

WHAT DO YOU WANT TO BE?

Youth aspirations in the time of the COVID-19 crisis.
Evidence from three Sub-Saharan countries

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KEY FINDINGS

- **The data shows significant differences in education and career aspirations across Ethiopia, Nigeria and Malawi. A large share of youth aged 23-25 years reported higher educational aspirations than their current academic achievements.** For instance, about 40 percent of youth aged 23-25 years in Malawi have not yet completed universal primary schooling, but assuming no barriers exist, 70 percent of them would like to complete either a university degree or post-graduate studies.
- **The share of youth aged 23-25 years currently working in their ideal job is lower than 40 percent**, specifically 39 percent in Nigeria, 29 percent in Ethiopia and 4 percent in Malawi. Across countries, having a high salary and doing an interesting job are considered by youths to be the primary characteristics of the ideal job.
- **The data also shows high rates of young people aged 23-25 years who are neither studying nor working (NEETs).** Specifically, Ethiopia reports the highest rate of NEETs among youths aged 23-25 years (39%) compared to their Malawian (21%) and Nigerian (14%).
- **Lack of money is the most reported reason for unrealized aspirations**, both in terms of educational level and professional realization, and the youngest female youth (15-18 years old) are the most affected by this constraint.
- **There are significant gender differences in youth career aspirations.** Female youth more commonly report being interested in pursuing a career in nursing or teaching, while male youth aspire to be engineers or soldiers. For instance, in Malawi, 28 percent of young women aspire for a career in nursing compared to 1 percent of their male peers, and 14 percent of young men in Nigeria desire to be an engineer versus 1 percent of their female peers.

INTRODUCTION

Understanding the aspirations and goals of the youth is essential to developing effective employment policies.

Aspirations can drive choices in education, employment, and job-seeking efforts; and they are shaped by an individual's sense of agency, a fundamental belief that one is responsible for their own outcomes, and expectations about the labor market institutions (Appadurai 2004; [Ray 2006](#); [Sen 1985](#)). Young people who have the ability and the tools to set realistic life goals and reach them through their own effort, are more likely to live a more satisfactory life than those ones without a clear pathway to achieving their aspirations ([Lybbert and Wydick 2018](#); [Dalton, Ghosal, and Mani 2016](#); [Bandura 1993](#)).

Policies should be designed to allow educational and professional aspirations of young people to align with pathways to achieving them.

If aspirations and life goals are not considered, policies aiming to match skills with labor market opportunities may continue to fail young people between the ages 15 and 25, a group which accounts for roughly 20 percent of the population in sub-Saharan Africa ([African Union, 2019](#)). Specifically, the World Bank estimates that by 2050, half a billion people in sub-Saharan Africa will be under the age of 25. This highlights the urgent need to create employment opportunities for Africa's youth, ones that match their skills and aspirations with the demand in the job market ([The World Bank, 2021](#)). For example, programs that provide information on how to enter the labor market plus a financial aid scheme are more likely to

have a positive impact on the target population than programs that do not ([Macours and Vakis 2014](#)). Also, programs do not always take into account that scarcity of resources often encompass much more than financial concerns but could also reflect a lack of incentives, motivation, or the necessary ambition required to putting those resources to good and productive use ([Macours and Vakis 2014](#)).

As the pandemic spread across the globe, it became more apparent that young people and their aspirations would be particularly affected by the COVID-19 crisis in terms of employment, education, and training opportunities due to a pandemic-specific combination of simultaneous labor market challenges. The latest ILO global estimates confirm these fears: in 2020, youth were particularly hard hit by the crisis across all regions, countries, and income groups. **Globally, youth employment fell by 8.7 percent in 2020 compared with 3.7 percent for adults, and employment losses among young people mostly translated into an increase in inactivity and hopelessness for the future** ([ILO, 2021](#)).

Recent surveys on youth or sub-populations of youth have included questions to capture career aspirations and life goals in the time of the COVID-19 crisis.

As part of the COVID-19 high-frequency phone surveys (HFPS) programme,¹ the Living Standards Measurement Study (LSMS) team developed the 'Youth Aspirations and Employment Module for High Frequency Phone Surveys (HFPS)' to collect information about (i) education history, i.e., level of education already achieved (in multi-topic household

¹ Find out more about the [LSMS-supported COVID-19 high-frequency phone surveys](#).

surveys, this information is partially captured in the Education Module), (ii) work history, i.e., age when respondent started working, previous work experience, sources of income, (iii) future plans, i.e., intended activities after completing education/training program, and (iv) career aspirations, i.e., desired work, role models, social norms, migration interest.² The module was implemented in one round in Ethiopia, Malawi and Nigeria between April and June 2021 for households that participated in previous HFPS rounds and have at least one young member (15-25 years old). Thus, the households included in the HFPS are sub-samples of LSMS households interviewed in the most recent face-to-face interviews, in the respective countries.

The data collected is nationally representative and age distribution is similar across countries. A uniform methodology was adopted in sampling, weighting, and implementing the survey across the countries, to make cross-country comparison feasible.³ In Nigeria, the data were collected in April 2021. Fifty-two percent of the sample are male, while 48 percent are female. Forty-four percent of the respondents are between 15 to 18 years old, 36 percent are

19 to 22 years old, and 20 percent are 23 to 25 years old. In Malawi and Ethiopia, the data were collected during May and June 2021, and the age and sex distribution is similar to that of Nigeria.

Incorporating the Youth Aspirations and Employment Module for High Frequency Phone Surveys (HFPS) into multi-topic household surveys has several advantages.

First, it allows us to capture and compare information on youth not in employment, education, or training (NEET) with those currently engaged in work activities, school, or training. Thereby contributing to the measurement of the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 8.6. ('By 2030, substantially reduce the proportion of youth not in employment, education, or training (NEET)'). Secondly, information on aspirations can be disaggregated by current activity or occupational status and personal and/or household characteristics, allowing for a skills match and inter-generational analysis, amongst others. Future implementations of this work may include the administration of the module in several HFPS rounds to measure the variation of aspirations during different phases of the COVID-19 crisis.

² The questionnaire was drafted based on recent household surveys: the ILO SWTS questionnaire (2009), Module 2; the World Bank Young Basotho's Aspirations and Challenges Survey (2019); and Young Lives, round 4, Ethiopia (2013-2014). The questionnaire is a living document and the piloted version is available at the [LSMS-ISA website](#).

