national level statistical data on various socio-demographic issues were also collected where these were readily available. While government policies have been used in a textual analysis, the secondary sources are used to place the interview data and the other primary sources in the appropriate local context during analysis.

4.5. Ethical Issues

Prior to the field work, all necessary steps were taken to ensure clearance. Since the research topic was not deemed sensitive and data was anonymized at the field level, ethical clearance from the Norwegian Social Science Data Services (NSD) was not required. But clearance for the actual field work was applied for and obtained from the local zonal and wereda level authorities prior to field work. During the field work itself; all participants were informed about the purpose of the study clearly and adequately. Participants were informed in unequivocal terms that their participation is solely based on their own willingness to do so. Special care was taken during the interview sessions with young farmers who were recruited through the local kebele administration office in order to ensure that participants do not feel compelled to take part in the study since they were contacted through the kebele administration.

Throughout the field work, I had close relations with two of the kebele administration officials who were particularly helpful in introducing me to people I wanted to contact and in allowing me access to appropriate venues for interviews. Although my relationship with them was at first mainly based on the fact that I needed their help, it soon developed in to a good friendship. Not before too long, I found myself spending most of my free time with them. I was aware that this presented a potential complication in the relationship I would have with participants of the study if they identified me with the kebele administration. In order to

minimize this potential threat, I started emphasizing, before all interviews, that I was a student studying in Norway and was in no way associated with the kebele administration or the government. This appeared to work and I felt more comfortable as participants had no problem finding fault with the local administration in my presence.

Although the topic of the research is not sensitive, all personally identifying data such as names, age and family background were recorded separately from the actual interview material. Personal information on participants was kept on a separate field diary and has not been included in the recorded discussions. All data presented here has been anonymized and pseudo names are used throughout the thesis where individual participants have been referred to.

4.6. Data Analysis

As many authors in the field have cautioned repeatedly, data analysis is a challenging, time consuming but nevertheless a crucial part of doing a qualitative research. This challenge was made even more demanding in my case due to the volume as well as diversity of the data collected in what was a relatively short field work. Due to the volume of the data I decided to merge the transcription and translation of the interviews in one step. Although intended to save time, this nevertheless proved more time consuming since transcribing and translating simultaneously required that I listen to each phrase quite repeatedly in order to properly understand as well as translate what was being said appropriately. The field notes taken during the interviews as well as my field diary have proven quite useful in this process. The essays composed by students were also translated. Once both the interviews and essays had been translated and contextualized, the material was then organized across pre-identified themes regarding aspirations, their construction and formation, views of the rural, views of farming, and imagined futures. This process of coding, done manually, revealed important differences across the different groups of participants, cross cutting themes, as well as emerging themes which needed to be integrated in to the pre-identified themes. This process continued throughout the writing of the thesis in what Creswell calls “the data analysis spiral” (2007, p.150). The distinction between pre-identified and emerging themes is however more fluid in my case than the terminology might imply. While the pre-identified themes were meant to guide me in answering the research questions, I was also open to what may emerge from the data outside of these themes.

AGRICULTURE IN A NATION UNDER TRANSFORMATION

5.1. Introduction

The importance of the agricultural sector in Ethiopia can hardly be overstated as I have indicated in chapter one. It is not surprising then that the sector happens to be at the center piece of the country's overall development program. Based on the belief that growth in the agricultural sector will feed growth in the other (mainly industrial and service sectors) sectors, the government of Ethiopia has embarked on an ambitious grand development plan that aims to place the country among the category of middle income countries sometime in between 2020 – 2030. This grand plan, which the government has dubbed “the Growth and Transformation Plan”, is the latest iteration of a series of five year developmental plans all based on an agricultural led industrialization policy.

This chapter discusses the role agriculture is given in the country's transformation. It also discusses the critical role assigned to young rural people in terms of bringing the plan in to fruition. In connection with these, the chapter also briefly discusses change and continuity in the rural agricultural way of life in the last two decades. My purpose in this chapter is to provide a detailed account of the national policy and the rural agricultural contexts which must be taken in to account in order to fully appreciate the significance of the aspirations of rural youth which will follow in later chapters.

5.2. Transforming agriculture, transforming a nation

Ethiopia's development plan for the last two decades has been based on the philosophy of the developmental state and an agricultural led industrialization strategy. To date, the country has had three consecutive five year development plans; the ‘Sustainable Development and Poverty Reduction Plan’ launched in 2002, the ‘Plan for Accelerated and Sustained Development to End Poverty’ (2006-2010) and the current ‘Growth and Transformation Plan’ (2011 – 2015). Each of these consecutive five year plans were meant to serve as the guiding strategic framework of development for their respective periods. Although slightly different in their specific objectives, all three five year plans are based on a much broader development philosophy that has guided the country's overall development plan since the

early 1990s, an Agricultural Development Led Industrialization (ADLI) strategy with a developmental state at the helm¹¹.

The earliest, and to date the most detailed, exposition of the government's take on the ADLI strategy is found in an Amharic publication entitled "*The Rural and Agricultural Development Policy and Strategies of the FDRE*" published for discussion in 2002¹². Although dated, the contents of this document are still reflected in more recent development plans of the country. In a way, it appears to be the backbone of the government's development policy and I make extensive reference to this particular document since it presents a more detailed and exhaustive account of the ADLI philosophy. In it, the government of Ethiopia presented a detailed explanation of how rural development, and particularly agricultural development, is the only viable means of delivering the overall "accelerated and sustained development" it seeks to achieve.

... the rural development effort is not something that can be regarded as just one element in the overall economic development package. It is more than just that. Rural development constitutes the plank that underlies all other efforts towards economic development. The reason for repeated mention of the nature of economic policy in Ethiopia being agriculture and rural-centered is because this is the basis for implementing the overall economic development objective and the guiding principle for our development efforts. The agriculture-centered rural development strategy maps out our main development path because it is capable of bringing to fruition the four elements, which constitute the country's economic development objectives (MOFED, 2003, p.9).

These four elements which the policy refers to are; accelerated economic growth as a fundamental goal and ultimate objective, ensuring broad based economic growth which

¹¹ Although based on the traditional conceptualization and understanding of the developmental state in East Asian countries, the Ethiopian government's conception and use of the term differs in many subtle ways. For a somewhat in-depth exposition of the developmental state as it is used by the Ethiopian government, see Meles Zenawi (2012) *States and Markets: Neoliberal Limitations and the case for a developmental state*. In Norman, et al (2012) *Good Growth and Governance in Africa*. Oxford University Press

¹² Although the original document first appeared in Amharic, it has later been translated in to English. Unless specified otherwise, direct quotes are taken from the official English version of the document.

involves and benefits the majority of the population, improving the country's position in the global economic matrix so as to move it away from its current status as an international alms recipient, and finally, accelerated economic development that leads to the development of an open, free market oriented economic system. For the government, there is no other “alternative” to choose from:

... the rural and agriculture-led development strategy is not only the best alternative for accelerated and sustained growth, it is also an alternative that promises maximum benefits for the vast majority of the people. Barring the option of income redistribution through some sort of welfare system, the only way one can create a situation in which the majority of the population can benefit from the development process is by upgrading the productive capacity of the people, and ensuring that this enhanced productive capacity is effectively employed. In Ethiopia, some 85 percent of the population live in rural areas. If our approach is to build the productive capacity of the people and use it, then there is no alternative to making rural development the lynchpin of economic growth and progress (MOFED, 2003, p.11).

Growth in the agricultural sector is not only sought for its own ends (such as achieving food security) but also because such growth is expected to provide the vital push the rest of the economy is believed to need. As described in the Rural and Agricultural Development Policy and Strategies of the government, failure here will easily and inevitably translate to failure in the overall development program of the country. The fact that this belief is still clearly apparent in the most recent development strategies of the country, the GTP, in which ensuring the agricultural sector *continues* to provide the massive push for economic growth and industrialization is stated as the second of the eight pillars of the plan clearly indicates the continuing commitment to the ADLI philosophy on the side of the government (MOFED, 2010).

The document also attempts to tackle the next obvious question, if growth in the agricultural sector is of such immense importance, how is this growth to be brought about in the first place. Agricultural growth is expected to be achieved through a number of concurrent strategies which involve, among other things, the proper and massive utilization of the rural labor force, proper land utilization strategies, a gradual shift from traditional subsistence farming to a more modern and market oriented system of farming and the identification and

proper utilization of ecological and market niches. In the end, improving agricultural productivity is just one goal of many. The government claims that increased productivity will achieve food security, but will not necessarily enable the rural poor to escape poverty. To escape poverty rural households have to shift from purely subsistence farming to practicing farming as a business. This means gradual diversification into higher value products and commercialization of small holder agriculture in the long run.

The policy document stresses that growth in the agricultural sector has to come from the resources it already has at hand, mainly human labor and agricultural land. But a labor intensive strategy by and of itself is not, the government contends, sufficient for the intended transformation of the sector and might in fact be wasteful; if for example, too much labor is tied to subsistence farming with little or no improvement to productivity. In addition to improving productivity through a massive utilization of the rural labor force, bringing about the desired growth and transformation of the sector as a whole requires the adoption of new and improved techniques and skills, the adoption of ecologically tuned farming methods and niche market crops. The government believes that these approaches are preferable since they are capital saving while being labor intensive. And being labor intensive, these approaches do require the active and continued involvement of young people in agriculture as we will see below.

5.3. Drivers of the transformation machine - young people as agents of change

What is also clearly evident in the policy discourse is the role given to rural youth in bringing about the desired change and transformation of the agricultural sector. The rural and agricultural development policy argues that not much can be achieved by trying to teach the older generation of farmers who are illiterate and unable and/or unwilling to acquire and adopt new, improved and scientific methods of farming. For this reason, it stresses, there is a need to cultivate a new generation of literate farmers who have preferably some post elementary school agricultural training or, at the very least, completed elementary school. This is made even more necessary, it claims, since more and more rural children and youth are attending school. If such youth have neither the willingness nor the means to become farmers and continue to migrate to urban centers, the urban economy simply has no capacity to absorb them and will collapse. As such, the policy argues that at least up to 70% of the rural youth and children currently attending school have to be contained where they are and be prepared to pursue a life in agriculture.

As part of its lengthy analysis of the nature of the agricultural sector, its role in leading the overall [economic] development of the country, and the specific technological, ecological and other adaptations that need to be taken to achieve the desired transformation of the sector; the government tries to address the huge gap it perceives between the expected role of the rural youth in this process vis-a-vis their current attitude towards and interest in agriculture. The government considers this to represent a formidable challenge for the overall success of the policy and repeatedly stresses the need to challenge and change the attitudes of young people towards farming, especially when it comes to those with some level of formal schooling.

In this regard, the major problem lies with the relatively more educated and younger generation. It is certainly true that there are [probably] thousands of young people who are educated and yet are engaged in agriculture either for lacking any other opportunities for work or other reasons; and these young people show a level of determination and commitment to their work no less than that of the traditional uneducated farmer. And, despite receiving no particular training in agriculture, they nevertheless have proven themselves to be more productive than the traditional farmer by simply putting to use the knowledge and skills they have received from their general education and by being highly receptive to new and improved methods. The attitude and mind set of the majority of young people who are currently in schools is, however, far different from that of these few. The urban and rural youth currently in school show no interest in going in to either agriculture training or farming. The vast majority of this group of youth perceive agriculture as an embodiment of poverty and backwardness. [...] For this group of youth, the apparent poverty and misery with in which the vast majority of agrarian population is forced to live and which this group of youth is witness to is simply proof enough that any occupation in that field will lead to a similar fate (MOI, 2002b, p. 42)¹³.

The policy goes even further to stipulate that the potential threat posed by this is so serious that it can result in a situation where work in the agricultural sector becomes only a last resort for the new generation of the rural youth (p.43). It stresses the need to tackle this attitude stating that no rural development policy can yield any results as long as this mind set is left to prevail. And considering the intense dislike the rural youth (and especially the more

¹³ I have chosen to use my own translation of the Amharic text as it appears in the original publication of the policy document here since I felt the English version did not adequately reflect the original Amharic text.

educated) it believes show to such a career, the policy aims to secure their immediate engagement in and long term commitment to a life of farming through a combination of two main strategies. First is challenging and changing the existing work ethic which tends to despise laborious work such as farming. Here it emphasizes the vital role of schools in inculcating the inherent value in any work including farming in the minds of students especially during primary education. But, this cannot, the policy argues, be very effective in changing the mind set and further requires making sure that the new generation of educated and trained farmers will be able to earn a level of income that is at least comparable to that of those with a similar level of education but engaged in other sectors [p. 44]. It therefore stresses the need to ensure that educated youth who go in to agriculture (either out of interest or for a lack of any other livelihood options) get the knowledge, skills, equipment, as well as the technical, material, and financial support they need to achieve a level of productivity that would generate, at the very least, a comparable level of income to other occupations and livelihood options open to people of a similar level of education. In short, the government aims to ensure that youth who go in to agriculture earn as much (if not more) as their counterparts who opt to pursue non-agricultural careers.

There are also similar discourses in other policy documents. The capacity building policy of the government also notes the emerging trend of the rural young to view agricultural work as undesirable and degrading (MOI, 2002a, p.40). It stresses the need for the education and training policy of the country to take into account the fact that agriculture will continue to be the major avenue of employment for most rural youth and stresses the need to devise an appropriate level of training that will prepare them for such an occupation not only in terms of the required knowledge and skills but also in terms of their willingness and commitment to pursue such an occupation (p117-118, 128 -129).

While underlining that the maximum utilization of labor, improving productivity through new, technological and innovative methods, the technological transformation of the traditional farming that has persisted thus far, and cultivating a new generation of educated, skilled and innovative farmers are the major goals of the rural development policy, the capacity building strategy argues that all of these are invariably tied with the youth. The rural youth are the major source of the required labor, they are likely to be relatively more educated, and hence more receptive to new ideas, methods and approaches. As such, it

argues, their participation in and commitment to the transformation that is being sought is more important than that of any other section of the rural society (MOI, 2002a, p. 254).

The rural youth, and especially those with elementary or post-elementary schooling, are considered key actors in both of these spolicies and the government has no doubts that its ADLI strategy would utterly fail if the rural youth simply decide to try out their luck somewhere else rather than pursuing a future life in agriculture. Not only are the rural young seen as being more receptive to new knowledge, ideas, technologies and methods; but also as instruments for showcasing such innovations. The rural agricultural TVET program for example consists of training development agents (DAs) who will in turn be used to train farmers at their respective local *kebeles* and show case the benefits of adopting new technologies and methods through actual implementation and demonstration of results.

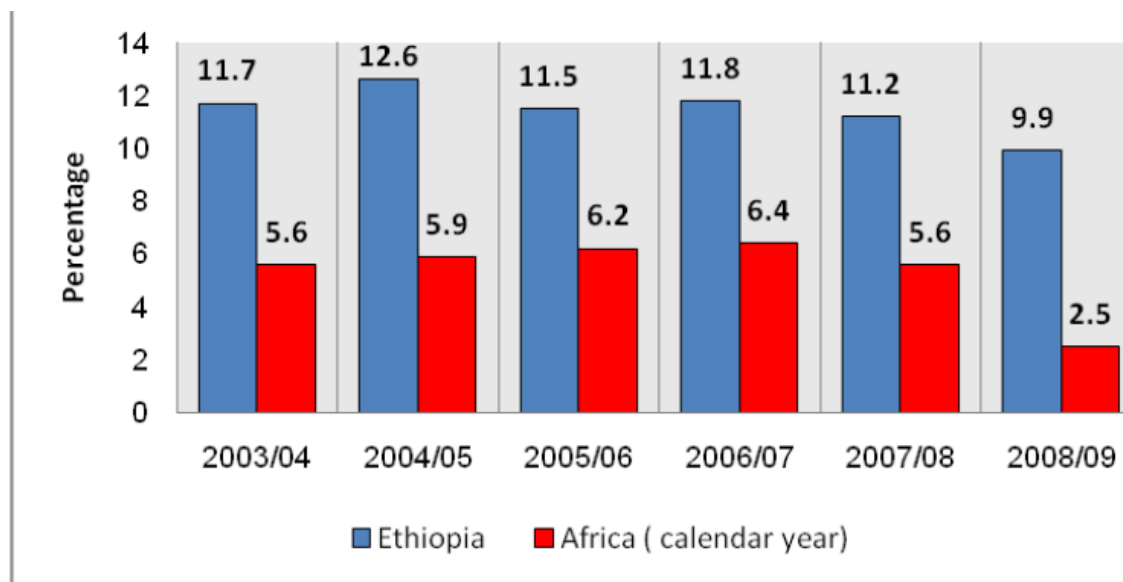
5.4. On the road to transformation? Change and Continuity in farming and rural life

There is a very polarized debate on whether the ADLI strategy and the philosophy of the developmental state is a sound choice in the Ethiopian context; or for that matter, in any context. But looking beyond the raging debate, the fact remains that the government of Ethiopia today is as committed to the ADLI strategy as it was twenty years ago. And this commitment, misplaced or not, will have tangible consequences to the lives of the many millions of rural people today and young people who are expected to become the new generation of literate and capable farmers. One of the many distinguishing features of the developmental state, which the state in Ethiopia openly professes to be, is a large and far reaching bureaucracy; and the Ethiopian state lives up to this expectation more than adequately. Although the country has gone through a series of decentralization moves in the past 15 years and local and district level administrations now hold unparallel decision making power, the hold the state has on daily political discourse is still indicative of the one way top-down flow of concepts. One, though admittedly simple and anecdotal, evidence of this can be found on the very wording of the latest five year development plan of the state; the Plan for Growth and Transformation or GTP. What is interesting here is that although there are quite a few Amharic words that can closely approximate the term “transformation”; the state uses this English term as is in its official and unofficial communication. This English term that was unknown to millions of people has, within a few years, become perhaps the most widely recognized word in the country. Heavily laden terms such as transformation, rent-seeking,

and good governance are now part of the common lexicon of the political elite and the lay man alike.

