

Original Article

Learning to Co-operate: Youth Engagement with the Co-operative Revival in Africa

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Abstract Co-operatives are seen to offer alternatives for individuals to improve their livelihoods. However, they have a mixed record, especially in Africa. Initially controlled by the state, many co-operatives did not survive with the advent of structural adjustment policies. However, there is now a revival. In parallel, some countries have policies to engage youth in co-operatives. Can co-operatives, as socially oriented businesses, throw off their history and provide an opportunity for youth? This article examines this question by combining extensive field data from youth co-operatives in Uganda and Lesotho with situated learning and human development theories. It finds that contemporary co-operatives and their networks provide an 'expanded learning space' for youth, although there is differentiation by education and gender and type of co-operative. The article makes a novel contribution to debates about co-operatives in development and their potential to provide an alternative route for youth futures.

Les coopératives offrent une alternative pour l'amélioration des moyens de subsistance des individus. Cependant, leur bilan reste mitigé et ce surtout en Afrique. Initialement contrôlées par l'État, de nombreuses coopératives n'ont pas survécu à l'avènement des politiques d'ajustement structurel. Pourtant, leur renouveau s'observe aujourd'hui. En parallèle, certains pays ont adopté des politiques pour promouvoir la participation des jeunes dans les coopératives. Est-ce que les coopératives, en tant qu'entreprises à vocation sociale, peuvent se débarrasser de leur histoire et fournir une opportunité pour ces jeunes? Cet article examine la question en combinant des données de terrain approfondies sur des coopératives de jeunes en Ouganda et au Lesotho, avec les théories de 'situated learning' (l'acquisition des savoir situés) et du développement humain. Il constate que les coopératives actuelles et leurs réseaux sociaux fournissent un 'espace d'apprentissage élargi' pour les jeunes, bien que des différences prennent forme en fonction de leur genre et niveau d'éducation, mais aussi, en fonction du type de coopérative. L'article offre une contribution originale sur le potentiel des coopératives comme voie alternative pour le futur des jeunes et alimente le débat sur le rôle des coopératives dans le développement.

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Introduction

The mixed history of co-operatives in Africa has raised doubts about their efficacy as a means of promoting successful businesses. It has also questioned their potential to contribute to equitable economic and social development. These are pertinent issues in the context of a co-operative revival (Develtere *et al*, 2008) and the drive in some African countries to promote co-operatives among youth, the majority of whom face an uncertain and precarious future.

The renewed interest in co-operatives has occurred in the context of a volatile world economy. The recent financial crisis in particular has regenerated debate about alternative economic

organisation (see, for example, Castells *et al*, 2012). However, co-operatives have a history of failure as well as success. In Africa, they have historically been controlled by the state and subject to mismanagement, corruption and elite capture (Develtere *et al*, 2008). They experienced a period of decline when international finance institutions imposed structural adjustment programmes on many African countries. In countries where the state had previously controlled the co-operative sector, only some, such as those that marketed high-value commodities, were able to survive.

However, in spite of their history and the criticisms, in recent times co-operatives have grown in number and there are now a billion co-operators worldwide under the umbrella of the International Co-operative Alliance (ICA). The revival in the African context has been reinforced by the ICA's promotion of co-operatives as membership-based organisations with particular modes of governance, values and principles (ICA, 1995). Several African countries have started to make co-operatives central to their economic policies (for example, Ethiopia, Kenya, Lesotho, Rwanda, Uganda and South Africa).

In parallel, there has been a growth of literature about the challenges facing large youth populations, especially, but not only, in the African context (Honwana and de Boeck, 2005; Christiansen *et al*, 2006; World Bank, 2007; Honwana, 2012). Research into the future prospects for youth, particularly where there has been civil strife (Honwana, 2006) and lack of employment opportunities (World Bank, 2007), has focused on the nature of youth agency and how it is shaped by, and in turn shapes, the contexts in which youth live. In this respect, co-operatives can be seen as presenting a potential opportunity for youth, to promote livelihoods and income, and to provide youth with their own 'training ground' in organisational skills, social solidarity and cohesion, and democratic processes.

In the light of these debates, this article examines whether and how co-operatives have been able to provide such opportunities for youth in the African context. Does the co-operative form present a way forward for youth to shape their own futures, and if so, how and in what ways? The two countries in this study, Uganda and Lesotho, have both promoted youth co-operatives: in the Ugandan case through an externally funded initiative developed by the Ugandan Co-operative Alliance (UCA), and in Lesotho through a government-sponsored programme. The ICA's articulation of principles and values has informed both these initiatives.