³ The sample of youth respondents was randomly selected among the household members that fulfill the age criterion and includes 841 youth in Nigeria, 910 youth in Malawi and 881 youth in Ethiopia.

YOUTH ACTIVITY HISTORY

This section describes the key findings regarding the main current activity of youth aged 15-25 years, as well as the youth activity history that have contributed to their level of education, school attendance, the reasons that could have prevented youth from attending the current school year, their career plans after completing the current education/training programs.

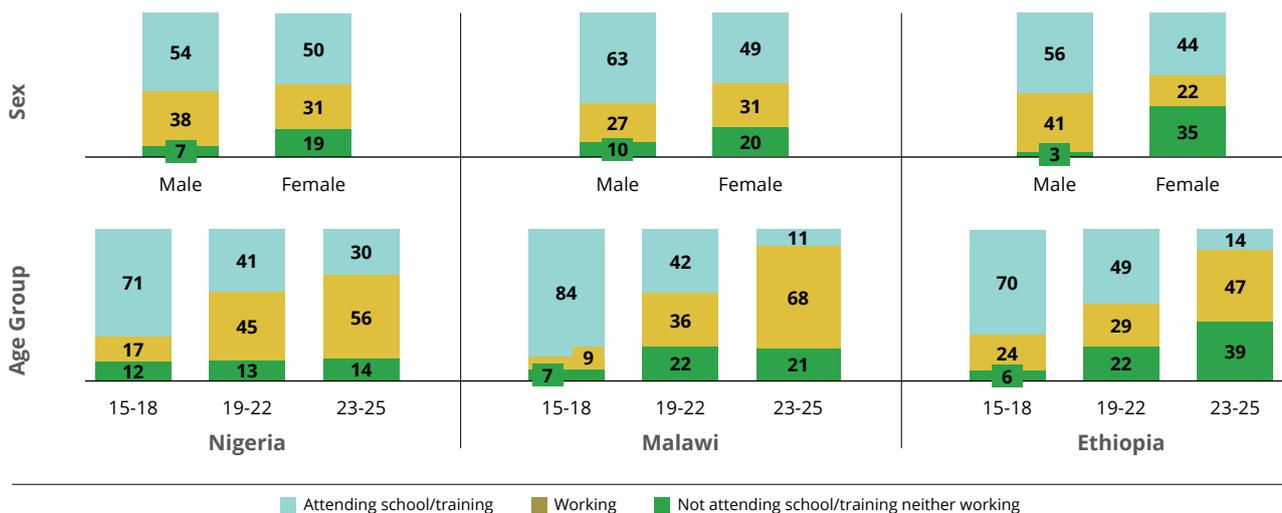
As of April-June 2021, more than half of the youth were attending school or training programs, around 30 percent were working and about 20 percent were neither studying nor working (NEETs) across the three countries. As illustrated in **Figure 1**, the share of young people currently studying is higher amongst males and the younger age cohort, across the three countries. This share decreases with age as the share of youth engaged in work activities or NEETs

increases. Ethiopia reports the highest rate of NEETs among youths aged 23-25 years (39%) compared to their Malawian (21%) and Nigerian peers (14%).

More than one third of the female youth in Ethiopia were neither studying nor working (NEETs) as the time of the survey. The share of NEETs is higher amongst female than male youth in all countries (19% vs. 7% in Nigeria, 20% vs. 10% in Malawi and 35% vs. 3% in Ethiopia). This trend is also presented when disaggregating by age cohort.

A high rate of school attendance amongst the youngest youth seems to be a predictor of a high employment rate in the older age groups at the country level. For instance, Malawi reports the highest rate of youth aged 15-18 years currently attending school or training programs (84% vs. 71% in Nigeria and 70% in Ethiopia) and the highest rate of

Figure 1. MAIN CURRENT ACTIVITY, % BY AGE AND SEX



Sampling weights used. T-tests of equality of means were conducted across men and women within each country. Any difference highlighted in the text is statistically significant.

Source: Own calculations based on HFPS surveys.

youth, aged 23-25 years, currently working (68% vs. 56% in Nigeria and 47% in Ethiopia).

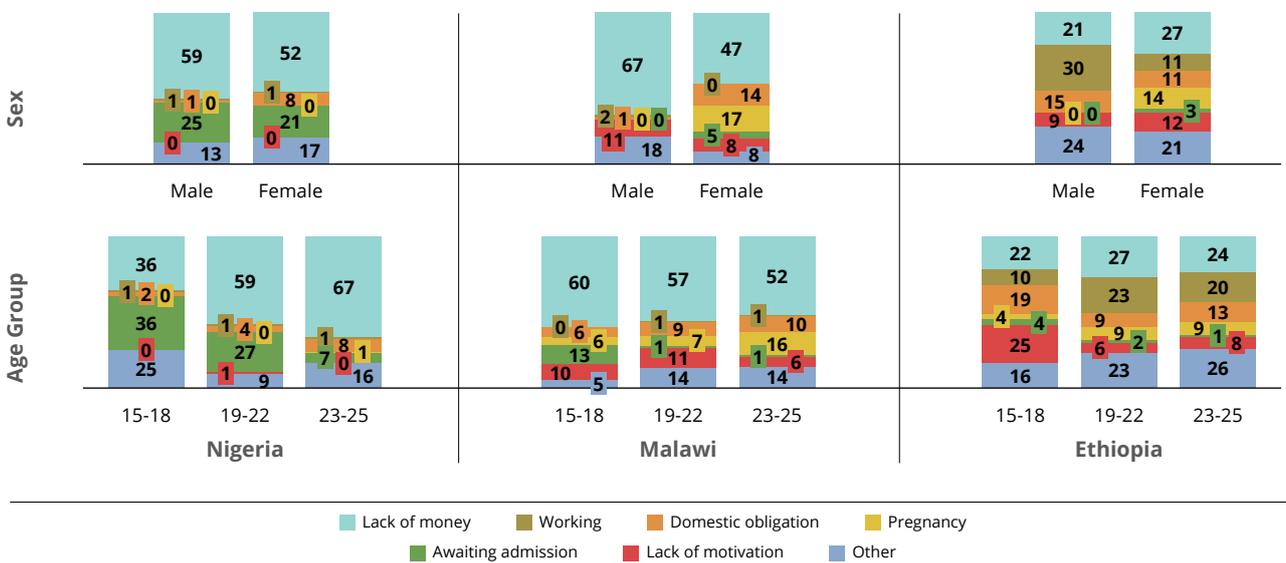
Looking deeper at the reasons that could have prevented youth from attending the current school year 2020/2021, Figure 2 shows that the main barrier is lack of money across countries.