As interesting as an analysis of the flow of political terms is, my purpose in raising the above is merely to show that the plans of the government are not simply words that remain in the filing cabinets of state officials. The Ethiopian state openly holds the view that anyone in the service of the government has to show unwavering commitment to the policies and strategies of the developmental state. And the primacy of this commitment over competence has been openly declared in more than a few public speeches the late prime minister had delivered; including one in parliament. As such creating wide spread awareness of and commitment to the government’s developmental plans among the public at large is considered a key element of the state bureaucracy which has tirelessly been working to convince all concerned that the plan is not only working but has been a tremendous achievement. Although I cannot go in to an exhaustive critic of what the “transformation” has brought about, I will attempt to discuss what changes the country as a whole and rural life in particular have witnessed in the last decade and a half.

Figure 1: GDP Growth Rate Comparison of Ethiopia to the rest of Africa



Source: African Development Bank¹⁴

¹⁴http://www.afdb.org/fileadmin/uploads/afdb/Documents/Publications/ECON%20Brief_Ethiopia%20Economic%20growth.pdf

There are certainly some indications that the country is indeed undergoing a transformation although the extent of this transformation and its cost are hotly contested. According to the government’s own figures, the country has been growing at an average rate of 11% for the last ten years since 2003/04 (MOFED, 2010, p4). The government also claims that the national poverty head count index has been reduced from 38.7% in 2004/05 to 29.6% in 2010/11 (MOFED, 2012, p17)¹⁵.

Table 1: Average GDP growth and percentage share of sectors

Sector	Average growth		Percentage Share of Real GDP
	2005/06 – 2009/10	2010/2011	
Overall Real GDP	11.0	11.4	
Agriculture	8.4	9.0	41.6
Industry	10.0	15.0	12.9
Services	14.6	12.5	45.5

Source: MOFED (2010, 2012)

With regards to the agricultural sector, the government has only more impressive figures to flaunt. It claims that the food poverty head count has decreased from 44% in 1999/00 to under 30% in 2009/10 while per capita grain production has increased from below 150kg in 2003/04 to 213kg in 2007/08 (MOA,2010). There have been equally impressive achievements in health care, education, and infrastructure development. But how have these developments impacted agriculture and rural life. The following section explores changes that have occurred in the lives of farmers and the rural way of life from the perspective of those who live there. It draws from informal interviews held with older farmers, local (wereda and kebele) level government workers and informal conversations and my own observations during the field work.

Farming and the rural way of life has changed tremendously over the past decade. Some of these changes are readily visible to anyone who is familiar with rural agrarian life in the

¹⁵ The World Bank defines the **poverty headcount index** as the share of the population whose income or consumption is below the poverty line, that is, the share of the population that cannot afford to buy a basic basket of goods

northern highlands of Ethiopia. Guai's topography is unusually plain for northern Ethiopia which is more characterized by rolling hills, elevated plateaus, and mountain ranges. But there is also something else apart from its unusual topography which meets the eye as one approaches the small set of villages that comprise the kebele of Guai; plot after plot of wheat sprouts that have been planted in rows. For anyone who is remotely familiar with agriculture in northern Ethiopia, two things stand out. First, farmers usually cultivate diverse crops. It is customary for a farmer to grow a little bit of *teff*¹⁶ in one plot, some wheat in another and a bit of maize around the house and so on. This is mainly because farmers generally produce what they need for their own subsistence and a little of something else that is meant to be sold to the market as their main cash crop. This diversification is not without its reasons. It has served them well during times when a particular crop fails. A farmer never puts all his eggs in one basket by relying on one crop alone. As such, seeing plot after plot of wheat farms with only the odd mix of *teff* or maize once in awhile strikes the viewer as something of an oddity¹⁷. The second oddity is perhaps even more striking. Seedlings that have been planted in evenly spaced rows. Farmers usually sow their plots manually which means throwing the seeds all over the plot as evenly as possible (broad casting). And doing so used to be a key skill the farmer took pride in. Now that too seems to have given way to something else.

The shift towards wheat, according to older farmers as well as the wereda agriculture office, is something that occurred in the last decade. Although the kebele has always been known for its wheat production, it has not been known to produce wheat so exclusively. The kebele was identified as an appropriate one for specialization in wheat in the 2002/03 agricultural season. With the introduction of improved high yielding varieties, the introduction and wide spread adoption of herbicides, and of course the ever increasing use of chemical fertilizers, wheat yields have more than trebled. The state agriculture extension machinery here is geared towards supplying farmers with the things they need to produce wheat. This has meant that a single hectare of land that can at best yield up to 12 quintals of *teff* can yield at least 40

¹⁶ Teff [*Eragrostis tef*] is grass like cereal/grain native to Ethiopia

¹⁷ In a later interview, the head of the wereda agriculture office told me that wheat was identified as the most appropriate (i.e, high yielding) crop for the wereda followed by maize. Out of 38,500 hectares of land under crop cultivation, 15, 360 hectare was taken up by wheat. This figure is for the wereda as a whole of which Guai is just one kebele. The share taken by wheat in Guai is much larger although I was unable to get exact figures. But local farmers estimate that wheat takes up as much as 2/3ds of the cultivated land.

quintals if one grows wheat on it; a yield that is nearly twice the national average yield of wheat (wereda agriculture office; CSA 2012). Even accounting for the higher price of *teff* per quintal, growing wheat would still bring three to four times more cash in to the farmers pocket than *teff*; and it does so with a lot less effort since wheat cultivation requires significantly less labour. This has led to the *kebele* producing, almost exclusively, wheat year after year to the extent that the local agricultural extension workers are now beginning to get worried about the effect of this on the long term soil fertility of the area. But the turn to wheat production coupled with the recent hike in wheat prices has made local farmers a little richer. With the switch to producing just one major seasonal crop, farmers have found they have time to engage in other things for the rest of the year. A few have started small business ventures such as flour mills and seasonal trading in cereals, grain and livestock. Others have built houses in the small town that has sprung up at what used to be a local open air market site which they rent to women selling beverages and food. All in all, farmers and residents of the small town all feel there is a lot more money floating around now than five or ten years ago.

With the small town now connected to the national electricity grid, television sets and compact disc players have found their way in to every tea house¹⁸. People do not just come in to these houses to have a drink, they are there for what is on the tv screens. The tea houses are more or less identical. They all have the same mud floors, long tree trunks that have been converted to horizontal benches, and they all sell more or less the same things. Putting the right stuff on the tv screen is often what makes the difference between a house full of guests or an empty saloon with the tea kettle making the only noise. Amharic movies made in the nation's capital showing smartly dressed actors living in luxury villas and driving cars on the cleanest of the capitals roads often dominate the tv screens here and seem to have the widest appeal. When the movies give way to music videos, the scenes hardly change except perhaps bringing in to view even more luxuries bars, hotels, and night clubs. Both the movies and the music videos seem to magnify the stark contrast between what is on the tv and what is on the ground. But people do appear to enjoy it.

¹⁸ I should note here that, as in many small rural towns, the electricity supply in Guai is extremely erratic and intermittent. This is often a subject of many jokes, for example, I have heard many people saying the power lines can perhaps be of better use as hangers for drying laundry since they don't seem to carry any 'power' most of the time.

Although there is just one tea house with a satellite dish, satellite tv seems not to have taken off, at least not among adults. With children though, it is a smash hit. Satellite tv offered western movies, western music videos and gave them a peek in to a world beyond. Watching live broadcasts of the 30th Olympic Games and sci-fi thrillers such as The Matrix alongside a baffled audience was also an unusually disorienting experience for myself. Here I was in this tiny rural town that had a barely functional electric supply, no water supply, or anything that one would identify with a town life. And I am watching live games and Hollywood blockbusters. In the nearby wereda town of Debre - Elias, I even saw an advertisement for the new season of the English Premier League which was about to get started. The ad read “come watch the gripping English premier league with us, the new season has just began!”.

While many things about the rural may have changed in the past decade and a half some things seem to have remained the same. As in most parts of the country’s northern and central highlands, agriculture is not just what people do here, it also defines a way of life. Farmers may have started earning a lot more than they used to and that is evident in some ways. Stories of farmers who have bought trucks or mini buses crop up in the interviews every now and then. But that doesn’t seem to have affected how agriculture is perceived in significant ways. The farmer, older farmers as well as young people tell me, still lives a hard, demanding and ‘backward’ life. This was puzzling since everyone seemed to agree one can make a lot of money as a farmer if they had a reasonably good amount of land and knew what to grow on it and how. Informants often tell me such a farmer would easily make more money than a local government official, a civil servant or perhaps even more than a local merchant. But for all the money being made in farming, informants often say, the life of the farmer still remains more or less the same. *“There are farmers who have bought a truck or have thousands of Birr in a savings account”* the head of the wereda Agriculture office told me. *“But they live the same life as the poor farmer. If you go in to the house of a rich farmer and a poor one, you wouldn’t be able to tell which one of them is the rich one. Their houses are the same, their clothes are the same, their children eat and dress the same. It is the same life of meager belongings and a life that is just slightly above miserable. Somehow, the farmer is still caught up in the old way of living meagerly. I think it is a cultural thing and it will take a while before this changes”* the informant explained.

And agriculture is still seen as something that the uneducated and ignorant do. The successful farmer is not one who makes good money out of farming. It is the one who makes enough money and knows enough to quit farming all together and move on to town for a better occupation and a better life. The adoption of labour saving methods such as the use of selective herbicides that have made manual weeding a thing of the past may have made farming a little easier but it is still seen as a life of brute labour and little rest. Most farmers may have switched to wheat production but farming is still rain fed and seasonal. Although the wereda agriculture office as well as local kebele agricultural extension workers are keen to stress that the land can be cultivated at least twice a year if only farmers were ready to adopt irrigation and water harvesting techniques, farmers seem to be content with the age old oscillation between one season of plenty and another of scarcity. This lingering perception of agriculture as something that epitomizes an unfulfilling life of labour and backwardness, even when it can bring riches, is something I will return to in greater detail in later chapters. For now, I will focus on one more aspect of the rural agricultural life which merits a closer look, the gender order.

5.5. Women and farming – Agriculture and the gender order

Traditional small holder farming in much of Ethiopia has always been seen as a “man’s business” where women only take part as care takers and helpers to the men who do the farming. In every Amharic folklore I grew up listening to, whether he is portrayed as wise or foolish, hard working or lazy, poor or rich; “the farmer” is invariably a man. And this synonymity of “the farmer” to “man” is not just limited to folklore and oral traditions; it is also widely prevalent in the public as well as official discourse. Frank (1999) notes that “... in terms of semantics, throughout Ethiopia, both within government bureaus and communities, the term ‘farmer’ is used synonymously with the word for ‘man’. It is clear that whether rural women contribute to the process of agricultural production to a greater or lesser extent, they are generally perceived as marginal players” (p.3).

Despite this perception, however, women do take part in many farm activities. In the northern Ethiopian highlands where rain fed agriculture is the dominant feature of farming, women take part in almost all farming activities except a few which are seen as the field of men; ploughing, sowing, and trashing - all of which involve working with oxen. The ox is often portrayed as the (male) farmer’s best friend in almost all folklore and only men work with

oxen. Women take part in many activities including land preparation, weeding, harvesting, and transporting harvests. Women are also primarily responsible for tending to back yard gardens, cleaning animal barns, milking, milk processing, and looking after poultry. Although almost all agricultural activities performed in and around the house are seen as the domain of women, bee keeping is left for men. Despite this however, women’s involvement in agricultural activities is often overlooked or unrecognized. As Frank (1999, p.3) for example observes, “many agricultural extension agents refuse to acknowledge the importance of women’s role in agricultural production”. This very close association of men to farming is also clearly visible in the results of a recent Rural Socioeconomic Survey carried out in 2011 – 2012 as can be seen from the table below.

Table 2: Self reported involvement in agricultural activities (last 7 days, age >=7)

Region	Male				Female			
	All Ages	7-14	15-64	65+	All Ages	7-14	15-64	65+
Tigray	64.7	66.5	63.5	65.3	45.2	43.2	47.1	34.0
Amhara	74.0	68.2	77.7	66.6	48.7	50.7	49.7	22.8
Oromiya	67.0	66.9	68.3	53.7	51.5	48.1	54.2	37.2
SNNP	65.7	48.6	75.4	65.2	46.6	32.5	55.5	28.6
Other regions	56.1	36.7	65.0	53.2	37.8	33.8	39.8	29.9
All	67.7	61.0	72.1	60.8	48.4	43.3	52.1	30.2
Rural	68.1	61.3	72.6	61.0	48.8	43.6	52.5	30.3
Small towns	19.4	15.5	20.6	26.6	13.8	4.7	17.1	22.1

Source: CSA (2013, p. 51)

What is even more interesting about the data above is the fact that it was self reported and indicates that even women themselves may under report their involvement in agricultural activities. This is hardly surprising when placed in light of the highly unbalanced gender relations that are widely prevalent in most of the country. Evidences of gender imbalances are numerous and a feature of almost all arenas of social life. A 2005 demographic and health survey reports that Ethiopian women are less educated than men and have a lower level of literacy and exposure to mass media than their male counterparts. Data from the same survey show that women are predominantly engaged in agricultural occupations, have little manual or technical skills, and are less likely than men to be engaged in the professional, technical

and managerial fields (CSA, 2006a, p. 235). A sizeable majority of women (81 percent) believe that a husband is justified in beating his wife for at least one of five specified reasons; if she burns the food; if she argues with him; if she goes out without telling him; if she neglects the children; and if she refuses to have sexual relations with him (CSA, 2006a, p.244).

A lot has happened in the policy front in the last two decades in terms of bringing about gender equality in Ethiopia. The country's first ever women's policy was legislated in 1993 (Buchy & Basaznew, 2005). A new family law and penal code guarantying women's equality were introduced in 2001 and 2005 respectively. The equal land use rights of women were recognized with the start of the rural land certification program which began after the 1997 Federal Rural Land Administration Proclamation. Before that, women only owned land through their husbands and their rights ended in the event of a divorce. And the rural land certification program is perhaps the most important change that has occurred in the history of traditional small holder farming in Ethiopia when it comes to addressing gender equality. Although the specific details of the certification program differ from one region to the other, in the Amhara region (with in which the site of this research is located) spouses are given a joint certificate featuring their names and pictures side by side as a testament to their equal land use rights. In the event of a divorce or the death of her husband, a woman now has legal rights to claim an equal share of the land she jointly owned. Nevertheless, legal rights don't always translate to actions. For example, six percent of women age 15-49 interviewed in the Ethiopian DHS have been widowed at some time and of these; one in five has been dispossessed of property belonging to their late husband (CSA, 2006a: 251). Citing Fafchamps and Quisumbing (2005) Tewodaj et al (2009) note that women bring only a negligible amount of land into the household upon forming a new household through marriage and nearly all land is brought in by the male spouse (p.10). During interviews I held with women in Guai, women were keen to stress that while they themselves as well as their husbands were well aware of their rights in the event of a divorce, men were still unwilling to abide by the law; and it often takes years of litigation, which many divorced women may find costly, to actually secure their equal land use rights despite the joint certification . And even when women do finally secure their land use rights, they cannot work on them directly since a woman cannot plough nor sow the land. Divorced women have to find men who will work

on their land through share cropping agreements which, as some authors have noted, may not necessarily favour them (Kumar & Quisumbing, 2010, p.7).