The research behind this article investigated whether and how co-operatives become a site for youth learning. Of particular interest was the situated and associative learning (Lave and Wenger, 1991; MacPherson, 2003) that might take place in a co-operative, that is, the learning from everyday interactions in the particular context provided by co-operatives, as well as the formal education and training provided by the co-operative movement. In turn, the research aimed to find out what capabilities (Sen, 1999, 2009) such learning might enable among the youth membership.

The field research focused on two cases of youth co-operatives and one case of a co-operative with a youth section in Uganda, and a school-based and a community-based youth co-operative in Lesotho. Although the strategies for promoting youth co-operatives in the two countries were different, common areas of skills and personal development, processes of learning and their impacts were identified across the five co-operatives. The data demonstrate that the co-operatives provided an 'expanded learning space' for youth that enabled them to shape their personal futures and to be perceived differently and perform new roles in their communities. The expanded nature of the learning space resulted from the networks that the co-operative provided, as well as from the specific activities in the co-operative and the formal and informal learning processes involved. There were, however, some differences between types of co-operative, between male and female youth and between youth with different levels of education, which are explained below.

The section 'Background, focus and approach' outlines the focus and analytical approach, while the section 'Researching co-operative learning in Uganda and Lesotho' explains the context

of the cases studied and the fieldwork methods used. The section 'Co-operatives as learning spaces for youth' analyses what youth co-operators learn, how they learn it and what capabilities are enabled. The section maps youth learning on to what youth value and have achieved through their co-operative learning, and discusses some of the issues, possibilities and constraints that are faced. The section 'Conclusions' draws conclusions about the wider implications.

Background, Focus and Approach

Co-operatives in Africa are currently largely located in the agricultural sector or are savings and credit co-operatives (SACCOs) (Chambo *et al*, n.d.; Develtere *et al*, 2008; Pollet, 2009; Kuria, 2011). The association of co-operatives with the agricultural sector has emerged from international and national policy interest in agricultural growth, poverty reduction and food security, as well as their historical roots in agriculture (Bernard *et al*, 2008; Louw *et al*, 2008; World Bank, 2008; Fraser, 2009; Francesconi and Heerink, 2010). Much of the literature on co-operatives in the African context focuses on their economic development impact, or their potential to reduce poverty or have a positive impact on jobs, including such aspects as increasing market share and income for members and provision of financial services (Birchall and Simmons, 2008, 2009; Develtere *et al*, 2008; Wanyama *et al*, 2008a, b; Kwapong and Korugyendo, 2010). Other studies have focused on the limits to member benefits, their internal organisation and governance, and the potential for elite capture (Platteau, 2004; Dasgupta and Beard, 2007; Bernard *et al*, 2008, 2010; Francesconi and Heerink, 2010; Francesconi and Wouterse, 2011).

Although some studies (Smith *et al*, 2005; Kyazze, 2010) have examined how co-operatives can lead to wider social action, such as HIV/AIDS awareness, there is some scepticism about the social outcomes of co-operatives (Pollet, 2009). A few analysts have argued that the social outcomes depend to some extent on the nature of co-operative education and training (MacPherson, 2003; Shaw, 2009, 2011; Woodin, 2011), and have linked education to the development of a co-operative voice, increased productivity and economic success (Chambo *et al*, n.d.; Fairbairn, 1999; Shaw, 2009; ILO, 2010). Others have examined the internal and social experiences of learning (MacPherson, 2003), including 'learning through co-operation' (Facer *et al*, 2011, p. 16).

The social as well as economic dimensions are particularly important in the context of the futures facing African youth. In many African countries, youth constitute more than 50 per cent of the population (World Bank, 2007). The statistics on youth are age-based; however, age is only one factor in being a youth. Other dimensions include the social construction of adulthood, the process of transition from child to adult, and when an adult might be expected to have a family and assume social responsibilities (Honwana and de Boeck, 2005; McGee and Greenhalf, 2011). Honwana and others have also carried out in-depth studies of how such transitions have been changed by conflict, lack of employment and absence of the usual pathways to adulthood (for example, Honwana, 2012).

In the light of such challenges for youth futures, a key focus of this research was whether the experience of being part of a co-operative enabled youth to learn in ways that enhanced their personal capabilities and agency. The research explored an assumption that the co-operative form provides a particular kind of space for youth learning because of its values and principles and mode of governance. Although there are training opportunities through the co-operative movement, the purpose was to study the effects of everyday activities, relationships and processes between co-operative members, and between the co-operatives and other actors in their networks.