Disaggregating by gender and age cohorts shows that pregnancies and domestic obligations are the second most common reasons for not attending school amongst female youth in Malawi and Ethiopia (31% and 25%, respectively), especially amongst Ethiopian youth aged 15-18 years (23%). In Nigeria, a significant share of both male and female youth is awaiting admission, and this is highest among the youngest youth (36%). In the case

of Ethiopia, engagement in work activities is reported by male youth as the main reason for not attending school in 2020/2021, and this share is three times higher than for female youth (30% vs. 11% respectively), but this gender difference is not statistically significant.

For Ethiopian youth aged 15-18 years, the lack of perseverance, motivation, and self-confidence (25 percent) is the main reason for not attending school during the 2020/2021 school year. A replication of this module in future rounds may help identify whether the current COVID-19 crisis is affecting the academic motivation of youths. Lack of motivation was reported as a main reason by 10 percent of Malawian youth. **Figure 2** reports the findings in detail.

Figure 2. REASONS FOR NOT ATTENDING SCHOOL IN 2020/2021 SCHOOL YEAR, % BY AGE AND SEX



Sampling weights used. T-tests of equality of means were conducted across men and women within each country. Any difference highlighted in the text is statistically significant.

Source: Own calculations based on HFPS surveys.

The main source of money for the youth is a regular job in Nigeria, and family or parents in Malawi and Ethiopia. However, the main source of income changes according to the age of the respondents.

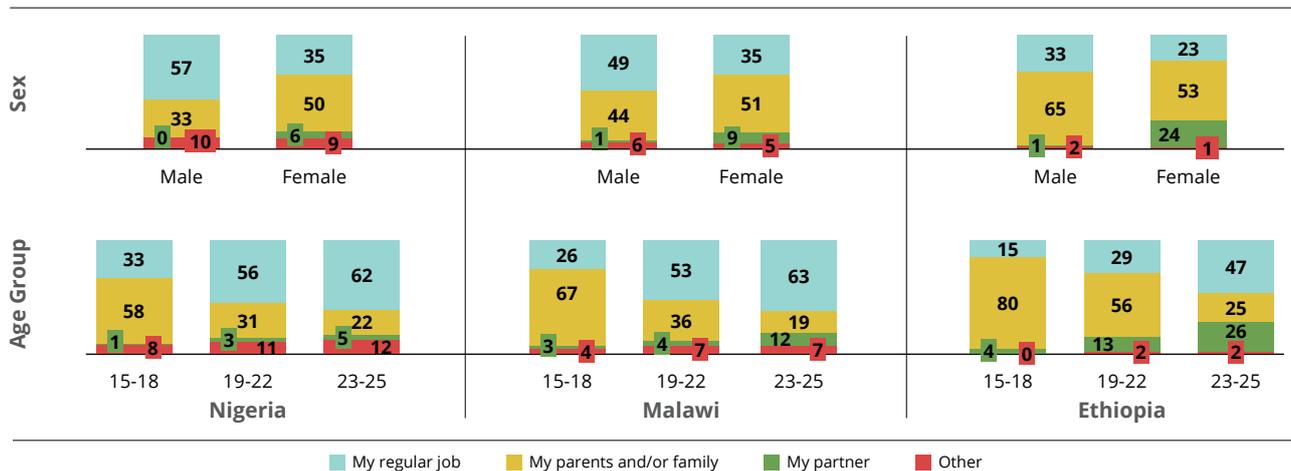
Figure 3 shows that family is the main source of income for young people aged 15-18 years who tend to still be in school and living with their parents (58% in Nigeria, 67% in Malawi, and 80% in Ethiopia). Conversely, income from a regular job is the largest source of income for the oldest youth aged 23-25 years, as they complete their education, leave their parents' house, and start working (62% in Nigeria, 63% in Malawi, and 47% in Ethiopia).

Female youth, more than their male peers, rely on the economic support of their family of origin in Nigeria and Malawi. Specifically,

50 percent of female youth versus 33 percent of male youth in Nigeria, while gender differences in family economic support are not statistically significant in Malawi. Moreover, youths aged 23-25 years rely more on their partners' support than the younger youth aged 19-22 especially in Ethiopia (26% vs. 13%).

Looking at the career plans of the youth aged 15-18 years currently attending school, more than half of them would like to continue studying after completing their current education/training programs, specifically 76 percent in Nigeria and 68 percent in Malawi (see **Figure 4**). Breaking down the employment plans of youths willing to work shows that 19 percent of Malawian youth aged 15-18, are more likely to desire working as employees, compared to 6 percent of their Nigerian peers.

Figure 3. TOP 3 SOURCES OF MONEY, % BY AGE AND SEX



Sampling weights used. T-tests of equality of means were conducted across men and women within each country. Any difference highlighted in the text is statistically significant.
 Source: Own calculations based on HFPS surveys.

Ethiopia presents a completely different scenario. Only 30 percent of the youth 15-18 years attending school would like to continue studying after completing their current education/training program.

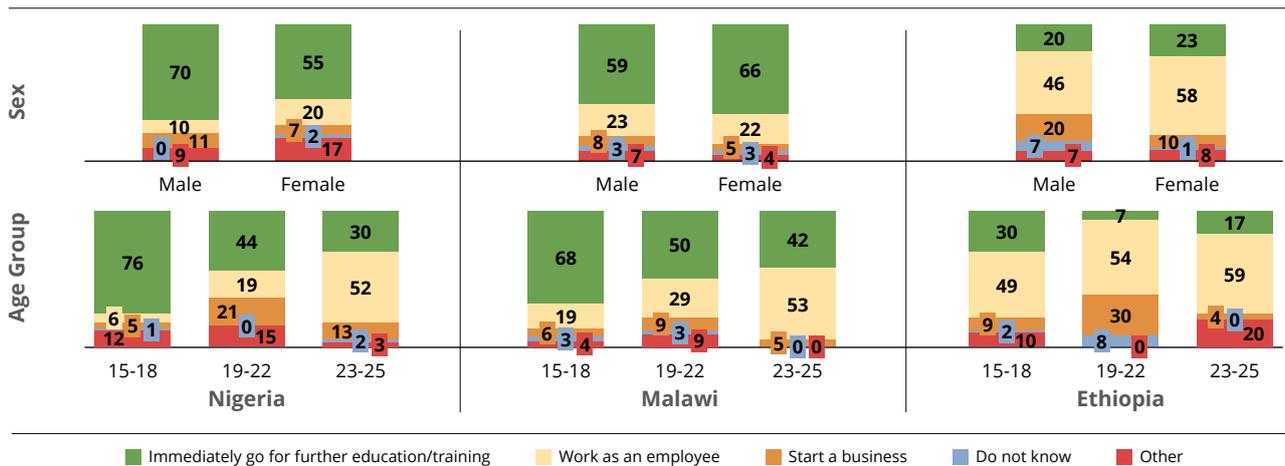
As illustrated in **Figure 4**, 58 percent of youth aged 15-18 years currently attending school plan to start working immediately after completing their education/training programs, either by opening a new business (9%) or working as employees (49%). The share of young people willing to start a business is higher in rural areas (20%) than in urban areas (6 percent), while youth living in urban areas are more attracted to the idea of becoming employees (57% vs. 49% in rural areas).