As I have discussed in the previous sections, the development policies of Ethiopia emphasise the role of agriculture in the overall development process. While claims as to the need of ensuring that women (as “parts of society which constitutes half the population”) take part in and benefit from the overall development of the country on an equal basis are abundant in the policy discourse, government policies are often surprisingly shy on what role women are to play in this grand plan. Although the fact that gender is taken as one of three cross cutting issues to be mainstreamed across the recent Growth and Transformation Plan, policy discourse on women and gender issues often remains instrumental at best. The rural and agricultural development policy talks about women in its part dealing with public participation and mobilization and mainly deals with the need to ensure gender parity in primary school. Here it treats the issue of women’s education as an instrument to an end as well as an end by its own right. It argues that “the provision of primary education to women makes a greater contribution to development than a similar provision to men” since it can prevent or at least postpone early marriage, improve family planning, household hygiene, and much more (MOFED, 2003, p.67).

And the agricultural extension programme has thus far mainly focused on men. Two to four agricultural extension workers, referred to as Development Agents or DAs, with expertise in crop cultivation, livestock and dairy, and natural resources management are based in each kebele to provide guidance and training to local farmers. In the vast majority of cases, these DAs are men and provide their training and guidance to ‘model farmers’ who also happen to be men. Although the ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development has developed an alternative development package for women in recent years with emphasis on expanding support for women’s agricultural activities, it only deals with activities that traditionally fall under women’s domain such as poultry and back yard vegetable gardens (Expert interview, wereda women’s office; Tewedaj et al, 2009, p.25).

5.6. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have looked at the policy discourse surrounding rural youth and agriculture as well as the central role given to both in the overall development plan of Ethiopia. Although I have mainly limited myself to the analysis of the contents of the country’s rural and

agricultural development policy, I do not see this to be a shortcoming since this policy lies at the heart of the other sector specific plans of the country as well as all three of the governments five year development plans. The country's development program, one which has set the ambitious goal of placing it among the middle income nations of the world with in 20 years, rests on the ADLI philosophy and the central role of agriculture in driving the change it seeks. With in agriculture, the strategy rests upon the cultivation of a new generation of young, literate, and capable farmers who can embrace new technologies and methods in order to transform the sector from its current subsistence state to a more market oriented sector. It estimates that as much as 70% of the rural young should be prepared to pursue life as farmers and stresses that increasing agricultural productivity as well as its profitability is a key element in motivating the rural young to take up farming not out of desperation but out of choice. In light of the existing literature reviewed in chapter 3, this commitment on the side of the state to ensure rural youth become farmers appears to be counter to the aspirations of the majority of rural youth. This apparent contradiction between government policy and the aspirations of rural youth will be explored in greater detail in the next two chapters.

As a result of the ADLI strategy and the emphasis placed on transforming agriculture, and more than a decade and a half of agricultural extension services, farming as well as the rural way of life have undergone major changes. In places such as Guai, farming has become a potentially lucrative source of livelihood. But the social value attached to farming as well as the rigid gender order of rural life appear to have remained largely intact despite government intervention. Government policy also seems to have largely overlooked the fact that farming can be an entirely different affair for men and women as I have shown in this chapter. Whereas the state has taken changing the social value given to farming seriously, it seems to have failed to give the role of gender the attention it deserves. The implication of these; i.e, government policy, changes that have occurred in farming and rural life, and the gender relations embedded in the rural agrarian life, to the aspiration of rural youth will be explored further in the next two chapters in relation to the literature and the conceptual framework presented earlier.

RURAL YOUTH, EDUCATION AND ASPIRATIONS

Education is among the few routes of social mobility open to a wider proportion of young people in Ethiopia. Although unequal life chances can and do result in an unequal chance of success or failure in education, it is often portrayed as the only way out of poverty in public discourse. “ያለ ትምህርት ብልፅግና፤ ያለ ውሃ ንፅህና፤ ያለ ማተብ ክርስትና፤ ሁሉም መና!” reads a saying plastered on the wall of a local tea house in Guai. Loosely translated, this saying states “*one can’t be clean without water, one can’t be a Christian without a mateb¹⁹, and one can’t have prosperity without education*”.

As discussed in Chapter three, there seems to be a general consensus in the literature that education seems to lead to higher aspirations among rural youth in Ethiopia. This chapter takes a closer and critical look at this claim in light of the empirical evidence from the field work. It discusses the aspirations of rural youth, both in and out of school as well as their view of the rural life and farming to see if these occupy any place in their imagined futures.

6.1. Occupational Aspirations

6.1.1. Primary School Students

The first thing that comes out strongly from the interviews held with primary school students as well as the essays composed by them is that they have high occupational aspirations and consider their education to be the primary if not the only means of achieving their aspirations. When asked what they wanted to be in the future; becoming a medical doctor, an engineer, a scientist, or a pilot were the most frequently given responses by students in primary school aged 14 - 16. Becoming a medical doctor is by far the most widely shared aspiration. The fact that this particular occupational aspiration was so commonly shared makes one question whether the expressed aspiration of one participant was influencing that of the others, especially during the group interviews. But this aspiration was also widely shared in the individual essays written by primary school children indicating something more than the influence of the interview context.

¹⁹ The ‘mateb’ is a thin, often a cotton or silk, thread worn around the neck among Ethiopian orthodox Christians which has traditionally been used to distinguish them from non-Christians

Table 3: Summary of expressed occupational aspirations for students in primary school (aged 14 – 16)²⁰

Aspired Occupation	Male	Female
Medical Doctor	14	8
Engineer	7	-
Scientist	2	2
Pilot	2	-
Prime Minister	1	4
Teacher	1	4
Other♣	4	-
Total♠	30	18

Looking in to the reasons given for having this aspiration further reinforces the case. In most cases where wanting to become a medical doctor was expressed, it appeared to be tied to the desire to contribute to the betterment of other people’s lives. Although participants also mentioned becoming a medical doctor was good for one’s own life, more often than not it was the belief that being a medical doctor would enable one to add to the betterment of the lives of many others in additions to one’s own life which was given more emphasis. Participants stressed they wanted to help their communities and their country by treating sick people and in doing so live a good and rewarding life. One participant (male, 15) claimed "there are so many sick people who need treatment; I want to be able to help them"; another (female, 15) said she wanted to be a doctor to help pregnant women have safer deliveries, still another participant (male, 14) said “the profession [being a doctor] requires one to have a very sharp and capable mind and constantly ask what can be done to help a variety of sick people. If I become a doctor, I want to be able to find a cure for HIV so that many people can be cured from this disease”.

In most cases, the desire to be a doctor seems to be unrelated to the participants’ knowledge of other people’s story who have been able to become doctors. Only two participants (one from the group interviews and another from the essays) were aware of individuals who had

²⁰ Explanatory notes: ♣These include becoming an investor, an electronic technician, a police officer, a government employee, and a modern farmer ♠The table represents the expressed aspirations of 27 boys and 15 girls. The sum total of the aspirations is slightly higher than the number of participants since some participants expressed two aspirations (for example, becoming a prime minister or a medical doctor, becoming an engineer or a medical doctor).

been able to become doctors. One of them (14, male) stated in his essay *“I want to be a medical doctor and work at the Black Lion Hospital in Addis Ababa like Dr Binyam [name changed]. Dr Binyam is a famous doctor and well known throughout Addis Abebea for his skills and abilities. I know that becoming a medical doctor is not such an easy task, and I may not be able to become as famous as Dr Binyam but I can nevertheless be a doctor like him. But to be that I have to study hard from now to the time I become what I want to be. I have to study day and night. If I study hard, there is no reason that I won’t be able to become a medical doctor and invent many new drugs and medicines and help many sick people and be famous”*. But cases like this where the aspiration is based on inspirations gleaned from the story of someone from the community who has become what the aspirer wants to be are an exception. In the majority of the cases, the participants were not aware of anyone in their community who had been able to achieve what they sought for their future. Only seven out of the forty two participants had occupational aspirations which can reasonably said to be visible with in their communities such as becoming a teacher, a government employee and a police officer.

There were, as can be seen from table 3 on page 54, some clear differences across gendered. For example, none of the girls expressed the aspiration of becoming an engineer or a pilot either in the interviews or essays and more girls were inclined to becoming teachers than boys. This is not surprising considering the fact that the two professions (engineering and aviation) are almost exclusively male in Ethiopia. Despite the remarkable fact that Ethiopia had Africa’s first ever woman pilot in training as far back as 1936²¹, whose career was unfortunately cut short by the five year long Italian occupation of the country, there were only five women pilots in the country out of a total of more than 390²² in 2010. The field of engineering, while relatively better, is another male dominated occupation. For example only 17% of the 3,944 students who graduated with undergraduate degrees in fields related to

²¹ Capital Newspaper – “Remembering Muluemebet Emiru: Africa’s First Woman Pilot”. Retrieved from http://www.capitalethiopia.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=981%3Aremembering-muluemebet-emiru-africas-first-woman-pilot&catid=49%3Afeature&Itemid=48 (4/26/2013 5:52 PM)

²² Figure is based on a cross reference of a news item broadcast on Ethiopian Television which mentioned the airline had 4 female first officers and 1 female captain (broadcast on or around 14 October 2010) with a 2012 corporate profile of the national air line which mentions 6% of its total 6557 employees were “cockpit crew” (ie, either captain, first officer or flight engineer). This figure is very crude and, quite possibly, not at all accurate but still indicative of how male dominated the field is.

Engineering and Technology in the 2011/12 academic year were female (MOE, 2012, p.250). This figure jumps to 30% in the health and medical sciences, rising even above the 23% share of women in the total number of undergraduates. It is therefore interesting to note that the most widely shared aspiration, becoming a medical doctor, was equally shared among both male and female students and also happens to be, in relation to other professions, the most gender balanced one in the country.

Table 4: Number of students who graduated from public universities in the last academic year (2011/12) by gender and field of study

Field of study	Male	Female	Total	% Female
Engineering & Technology	3,271	673	3,944	17.06
Natural & Computational Sciences	10,588	2,576	13,164	19.57
Medicine & Health Sciences	2,256	961	3,217	29.87
Agriculture & Life Sciences	7,107	1,329	8,436	15.75
Business & Economics	11,112	4,830	15,942	30.30
Social Sciences & Humanities	15,568	4,968	20,536	24.19
Total	49,902	15,337	65,239	23.51

Source: MoE, Annual Educational Statistical Abstract 2012, p. 250

But coming back to the expressed occupational aspirations of primary school students, it is clearly evident that both male and female students held very high occupational aspirations although there were some differences across gender. Students also felt their education was the only way of achieving their aspirations but this is not surprising considering the highly professional nature of the occupations they aspired to. As such most of the students perceived their aspirations as achievable; all it takes is “studying very hard” and excelling in their education. The certainty is surprising given their high aspirations but can partly be attributed to their young ages and their not being aware of the tremendous structural hurdles that stand in their way. However, a few of the participants did in fact seem to be aware of this and expressed their aspiration in very uncertain terms. One participant (16, male) who wants to become a pilot states;

“What I really want to be is a pilot. It really fascinates me. I sometimes wonder, how do they fly an airplane from one place to another without losing their way. I mean if it was on land you have a road in front of you, all you have to do is follow the road. There is no road to follow in the sky. I just don’t know how they do it. It is a mystery to me. So I want to become a

pilot, learn how it is done and tell people who wonder about it like me how it is done. But if that doesn't happen and I am unable to become a pilot, I think will make a good living by becoming a modern farmer. I want to be a very modern farmer who uses modern methods and technologies. I will raise cattle and sheep and keep lots of modern bee hives. I will cultivate crops using modern techniques and technologies such as planting wheat and maize in rows rather than scattering them all over the farm. That way I will be able to produce a lot and be rich. And the land here is very blessed, it already gives a lot and I will get a lot more out of it by using modern methods. I can be very rich and live a good life by becoming a modern farmer if I can't become a pilot".

But this sense of uncertainty and having a lesser secondary aspiration as a result was more an exception than the general trend. Most were certain. All it takes is being a good student and studying very hard and they will get where they want to. But as certain as these young boys and girls might be, getting where they want to will be a very challenging task for most of them given that the Gross Entry Ratio²³ for secondary school and higher education stand at only 36.9 and 9.4 percent respectively (MOE, 2012).

It should be noted here that perhaps the highest occupational aspiration mentioned by the primary school children appear to be highly influenced by current affairs at the time of the field work. Following the death of the country's long time leader and Prime Minister, the state owned media was broadcasting nothing but a continuous eulogy of the late prime minister's life and contribution to the country for more than three weeks. This relentless propaganda appears to have caught on to some of the school children who said they wanted to be a prime minister. I believe this particular aspiration was more of an attempt by the young students to play along with the propaganda campaign which repeatedly asserted everyone should dedicate their lives to the fruition of the late prime ministers plans for the country rather than a genuine aspiration and can therefore be safely disregarded. But even ruling this particular aspiration out, it is important to note that most of the other occupational aspirations expressed by primary school students were still very high and not readily visible in the rural agrarian context they lived in.

²³ The Gross Entry Ratio is the ratio of the total number of new entrants regardless of age to population of theoretical entrance age.

Apart from occupational aspirations, primary school children who composed essays were asked to describe someone they considered to be their role model and their responses also shed more light on their occupational aspirations. Once again, the late prime minister was prominently given as a role model by many of those who participated in the essays. This is mainly because most of the essays were written in the weeks following the death of the prime minister during which the event had captivated the nation as a whole. Of the 15 essays written after the event, 10 featured the late prime minister as a role model while none of the nine essays written before the event featured the late prime minister as a role model. The rest of the responses were however diverse. Three students aged 14 and 15 (all male) wrote about individuals whom they said had become doctors after completing their education.

“I admire Dr Alemayehu [name changed]. He has opened a [private] clinic in Debre Eliyas and he is now treating many patients. Since he is very good at what he does, many patients go to his clinic to get treatment. He charges a lot of money but people still go to his clinic because he is very good. So he has become very rich and is helping his family a lot. That is why I admire him and want to be like him. He has become very rich but he is also helping a lot of people; his family, his patients and even his country” (Essay # 03, Male, 15, grade 8)

The other two accounts were of two other individual who have also become doctors but in many ways similar to the above. One of the 8th grade students (male, aged 14) wrote about Sheik Sheikh Mohammed Al Amoudi, a Saudi – Ethiopian business man and billionaire who is among the most widely known personalities in Ethiopia.

“I admire Sheik Alamoudi because he has been able to amass a great wealth from modern agriculture very easily by using tractors and other machines. He has become the richest person in the country as a result [Essay #05]”.

The sheik was not, however, the only famous individual mentioned as an inspiration figure in the Essays. One 16 year old male student wrote about the late patriarch of the Ethiopian Orthodox church who had also died a few weeks earlier and was continually in the news for his legacy; a 15 year old female student wrote about Tirunesh Dibaba, one of the most successful Ethiopian athletes who made history by winning an Olympic double in the Beijing Olympics in 2008. These famous personalities, as well as the late prime minister, were all mentioned for excelling in what they did and the good they have done to their country. Other role models included an uncle who had become a pilot (mentioned by a 15 year old male),

and fellow students who were seen as talented and clever (mentioned by three students). Some of the participants wrote in more general terms without identifying any particular individuals. Two wrote about government employees, one about pilots in general, and two wrote about students who are able to go to university.

“I admire Tadele Qume [a local student]. He is very clever and talented. He is a very good student. He helps his parents, studies hard in his spare time and is known for helping other students when they have difficulties understanding a particular subject or when they face difficulties in doing their home work. He is well known and admired by people both for his talent and good manners. I consider him a role model and want to be like him.” (Essay #07)

All in all, of the 24 responses, only five consisted of a description of someone the participant was related to on a personal or social level; i.e., at the level of the local community.

6.1.2. High school students and Out of school youth

The data from rural youth who are either attending or completed high school is limited to one group interview held with each group of students involving a total of nine (3 female) high school students and 14 (7 male, 7 female) who have either completed or dropped out of high school. This was a practical limit imposed by the context of the study rather than a choice made on my part. Since the elementary school in Guai only teaches grades 1 – 8, those who do make it past grade 8 are left with the difficult and often costly choice of continuing to high school in the nearby town of Debre Elias which has the only high school in the wereda. The town of Debre Elias is about 20 kms away and is linked to Guai with a dry season only dirt road. Although a couple of old buses service the two towns at least twice a day during the dry season throughout which schools are in session, a daily commute to and from Debre Elias is out of the question for anyone who wants to continue their education in to high school. At 12 Birr per trip, this would amount to more than 480 Birr per month for transportation costs alone; an amount well above what most if not all families in the area would afford. Instead students rent small rooms, called dorms, for anywhere between 40 – 100 Birr per month and live in the town returning to their families every two or three weeks or so to stock up their food supplies. Even this rent is too much for many students and is split among two or more students who share a single room. Although schools were closed for the annual rainy season at the time of the field work and therefore even those who were attending high school in Debre Elias were back with their families in Guai, I was only able to get only a few enough to organize one group interview session. Similarly, I was unable to get hold of enough young

people who have completed high school to do more than one group session. The fact that the rainy season was the busiest period in farming didn't make matters any easier since most young people were busy in the farms of their families.