The starting point was the concept of 'situated learning' (Lave and Wenger, 1991). The concept of situated learning focuses on tacit areas of knowledge (experiential knowledge and tacit agreement or assumptions about how things are done) as well as codified forms (formal education

and training, manuals and so on) when individuals are working or participating in groups. In other words, the focus is on the social processes of learning. Lave and Wenger's (1991) original work focused on how apprentices learn, using the idea of 'legitimate peripheral participation' to describe the social positioning of apprentices in a work group and how the situated nature of learning changes their social positioning as they become more knowledgeable and become core to the group.

Such ideas have been developed further, for example, in the concepts of 'communities of practice' (Wenger, 1998), where common goals and shared experiences lead to repertoires of shared knowledge and skills, and 'constellations of communities of practice' (Wenger, 1998, p. 127) – the overlapping nature of identities and practices in which people engage. Brown and Duguid (2001) have explored 'networks of practice', which stretch across organisational boundaries, while in the workplace learning literature Fuller and Unwin (2004) have used the concept of 'expansive learning environments', which encompasses multiple types of learning experience within and outside groups and organisations (see also Felstead *et al.*, 2009a; Felstead *et al.*, 2009b). Using an experiential learning framework, Baker *et al.* (2005) have conceptualised 'conversational learning' whereby conversations create spaces for experiences and knowledge to be shared and explored. Finally, within co-operative studies, MacPherson (2003) has used the concept of 'associative intelligence' to capture the learning that takes place in co-operatives, and is ascribed to the nature of co-operative organisation, while Facer *et al.* (2011) have used the term 'co-operative learning' to signal learning arising from the process of being a co-operative member.

Concepts associated with situated learning have their critics. For example, in the case of communities of practice, Johnson (2007) has noted that there is often little recognition of power relations within and between groups. Wilson and Johnson (2007) and Borda-Rodriguez (2009) point out the relevance of shared and unshared backgrounds, where shared backgrounds and experience can be conducive to trust and co-learning but unshared backgrounds and difference can result in the imposition of particular knowledges, on one hand, but also be an opportunity for new learning, on the other. Other contributions come from research on workplace learning. Fuller and Unwin (2004) observe the lack of discussion of horizontal learning flows as well as vertical flows from those with expert knowledge to others. Fuller *et al.* (2005) elaborate this point by demonstrating the non-linear processes of learning between assumed experts and novices whereby novices can also be teaching experts. Moreover, they also point out that presumed novices come into work situations with prior knowledge and experiences that they are able to share and build on in the new environment. The context or nature of the workplace and organisational or group settings is also seen to influence learning (Fuller and Unwin, 2004, 2009, 2011, 2012; Fuller *et al.*, 2004; Fuller, 2007; Felstead *et al.*, 2009a, b). This aspect is particularly significant for this study: co-operatives, if not a workplace in the usual sense, are a work 'space' in which individuals (in this case, youth) come together for the particular purpose of improving their livelihoods, informed by particular values and principles.

Within co-operative studies, although there have been attempts to conceptualise co-operative learning (MacPherson, 2003; Facer *et al.*, 2011), there has been little research into the processes and their outcomes. These aspects were of importance to this research, particularly given its focus on youth and youth futures. However, researching situated learning alone was insufficient to capture and interpret youth narratives about their learning and its outcomes, and the potential that co-operatives might offer in developmental terms. The research therefore combined ideas about situated and social learning with Sen's capability approach (Sen, 1999, 2009; Robeyns, 2005) as a way of both capturing processes and identifying development outcomes for youth. The capability approach aims to explain whether and how individuals are able to achieve things they value (functionings), while capabilities are the opportunities and freedoms people have to achieve

their valued functionings. As discussed in the literature by Sen and other Senian writers, a capability does not automatically lead to an achieved functioning. Achieving a valued functioning might be limited or enabled by the social, political and economic conditions in which a person lives, as well as by personal factors (such as the ability to choose to do or not to do something). Such dimensions have been called conversion factors (see Robeyns, 2005).

In particular, the research sought to locate the relevance of the co-operative experience for youth learning by analysing the processes that youth engaged in, what capabilities were enabled, what youth valued in terms of their futures and whether their learning in the co-operatives helped them to achieve their valued functionings. As implied above, the capability approach emphasises the role of individual agency, as well as acknowledging the possibilities and constraints posed by particular social and institutional settings. In this sense, bringing in a capability approach helps identify the role of youth agency, as well as the constraints on learning and on using learning in the co-operative. Bringing these perspectives together thus also enables reflection on whether and how co-operatives can promote youth futures in development and what policy issues are raised for governments and co-operative support organisations.