Career plans change with age across countries. The share of youth aged 15-18 years willing to keep studying after completing their current education/training program is higher than among youth aged 19-22 years (76% vs. 44% in Nigeria, 68% vs. 50% in Malawi, and 30% vs. 7% in Ethiopia).

The opposite is true for youths that plan to start working immediately after completing the current program, either as employees or business owners. When combining these two categories, the share is lower amongst youth aged 15-18 years and it increases among youth aged 19-22 years (11% vs. 40% in Nigeria, 25% vs. 38% in Malawi, and 58% vs. 84% in Ethiopia; see **Figure 4**).

Female youth in Nigeria currently attending school are less likely to continue on to further education (55%) when compared to their male peers (70%), and more willing to start working as employees (20% vs. 10%), and more willing to start working as employees (20% vs. 10%). We found similar results in Ethiopia, where the share of female youth willing to start working as employee immediately after completing their current studies is higher than among male youth (58% vs. 46%). Conversely, in Malawi, more female youth would like to keep studying compared to their male peers (66% vs. 59% respectively), but these gender differences are not statistically significant.

Figure 4. PLANS AFTER COMPLETING CURRENT EDUCATION/TRAINING PROGRAMME, % BY AGE AND SEX



Sampling weights used. T-tests of equality of means were conducted across men and women within each country. Any difference highlighted in the text is statistically significant.
Source: Own calculations based on HFPS surveys.

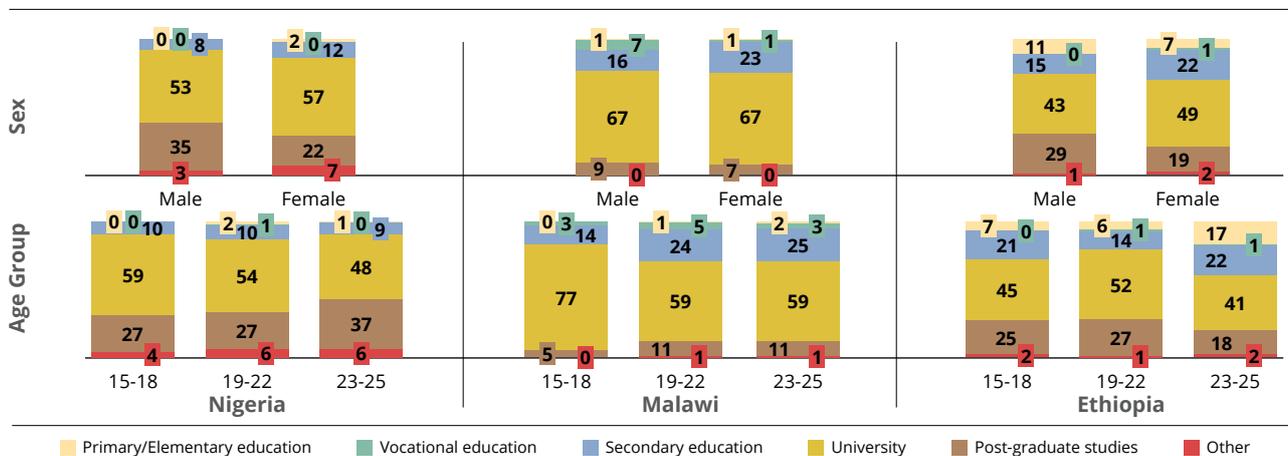
YOUTH ASPIRATIONS IN EDUCATION

The HFPS data shows differences on academic achievements and educational aspirations across the three countries. Nigeria reports the highest educational attainment among the youth. Forty percent of youth aged 23-25 years in Malawi and Ethiopia have not yet completed universal primary education, while 51 percent of their Nigerian peers have attained the secondary school qualification as the highest degree. However, the actual level of education attained does not appear to match the expectations of the youth. Assuming no barriers exist, 85 percent of Nigerian youth aged 23-25 years reported their desire to complete either a

university degree or post-graduate studies, compared to 70 and 59 percent, respectively, of youth in Malawi and Ethiopia (see **Figure 5**).

We further observe that youth aspirations in education adjust with age, and usually the oldest youths lower their educational expectations. For instance, in Malawi, 17 percent of the youth aged 15-18 years would like to stop their studies at the secondary education or vocational training, while this share increases to 28 percent for the cohort of 23-25 years old. We observe similar results for Ethiopia, where the share of youth willing to reach the primary education goes from 7 percent for youth aged 15-18 years to 17 percent for youth aged 23-25 years (see **Figure 5**).