Picture 2: Views of the dirt road linking Guai with the wereda town of Debre Elias and some of the old buses which serve the route.

But limited as it may be, the data from high school students and those who have completed high school does provide an interesting contrast to that of the primary school students discussed so far. For a start, occupational aspirations were less flamboyant among high school students who were slightly older and getting close to completing their high school education. Although becoming a doctor appeared once again as the most widely shared aspiration, most of the high school students were not at ease pin pointing a particular occupation. Their occupational aspirations were phrased in far more uncertain terms and took in to account the possibility that their aspirations may not be realized. Although all of them invariably saw their best future to be the one where they succeed to go to college and get professional carriers, they also seemed to recognize that this may not come true. Options such as going in to small scale and petty trading, or attending a technical school, and in the case of one young man, becoming a farmer were all given as possibilities in case one failed to proceed to college.

“Hopefully I will be able to pass the entry exams and go on to university. If that comes to be, I will become a teacher or a government employee or perhaps something else. But I will be able to have a job and make a living. If I can’t pass the exams, I think I will go in to farming and start my life over.” (Melese, 20 grade 10).

Nevertheless, all three of the young women and two of the young men saw succeeding in their education as the only option. Adane (M,20 and a grade 11 student) expressed his view of the future as follows:

“God willing, I will be able to succeed in my education and go off to university. After that, I will have acquired some form of professional skill I would make a living out of. I know it doesn’t sound much of a plan but that is the only one I have. If I fail in my education, there is nothing else I can possibly do. My parents are not rich, nor do I know anyone who is. So it is not like I will be able to open a shop or be a grain trader, where would I get the money to start it with? And I really don’t want to end up a farmer. So I have no other way but my education to get where I want to”.

Unlike the younger students who were still in primary school, the occupational aspirations of high school students were not focused on achieving a particular occupation or profession. Rather, they focused on the importance of living an independent, if possible, professional career life which takes them away from a potential life as a farmer, the possibility of which

was much more real in their case. Of the 10 high school students I interviewed, three were in their last two years of high school; five had three more years of schooling remaining while the remaining two had only started high school. The future for them is not a far away dream land filled with possibilities and options. They perceived the future in more immediate terms and with some dread regarding what it may present. To be independent and to earn a living; no matter what the occupation was repeatedly stressed in the responses although the ideal occupation was still one in which the student was admitted to college and graduated with a professional degree.

Female high school students appeared even more uncertain about whether or not they would achieve their aspirations of their future. Of the three female high school students I was able to interview; two were afraid they wouldn't make it past the national examinations at the end of grade 10 which determine entry to preparatory school. One of the girls put it as follows;

“I want to go to university, get a job have a professional career, and help my family like everyone else. I can't say I will become this or that in five or ten years. I don't have plans like that. But I hope I will be able to go to college and at least become a government employee once I graduate. Then again, I have to pass the grade 10 exam before all that and I fear I may not. I don't know why but many girls don't make it past the grade 10 exam and I am not sure if I would be” (Ejigayehu, 18, grade 10).

Ejigayehu was unable to elaborate why she thought many girls failed to go beyond grade 10 during the group interview session and I followed this up in an informal discussion with the three girls later after the session was over. During the informal discussion she told me that it was difficult for her to say why many girls failed the exams at grade 10 but it was perhaps, she contemplated, because the boys were more intelligent; “what else can it be?” she asked. This was not an answer I expected and I was genuinely taken aback for some time. I asked if the other two girls shared her view and they both said it was true that although girls outnumbered boys in grades 9 and 10, this is reversed for grades 11 and 12²⁴. But they

²⁴ High school in the Ethiopian school system consists of two cycles; grades 9 and 10 make the first cycle of high school. A national level examination is administered at the end of grade 10 to determine those who pass on to the second cycle of high school consisting of grades 11 and 12. The second cycle consists of a preparatory curriculum for higher education and is often referred to as preparatory school instead of high school. At the end of grade 12, students sit for entry exams to university in their preferred choice of higher education.

neither supported nor refuted Ejigayehu’s possible explanation choosing instead to say they really didn’t know why this was so. Ejigayehu’s suggested explanation may perhaps be a result of my persistent questioning for an explanation but it still tells a lot about the challenges girls face in education after nearly two decades of work on gender equality in education. The government’s repeatedly stated commitment to achieving gender equality in education may have had very encouraging results at lower levels of education at least in terms of increasing the number of girls who enter primary as well as secondary education. But at higher levels, the education system still remains disproportionately male dominated. Looking at the Amhara region as a whole, the total number of girls in the first cycle of secondary education was greater than that of boys at 172,269 and 167,422 respectively for the 2011/2012 Academic year while, in the second cycle, this is reversed significantly; there are 47,563 boys in grades 11 and 12 while the figure for girls is 36,106 (MoE, p.42).

Table 5: Country Level Summary Results for the Grade 10 Examination of 2004 EC (2011/12)²⁵

Score	Male	Female	Total	% Female	% Male
<2.00					
>= 2.00	212,521	137,093	349,614	39.21	60.79
>=2.14	180117	105298	285,415	36.89	63.11
>=2.29	149,648	79,087	228,735	34.58	65.42
>=2.43	123,378	59,223	182,601	32.43	67.57
>=2.57	101,031	44,712	145,743	30.68	69.32
>=2.71	82,251	33,982	116,233	29.24	70.76
>=2.86	66,431	26,043	92,474	28.16	71.84
>=3.00	52,706	19,853	72,559	27.36	72.64
>=3.14	41,090	15,239	56,329	27.05	72.95
>=3.29	31,929	11,625	43,554	26.69	73.31
>=3.43	24,905	8,951	33,856	26.44	73.56
>=3.57	19,262	6,856	26,118	26.25	73.75
>=3.71	14,646	5,195	19,841	26.18	73.82

25 The table only includes those who have scored a passing CGPA of 2.00 or above. But the limited availability of higher education means that the entry point for preparatory school is fixed well above the passing score; for example in this case although 363046 pupils who had scored 2.00 or above, the intake capacity for government higher education institutions for the same year was only 10,4259

>=3.86	10,565	3,857	14,422	26.74	73.26
>=4.00	6,442	2,409	8,851	27.22	72.78

Source: MOE; Annual Educational Statistical Abstract for 2011/12 (p.50)

Table 5 above shows a summary of the number of students who scored the minimum passing point of 2.00 or above in the 2011/12 grade 10 national examination. Although 2.00 is considered the minimum passing mark; the limited intake capacity of higher education institutions means that the base score for entry in to preparatory school is often well above the passing mark. What is worthy of note here is how the relative proportion of female students drops from 39% to around 26% percent as we go from the lowest to highest score. It is in this context that the experiences of young girls in high school have to be understood. And it is this context that makes understanding and even sympathising with the views of Ejigayehu and others like her, who may believe that they stand a lesser chance of achieving their aspirations through education for no other reason than being born a girl, easier.

Once gain there is an interesting contrast between primary school students, high school students and those who have completed high school. Primary school students were keen to portray a bright future for themselves; they aspired for very high status occupations and believed that their aspirations were achievable; high school students were less keen to pin point a particular occupation as an aspiration and even far more uncertain in terms of whether they would be able to achieve their aspiration. Those who have completed high school and have failed to go to higher education, on the other hand, often spoke of their aspirations in the past tense.

“I would have liked to become an artist²⁶; that has always been my dream. I have a bit of a talent [ተሰጥኝ] when it comes to writing short stories and poems and so on and I am good at acting. I used to read poetry and participate in plays while I was in school. I still would like to believe that I can become an artist some day but I don’t know if it would ever become true. When I didn’t pass to the preparatory school after grade 10, I came back here and I thought

²⁶ The English term artist is used in Ethiopia as is to describe a very broad spectrum of people involved in music, entertainment, literature and art. Unlike its use in the English language where the term often is limited to the visual arts; it is used to refer to anyone from a musician, a singer, an actor, a novelist, a playwright, a poet, to a painter or even a sculpture in Ethiopia.

maybe I will go in to farming but even that is proving more difficult than I had thought”
Belayneh (M, 20)

Like Belayneh, others also spoke of the dreams they had once as if these dreams didn't matter anymore. Of the two group interviews I held with youth who have completed high school; one was held at the premises of the primary school in Guai. Many reminisced about the times they have spent in the school as children and spoke of the dreams they once had. For some, even coming back to the school was an emotional experience. My questions regarding their aspirations were answered with emphasis on their present situation, and above all, the need to make an independent living.

“I think none of us here can tell you we will be this or that in 5 or 10 years. Once I finished school, I came back here since I had nowhere else to go. I now live with my parents and try to earn my meal by working in the town. I load quintals of grain on to lorries whenever they come here. Is that something I want to do always? No! I would like to get some kind of job and have an independent life. But I don't think I can do that yet. We need some kind of help from the government. The government is giving young people in towns and cities all kinds of help; they give them training, they give them loans, they give them something to start a business. But no one thinks of us. A while back, people from the wereda came here and they took a few of us to Debre Markos where we were trained as electric technicians for two months. Once we finished the training, they said they will come and help us create jobs for ourselves. But more than a year has gone since then and no one came back and tried to help us” (Derib, 21 M).

Like derib, many of the participants were unable to see beyond their presently uncertain future and articulate an aspiration. This doesn't however mean that they didn't have any aspirations at all. Some, such as Teshome (19 M) who had just finished high school the year before, wanted to continue their education by enrolling in private higher education institutions. “If I can, I want to continue my education. I can still attend a private college if I can find someone who will help me pay the fee. And I am hoping some of my relatives would help me do that”. Some, such as Belayneh who I quoted earlier and another male participant, had hopes that they would ideally prefer to pursue their earlier aspirations of becoming an artist. Others hoped they would like to get jobs in the government civil service. But the discussion over these aspirations was often short lived and invariably ended with the remark

that this was unlikely to happen given their present situation. Many felt that, realistically, their best options were either to start a small business or go in to farming. But at the time of the field work none of them had started these since, according to them, they did not have the financial and other resources to get started. The issue of farming is something I will return to in greater detail in the next chapter but the issues complicating the other option, that of starting a small business, need further elaboration here. Many of the participants felt that they could not start a business without financial assistance. And some said they had gone to the wereda micro and small enterprises office to seek for such assistance. Basse (M, 20) recounts their experience as follows:

“ we know that the government is doing a lot to help young people with out jobs in towns and cities. They give them trainings, they organize them in to groups and cooperatives, help them identify business opportunities and even give them loans through micro finances. So the youth there form cooperatives and do things like wood work and metal work and so on. We would also like to be given the same opportunity but it looks like the government has forgotten about us. We need some kind of help but no one has come to us and asked us what do you need to get started and what can you do? It is just the same old rhetoric about how we must create jobs ourselves. We went to the wereda micro and small enterprises development office, we were four. We asked them about what opportunities there are and what they can do to help us. But we came out even more discouraged than when we went in to their office. They told us we can either form a cooperative or “an association [“yeshirkina mahber”] depending on how many we were. But in either case, they said, we would have to go all the way to the federal government to get the registration and licensing approved and asked if we had enough money to follow through the registration process. We wouldn’t have gone asking for their help if we had money, we would have set up a business by ourselves. But they said we had to have a saving first so we gave it up”

The group interview with young women who have finished high school brought to light similar views concerning their aspirations. The young women, three from farming families and four from families who had tea-houses or *shai-bets* in the town, did not feel at ease talking about their aspirations or plans. As one of them put it

“What good will it do me if I say I want to be this or that? I think of ways to get by, I think of small things I can do to earn some money. My education has not taken me anywhere so now

all I can hope for is to do whatever I can and may be save a little to start up a small shop. But all that is wishful thinking right now, it won't do me any good if I plan without regard to what I can and cannot do. For now my choice is to look for any job, maybe become a daily labourer or start a small tea house of my own and take it from there."(Simegn, 20 F).

6.2. Beyond the occupational –the place of the rural in imagined futures

As I have discussed in chapter two, aspirations are often far more than occupational and involve broader ideas about the good life. In this study, I asked participants to describe where and how they would live out their lives if the choice was up to them. When asked where they would live if given the choice, almost all of the students, from both primary and high school levels, said they would live in “a well developed city” such as Addis Abeba, the country’s capital. This desire to live in ‘a well developed city’ was in sharp contrast to the views of many primary school children regarding rural life which most considered to be better than an urban one. This was despite both boys and girls saying they spend more of their time working than either studying or playing. Even though most of the primary school children were below the age of 16 they participated in agricultural activities actively. The boys looked after cattle in the grazing fields, took part in weeding, harvesting and even ploughing²⁷. Girls also participated in weeding and harvesting but are not allowed to plough land nor look after cattle due to cultural norms. Instead, they helped their mothers and older sisters in cooking food, looking after backyard gardens, feeding and maintaining poultry, milking and milk processing, washing clothes, and cleaning the house as well as animal barns. The boys especially seemed to consider rural life to be better than an urban one due to their closer association with farming. “[As farmers] *we get to grow all kinds of things and live of the land. We look after the cattle and help our parents while at the same time attending school. And we can either read our books or play with our friends in the fields while we look after the cattle*” said one of the primary school students (Meseret, 14 Male) while explaining why he considered rural life to be better than that of an urban one. The availability of wide open spaces (fields) for both play and work (farming) as well as the belief that as farmers (or more specifically, as sons of farmers who took part in farming) they lived of their labour and the

²⁷ The fact that boys as young as 14 did in fact plough is very interesting since it was somewhat at odds with the popularly held belief that women can’t plough because ploughing was a very hard and demanding task which only men can do.

land without any dependence on anyone else was emphasized as constituting the better side of living in a rural area by most of the participants, especially the boys.

Although the girls in primary school also said they thought rural life was better than an urban one, they were less forthcoming in terms of reasons as to why they thought so. Girls appeared to have less time for play and entertainment as opposed to boys since they said their play times were often limited to weekends (mainly Sunday) and religious holidays. Even then, the girls said that they have to do a variety of chores such as washing their clothes and that of their families and other household chores even during days they considered to be relatively free of work. While boys mentioned playing football and other field games as their favourite and frequent form of play, girls said they often play in or around the home with other girls of a similar age during their free time. Such differences in time use and the relative distance girls had to farming in comparison with boys may explain why girls were less forthcoming than the boys when it comes to identifying what was good about rural life. It can in fact be the case that the girls didn't think rural life was good, and were only expressing what they felt was the right answer in saying that it was good.

There were, however, responses that deviated from this view of rural life as being better than an urban one. Children who lived in the small town of Guai which served as the market for the surrounding villages felt their lives were by too rural for their liking. This group of children (2 girls and 3 boys) lived with their single mothers who operated tea-houses in the small town. Although they lived in the small town and did not take part in farming directly, they did not consider themselves to be living in an urban life. In their eyes, the small town of Guai was too small to be called a town and still rural. Asked what it lacked to be called a town Atalalay (16, Female) said "*there are no [big] buildings, no cars, no roads, no water [pipeline], even the electricity comes on once or twice a week. There is no [mobile phone] network. If it had some of these it would have been a town*". As such, they considered themselves to be rural boys and girls. But as opposed to others who lived in rural villages and came from farming families, none of the participants in this group considered rural life to be good. Focusing on what they felt were missing in their rural life such as electricity, roads, good houses and cars, they felt that urban life was much better than rural life. As discussed earlier, most of the high school students also felt that an urban life was better than a rural one.

What is common to all, however, is the fact that none of the school students, whether they be in primary or high school, wanted to live a rural life in the future. As I mentioned earlier, when asked where they would prefer to live in the future if the choice was theirs to make, all of the participants said they would live in a “developed city” such as Addis Abeba, the country’s capital. Moving out of the village to live in a well developed city was considered to be part of the professional carriers they all envisaged for their future. Living in a city was also seen as offering more options for livelihood and personal betterment. Living in Addis Abeba was desired the most since the city was considered to be “*yebeletsegech ketema*” by the participants. When asked what they thought they would get by living in Addis Abeba that they wouldn’t get living elsewhere, responses were a little vague with most participants simply saying that they think living in Addis Abeba would be nice and present one with a lot more opportunities for personal betterment as well as a comfortable and enjoyable life. “*It is a developed city, and the people are educated. I think living in such a place would be nice*” Meseret reasoned. The term “*yebeletsegech ketema*” which loosely translates to “a developed city” or “a prosperous city” repeatedly arose in all of the interviews. When asked to explain what they meant by the term, participants equated “*mebeltseg*” (development or prosperity) with personal growth, opportunity, and living a relatively comfortable life. Addis Ababa, for them, was a place where there were many riches to be found, many opportunities to gather wealth and live a comfortable and enjoyable life.

This desire to live in a well developed city was, at first, puzzling since it was often expressed by the same participants who held the view that rural life was better than an urban one. In one interview, I recalled that participants seemed to suggest rural life was better than urban life earlier in the interview and now seemed to contradict that by saying they all wanted to live in “*yebeletsege ketema*”. Bekele (M,) tried to rationalize this apparent contradiction as follows.