As the next section goes on to outline, this was an inductive study informed by these theoretical and conceptual understandings. It was not the purpose to demonstrate that, for example, co-operatives create communities or networks of practice or that co-operatives necessarily enhance youth capabilities. The purpose was to understand youth experiences of learning through a co-operative and to interpret their narratives about what it enabled them to be and to do in practice. Thus, while a conclusion of the study was that youth co-operatives provided an 'expanded learning space' for youth (explained further below) and enabled them to achieve some of the aspects of life that they valued, this was not foreseen at the outset.

Researching Co-operative Learning in Uganda and Lesotho

The initiatives in Lesotho and Uganda were novel approaches to encouraging youth to form their own co-operatives¹. There are other examples of youth engagement in Ghana (Smith *et al.*, 2005), Kenya (Okeyo, n.d.) and South Africa (Umsobomvu Youth Fund, 2003); however, they are relatively new or isolated examples. The Youth Economic Empowerment through Co-operatives Project (YEECO) in Uganda, supported by the UCA, has resulted in 61 youth co-operatives being established, while the government-promoted school and community-based youth and student programme in Lesotho has resulted in 20 youth co-operatives. Both programmes have been operating for over 10 years.

As the intention was to gather youth narratives about their learning and its outcomes, a qualitative case study approach was used. Five co-operatives representing different levels of activity and success (as co-operatives) were selected: two agricultural marketing co-operatives including one with a mixture of adults and youth (not part of the YEECO programme) and one youth SACCO were selected in Uganda; a school-based and a community-based youth co-operative, with one based in a rural area and one in an urban area, were selected in Lesotho. A summary of the characteristics of the five co-operatives can be found in Table 1.

After an initial scoping study in 2009, research was conducted over 3 months in Uganda and 2 months in Lesotho. As the research aimed to capture youth narratives about their learning and capability development, multiple methods were used, providing different types of data and allowing different narratives to emerge. The research aimed to be participatory and engage the interest of youth, creating a two-way process (Heron and Reason, 2001) where youth fed into the design of the research and the type of data collected.

Table 1: Characteristics of the co-operatives selected

<i>Co-operative</i>	<i>Main activity</i>	<i>Membership</i>
Subeng Dinosaur Co-operative, Lesotho Established 2007	Rural tourism – tours and selling crafts Active ^a	7 females and 5 males (18–35 years old) but two members are between 40 and 50 years of age
Rise and Shine Co-operative, Lesotho Established 2004	Urban savings and credit Very active	35 females and 6 males (17–21 years old)
Kigayaza Co-operative, Uganda Established 2004	Agricultural marketing Very active	73 males and 25 females (18–35 years old)
JoyFod SACCO, Uganda Established 2004	Rural savings and credit Very active	545 males and 819 females (18–35 years old) but some older members
Twkembe Farmers Rural Producers Organisation, Uganda Established 2002	Agricultural marketing Active	Mixed membership: 450 members with 62 in the youth group (30 females and 32 males)

^alevel of activity defined by scales used by the UCA.

The approach was to conduct detailed research with a number of members in each co-operative. Members were selected through initial observations and interactions and discussions with the co-operative boards on members' suitability and availability, with particular attention being given to gender, position in the co-operative, duration of membership and age of members. Individual and group interviews and focus group discussions aimed to elicit learning experiences of youth members. To collect such data, members were asked to produce 'learning audits', which asked them to identify different types of learning and knowledge they had gained through being a co-operative member, how it had come about and what they were able to do as a result, both inside and outside of the co-operative. The learning audits were carried out in the interviews and the focus groups. In each co-operative, a member was also chosen to give an account of their life history, which was compiled through several interviews. When selecting life history participants, particular attention was given to members' interest in taking part, availability to complete the additional interviews and their level of involvement in co-operative activities. As part of this process, the youth was also asked to carry out a self-directed photography project, in which they were given a disposable camera for a week and asked to take photographs of what the co-operative meant to them. The photographs were then used to hold a discussion about the processes and activities in the co-operative. Finally, meetings and activities were also observed, and, as part of the agreement on how the research would be conducted with the co-operative members, a training session was carried out in each co-operative and the responses recorded. Overall, research across the five youth co-operatives consisted of 30 individual interviews with youth members (producing 17 individual learning audits, 5 life histories and 5 self-directed photography projects), 12 group interviews, 14 focus group discussions (2 in Lesotho, but 12 in Uganda, overall ranging from 9 to 19 participants and producing 5 further learning audits), 10 observations of activities in the co-operatives and 5 training sessions (1 for each co-operative).²

This article focuses on the youth narratives from their learning audits, interviews and focus groups. The data were analysed inductively to see what themes emerged in terms of youth learning experiences – what they had learnt and attributed to being part of the co-operative and what processes had been involved. The data were also scrutinised to identify aspects of life and

livelihoods that youth valued. Youth's experiences of learning and of how they used their learning were also mapped on to what they valued. Overall, the analysis was an iterative, reflective and inductive process. For example, Sen (1999) makes it clear that what people value emerges contextually and cannot be predetermined. The question was whether and how the associative and situated processes of being part of a co-operative led to learning that youth valued and were able to use developmentally – both personally and in the wider context. The following section goes on to discuss these findings.