Figure 5. LEVEL OF EDUCATION THAT YOUTH WOULD LIKE TO COMPLETE, % BY AGE AND SEX



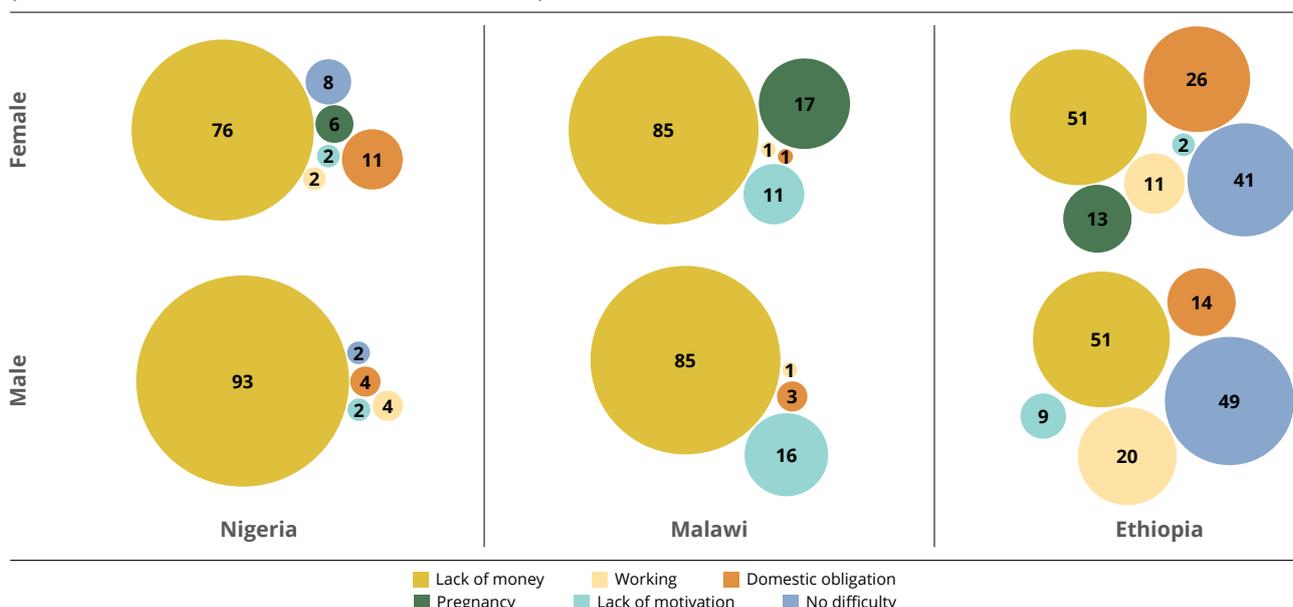
Sampling weights used. T-tests of equality of means were conducted across men and women within each country. Any difference highlighted in the text is statistically significant.

Source: Own calculations based on HFPS surveys.

Eighty-five percent of youth in Malawi and Nigeria and 51 percent in Ethiopia, report lack of money as the major constraint for youth to achieving their ideal educational level. As illustrated in **Figure 6**, when we disaggregate by gender, 93 percent of male youth in Nigeria report lack of money as the primary barrier to reaching their desired education level.

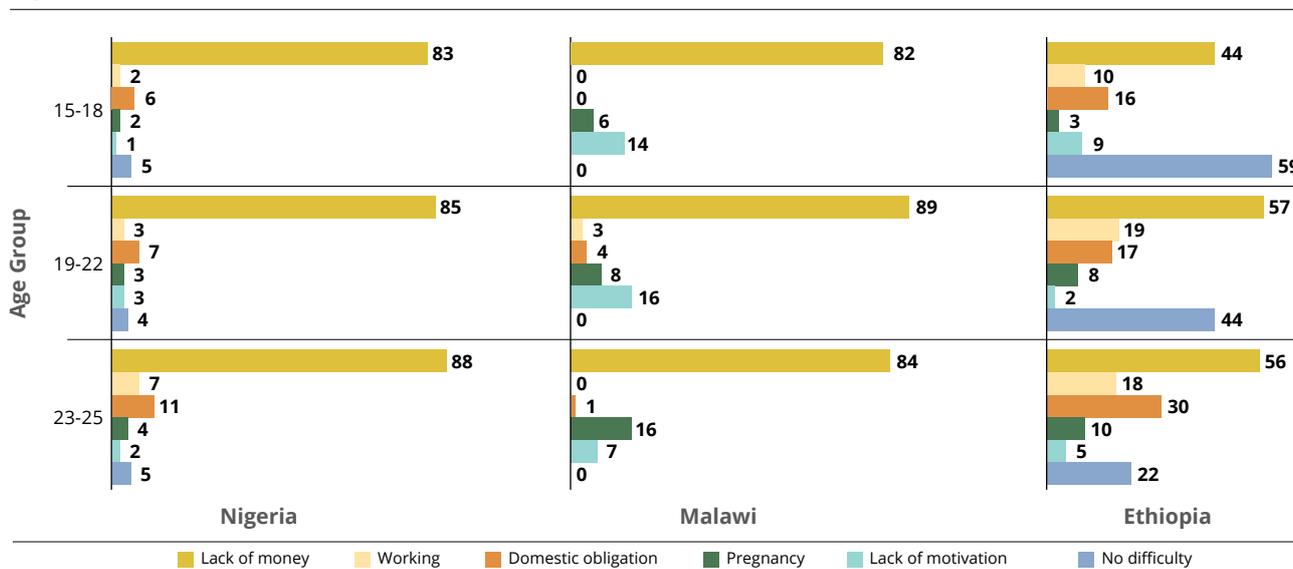
Seventy-six percent of female youth also report the lack of money as the main barrier, and 17 percent report domestic obligations and pregnancies as the second most common barriers. In Malawi, lack of motivation is the second major barrier after lack of money, especially amongst male youth (16%) and age cohorts 15-18 years (14%) and 19-22 (16%) (see **Figures 6, 7**).

Figure 6. MAIN BARRIERS FOR YOUTH TO ACHIEVING IDEAL EDUCATIONAL LEVEL, BY SEX (% OF YOUTH RESPONDENTS 15-25 YEARS OLD)



Multi-choice question. Totals may exceed 100 percent. Sampling weights used. T-tests of equality of means were conducted across men and women within each country. Any difference highlighted in the text is statistically significant. Source: Own calculations based on HFPS surveys.

Figure 7. MAIN BARRIERS FOR YOUTH TO ACHIEVING IDEAL EDUCATIONAL LEVEL, % BY AGE



Multi-choice question. Totals may exceed 100 percent. Sampling weights used. Source: Own calculations based on HFPS surveys.

Almost half of youth in Ethiopia report that they have not faced any barriers to realizing their educational goals or that they have already reached their ideal educational level. The share decreases to 22 percent amongst youth aged 23-25 years, but this is still an exceptional percentage, especially when we compare to a similar group in Nigeria (5%) and Malawi (0%) (see **Figure 7**). However, this finding can be correlated with the lower educational aspirations reported by Ethiopian youth aged 23-25 years.