“I like living here now and I think it is better than living in a town. But that is only for now while I am just a boy and a student. Once I finish school and get a job, I would rather live in Addis Abeba. If you just pack and go to Addis Abeba without anything, it won’t do you any good. You need to have the knowledge to do something that will bring you wealth. Or you will at least need some money to start a business or something. That way you can live a good life.”

What at first seemed to be a contradiction was only a statement of two desires that were set apart temporally. Rural life, even when considered to be better than an urban one, was only better for now, not in the long run.

Their desire to live in a well developed city such as Addis Abeba was also not based on anything participants had heard firsthand about life there. Rather it was based on a notion of the city as a place of opportunity and riches where one could make money and live a good life. What lead them to this notion does not seem to be very clear from the interviews but does seem to be related to the image they have developed of the city from what they have heard from people who have been there and the occasional picture of the city on a tv screen. When asked what they have heard about life in Addis Abeba participants mentioned several claims they have heard about it. Bayable (M, 15) said he has heard that “*there is no need to walk on foot in the city, everyone goes about their business in cars*”; Eniyew (M, 14) mentioned he has heard people say everyone there was educated and never worked with their hands since there were machines to do everything. This extremely rosy view of the city was not peculiar to the primary school children.

High school students equally partook in this view that the rural way of life was not something to be aspired for. “*Rural people are uneducated, they don’t look after themselves, they are not hygienic, there is a lot of disease. Even when you see the simple things like how they prepare and handle food, there are a lot of problems. Even the life itself is very hard and demanding*” one of the high school students, Mesele (M), 19, asserted. Another (Alebel, 19 M) mentioned he has come to learn of the modern way of life from the television series “Gemena”. “*There was this episode where lemelem (a character in the series) went to a rural village where she fell down a well and broke her leg. She was stranded there for a long time and was living with a local family who took her in. We had seen how she used to live in Addis Abeba, and now she was living in this poor village. I saw how the two lives differed. She couldn’t even drink the water in that village, it made her sick. They had to give her milk all the time*” Alebel asserts that he has learned about the difference between urban and rural life from those few episodes narrating the story of lemelem than from anywhere else. Only three of the participants had relatives who lived in Addis Abeba and therefore could have any potentially reliable source of information regarding what life was like there. Even then, their views regarding life in the city were equally rosy. Where the high school students differed with the primary school students was in their view of their current rural lives. Unlike primary school

students, they were very hesitant to see anything good in a rural agrarian way of life often choosing to describe it as demanding, unclean, and unhealthy.

Exceptions to the desire to live in Addis Abeba were very few but nevertheless present. Three of the participants (all male) said they would have preferred to live their lives in a ‘developed’ country abroad, outside of Ethiopia if it were up to them. Reasons for this included the belief that one would get better opportunities to better oneself in a developed country and assists one’s family better than if they lived in Ethiopia.

“If it was up to me, I would have lived in a well developed country like America. Ethiopia is a poor country and there isn’t much you could achieve here. Don’t get me wrong, I love my country and all and I would do anything to contribute to its development. It is only that I think I would be able to do that more if I lived and worked some place where I would be able to better myself first”

But the desire to live abroad does not seem to feature strongly. Even where it was expressed, it was expressed in very vague and general terms and seemed more of a whim than a desire. For example only one of the three participants who said that they would have liked to live abroad has ever thought about it seriously enough to have done something about it by applying for the annual Diversity Visa lottery offered by the United States.

The fact that the rural did not occupy any place in the futures young rural people imagined for themselves can partly be explained by the association of the rural with the agricultural way of life. To be rural was to be or, at the very least, to live with the farmer who was portrayed in very unflattering terms by many of the participants of this research both young and old. Almost all of the young people who participated in this study were from farming families and took part in agricultural activities themselves. Although a majority of them were from relatively young families with siblings who were still in school, a few had brothers or sisters who have already started an independent life as farmers or worked on farms full time while living with their parents. But all of the participants, including those who saw rural life to be better than an urban one in some ways, preferred to live in a “developed city” in the future. This preference for life in the city was strongly present in all of the interviews and appears to be based on a stereotypical understanding of the modern way of life which the participants contrasted with and preferred to a demanding, hard, and unrewarding life of farming in rural areas. Living in a rural area meant living as a farmer, there were no other

options. One of the main reasons rural life was considered unappealing in the future was because of this perception that life in a village could only mean living as a farmer.

Despite their close connection and involvement in agriculture, the participating students, both young and older, male and female had no desire of ever becoming a farmer themselves. For them, they were attending school precisely because they wanted to be ‘more than a farmer’. This desire was stronger among the younger students who were still in primary school. In one group interview session with elementary school children where all participants expressed occupational aspirations that ruled out farming, I posed the question “You all want to be doctors, engineers and pilots. Who do you think will be a farmer in the future?”. The answer (spoken with a tone of questioning that seemed to suggest I was foolish for not knowing the answer) was very quickly given. Only the uneducated become farmers since they can’t be anything else.

Although the farmer was at times described as “the source of all life”, “feeder of all”, “moral” and “God fearing”; these descriptions were usually given after prolonged silences during which participants seemed to think hard in order to dig out positive things they could say about the farmer and farming. The negative sides to being a farmer were not so hardly thought over. Participants had no trouble coming up with phrases that described the farmer as uneducated, simple minded, backward, and even filthy and ridden with disease living a hard and tiring life of labour. Furthermore, such views were not unique to young people who were in school so that they can be, in their eyes, more than just a farmer. Young and older farmers themselves shared this stereotypical description of the farmer as uneducated and backward. When farmers were asked if they wanted any of their children to be farmers themselves, the most frequently given answer was “*ignam eko mehayimna denqoro banhon noro mech gebere inhon neber*”. The phrase translates to “we are illiterate, and uneducated and hence have ended up being farmers. We are farmers simply because we can’t be anything better” suggesting farming was only for the uneducated and not something to be wished upon their children.

These views are hardly surprising in the sense that previous research has had similar findings. One such study I was previously involved in has found that young boys and girls currently attending school were more inclined to view agriculture as a dead end: an option they were either unwilling to consider at all or only as a last resort if their education failed to take them

where they want (Tadele & Gella, 2012, p.36). It found similar views among farming parents who felt their children would do better if they were able to avoid the possibility of becoming a farmer all together. What is somewhat surprising is, however, the fact that such similar views were present in Guai which was very different from the two *kebeles* that were studied by Tadele & Gella (2012). Guai was relatively fertile, land holdings were relatively less fragmented and by the accounts of local farmers, possessed by far the most productive land they have seen anywhere in the region. Expert interviews with local agricultural office workers paint a similar picture of the area. In one informal discussion, a local farmer did say he had 16 and a half *gemeds* of land which would convert to more than 4 hectares²⁸. Such land holdings do appear relatively rare but even at an average of one and a half hectares, Guai definitely stands out in the whole of the Amhara region as one of the *kebeles* where land holdings are substantial. And with the recent trend towards specialization in wheat which have enabled harvests of 40 - 50 quintals per hectare, farming here is hardly the hand to mouth subsistence affair it is in other places. It is a potentially lucrative business through which many local farmers have been able to acquire significant wealth. And it is this fact which makes the views expressed by school students as well as farmers somewhat interesting. And it is this which seems to indicate there is more to the desire of becoming something other than a farmer than simply seeking wealth and riches.

6.3. Aspirations Revisited – Influences and Implications

Returning to the literature in light of the empirical findings I have presented thus far, a few observations are due. The first, and perhaps most straight forward of these, is on the role of education in shaping the aspirations of rural youth. On the surface, the data presented in this chapter seems to further support claims that have already been made by previous research regarding the effect of education in raising the aspirations of school children. Primary school

²⁸ This conversation occurred during a bus trip to the nearest town of Debre Elias during which I had conversation with local farmers on a variety of topics. The farmer carried an AK 47 rifle which is often a sign that someone is associated with the local *kebele* administration since only the government can give out arms to people, usually to *kebele* chair men and the local militia. And his claim that he owned 16.5 *gemeds* of land did surprise many others who were taking part in the conversation some of whom questioned if he was involved in the last land redistribution which occurred in 1997/98 as “a distributor”. After the gentleman disembarked the bus, many questioned the equity of the current land administration system which they saw as unjust. One farmer remarked that allowing so much land to be in the hands of one farmer while many young farmers had no land of their own was the government’s main failure when it comes to encouraging young people to get in to farming.

children have much higher aspiration and expectations about their future when compared with those who have in or completed high school. Those in high school do in turn have slightly higher aspirations than those who have completed high school but failed to enter higher education. This by itself is not surprising since aspirations are, as discussed in Chapter two, dynamic and significantly likely to be affected by one's projected future which in turn depends on one's current circumstances. As such actual failure to enter higher education or its perceived unlikelihood is likely to affect aspirations which were framed with the assumption that one would be able to proceed to higher education. But this leads to the second point that needs to be made regarding education and aspirations. Although education is used as a means of imagining a better future in rural contexts, it is the state of being in school which seems to matter most rather than the state of being educated in the construction of imagined futures. This is in some ways in line with what Mains (2012, p.159) has noted about education appearing to be an important means of constructing "narratives of hope". In the absence of education or where education has been discontinued, there doesn't appear to be other means of building an alternative narrative of hope as powerful as the one provided by education. The overwhelming reliance of rural youth as well as parents on education as the only means of securing a better future is such that alternative "narratives of hope" do not appear until late in high school or after the completion of high school when the route to a better future through education begins to fade from view. In this regard, it is one's perception of the opportunity structure; i.e. what is considered possible through education, rather than the actual opportunities that education opens up that is crucial to the construction of imagined futures. This is also reflected in the way the future is perceived in relation to its immediacy.

There is a significant difference between the time frame of aspirations among younger students who are still in primary school and older ones who either have completed or are near the completion of their high school studies. Younger students in primary school have a much extended view of the future and tend to engage in a very idealized view of the future when asked to describe their aspirations and expectations. The future is not something immediate and pressing. This can in turn allow for the creation of elaborate and idealized versions of one's place in the future. In contrast, older students and especially those who have completed school can ill afford this luxury of an extended future and tend to think of the future in more immediate terms.

In terms of how being educated affects the opportunity structure, there is little evidence that being educated to high school significantly affects this. Previous research has indicated that what is learned in school is of little use in carving out a future for those whose education ends at high school and that school education hardly prepares children for livelihood opportunities within their own local contexts. (Abebe, 2008, p.18; Negash, 2006). It is true that some young people do succeed in education. There has been a tremendous expansion in higher education in the last five years. The total number of public universities has gone from less than 10 to more than 21 in less than a decade and the number of students enrolled in higher education has nearly doubled from 135,800 in 2007/08 to 269,862 in 2011/12 (MOE, 2012, p.60). But even in the face of such impressive growth the fact remains that only 1 from every 5 students completing high school stand a chance to pursue higher education. While the TVET program, intended to equip those who do not make it to university with vocational and technical skills can be seen as providing some chance for some of those who don't make it in to higher education; the majority of students are left with nothing but their broken dreams at the end of secondary school. This is even more so for rural youth who find themselves stranded in between two worlds; unable to secure the 'modern' jobs they have been lead to expect and, as we will see in the next chapter, unable to go back to the only thing they know how to do; farming.

A further point can be made about the role of gender. While subtle differences in occupational aspirations across gender do appear as early as primary school; the difference between young boys and girls seems to increase further in terms of how they relate to the future as they approach the end of secondary school. Although education is extensively used as the primary means of constructing narratives of imagined futures by both boys and girls; girls in high school as well as those who have completed school seem to struggle more with imagining alternative futures in case success through education does not happen. Although the uncertainty surrounding the success through education narrative increases for both boys and girls as they approach the end of high school; this sense of uncertainty is experienced by girls more acutely as they begin to realize the slim chance of succeeding in the upper levels of secondary school which appear to be adept at weeding girls out.

The absence of the rural in narratives of the imagined futures of rural youth, irrespective of differences in gender, age and level of education, also strongly suggest to the dominance of a modernization based public narrative where the rural is tied to the traditional and the urban is

made to appear more glamorous than it ought to be. The school system itself can be seen as a tool of modernization and it has undoubtedly made contributions to the overwhelming dominance of the urban in imagined futures. But there is at least one other factor that needs to be considered in explaining this dominance; the role of the media. The penetration of the mass media is still very low in Ethiopia²⁹. Guai being a very small town with little to no modern amenities, most of the children and young people I interviewed did not have frequent opportunities for media consumption. Even so, rural school children had opportunities to watch TV at school for 15 minutes every school day during their break. In addition to this, all of the male students said they get to watch television programmes and movies in one of the many tea houses in the town during Saturdays after they have been to the market. Since it is considered culturally inappropriate for women and especially young and unmarried girls to go in to the tea houses, female students did not have the same opportunity. This was also true for female high school students who lived in the nearby town of Debre Elias away from their families to attend high school there. Although they lived away from their families and in a relatively larger town, female high school students did not have as much opportunity to watch TV as their male counterparts since they would be considered ill mannered if they went in to a tea-house. Male high school students on the other hand reported that they watch TV at least twice a week and for about 5 hours a week. The consequences of this different level of exposure to the media appear minimal however since both male and female students alike have the same or similar narratives regarding their future hopes and aspirations.

But nevertheless, there are indications in the data as to the potential influence of the media on imagined futures. The influence is greater among the younger participants aged 14 - 16 who were still in primary school. In addition to having very high occupational standards, this group of students also appeared to be very responsive to what goes on in the media as shown by the sudden rise of aspirations related to being a prime minister following the death of the country's long time leader. This is not surprising since both the national television and radio

²⁹ Data from the central statistics agency indicate that only about 10% of households in the country own a television set (SCA, 2012). But this is a significant development as compared to a decade ago when only 2.8% of all households have access to TV sets. While radios are far more ubiquitous in comparison at nearly 40% of households owning one, this figure is still very low even in comparison to other countries in Sub-saharan Africa . But access to media consumption is likely to be higher than these figures would indicate since access is not necessarily bound by ownership. It is not unusual for households without their own television sets to be able to watch TV at their neighbours' or public places such as bars, cafes and tea-houses

had suspended normal programming and launched a relentless propaganda campaign aimed at portraying the late prime minister as a true Ethiopian hero who fought (and conquered) the country's historic arch enemy, poverty.

The influence of the media on the aspirations of young people was also apparent in more subtle ways. As mentioned earlier, the kebele of Guai is almost entirely rural. Only the small town that has sprouted around the local market has an electricity supply even if sporadic. There is only one elementary school and a very basic health centre. The economy of the kebele is entirely dependent on small holder farming. There are no doctors here, nor engineers or pilots. But the school children interviewed did not mention being a farmer or a trader as an occupational aspiration; save for one student who wanted to be a modern and wealthy farmer and a few more who put it as a secondary aspiration. Some locally visible occupations such as being a teacher and a civil servant were mentioned a few times but the majority of the participating students mentioned becoming a doctor, an engineer, a pilot and a scientist as their aspirations. These aspirations cannot be based on local experiences since there were no such people in Guai. They cannot be said to be based on personal experiences and social ties since, with the exception of three cases, none of those who mentioned these as aspirations knew or have heard of individuals who had become any one of these things.

The role of the media in influencing the aspirations of young people is also evident in the personalities the students took as role models. Although fellow students who were considered exceptionally intelligent and former residents of the area who left for university and have become doctors were mentioned as role models by some, a lot of the participants drew inspirations from personalities they could have only come in to contact with the help of the media. These included Sheikh Mohammed Al Amoudi, a multi billionaire business man whose net worth is estimated around USD 12.5 billion³⁰; Tirunesh Dibaba, three time Olympic gold medallist; Abuna Paulos, patriarch of the Ethiopian orthodox church, and of course, Meles Zenawi, prime minister extraordinaire. It is important to note here, however, that these personalities were considered role models to be emulated by the participants not only because they have excelled as individuals but also because they were seen to have contributed to the betterment of the country and its people. The desire to be like them

³⁰ <http://www.forbes.com/profile/mohammed-al-amoudi/>

therefore reflects much more than a desire for personal success on the side of the participants. When asked why they considered their role models to be that, the desire to do good as they have done and to contribute as much as they have to the nation was given as the primary reason. Such reasons, while they can be said to be socially rooted, were also in line with what goes on the state owned media continuously about the importance of giving oneself to the national cause, which at the moment is, as state media is tirelessly reminding everyone, a full scale war on poverty.