Co-operatives as Learning Spaces for Youth

This section examines the learning audits produced in individual interviews and the focus group discussions, that is, what youth said they learnt through being a co-operative member and how they perceived the source and process of their learning and what the learning enabled them to do (both capabilities and achieved functionings). Inevitably, these are subjective accounts; however, an aim of this research was to give youth a voice and to record their own narratives of being a co-operator. The section then moves on to see how youth learning mapped on to what they valued, that is, their valued functionings. In other words, what capabilities had been created or enhanced through being a co-operator and how had youth been able to use their learning to achieve what they valued? Finally, the section also highlights some of the constraints and possibilities in co-operative learning for youth.

What Did Youth Learn and How Did They Learn It?

An article cannot convey all the richness of youth learning experiences, which are therefore summarised in Table 2. Table 2 provides a summary of common skills as well as personal development dimensions that the learning audits produced in each country, in descending order by frequency mentioned. Skills refers to the development of capacities to engage in and carry out a particular type of work or job (King and Palmer, 2010, p. 1336). The concept of personal development is seen as the development of identity, self-awareness, self-confidence and the ability to interact with others, and builds on Eraut's (2004, p. 202) work on personal knowledge, which he defines as the ideas and abilities that people 'bring to situations that enable them to think, interact and perform'. In Table 2, the skill areas are linked both to business skills and skills in running the co-operative, while personal development refers to aspects such as self-confidence. It would be wrong, however, to assume that these are discrete categories of learning. Confidence contributes a tacit dimension to other more codified forms of learning such as book-keeping or record-keeping, while learning how to work in a group is essential to the running of the co-operative and contributes to wider community interactions. The types of learning are also obviously contextually linked – thus, farming knowledge appears more often in Uganda than Lesotho because two of the Ugandan co-operatives were involved in agricultural marketing, while managing clients and book-keeping surfaced more frequently in Lesotho.

The different types of learning and how they are interrelated is addressed more often in situated learning literature than in co-operative studies. For example, Fairbairn's (1999) work on co-operative education focuses on what he called conceptual and technical knowledge, but omits personal development. By contrast, the concepts of associative intelligence (MacPherson, 2003) and co-operative learning (Facer *et al*, 2011) point to the situated dimensions of learning that encompass many interrelated dimensions, but as noted above, this literature does not analyse how

Table 2: Common skills and personal development in youth co-operatives (from 22 learning audits across the 5 co-operatives)

<i>Lesotho</i>	<i>Total instances cited</i>	<i>Type of skill/development</i>	<i>Uganda</i>	<i>Total instances cited</i>	<i>Type of skill/development</i>
Confidence	8	Personal	Farming knowledge	6	Business
Interpersonal skills	6	Personal and business	Confidence	6	Personal
How to work in a group	5	Personal and business and co-operative	Responsibility and focused on development	7	Personal and co-operative
Book-keeping	5	Business	Saving	6	Personal and business
Leadership	4	Personal and business	Enterprise selection	5	Business
Open-mindedness	3	Personal	Record-keeping	5	Business
Co-operative values	4	Co-operative	Interpersonal skills	4	Personal and business
Marketing products	3	Business	Co-operative values	4	Co-operative
Managing clients	3	Business	Leadership	4	Personal and business
Responsibility and focused on development	3	Personal and co-operative	How to work in a group	4	Personal and business and co-operative
Care for those less fortunate	3	Personal and co-operative	Training skills	3	Personal and business
Saving	2	Personal and business	Managing income for business	4	Business

these processes occur. So in what ways is the learning experienced by youth situated in their co-operative experience?