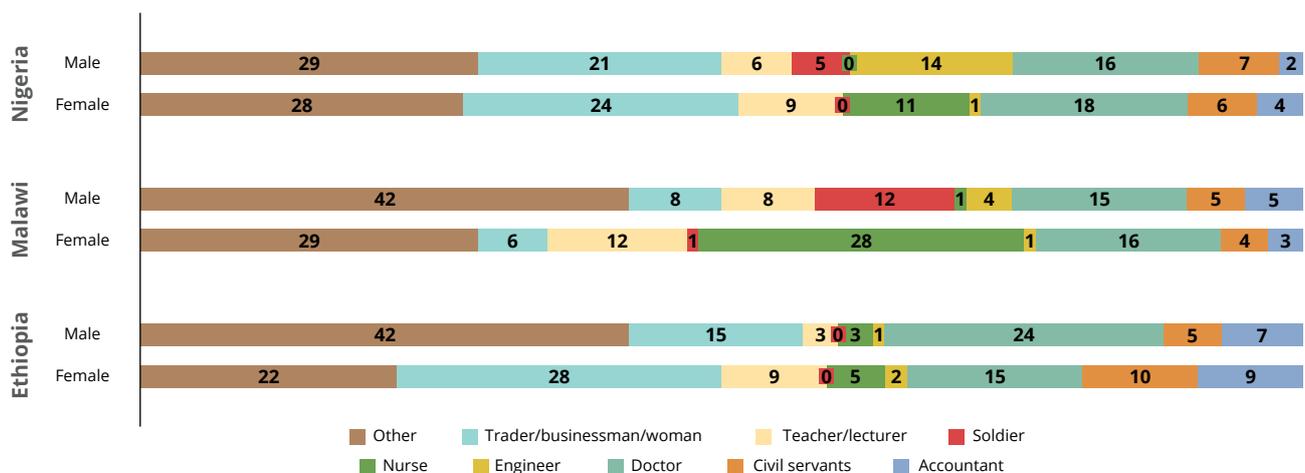
YOUTH ASPIRATIONS IN LABOR

Youth career aspirations and goals are consistent across countries in both urban and rural settings, with some exceptions. In the case of Malawi, aspirations towards a career in education are reported more by youth living in rural areas compared to urban areas (12% vs. 5% respectively). Conversely, career aspirations for jobs in engineering, which require higher levels of education and

technical skills, are mostly reported in urban as opposed to rural areas (6 percent vs. 1 percent respectively). Similar results are found in Nigeria and Ethiopia. Breaking down career expectations by gender shows significant differences across countries.

Career aspirations by gender are significantly different in the three countries. As illustrated in **Figure 8**, aspirations towards becoming a nurse practitioner or a teacher are mainly reported by female youth. In Malawi, 28 percent of young women aspire to be a nurse practitioner versus 1 percent of their male counterparts. **Conversely, aspirations towards becoming an engineer or a soldier are mainly reported by male youth.** For example, in Nigeria, 14 percent of young men desire to be an engineer versus 1 percent of female counterparts. Gender differences in aspiring of being nurse for female youth and engineer for male youth are statistically significant across all countries.

Figure 8. IDEAL JOB, BY SEX (% OF YOUTH RESPONDENTS 15-25 YEARS OLD)



Sampling weights used. T-tests of equality of means were conducted across men and women within each country. Any difference highlighted in the text is statistically significant.

Source: Own calculations based on HFPS surveys.

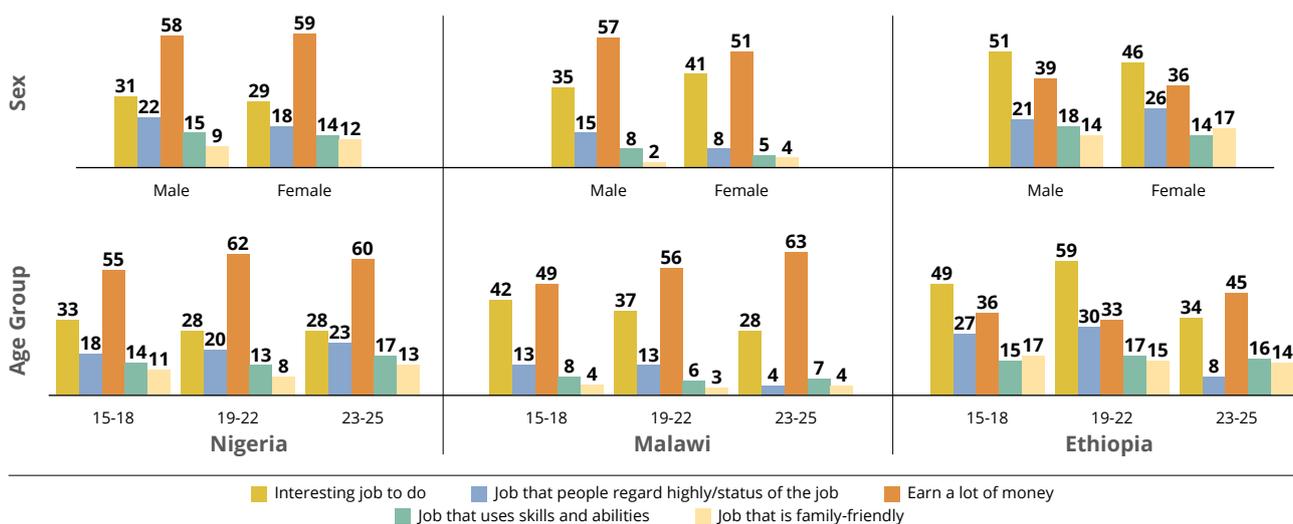
When accounting for gender differences in the career aspirations of youth, we observe a consistent pattern across the three countries that may depend on the exposure to traditional gender roles, patriarchal values, and cultural expectations. Cultural beliefs about gender roles can be a constraint on the career aspirations of female youth who tend to seek jobs in fields like nursing or teaching, which tend to pay less than higher paid jobs in traditionally male-dominated professions, like electricians, engineering, etc.

Looking at the ideal job characteristics, young Nigerians and Malawians aspire to work in high paying jobs. Figure 9 shows that, on average, almost 60 percent of youth in Nigeria and about 50 percent in Malawi say earning a lot of money is the main factor in assessing career satisfaction for both female and male youth. This percentage is

particularly high in the 23-25-year age group in both countries. On the other hand, about half the youth in Ethiopia rate how interesting the job is as the number one characteristic the ideal job should have, especially among the lower and middle brackets, 15-18 and 19-22 years. With the third bracket, 23-25 years, earning a lot of money is the main consideration, according to 45 percent of youth in that group.