It is important here to note also the selective nature of the influence of the media on the minds of young rural students. As part of the effort to change the negative attitudes towards agriculture by showcasing “millionaire farmers”, the state owned media has been broadcasting programmes featuring model farmers who changed their lives through farming. Thousands of model farmers have received prizes from the hands of the late prime minister who honoured them annually. But this side of the media’s message seems to have been lost on the minds of the young pupils interviewed. This may suggest that the educational system as well as the public discourse surrounding modernity may in fact be stronger forces when it comes to influencing future hopes and aspirations rather than the media. The desire to leave the village and live in a big city with a professional carrier seems to have more to do with the perception that agriculture and a rural life is ‘backward’ no matter how much one gains out of it while living in a city and having a professional carrier is part of what constitutes the ‘modern’ way of life which the participants aspired for. But this leads us to the final question I will be asking in this thesis; who becomes a farmer and why which will be taken up in the next chapter.

6.4. Conclusion

In this chapter, I took a closer look at the link between aspirations and education among in school and out of school youth in the context of a rural agrarian community. The empirical evidence suggests a strong link between education and aspirations, further reinforcing the findings of the literature review. But the link between education and aspirations is more dynamic than the literature suggests. On the one hand, the state of being in school significantly opens up the imaginations of young people as to what is considered possible and achievable. This clearly evident in the significantly elevated aspirations of younger students in primary school and the gradual waning of aspirations towards the end of high school. In this regard, it is the state of being in school rather than the knowledge and skills gained from

schooling that appears to be more important in the construction of aspirations and imagined futures. This also seems to indicate the performative use of aspirations among school children where by what is aspired for, even when it is unlikely to be realised, serves as a statement of hope. The immediacy of the perceived future is also another important factor that shapes aspirations. While a far off future opens up the imaginations regarding what is possible and allows for the construction of ambitious aspirations, a future that is perceived to be immediate and pressing curtails what can be imagined.

The general modernizing influence of education is also evident in not only the professional careers that primary school students aspired for but also in the often emphasised desire among all young people, even those who have completed school, to live in a “well developed” city. This is further reinforced by the influence of the media and the strong modernization discourse among the public leading to the idealization of the urban and the demeaning of the rural.

With regards to gender, although there are very subtle differences in the aspiration of boys and girls in primary school, gender seems to become more prominent as young people approach adulthood. The opportunity structures with in which aspirations are constructed significantly diverge for young boys and girls towards the end of high school and especially after the completion of high school. As young girls become increasingly aware of the structural hurdles that stand in their way, their aspirations also become less flamboyant than their male counterparts.

VII

BECOMING A FARMER AND BEYOND

Introduction

From the literature reviewed earlier in this thesis as well as the views of rural youth regarding their future presented in the previous chapter; it does appear that young people who are still in school consider a life of farming to be a second best choice at most. While farming may not be an appealing choice for many, it is inevitable that some do end up becoming farmers; if not by their own choice due to the absence of other choices. This chapter attempts to answer the question who becomes a farmer and why. I will also try to answer the question ‘does entry in to farming mean that one is giving up all other hopes and dreams?’. In addition, the chapter will also discuss structural factors that facilitate or hinder entry in to a life of farming. The chapter draws data from interviews held with young farmers and out of school youth who, after completing high school, find themselves faced with the question of what to do with their lives.

7.1. Becoming a farmer

During the interviews I held with young farmers (between the ages of 19 to 29), the most frequently given answer to why they decided to become farmers was to point out the absence of any other options. Although some of the young farmers I interviewed did attend school at some point, most of them had never set foot inside a school. Out of the 21 young farmers I interviewed in three group sessions, only three had ever gone to school.

“It wasn’t like it is now back then” Wubante (Male, 25) told me; *“when we were children, parents weren’t forced to send their children to school. And mine didn’t. I grew up looking after the cattle instead of going to school. So when I came of age, farming was the only thing I knew how to do and the only way of life I could lead. So I became a farmer. I couldn’t have done anything else”* he concluded.

This wasn’t just specific for Wubante. In another group session one of the participants summed it up as follows:

“I think it is all the same for all of us here, none of us went to school. If our parents had sent us to school we wouldn’t probably have become farmers. I myself never went to school. I

didn't even grow up with my parents. They sent me away to work as an 'abelegna'³¹, from an early age. I had to work for my keep and I have had to fend for myself ever since [...] And I know nothing else I can do except farming. I can't even write my own name. If you gave me a piece of paper that says "put the bearer of this letter in prison" and asked me to go give it to the police, I would take it to them and hand myself in like that, I wouldn't know any better. Sometimes I think I would have done better if I had become a trader. But how could I, I am not so good at adding up numbers. Anything above five gets me all confused. How can I become a trader when I am like that? If I they had sent me to school I wouldn't have been like this, would I? Or may be I would have, I don't know. But, I would have at least known how to write my name and add numbers" Asre (28).

For those who grew up without an education, the entry in to a life of farming was something that came naturally with the transition from childhood to adulthood. Variations of the above quoted answers were given to me by every one of the young farmers who never went to school. They were never sent to school when they were children. Instead, they grew up looking after the cattle and the sheep, helping at the farm and sometimes were even given away to other families as extra hands for hire. Some even spoke grudgingly of their parents' failure to send them to school which they felt was an injustice. Farming has been what they did from childhood and they knew nothing else they can make a living from. But this apparent absence of any other means of livelihood did not mean, in their eyes, they were forced to walk down the wrong path. Almost all of the young farmers said farming was not just the only option of making a living; it was also the most appropriate one. Many felt that farming was perhaps the most profitable and financially rewarding option of livelihood available in their locality. This view was not just held by those who never went to school. Young people who went in to farming after dropping out of school or even after completing high school felt farming gave them a chance to make a good life. Esubalew, a young man who found himself in the precarious position of being unable to pass the national school living exam at grade 10, describes how he ventured in to life as a farmer as follows.

³¹ "abelegna" – is a helping hand (always a man or boy) often hired for a year's work and paid either in cash or kind (this many quintals of this or that crop). The abelegna lives with the household he works for as a family member and the household provides for his needs.

“I started with nothing. I only had the clothes I wore when I dropped out of school and came back to my parents. I had absolutely nothing. I started out by working as an “abelegna³²” for my parents in 2008 and earned seven quintals of wheat that year. The next year, I used some of that and rented one ‘gemed’³³ of land from my family. They also gave me another gemed to cultivate for free for that year. I sold the rest [from the seven quintals he earned the previous year] to buy fertilizers and seeds; and a few clothes for myself. When the year was over I got 18 quintals of wheat from those two gemeds of land. So the next year I was able to rent 5 gemeds of land for a total of 15 quintals of wheat. So I planted 2 gemeds of maize and 3 gemeds of wheat. The wheat didn’t give much yield that year, I only got 7 quintals once I paid up the 15 for the land owners. The maize gave me 9 quintals. All in all I got about 7000 Birr that year. With that I started a family of my own, got married and started living independently. And I have a daughter now and I am able to fend for myself and my family” (Essubalew, Male 28).

Yet, not all of those who come back to their village after completing school succeed in their attempt to become farmers like Essubalew. From the interviews with young farmers as well as expert interviews held with kebele and wereda level officials, it was clear that those who do finish high school often find it difficult to start life as a farmer. The existing literature has plenty to say on the negative attitudes rural young people have towards farming. Tafere and Woldehanna (2012), Tadele and Gella (2012), as well as Abebe (2008) have noted the strong desire among rural youth in school not to end up like their parents. What these studies do not show sufficiently is, however, the difficulties of becoming a farmer even when young people wanted to. Although farming may appear as a last resort for many rural youth who are either attending school or have completed school, there are other factors which make this last resort inaccessible to many young people. Three factors particularly stand out in this regard; lack of assets, the rural gender order, and landlessness which will be discussed in the subsequent pages.

³² it is somewhat unusual for a family member to work for his own family under these arrangements

³³ A *gemed* is a measure of land that is roughly equal to a quarter of a hectare

7.2. Barriers to entry

7.2.1. Beginning from scratch – returning to farming after leaving school

Although many young people who are still in school may consider farming as a fall back option in case they didn't succeed in their education, returning to farming can prove more challenging than they might have anticipated. Young people who have spent all their time and effort towards their education come back empty handed and ill prepared to start life as a farmer. As compared to those who never went to school, they have little or no assets to begin with as the following quote from a group interview session shows.

“I think those who have attended school to grade 10 or beyond find becoming a farmer very hard [...] they have spent most of their lives as students and yet don't have anything to show for it. I have never gone to school but my younger brother did and he came back after finishing grade 10. He couldn't go any further. So he became a farmer. But he had to start from scratch. I on the other hand already had two oxen when I was his age. So I think it is not just that they think farming is beneath them, it is also that they have nothing and have to start from nothing. They have to go back to their parents and ask them for their help. Their parents sent them to school thinking they will learn and then get jobs. When that doesn't happen and they come back to them with nothing but their bare hands, I think everyone will be a little disappointed and frustrated.”[Chekol, Male farmer, 27]

Young men who have completed high school often find themselves stranded once they discover they cannot proceed with their education any further. Their hopes of securing a professional carrier and a job are more or less shattered but at the same time, entry in to a life of farming proves more difficult than they had contemplated it to be. In the group interview with young high school graduates, the dilemma of where to start now that their education has ended repeatedly arose. Many of the high school graduates found it difficult to contemplate a future life in farming simply because they did not see a way in. The following quotes are from young men in their late teens and early 20s who have returned to their families in Guai after attending school to grade 10. They all completed high school in the last three years and are now living with their parents. The question of whether or not one can go in to farming arose during our discussion of their future.

“ it is not that we don't want to be farmers, it is just that the way is shut. This wereda is well known for its fertility and yield. Being a farmer here pays off well. But it is not just about

whether we want to be farmers or not, it is difficult to be a farmer even if one wanted to [...] you can't just be a farmer, you need to have some money to rent land and buy inputs.”

“A single ox costs anything between 5 to 8 thousand [Birr] these days. I can't even think of buying one let alone two and you need two to draw the plough. And then there is the cost of seeds and fertilizers. If you had may be 6 or 8 gemed of land you can rent half of it and use the money to cover the cost of fertilizers and seeds and so on so that you can cultivate the other half. But our families have 3 or 4 gemed of land and they need all of that to get by. There is no land they can spare for us. How can we get to be farmers even if we wanted to?”

“I don't think there is anything here which will bring you success as much as farming would. If you see the farmers who own their land and do their farming properly, they make quite a lot. They are even better off than people who live in town. Especially here in this wereda, the farmers make more money than anybody else. There are farmers who get as much as 10 quintals [of wheat] from a single gemed of land. That is quite a lot.”

“... the ones doing well, all the traders and the shop owners were all farmers once. They are people who have a lot of land. They have earned enough to start a business and still get a lot from renting their land. Some have as much as 12 gemed of land and earn nearly 20 thousand [Birr] a year from renting it alone.”

The issue of landlessness among rural youth is something that arose in every discussion I had with young farmers and those who were contemplating entry in to farming and it is something I will return to a little later as it deserves a detailed discussion. But there are other assets, other than farm land, starting out as a farmer requires. Oxen, seeds, fertilizers, a variety of farming equipments from plowshares to sickles and a host of other accessories all require capital which most school leavers are not in a position to afford. Although some young people are willing to start from scratch and do so, for most the thought of becoming a farmer with nothing at hand is simply unfathomable. In the past, I was told throughout my stay in Guai, desperate youth were able to venture out in to the uncultivated wilderness of the Abay (Blu Nile) river gorge which borders Guai to the south west. This is a wilderness infested with malaria and going there carried the risk of losing one's life. But for those who needed somewhere to start and were willing to take the risk, it provided them the opportunity. Young men went there in groups, cleared the forest and cultivated sesame. It required little investment, just the seeds and a dried food to last a few months, and gave a tremendous

return as sesame seeds are exported and quite expensive. But all that changed when the government evicted what it claimed were illegals, mapped the wilderness and started leasing it to investors about three years back. Land that used to be free for anyone willing to risk their lives working on it now cost more than 800 Birr per hectare. Many of the young people who were farmers already or were considering farming lamented this fact that they were barred from partaking from the benefits other before them had reaped. Although I was told this story numerous times and expert interviews with local officials attest to its truth, the extent to which it had offered a chance for riches may have been greatly exaggerated. The rags to riches stories of a few years ago, whether one doubts their truth or not, along the claims of being locked out of farming today do however illustrate the feeling many young people in Guai have that farming as an occupation is increasingly becoming inaccessible as it becomes increasingly profitable.

But it is important to note here that those who are really desperate can and do find a way in as illustrated by Essuablew's account earlier. There are still other factors that complicate the "choice" of becoming a farmer. Being a farmer is not the same for young men and women and it is to this that I turn to next.

7.2.2. Gender and farming – the 'choice' for young women

As I have discussed in chapter five, rural agricultural life in Ethiopia is extremely gendered. Although women do take part in agriculture actively, some activities such as ploughing, sowing and "beray" {trashing with oxen} have traditionally been considered a male only activity. Likewise, domestic work including cooking, taking care of children, and backyard vegetables are considered female only activities. There have, however, been some small changes in this rigid gendered division of tasks which in the past was considered more or less a natural extension of being a man and a woman. In the interviews I held with young farmers as well as students, the "naturalness" of this gendered division of tasks was frequently questioned. Participants, and especially girls and young women attributed its continued existence to "bad culture". In one interview session held with young farmers, participants brought up two examples of how this traditional division of labor was being challenged by women and men. The actions of one local farmer, a woman, who ploughed her own land and sowed it and did everything else a male farmer would do was given as an example of how things ought to be by one young farmer during one of the group interview sessions.

There is this woman in Yetenter [name of nearby village]. She ploughs with her own oxen, even does the sowing herself. When people pass by her, they stand still and see her like she is out of this world, but they don't laugh at her or consider her to be a disgrace. And she is doing well as a farmer. She was even given a prize by the government. She was made a model farmer. And some farmers [male] even go back to their wives and mock them saying "have you seen so her, she even does the ploughing, maybe you should as well." [Yitayih, Male, young farmer]

Another example involved another woman who has become known to many as an "investor".

"We have a woman investor for example; she is a woman who goes by the name Alganesh. She has leased a large amount of land in the desert and started a commercial farm. She has hired so many people who work there. May be we can't say she is a farmer since she is an investor. But the point is, women can also be farmers, and investors." [Chekol, Male, young farmer]

And participants often also expressed their own frustration with and unwillingness to abide by these traditional divisions.

"I don't know about others but I help my wife. She gave birth a few months back and is nursing right now so if she is baking injera I will peel and chop the onions. And if she is busy I will even make the stew but it doesn't taste as good as the one she makes so I still prefer it if she cooks it. But if she is doing something else I will do it. It is all about understanding one another and caring for each other. If he cares about her, why wouldn't the husband help his wife?" [Essubalew, Male, young farmer]

But this was far from the norm as the young women who have completed school were keen to point out to me. One of the participants, Bayush, who was pondering what to do after completed high school recently summed it up as follows:

"But there are plenty of men who will say to their wives 'why in the world did I marry you then' {Min wilesh litbey – literall translation – how then will you earn your keep} if they asked them to help with the housework." [Bayush, Female, high school graduate].

In expert interviews held with the wereda children, youth and women's affairs office, the interviewee outlined a number of steps that have been taken by the office to change such

traditional views and ensure that women take part and benefit from farming on equal basis with men. For example, while male farmers (as household heads) have been organized in to kebele level ‘development team’ where by model farmers take three to five other farmers and help them be as good a farmer as they have become, there have been no equivalent teams for women. Nor did women take part in the activities of the male only development teams. In an attempt to rectify this, the office has started establishing women’s development team. As much as this may seem, on the surface, an attempt to challenge gendered divisions, in reality it may end up further reinforcing them. While the men meet and develop plans about what they will sow on a particular plot and what inputs they will need and expenses they will make and returns they expect, the women are only expected to plan about which children they will send to school and which ones to the local clinic and what they will grow in the back yard or whether or not they will keep a few hens.

The office has also attempted to get women involved in natural resource conservation activities such as the erection of barriers and the planting of trees on areas considered prone to soil erosion. These activities, often planned and executed by local kebele administrations, were also exclusively done by men in the past. Yet, it does not seem clear how adding more burdens to women’s already crowded schedule will help in bringing about gender equality. Limited as they may be, these efforts as well as the views expressed by participants of the interviews I conducted reflect an increasing desire to change traditionally held view regarding the role of men women in farming and efforts towards that end. But when asked if a young woman by herself can make a living as a farmer (in the same way an unmarried young man could make a living from farming even when he didn’t own land and property), the response of participants was always no; she either needs to be married or hire an “*abelegna*” – a helping hand. Although one or two women may have broken the norm, a woman is still considered incapable of ploughing and sowing her own field, nor go out and rent a plot to cultivate herself.