From interviews, focus groups and learning audits, 92 instances were recorded about process in Uganda, 62 of which were located directly in co-operative activities. In Lesotho, there was a total of 110 process instances mentioned, with 70 located in co-operative activities. These data refer to the daily work of the co-operatives, and include dimensions such as holding a leadership position, learning by doing things in the co-operative, learning about values and principles as a co-operative member, learning from other members with more experience, learning through conversations (conversational learning), or visiting the business activities of different members and observing what they do. However, there were also other types of co-operative-related activity in which learning occurred between organised sessions such as workshops or school study and the experience of everyday interactions. Examples were visits to other co-operatives or listening to a co-operative show on the radio. The latter also points to the importance of the wider networks and opportunities that the co-operatives provided, which enabled horizons to be expanded in general terms. Moreover, on the formal training side, members were able to attend workshops organised by the co-operative movement, the government or non-government organisations (NGOs), and, in the case of the Lesotho co-operatives, link their co-operative learning to school study. It is in this sense that the co-operatives acted as an ‘expanded’ learning space with multiple interlinked pathways.

From these data, one can therefore see how new freedoms, opportunities and capabilities were enabled, closely related to everyday activity: making a living, growing up, growing in

confidence and other life skills. However, there were a number of limitations and constraints, which tended to reflect the wider context and social settings. Such constraints can be characterised within the concept of conversion factors in the capability approach. We return to these limitations and their implications after considering how youth learning mapped on to what they valued and were able to achieve.

What Youth Valued and Achieved through Co-operative Learning

What youth valued was derived from the interviews and focus groups and emerged from answers to questions such as ‘What are your hopes for the future?’ or ‘What are your future plans?’ Examples of responses are: ‘I would like to change my business from the local setting ... and I would like to further my education by getting a diploma in engineering’ (IntUJF³ Mohammed); ‘I would like to get a degree in social work and social administration. I want to continue working with the community’ (IntUK Geoffrey). Through such questions, the valued aspects of life most frequently mentioned were economic, for example, increased income, access to finance (credit), being able to build a livelihood or successful business. However, other dimensions were also often mentioned such as access to education, access to information through networks and training, gaining recognition in one’s family and community, building peer groups, being productive, being able to access healthcare, being able to avoid ‘risky lifestyles’ that lead to drugs, gambling, unwanted pregnancies or HIV/AIDS, and being able to think about and plan for the longer term.

What youth valued was linked to what they had achieved through their learning in the co-operative being a member of the co-operative. A summary is presented in Table 3. The achieved functionings shown in Table 3 are also indicative of increased agency on the part of youth: ‘Before I used to spend most of the time in town for leisure and I never used to programme myself Now I am good at time-keeping, I use planning, have increased management of my tasks and I have made new friends as well’ (IntUT Amina).

The peer support in the co-operative emerges as an important contributor to building trust and relationships within the co-operative and in the wider community, even changing relationships. One focus group participant noted, ‘Men used to be the final decision makers but now from the co-operative to the home, the style of decision making has spread. Now members sit at the table and make the decisions with their wives’ (FGDUK). Relationship building extended to organisations outside the co-operative and the community, such as NGOs and government organisations. However, youth also expressed a greater engagement in the community as a result of their work in the co-operative, for example, ‘Working with different groups of people has helped develop my heart for the community. The community then knows you can co-operate and sees you at higher levels of development. Communities under-rate youth but in fact we are at the same level’ (IntUK Geoffrey).

The same interviewee went on to explain how members of his community acknowledged the changes in him through his involvement with the co-operative, and how members of the co-operative were now being invited to participate in community affairs. Other youth co-operators provided similar accounts, corroborated in one case by the head teacher of a school in Lesotho, who observed that the youth co-operators ‘develop a personal discipline to chat to each other and think of one another. They are competent They find ways of helping each other and learn how to live with their problems They develop a sense of self-esteem – they trust in themselves and others’ (IntL, Head Teacher Mohale’s Hoek High School).

Table 3: Association of co-operative learning outcomes with achieved functionings

<i>Achieved functionings</i>	<i>Instances cited in Lesotho</i>	<i>Instances cited in Uganda</i>	<i>Links made to learning outcomes in the cooperative</i>
More informed and educated	10	11	All learning experiences
Can talk to people, made friends and built networks	7	7	Confidence and self-esteem; communication skills; becoming open-minded
Increased participation in the community	6	5	Increased interest in the school and community; developed mobilisation and training skills; becoming more open-minded
Improved basic living standards: food, housing, schooling, sanitation, health	4	5	Have become motivated to invest in these areas; new knowledge (for example, sanitation)
Improved relationships at home and in community	5	4	Confidence and self-esteem; communication skills; becoming open-minded
Focusing on productive activities	5	4	Motivation to focus on life
Improved business and income	2	6	Increased business skills
Part of a support network	4	2	Learning to trust others
Engaged in a livelihood	5	1	Increased business skills
Increased ability to find job/set up a business	5	0	Gained transferable skills
Have a leadership position in co-operative, community or school	2	3	Gained leadership skills and experience; increased confidence; interest in wider community
Able to initiate consultative decision making at home and in wider community	2	2	Skills and experience gained in this area

