



Shaping 'Youthful Futures' in the Global South. Sociological Perspectives

Spring Conference of the Section Development Sociology/Social Anthropology (ESSA) of the German Sociological Association (DGS) in cooperation with the Fulda Graduate Centre in Social Sciences (FGCSS) and the Research Cluster "Shaping Future Societies" (SaFe)

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In recent years, development organisations have highlighted the potential of youth in driving development. Actors such as the World Bank describe the rising number of young people in the African continent as an "enormous opportunity to super-charge economic growth,"¹ while German development cooperation initiatives prioritise youth employment promotion to foster sustainable development. At the same time, research from development sociology and social anthropology has underscored the challenges young people across different parts of the so-called Global South face in shaping their futures.² Various ethnographic accounts particularly stress the lack of future perspectives, dwindling hopes following higher education, the politics of waiting, and unfulfilled aspirations as well as aspirations "on the go"³. On the one hand, much of this frustration arises from struggles to secure livelihoods, improve precarious working conditions, expand public services, or reshape gender relations. On the other hand, shifts in imagined futures can be observed, ranging from positive aspirations to lived utopias—though they remain structurally and socially restrained.

Youth engagement with the future is also embedded in complex figurations shaped by structural historical inequalities (e.g., class, caste, and gender), economic conditions and (neoliberal) reforms, political dynamics and shifts (e.g., towards authoritarianism, but also resistance to it), the climate crisis, and cultural transformations (such as "re-traditionalisation"). Another dimension of how younger generations engage with the future highlights widespread disillusionment with development discourses, including modernisation, democratisation, and participation. In the face of political swings to the right in Europe and the U.S. and deepening global inequalities, the grand promises of these discourses no longer inspire the same hope or provide platforms for envisioning decent and secure futures.

¹ World Bank, 2024. "World Bank Youth Programs and Initiatives in Africa." Available at: <https://www.worldbank.org/en/region/afr/brief/youth> [Accessed on January 23, 2025].

² See, for example, the latest issue of the PERIPHERIE, "Bildung für alle – Versprechen oder Falle? (Education for all – Promise or Trap?)." Available in German at <https://shop.budrich.de/produkt/peripherie-2-2023-heft-171-172-bildung-fuer-alle-versprechen-falle/> [Accessed on January 23, 2025].

³ Wu, D.B., Hou, S. International student mobility as "aspiration on the go": stories from African students at a Chinese university. *High Educ* 85, 759–773 (2023)

However, through prefigurative politics, young people not only express dissent but also develop a “capacity to aspire”⁴, embodying forms of social relations, choices between different alternatives, and specific (sub-)cultural systems of representation. By shaping imagined futures, prefigurative politics enable aspirations to be articulated in the present and foster experimentation with alternative life designs, human-nature-relationships, gender orders, and citizenships—even if only temporarily and on a volatile basis.

A further dimension highlights the everyday challenges youth face in both urban and rural settings. Large-scale transformations, including migration, mediatisation, and ecological crises, compel young people to adapt and develop strategies for shaping their futures. These adjustments of aspirations and plans are embedded in processes of negotiating gender relations, intergenerational expectations, the distribution of care work and paid work, and household-level readjustments.

This conference seeks to explore the nexus between youth and the future through theoretically and empirically grounded insights into youth projects and experiences in the Global South. We invite contributions that:

- Analyse negotiations within initiatives aimed at producing alternative narratives of a “decent life.”
- Examine transformations in young people’s everyday lives and their initiatives to design pathways towards a (better) future.
- Investigate tensions arising from the lived experience of individuals seeking to escape the insecurity and complexity of the contemporary global economy through utopian visions of a different society, as well as other forms of addressing these challenges at both ‘individual’ and ‘collective’ levels.
- Discuss methodological and empirical approaches to researching the future and youth in the Global South

Possible questions and topics to be addressed include, but are not limited to:

- How do younger generations and individuals contest structural historical inequalities through future aspirations?
- How are visions of the future shaped and negotiated at the intersection of individual aspirations, collective imaginaries, and structural conditions? What role do prefigurative politics and lived utopias play in shaping youth engagements with the future?
- How do migration, mediatisation, ecological crises, and racialised discrimination intersect with youth attitudes and strategies for adapting and planning their futures?
- In what ways are gender relations, intergenerational interdependencies, and household adjustments being renegotiated in light of these transformations?
- How can the concepts of future and youth in the Global South be effectively explored through empirical research?

Please send your abstract (not exceeding 300 words) and your contact details to ***ESSA-conference@hs-fulda.de*** by **March 15, 2025**.

⁴ Arjun Appadurai (2004): The Capacity to -Aspire: Culture and the Terms of Recognition”