To sum up, earning a high salary and how interesting the job is are the main factors that the ideal job should have, and the former becomes more important with age. Other job characteristics such as family-friendly environment, or skills matching are only reported by less than 20 percent of the youth groups presented on Figure 9. The data does not show any consistent and significant gender differences across countries.

Figure 9. MOST IMPORTANT CHARACTERISTICS THAT “DREAM” JOB SHOULD HAVE, % BY AGE AND SEX



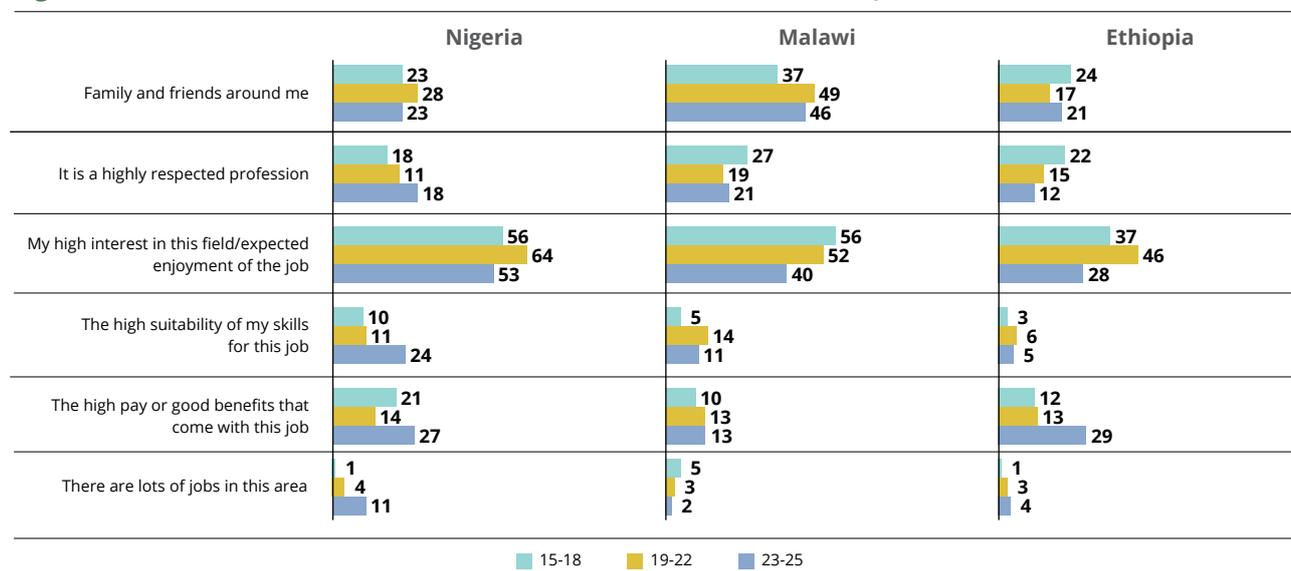
Totals may exceed 100percent due to multi-choice questions. Sampling weights used. T-tests of equality of means were conducted across men and women within each country. Any difference highlighted in the text is statistically significant. Source: Own calculations based on HFPS surveys.

Across countries, the aspiration of working in the field of interest is the main factor that influences youth to imagine their ideal job (59% in Nigeria, 52% in Malawi, and 38% in Ethiopia). When analyzing the potential factors and circumstances that shape youth career aspirations, **Figure 10** shows that in Nigeria, the importance of working in the field of interest increases with age, from 56 percent for youth aged 15-18 years to 64 percent for youth aged 19-22 years, and in Ethiopia, from 37 percent to 46 percent, before dropping for youth aged 23-25 years in both countries. This reduction is due to high pay and benefits taking over as the main factor in shaping career aspirations for youth in the 23-25-year age bracket in Ethiopia (29%) and in Nigeria (27%). In Malawi, working in the field of interest is a factor that shapes career aspiration mainly

amongst the youngest youths (56%) and less in the oldest age group (40%). Findings in all the three countries are in line with the increase of importance that the 23-25-year youths give to earning a lot of money, as showed in **Figure 9**.

The data shows that family and friends also play a crucial role in influencing youth career goals and preferences, especially in Malawi. Almost 43 percent of Malawian youth believe that their expectations about the ideal job are influenced by their social networks. Specifically, family and friends are reported as the most influential factors in shaping the career aspirations of half of the oldest youth aged 19-22 years (see **Figure 10**). Regarding gender, there are no significant differences across the countries.

Figure 10. MAIN FACTORS INFLUENCED YOUTH TO IMAGINE THEIR “DREAM” JOB, % BY AGE



Multi-choice question. Totals may exceed 100 percent. Sampling weights used.
 Source: Own calculations based on HFPS surveys.

Looking at the oldest cohort of youth aged 23-25 years who are currently working, only 39 percent in Nigeria, 29 percent in Ethiopia and 4 percent in Malawi report doing their dream job.