More importantly, the gendered nature of agricultural and rural life also has implications on young men and women’s entry in to agriculture. Young girls who have never gone to school tend to be married out at an early age, usually to older males who have already started farming and therefore do become farmers themselves – or more appropriately farmers’ wives. Young girls who complete high school and fail to go beyond also face the same option once they go back to their families. While young men, whether they have come back after

finishing high school or been there their entire childhood, get the option to work on their own and accumulate a few assets before getting married and starting a family, young women do not often have such options as there are few to none ways they can make a living as unmarried single women in the village. The choice is often between getting married and moving in to a town or city and trying their luck there.

The fact that there are very few unmarried young women in the villages is clearly reflected in the number of young men and women the local administration has been able to organize in to groups who then receive a communal land to get started. In an attempt to tackle landlessness and assist young people enter in to agriculture; the wereda has been trying to organize landless young men and women in to groups who then receive part of a communally owned land for agricultural activities. In Guai, a total of 16 such groups have been established. There are 242 young men in these groups, and only 6 women. When these groups were formed two years ago, there were only that many unmarried young women above 18 who had no land as opposed to 242 young men.

7.2.3. Laboring to enrich others – the issue of landless youth

The rural land proclamation of 1997 as well as the federal constitution it is based on state in unequivocal terms the right of anyone who intends to engage in farming to get agricultural land. Nevertheless, none of the young farmers or the high school leavers I interviewed owned land. The issue of landlessness among rural youth is not something peculiar to Guai nor a recent problem in Ethiopia. Researchers who have done extensive studies in the topic such as Rahmato (2008) are keen to point out that landlessness among rural youth has been a recurring affair encountered by successive generations of youth who come of age after the state led land redistributions that have been implemented by the last two political regimes in the country³⁴.

While land for rent and share cropping is still available in Guai, young farmers says it is often difficult to get as much of it as they would want and the share cropping terms often favour the land owner. Although renting land for a single season in return for cash payments ranging from 600 – 800 Birr per gemed is increasingly becoming the norm, there are also other arrangements for renting farm land. These include “siso” whereby the land owner is given 1/3

³⁴ See Dessalegn Rahmato (2008). *The Peasant and the state: studies in Agrarian Change in Ethiopia 1950s-2000s*; particularly Chapter Six.

of the harvest, “ikull” where the harvest is shared equally between the land owner and the renter, and “qurtt” in which a the renter agrees to give a specific amount of grain (very often wheat) in return for the right to cultivate the plot for a year, Although the amount of grain given depends on the fertility and location of the plot, the most often agrred upon amount appears to be between three to five quintals of wheat per gemed. Of these different arrangements, land owners were often said to favour the cash for rent and “kurtt” arrangements since they serve them more favourably. For example while the share cropping arrangements in “siso” and “ikull” inherently involve the sharing of risks since whatever is harvested is then divided between the owner of the land and the renter. In contrast both the cash for rent and “kurtt” arrangements shift all the risk to the side of the renter since the owner receives a specific amount either in cash or in cereals irrespective of whether or not the harvest goes well or bad.

For young farmers who do not own their own land, the only way of making a living out of farming is to enter in to these arrangements even if they feel that they are being exploited. There haven’t been any land redistributions since 1997. Nor does any future redistribution look feasible in the near future since the government has decided any further redistribution will result in land fragmentation, according to government informants. All of the young farmers I interviewed (or for that matter anyone else who is 30 or below) were not yet 18 at the time of the last land redistribution and, as a result, were ineligible to get land at the time.

The only means of acquiring agricultural land for ownership that remains open for young people is through intergenerational transfers such as inheritances and transfer of land ownership rights. But according to the accounts of interview participants as well as experts from the local land administration office, inter generational transfers still remain very low. Apart from the inevitable and more or less automatic inheritance that occurs in the event of the death of either one or both parents, the transfer of land ownership or use rights to children before death are quite uncommon. Data obtained from the wereda administration indicate that there wasn’t a single case of land transfer from parents to children while parents were alive; and only 4 transfers of land ownership rights through inheritances in the previous calendar year. The interviews with young farmers seem to corroborate this evidence since all but one said they have received only a small plot they can build their houses on from their parents. Parents don’t give out farm land for their children, instead they only allow them to either rent it from them or use it free of charge for a year or two until they can get enough to stand by

their own feet and land transfers only happen through inheritance after the death of one or both parents. Some of the young farmers spoke grudgingly about their parents and felt that they were being too selfish.

“Our parents just want our labour. Mine gave me two gemeds for a few years while I lived with them and worked for them. But once I got married and moved out, they took it away from me because I wasn’t working for them anymore”[Bayabel, Male, young farmer]

“What our parents give us is just a piece of land to put our houses on, nothing more. They might give us a plot or two for a year to work on but that is just so that we can get up and start on our own feet. And we have to behave well, if they think we are misbehaving or are not helping them as much as they think we ought to, they won’t blink twice before renting the land to someone else. I think we have come of age at a bad time”. [Masresha, Male, young farmer]

But other participants felt their parents were not to blame, there was simply, in their view, not enough land for everyone.

“People have 6 or 7 children, they can’t give every one of their children land, they simply don’t have enough. So they may give you a little land to put a shade on and then may be if they are kind and caring give you a gemed of land or two to work on for a year or two. And once you are able to stand by yourself your younger ones will use the same land to get started as you did. I don’t think we could ask more of our parents. What else can they do? There are just too many people and too little land. My father wanted to give me two gemeds of land but I told him I will manage, I am young and can work here and there. I would rather do that than see my family struggle to survive while I take their land and get rich. So I don’t think we should blame our parents that much”. [Alamir, Male, young farmer]

Obtaining farm land from other people through share cropping and renting agreements is also becoming more and more difficult. The prices are going ever higher and land owners were often said to be unwilling to rent their land to people they don’t know or are not related to.

“These days they [farmers who own land] don’t even care for share cropping, they prefer kurtt, they will ask for 3 or 4 quintals of wheat for just one gemed of land. And that is very risky. If you were share cropping, you share the risk as well. At the end of the year, you split in half what you got out of the land no matter how large or small the harvest is. But it doesn’t

work like that for kurttt. You have to pay them that 3 or 4 quintal of wheat no matter how much or little you got out of their land. They won't care if you have to sell your oxen to pay them, they just want their pay. And that is not fair. It all depends on the fertility of the land but even when you get the most out of it, may be you will get 7 or 8 quintals of wheat from it at the most. And you cover everything yourself, you buy the seed you buy the fertilizers, you buy the pesticides and you work on it all season. And the owner takes half of it just because he owns the land. It really is frustrating but we have no other choice”.

As frustrating as it may be, young farmers have no choice but to try and make a living by renting and sharecropping farm land from others. And many of them do earn enough to make a living. But they feel that they are being exploited. They see themselves as instruments for other people's enrichment, as the following excerpts from interviews with young male farmers clearly show.

“My greatest wish is to be able to put my labour and hard work to my own benefit, I am but a means for other people's enrichment. If I could use my labour for my own use, I would have been able to change my life within a few years. I am young and strong and my labour is the only wealth I have. But it won't be there for the rest of my life. I will grow old and weak. What saddens me so much is the fact that I am unable to use my labour for my own betterment while it lasts.” [Essubalew, Male, young farmer]

The young farmers I interviewed cultivated between three to six gemedes of land per season. Had they owned the land they worked on, they argued, they would have turned their lives around to the better instead of struggling to make a decent living.

“Just put yourself in our position. We pay for everything, we pay for the seeds, we pay for the fertilizers, we pay for the pesticides and we work ourselves to death. And the land owner takes half of what we produce. Sometimes it might even be as much as 3 quarters of it. So the return is very little. It is like trying to grind water, no matter how hard you try you are back where you started. But if it was our own land and we work this hard for three or four years, we would have gotten something that would have been enough to change our lives. Right now, it is like we are pounding water, it doesn't matter how much hard work we put in to it. In the end, we are only laboring to enrich other people and there is nothing we can do about it”. [Dagnachew, Male, young farmer].

The “pounding water” analogy seems to catch the situation aptly in so far as they are unable to see how they would get from where they are now to where they want to be in the long run.

7.3. Farming as a stepping stone - aspirations of becoming more than just a farmer

Although all of the young farmers feel that they had no choice other than being a farmer and most of the high school graduates were at least willing to go in to farming if they had the option, there was also a clear desire amongst many to become more than a farmer in the long run. Although attitudes towards farming do seem to be more favorable among this group of participants when compared to that held by in-school youth, young farmers and those who have not gone in to farming and yet were willing to consider it held the view that farming was best if seen as a stepping stone to a better livelihood than being considered an end by itself. Far from settling for a life of farming, most of the young farmers saw opportunities for a better life in the future and drew aspirations from the lives of those in their community who have been able to become wealthy business men.

“God willing, I hope that I would one day become a business man if I can. I am a farmer today because I can’t be anything else. But that doesn’t mean I have to be a farmer for the rest of my life. Farming, as much as I don’t want it, is the base for everything else. It is a stepping stone to my future as a business man or an investor. I can sit here all day dreaming about how I want to be a very rich investor but it won’t just happen like that. I have to start somewhere, and farming for me is the spring board to a better life. I am young now, I have the labor and the energy to work hard, save up for a few years and then move to town and lead an easier life when I get a little older; or if God wills it and I am fortunate, I will save enough to start a business in town long before I get old and weak. Farming is not a good way to make a living when you are old and frail. [Essubalew, Male, young farmer]

“I think at the end of the day what we all want is to get some wealth and live a good and comfortable life in town. Whether you can make better money as a farmer or a business man is different for everyone of us. But my plan is to be able to buy a truck after a while, may be in share with someone else. ”[Yitayih, Male, young farmer]

It is all God’s will isn’t it. As the saying goes “Man plans but only God knows [if that plan will come true]”. I have started out as a farmer but that is not what I want in the long term. If I can, I will try to save a little and join the business world in 5 or 6 years from now. I would

rather have a business or two in town and become an investor, rather than ending up a farmer for the rest of my life. [Amare, Male, young farmer]

But not all participants shared these views. There were some, even if few, among the young farmers I interviewed who felt that farming was the best livelihood they will ever have since they either liked life as a farmer or saw themselves as being unable to do anything else. Those who have already established families especially felt that they should stick to their current life of farming and bring up their children as best as they could rather than introducing instability and uncertainty in to their life by moving on to something else.

I have already started a family and have two kids, and I have already become a farmer. So I can't just throw it all up and look for something else to do even if I wanted to. Not that I want to, but even if I did, my life isn't my own anymore. I have a family and kids to worry about. So I would rather live here for the rest of my life, be as good a farmer as I can and bring up my children as best as I can.

But the dominant view seems to be one of preferring an urban non-agricultural life in the long run.

I think most people here would rather live an urban life if it were up to them. But it isn't. You can't just decide to go and live in a town and go there with nothing but your hands and feet. At best you end up becoming a daily labourer. But that is even worse than being a farmer, it is equally hard and tiresome and even less rewarding. But if you have money instead of just your bare hands, you can invest that. Buy a mini-bus taxi or a house and then rent it, or start a business, then you can live a better life there than you would here.

And this desire to use farming as a stepping stone to a better non-agricultural life was stronger among the high school graduates interviewed. Although they felt that their entry in to agriculture and farming was barred, they saw farming as the best starting point on their way to secure a better life.

“As long as it is something that can help me change my life to the better I don't care what it is [that I do]. And around here, farming is what gives you that opportunity to turn your life to the better. All the successful business people, even the ones who own a fleet of trucks, started from farming. Not just here, even the ones in Debre Elias [nearest town and wereda capital] started from farming. You farm a few years and once you save up a bit, you start a business

in town or you buy a truck. If the business goes well, you rent your land and move in to town. That is how it works around here. Everyone was a farmer when they began”.[Walelign, Male 18, completed grade 10 in 2011]

Of course rural life is better in some ways. Take our parents for example, they won't even last a week in a town, they don't like it there. The land is greener here, the air is fresher, they have all kinds of things growing and blossoming in their back yards, they grow what they eat, they don't just go out and buy it. They know what went in to it and every piece of food they take a bite of is something they grew. They know how their food got to their dinner. So these things are pleasing about rural life. I think rural life is even better when it comes to proper feeding; everything here is fresher and much more tastier than what you get in a town or a city. But then again if you want something more than that, you won't find it here. Especially when you have a little education and you know a little more than just the ways of the village and the nearest town, it is hard to be content with a rural life. Rural life is too simple, if you have a little knowledge or some money or better yet both, you want some thing more than just a simple life so you start looking towards a town or a city instead of what is under your feet. You start thinking “how long do I have to live in this mud bath”. [Mehari, 21 Male, completed grade 10 in 2010].

What comes out clearly from the above excerpts as well as the discussions held with young farmers is, once again, the absence of the rural in imagined futures. The urban ‘modern’ way of life, it appears, has taken a strong hold on imagined futures and discourses of a better life. I have hinted at this in the previous chapter in connection with young people who are still in school and attributed it to the modernizing influence of education as well as the media. But the fact that it also appears strongly in the imagined futures of young farmers most of whom have little or no formal education hints to the role of something other than the school system.

7.4. Conclusion

This chapter has looked at the process of becoming a farmer from the point of view of rural youth and has tried to answer the question who becomes a farmer and why. I have tried to show that the process of becoming a farmer is relatively simplified for those who have never attended school; that this process comes as part of the rural transition from childhood to adulthood. But as more and more rural children grow up in the school system, this simple transition is likely to become increasingly difficult. While the existing literature emphasizes

unfavorable attitudes among rural youth towards farming, structural factors that complicate entry in to farming have largely been overlooked. This chapter shows that rural youth who return to their villages after completing high school, having spent the majority of their lives attending school, come back to their villages ill prepared to enter a life of farming. In addition to the unfavorable attitude they may have towards farming, they lack the assets and resources that their uneducated counterparts who spent their childhoods in the village have accumulated. The ever increasing cost of agricultural inputs means that only those who have families willing and able to assist them in establishing themselves are likely to become farmers. Ironically, the increasing profitability of farming also seems to be leading to established farmers and an emerging group of farmer investors taking a greater foothold on farming resulting in the exclusion of young people who are finding it increasingly difficult to access agricultural land. The process of entry in to farming also appears to be more complicated for young women, especially those who have been to school, than for young men. While unmarried young men have opportunities to work towards establishing themselves as farmers, young unmarried women do not have such similar or parallel opportunities. Furthermore, the highly gendered nature of rural agrarian life means that women can only be considered as farmers' wives and not 'true farmers' by themselves.

Contrary to claims in the literature that seem to indicate entry in to farming is the result of failed aspirations (Tafere & Woldehanna 2012), I have found out that the majority of young farmers as well as those contemplating entry in to farming consider farming as a stepping stone to realizing further aspirations. As in the case of in school youth, most young farmers as well as those who are looking to farming as a starting point consider farming to be an instrument to achieving a better, urban based, non-farming occupation in the long run. This is similar with the views of in school youth explored in the previous chapter in so far as the urban occupies a strong place in imagined futures. This prominence of the urban over the rural and the preference to a non-farming occupation is indicative of the low social value given to farming even when farming is considered lucrative.

This chapter also shows the capacity to aspire is constrained by more immediate concerns. Although young farmers as well as those who are contemplating it as a potential future livelihood imagined a better future and aspired for better lives through farming, their exclusion from any meaningful access to farm land meant that they saw themselves as unable to progress to this future. As in the case of in-school youth, the performative use of

aspirations can explain why such aspirations are held even when they are considered unlikely to be realized.

VIII

CONCLUSION

I began this thesis with a discussion, in chapter two, of the meaning, nature and, implication of aspirations and I want to conclude by returning to these in light of the empirical and contextual data presented thus far.

8.1. On the nature of Aspirations

As discussed in chapter two, the “developmental” and “opportunity structure” approaches to the study of occupational aspirations used until the 1980s have, in more recent times, been combined to represent a more dynamic relationship between individual aspirations and opportunity structures. One such approach given by Armstrong and Crombie (2000) suggests two processes through which occupational aspirations are formed; circumscription and compromise. In this approach individuals are seen as forming their aspirations within the limits of a “zone of acceptable alternatives” (circumscription). But even from this set of alternatives, individuals have to narrow down their aspirations to the more realistic choices in such a way that previously held aspirations are substituted for new but more realistic ones in a process of continual compromise. This approach can in part explain the gradual evolution of occupational aspirations among rural students in Guai. Occupational aspirations start very high in elementary school where students see themselves as being able to achieve high status, socially desirable occupations such as being a doctor but gradually fade to less distinguishable aspirations such as being independent and employed as students approach the end of secondary school. But it does not explain why initial aspirations were very high to begin with. Here, a performative model of aspirations seems to present greater explanatory power. As discussed in Chapter two, “aspirations can be viewed as constructions reflecting both the holder's structural placement and their agentic understanding: where they are and what they can do” (St Clair & Benjamin, 201, p.504). And the effect of these structural placement and the holder’s agentic understanding of where they are and what they can do is clearly evident in the way young farmers limit their aspirations to their view of what they can do at the present as discussed in Chapter seven. It is also evident in the uncertainty that dominates the imagined futures of young people who have completed high school but are caught in between their desire for professional careers and their inability to pursue such

careers. In the case of younger children who are in primary school, however, their high aspirations as well as their elaborately imagined futures can, quite simply, be a representation of what they need to believe and what they need to tell others about what they want to be and do 'when they grow up'. As St Clair and Benjamin (2011) are keen to indicate, such a view does not imply that their aspirations are unimportant or trivial. The use of education among primary school students as a means of constructing imagined futures that are overwhelmingly divorced from the immediate local rural context and are highly unlikely to be realized should not be dismissed as mere day dreaming. Their high aspirations indicate their agentic power in so far as they have the space and freedom to imagine elaborate futures as well as what they consider is possible for them to be. Their aspirations, even when contrary to what is realistically possible or likely for them, also demonstrate, at the very least, their conception of what is socially desirable for someone in their position to aspire to. In this respect, the fact that, apart from a few gendered differences, both boys and girls aspire for high status professional careers is encouraging in so far as gender does not become an obstacle in the act of aspiring.