Issues, Constraints and Possibilities

The extent to which valued functionings were achieved through learning in the co-operative and the enhanced capabilities of participants was influenced by social and economic context, as well as individual histories and motivations (Robeyns, 2005). Some youth co-operators recorded many changes and others only a few. Differences could be seen between co-operators in marketing and productive activity co-operatives, which were relatively small and involved considerable co-operator engagement compared with large savings and loan co-operatives where members have less direct involvement. Other differences were evident (see Table 3), for example, the importance given to obtaining a job in Lesotho compared with Uganda, which arises from the role of the school co-operatives in promoting employment beyond school and engagement in the school-based co-operative. By contrast, in Uganda, achieving increased income is more frequently cited and is based on the business-oriented nature of the co-operatives and their relative financial success.

There were also differences relating to gender and educational level. For example, there were differences between male and female youth, particularly in Uganda, with the former holding more leadership positions. In Lesotho, there were more females than males in the school co-operatives and few gender differences in the learning audits; however, females also reported having less access to learning opportunities compared to male members and were often unwilling to put

themselves forward, believing they would be seen negatively if they were 'too confident'. Youth co-operators with higher levels of education were found to have greater access to learning opportunities. One reason they gave was that those with higher educational levels were judged more able to absorb and share learning from training. For example, their level of English meant they could understand the formal training provided nationally. In Uganda, it was found that leaders often had a higher level of prior education, whereas in Lesotho this difference was not evident because the co-operators were all in school. Leadership itself can provide further advantages: greater access to learning opportunities and training sessions and access to networks.

Although youth narratives indicated how much they were learning by being members of the co-operative, paradoxically they gave greater importance to external training (a finding paralleled in the workplace learning literature (see Fuller, 2007)): 'The main benefit is sharing experiences with other members ... I have gained more knowledge on cattle keeping, pig rearing, poultry, and this has helped me earn a living. I have not got any services from the co-operative, like training, for instance' (IntUT David); '[Are there any barriers to learning in the co-ops?] Yes, we do not have access to trainings. [Do you have internal training sessions?] No. [So when do you learn from each other?] In meetings and discussions' (IntLSD Agnes). However there were differences between co-operatives in their relative access to external training, particularly if they were not established in the wider co-operative networks. For example, in a large SACCO, the scope for situated and associative learning is less evident because of the larger number of members and the main relationships being between employed staff and individual savers and borrowers. On the other hand, there was greater access to formal training opportunities because SACCOs, such as JoyFod with over 1000 members, are often profitable enterprises and can make such provisions. Access to co-operative networks was another differentiating factor, depending on the location of the networks (for example, co-operatives nearer urban centres received more training support), how extensive the networks were, the funds available for their operations, and whether the co-operative was officially recognised and could therefore be legitimately supported. This last point reflects differences in attitudes to youth membership within the national co-operative movements. While there is a policy of encouraging youth engagement in both Lesotho and Uganda, interviews with members of federations indicated that there was less than full support for youth-only cooperatives, in part reflecting attitudes to youth in wider society.

However, in spite of access to external training, or because of its absence, situated learning was core to youth capability development. One interviewee responded, '[What do you think is the main way learning takes place?] From each other, from other members. I have learnt communication skills in this way, learnt how to communicate with clients and other members. [How?] Interacting has helped communicating at home and school' (IntLRS Puleng). The 'legitimate peripheral participation' identified by Lave and Wenger (1991) can also be discerned. Interviews at a youth congress in Lesotho reported that there is an induction process when someone takes up a position in a co-operative. However, experience and achievement are regarded more highly than length of time as a co-operative member; for example, a youth could join the co-operative with prior experience of pig rearing and be considered an expert in that aspect of farming and go on to share that knowledge with existing members. A Ugandan youth noted, 'I learn from the youth members, from both males and females. [Do fellow members learn from you?] They consult me on different projects as I beat many in terms of income and expenditure. [What are the main things you want to learn from fellow members?] How to manage different projects, also about diseases and pests etc. [When does this take place?] Normally on visits to their farms. [Does being in the youth group enable you to approach farmers more easily?] Yes it helps that we are all members. This style of learning really excites me' (IntUT David). David also explained that the co-operative connection enabled members to approach each other and ask other members

to share knowledge. These findings suggest that learning processes are more nuanced than Lave and Wenger's concept of legitimate peripheral participation. As argued by Fuller *et al* (2005), learning also relies on prior experience and horizontal flows.