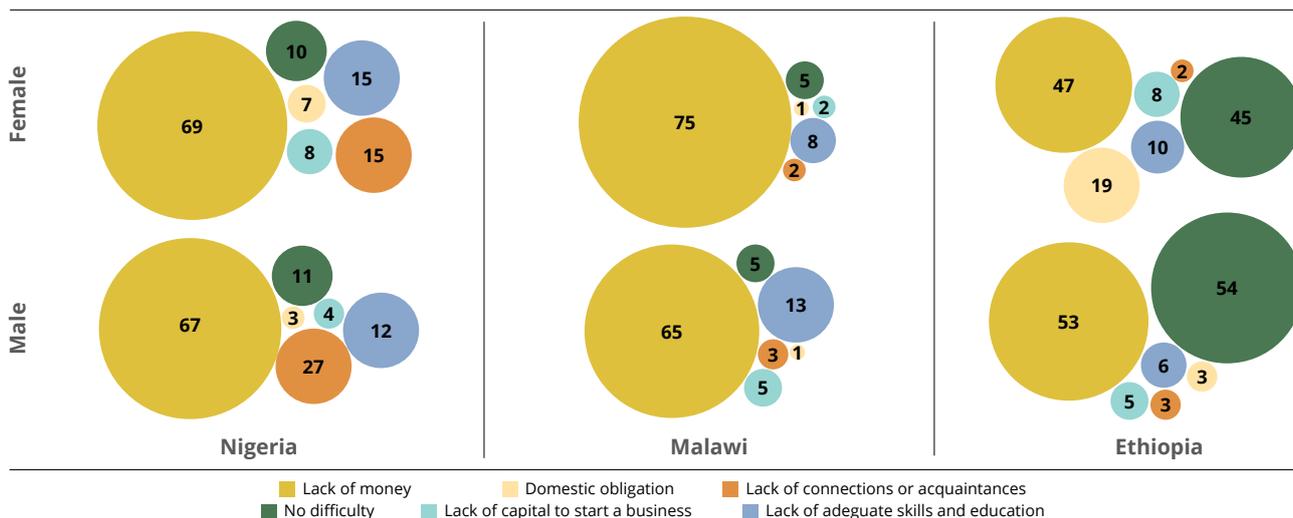
However, Nigerian and Ethiopian youth aged 23-25 years have high expectations that they will have their dream job someday. Almost 90 percent in Nigeria and 77 percent in Ethiopia report that their dream jobs are likely and very likely achievable. Conversely, Malawian youth seem to be more hopeless – only half of them believe they will succeed in achieving their desired profession, especially among the youth aged 23-25 years.

Understanding the gap between aspirational goals and successful outcomes will be aided by a look at the barriers/obstacles faced by youth. Across all three countries, the lack of money is reported as the primary reason

for youth failures in career aspirations. As illustrated in **Figures 11** and **12**, 66 percent of youth aged 23-25 years in Malawi report lack of money as the primary reason for aspiration failures. Similar results are found in Nigeria and Ethiopia, but the gender differences are not statistically significant in both countries.

We observe further that the lack of connections or acquaintances is the second most reported constraint to the aspirations of male youths (27%) and people aged 23-25 years (22%) in Nigeria, while domestic obligations are the second most reported barrier for people aged 23-25 years in Ethiopia (12%), especially amongst female youth (19%), and more than in the other countries (7% in Nigeria and 1% in Malawi). **Ethiopia also shows the highest rate of youth aged 23-25 years reporting any difficulty in realizing their ideal job (38% vs. 7% in Nigeria and 5% in Malawi).**

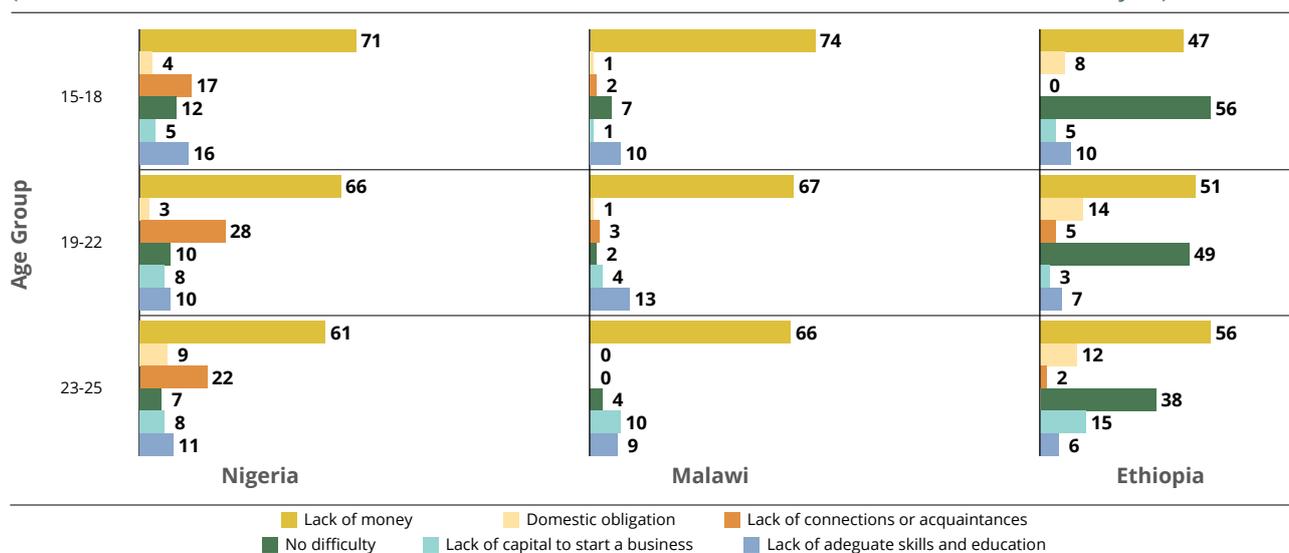
Figure 11. MAIN CONSTRAINTS FOR YOUTH TO REALIZING THEIR “DREAM” JOB, BY SEX
(% OF YOUTH RESPONDENTS 15-25 YEARS OLD WHO ARE NOT CURRENTLY DOING THEIR “DREAM” JOB)



Multi-choice question. Totals may exceed 100 percent. Sampling weights used. T-tests of equality of means were conducted across men and women within each country. Any difference highlighted in the text is statistically significant.

Source: Own calculations based on HFPS surveys.

Figure 12. MAIN CONSTRAINTS FOR YOUTH TO REALIZING THEIR “DREAM” JOB, BY AGE
 (% OF YOUTH RESPONDENTS 15-25 YEARS OLD WHO ARE NOT CURRENTLY DOING THEIR “DREAM” JOB)



Multi-choice question. Totals may exceed 100 percent. Sampling weights used.
 Source: Own calculations based on HFPS surveys.

In conclusion, measuring youth aspirations helps shed light on the possible employment outcomes that can be observed in adulthood and play a role in breaking poverty circles, which is highly relevant for public policy. Improved data collection supports the targeted design of policies to answer specific questions, such as, what is the right age to intervene – if the goal is to help shape aspirations, amongst others.

Including an aspirations module on household surveys can help to identify aspirations over time and link them with household characteristics. By collecting

data at the individual level in a multi-topic household survey, we will be able to identify different characteristics of the youth and their families, that will help to understand how aspirations shape the youth future. An area for possible further research may explore how aspirations change with respect to age, shocks, and coping mechanisms. In addition, understanding the link between current youth aspirations and family factors, i.e., the educational achievements of their parents or the socio-economic background of the household, may contribute to a more robust discussion around policies intended to match aspirations with job opportunities.

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