The concept of imaginations and imagined futures takes us beyond what can be glimpsed from occupational aspirations. There is no denying that occupational aspirations are an important element of the imagined futures of young people as evidenced by the aspirations of rural youth in school who often conceive of their futures in terms of being able to achieve high status occupations. But there is more to imagined futures than occupations. This is clear in differences and similarities in terms of time and space in the narratives of the imagined futures of rural youth. In terms of space, I have shown how the "rural" rarely appears in imagined futures of rural youth while spatial mobility from the rural to the urban is a highly visible and common feature of imagined futures. Given the limited and exploratory nature of this study, it is very difficult to conclusively answer why this happens to be the case. But the data gives indications regarding the influence of the school system, the media as well as a broader modernist public discourse which have all contributed to the dominance of the urban non-agricultural way of life in the imagined futures of rural youth. In terms of time, younger youth in primary school tend to conceive of the future in much extended ways while older youth who have completed high school or nearing the completion of their high school education tend to imagine the future in more immediate terms. The safety of a relatively far off future allows for the construction of elaborate and extensive imagined futures in which

the individual is free to imagine with little to no concern to their immediate situation. This happens to be the case among younger students in primary school who still have a number of years of schooling left. In contrast, those approaching the end of schooling as well as those who have left school are confronted with the immediacy of their future. Here, the concern is what to do now or in the immediate future which allows little luxury for the imagery of one's future life in the long term.

8.2. The capacity to aspire

Returning to Hart's concept of "the capacity to aspire", I want to reflect briefly on what the aspirations and imagined futures of rural youth tell us about their capacity to aspire. In line with the capability approach, we can understand aspirations as representing, or at least approximating, "the freedom an individual has to develop capabilities and to choose to pursue a future they have reason to value" (Hart, 2012, p.94). From the discussions in the last two chapters, a number of reflections can be made regarding the capacity to aspire and the factors that facilitate or hinder it. First, education and more importantly, the state of being in school is an important element in expanding the capacity to aspire. This is closely related to Mains' (2012) argument that education in Ethiopia represents a means by which narratives of hope are constructed and reconstructed. The fact that one is still in school significantly broadens the space for aspirations (in both how far and how high one can aspire) and can be argued to enhance the capacity to aspire. But at the same time, education can also be seen as a factor constricting the capability to aspire in so far as it mainly serves as a means to imagining futures that are solely based on images of an urban based professional career.

Second, the gender order is an important element in the capacity to aspire. This can be seen in the 'inability' of young girls to aspire for some of the occupations which the boys aspired to in Chapter six. It can also be seen in the greater sense of uncertainty young girls approaching the end of their secondary school studies feel in their anticipation of whether or not they will make it through the national school leaving certificate examination. It is also evident in the different routes to farming that young men and women have to take and the greater invisibility aspirations based on farming among young unmarried women as I have shown in Chapter seven.

Third, the structural positions of young men and women and the power relations present in these structural positions have an important effect on the capacity to aspire. As discussed in Chapter seven, the current power relation among farmers in Guai is highly skewed in favour

of established male farmers. Young male farmers who have lesser resources and no land of their own are made to work for the enrichment of older farmers who own land. This power relationship and the resulting expropriation is having a negative effect on the capacity of young male farmers to aspire for a better future in so far as they are forced to deal with the urgency of meeting their present needs. The power imbalance is even more pronounced for young women who are unable to follow the same routes to farming as young men. While young men, especially those who have never gone to school, are able to work for other established farmers and thereby gradually accumulate assets to become semi-independent farmers themselves, a young woman's only route in to farming remains marriage and becoming the wife of a farmer rather than being a farmer by her own right. Despite interventions on the side of the local administration to address gender inequality, farming is still predominantly seen as the world of men where women only appear as their helpers and care takers.

8.3. Rural youth, aspirations and farming

The relationship between rural youth and farming is more complicated than a cursory read of the existing literature would indicate. Some of the findings of this study are in agreement with claims found in the literature such as the social undesirability of farming as an occupation for the majority of rural youth, especially those who have been to or are still in school. Where I differ from the literature is on the possible reasons for this. The existing literature mainly attributes this to the condition of farming in the country, its low productivity and the meager living that can be made from it (Tafere & Woldehanna, 2012), its low social value (Tadele & Gella, 2012), and the influence on rural youth of the school system which has inherited too much from modernization thought (Abebe, 2008). While I concede that these are all factors to be reckoned with, they do not provide the full picture of issues involved. At least not in places such as Guai where farming has historically been, and is increasingly becoming, more profitable.

Those who are still attending school do have generally unfavorable views about farming but this has more to do with the influence of the school system on their imagined futures than the condition of farming as Abebe (2008) has argued and as I have also pointed out earlier. This may also be why failure to proceed to higher education throws these imagined futures in to doubt and rekindles interest in farming among rural youth as I have shown in Chapter seven. And entry in to farming is by no means a result of failed aspirations as Tafere and

Woldehanna (2012) seem to indicate since even those who do end up becoming farmers maintain aspirations of leaving farming behind and proceeding to what they see as a better non-agrarian urban based life in the long run. In this sense, farming seems to be an alternative route to achieving higher aspirations rather than representing a complete abandonment of hope.

But there are important factors beyond attitudes, prior aspirations, and social values which complicate the choice of being a farmer for young people. Entry in to farming is increasingly becoming difficult and more so for those who try to get in to farming after leaving school. The process of becoming a farmer is also significantly different for young men and women. Young unmarried women, school leavers and those from poorer families are faced with more hurdles when trying to start life as a farmer. In this regard, this study shows the increasingly inaccessible nature of farming today and points to a worrying fact. Although many rural youth may consider farming to be a safety net to fall back on to if in case their education failed them, farming is also proving to be inaccessible as it becomes more and more profitable. This presents a new challenge to the government's stated objective of cultivating a new generation of literate and capable farmers. Whereas the government has, for some time, recognized the challenge presented by educated rural youth who may be unwilling to consider farming as a desirable means of livelihood, there doesn't seem to be an appreciation of this emerging challenge where young people, willing and able to be farmers, are marginalized from farming. Even more importantly, those who never went to school, have a better chance at becoming farmers than those who do bringing the whole "cultivating a new generation of literate farmers" discourse of the government in to question.

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Appendix I – Structure of the Ethiopian Education System

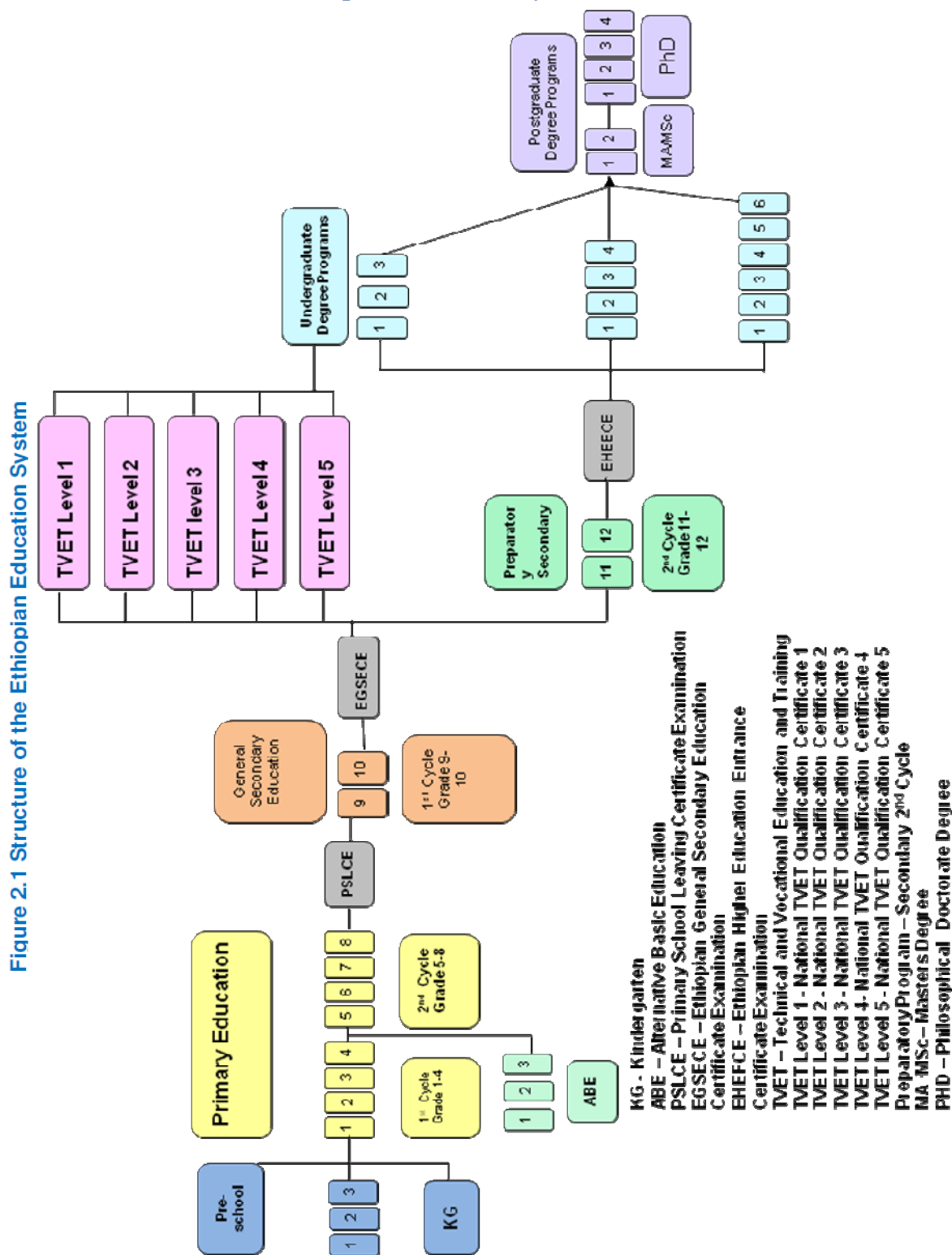


Figure 2.1 indicates the structure of both formal and non-formal education available in Ethiopia, including the examinations that influence education options.

Source: Ministry of Education, Education Statistics Annual Abstract 2004 EC (2011/12), p.4

Appendix II – Interview Guides

A. Interview Guide for group discussions with young people (aged 15 – 24)

Introduction: *The group interview with rural youth [between the ages of 15 – 24] are intended to explore their views regarding their life, their relation to the rural and their future hopes and aspirations. Ideally, separate discussions should be held with three different groups of youth,; one with young boys and girls aged 14 - 18 who are still in school, one with youth older youth aged 19 – 24 who have at least completed high school, and another with youth aged 19 -29 who have gone in to agriculture. Separate discussions will be held with men and women, boys and girls.*

Begin by explaining the purpose of the study and ask participants if there is anything they would like to know more about before starting the discussion. Remember to seek verbal consent before proceeding.

A1. Background Questions

- 1. Ask each of the participants to describe their life and that of their families. What do their parents do for a living? Do they have sisters? Brothers? What do they do? How about they themselves? What activities (besides school for in-school youth) do they take part in and how much do they spend on these (for example hours per day or week). Is this different from that of their peers? How so?*
- 2. What do they do for leisure? Do they watch tv or movies? Listen to the radio? Where and how often? What do they like what they watch/listen and why?*
- 3. For older (out of school) youth, ask about their family situation, children, what they do for a living, how long they have been engaged in what they do and why they went to that particular livelihood.*

A2. PERCEPTIONS to and UNDERSTANDINGS of Rural Life

1. *What does it mean to be a rural boy/girl? Explore how this can differ for boys and girls.*
2. *Has this (the above) always been so or are there changes?*
3. *What characteristics/features describe rural life? Ask participants to list as many features/characteristics of rural life as they possibly can; note characteristics that seem to emerge more often and probe further on how these came to be associated with rural life.*
4. *If the contrast with the urban does not emerge in the above, ask about how rural life contrasts with urban life.*
5. *Do participants consider their current lives to be good? Why? Explore good/desirable and bad/undesirable aspects. Explore what they feel is missing in their lives for them to consider it good.*

A3. FUTURE Hopes and ASPIRATIONS

1. *Aspirations and hopes – what do they want from their life? Are there any occupations they aspire for? Why do they consider these occupations to be desirable?*
2. *How about family life [future]? And other things they want from life (other than occupation)? What do they consider to be the most important thing in life?*

3. *Have their aspirations, hopes and expectations changed? Since when? How and why?*
4. *If it were completely up to them, where would they want to live their lives and how?*
5. *How do they think about the future? Is it something they have planned for?*
6. *Where do they think they will be 5 years from now? How about 10 years from now?*
7. *Given their currently attained (or expected) level of education, skills, and resources (family assets, etc) do they think there is a chance for them to realize their plan? Do they feel, if ever, that they are wishing for things that might never come true?*
8. *Children and Spouses*

A4. Migration

1. *Do they know people who have migrated from the area? Where did they go and why? Do they feel that this was a good thing for the people involved?*
2. *What have they heard from people who have migrated? How has this influenced their views regarding what to expect from life?*
3. *Have they themselves ever considered migration? Why? Where would they go and how?*

A5. Any other issue you would like to raise

B. Essays about future aspirations and hopes (for youth aged 14 – 19)

Introduction: Participants will be asked to compose an essay across the following main themes. Participants will be asked to write freely, as much as they can with little regard to the questions posed as possible. The questions are meant to guide rather than dictate specific responses.

B1. Role Models

Write about someone you consider to be your model. Why do you consider this person to be your role model? Do you wish to be like him/her in the future?

B2. Future hopes and Aspirations

If it was completely up to you to decide, where and how would you like to live in the future? Why?

B2. Media Habits

Write about a television or radio program you regularly follow. Why do you like this particular program?

B4. Expectations and ways of getting there

What do you want to be in the future? Do you think you will be able to achieve this?

C. Interview Guide parents

C1. Background Questions

- 1. Ask participants to describe their life and that of their families. What do they do for a living? Do they have children? What do their children do? Do their children take part in what they do for a living? Is this the same for sons and daughters?*
- 2. What is their source of information about what goes on outside of their community? Outside of the country?*

C2. PERCEPTIONS to and UNDERSTANDINGS of Rural Life

- 1. What does it mean to be a rural man/woman? Explore how this can differ for men and women.*
- 2. Has this (the above) always been so or are there changes?*
- 3. What characteristics/features describe rural life? Ask participants to list as many features/characteristics of rural life as they possibly can; note characteristics that seem to emerge more often and probe further on how these came to be associated with rural life.*
- 4. Do participants consider their current lives to be good? Why? Explore good/desirable and bad/undesirable aspects. Explore what they feel is missing in their lives for them to consider it good.*

C3. Future hopes towards children

1. *what do they want for their children? Is this different for sons and daughters? Are there any occupations they wish their children could achieve? Why do they consider these occupations to be desirable?*
2. *How about family life? And other things they want their children to have (other than occupation)? What do they consider to be the most important thing in life?*
3. *Have these wishes changed over time? How and why?*
4. *What have they done to enable their children to attain these wishes/desires? Explore gender differences.*
5. *If it were completely up to them, where would they want their children to live their lives and how?*
6. *Where do they think their children will be 5 years from now? How about 10 years from now?*
7. *Given their currently attained (or expected) level of education, skills, and resources (family assets, etc) do they think there is a chance for their children to realize the things they desire for them? Do they feel, if ever, that they or their children are wishing for things that might never come true?*

C4. Migration

- 1. Do they know people who have migrated from the area? Where did they go and why? Do they feel that this was a good thing for the people involved?*
- 2. What have they heard from people who have migrated? How has this influenced their views regarding what to expect from life?*
- 3. Have any of their children migrated? Why? Where did they go and how? How did this affect the family?*

C5. Any other issue you would like to raise