As noted above, engaging in such processes requires a degree of trust. Trust was nurtured through having a shared set of values and principles as well as a stake in the success of the co-operative. However, it also came from the shared backgrounds of the co-operators from the same community and shared experiences of living in their community. At the same time, differences between co-operators were also an important source of learning: 'I learn through the co-operative In most cases when you see something very different to yours you have to take care to pick something for yourself. [In what areas?] In bananas, business or the garden' (IntUK Godfrey); 'Members being from different backgrounds really helps and strengthens the co-op as they can then deal with a range of issues and also learn a lot from each other' (IntL Phoko, Easy Go Travel). The conversational dimension of learning was also identified in some cases, for example: '[Do you find it easy to learn new things?] No, it takes time. I cannot learn by just sitting there. In groups through having conversations you will learn. [How?] As we are talking, we will start conversing about something. Someone then comes up with a good idea, we discuss it and we will learn from that' (IntLSD Petrus).

These issues, constraints and possibilities lead to the following conclusions.

Conclusions

It is too soon to say whether the legacy of the past has been thrown off in the case of youth co-operatives. However, there is evidence from these five youth co-operatives that situated learning takes place through the everyday interactions between youth as they learn about running and carrying out the business of the co-operative. The values and principles of co-operatives are conducive to trust and relationship building, and youth are able to both build a sense of identity with the co-operative and learn from each other. In addition, youth are able to achieve some of their personal aspirations, enabled by their learning, and to start to become valued members of their communities as well as seek higher-order goals (such as further study) and envision a future. These data cannot be generalised to all youth in all youth co-operatives; however, they signal the possibilities and potential that youth co-operatives can support. This potential also lies beyond the co-operative in the wider networks to which being a co-operative member provides access, with their possibilities of formalised training as well as more diffuse forms of learning and knowledge sharing. In this sense, co-operatives, with their multiple pathways for different kinds of learning, provide an 'expanded' learning space, even with the issues and constraints outlined above.

What, then, does this study contribute to wider thinking about youth futures in the African context? First, it suggests that proposals for alternative economies require a multifaceted analysis, which includes the social dimensions of organisation, learning and agency. Although not a new observation, it becomes particularly important where current models are failing large sectors of populations such as youth in Africa. Second, there is a tension between the need for innovative forms of social and economic organisation that are both inclusive and also provide a foundation for learning and creativity that can have effects beyond the organisation. Youth co-operatives possess this potential but are hampered by wider issues of social exclusion (gender, education and, not considered in this article, collateral for financing). There are some clear imperatives for youth engagement in development, identified in the literature by Honwana and others, such as the need to create platforms that youth can use to shape their futures in the context of their own social

settings. Youth co-operatives are potentially one such platform, in spite of the constraints outlined above and the need to finance co-operative start-ups. Youth co-operatives are potentially one such platform, in spite of the constraints outlined in the section 'Co-operatives as learning spaces for youth' and the need to finance co-operative start-ups. These constraints present policy challenges for co-operative federations, government policymakers, credit providers and co-operative support organisations. However, policymaking also needs to engage directly with, and be informed by, youth co-operative experience: as suggested by this research, youth have agency and can take advantage of the learning opportunities provided by co-operatives to build the capabilities needed for shaping their futures.

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Notes

1. In Lesotho, youth are defined as 15–35 years old (Ministry of Gender, Youth, Sports and Recreation, 1999) and represent 40 per cent of the population (Lesotho Bureau of Statistics, 2004). In Uganda, youth are defined as 12–30 years old (Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development, 2001). No population data are available for this age group but 21 per cent are 18–30 years old and those under 18 years old constitute 57.3 per cent.
2. In addition to these data, 53 local, national and regional stakeholders were also selected for interview. They were mainly representatives of co-operative organisations (both non-government and government) and people from a range of related government ministries and NGOs (for example, organisations working with youth and/or agriculture). In Uganda, two focus groups were held with students from the national co-operative college and with a group of youth who were not members of co-operatives. These additional interviews and focus groups were part of gathering data on contextual and policy issues as well as to triangulate and add to findings from youth in the co-operatives. These data are not referred to in this article.
3. A coding system is used to refer to extracts from the data – (Int) Interview; (FGD) Focus Group Discussion; (L) Lesotho; (U) Uganda; (JF), (K), (T), (SD) and (RS) refer to the names of the particular co-operatives.

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