Aspirations and sex: Coming of age in western Kenya in a context of HIV
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Citation for published version (APA):
Early morning at Dhonam’s beach, and although the air is still fresh you can feel from the first rays of sunshine that it will be a very hot day. The village is already bustling with activity at 7 a.m. After spending the whole night on the lake, fishermen come to shore in their wooden boats, painted with images of heroism, love, and devotion to God or Bob Marley. Depending on the wind and the water hyacinths, the infestation of which clogs increasingly large areas of Lake Victoria, landing a boat can be nearly impossible. On the pathway to the lake, female traders await the fishermen—who will soon have cash in their pockets—hoping to attract them to their wares of furniture and clothes, spread out on blankets along the path. Others sell snacks like boiled mwogo (cassava) and mandazi (East African fried bread). Restaurants along the lakefront are also open to serve the fishermen an early, heavy breakfast.

As soon as the fishermen arrive, female fish traders hurry toward the shore and make their way through the water hyacinths. They surround the boats and purchase omena, a kind of small sardine. Fish traders who can afford to have paid in advance make sure they get priority. Sometimes, they reserve fish before the fishermen even go out, and pay up when the fishermen return. Regular customers who buy a lot of fish also get preference. A number of the female fishmongers are in sexual relationships with the fishermen, as their girlfriends or wives, which guarantees them access to fish. It is said that one must have many fishermen as ‘friends’ to obtain fish. Fishermen sometimes move from one place to another searching for fish. At Dhonam’s beach, a number of the fishermen have migrated to Winam from different places, perhaps leaving behind wives and children. Younger fishermen, who haven’t yet married, quickly find a girlfriend to temporarily stay with.

The fishmongers carry the omens out of the water in basins, and then clean them on the shore; most of the omens will be dried in the sun and then sold at the evening market. Only a few go door to door to sell fresh omens in the morning hours; the lake
has recently been declared off-limits during and after spawning season, in order to let the stock recover, and selling *omena* has become illegal during the closure of the lake. Since there is no alternative, *joamuok* (people who fish and trade fish) prefer risking arrest to losing their small daily income.

After the *omena* catch has been distributed among the female fishmongers, the fishermen carry ashore the rest of their catch and arrange them on the ground according to size. Most nets are half-empty: all the hard work of last night, and all the competition with other boats for the best spots, have yielded very few, decent-sized *ngege* (tilapia)\(^1\) and *nyamami* (bigger tilapia), the type of fish that sells best on the local, national, and international markets. There are plenty of *mbuta* (Nile perch), an inexpensive delicacy in Europe’s supermarkets, but not a favourite in Winam. The fishermen stand next to their boat’s catch while the *karan* (boat secretary or cashier) records the number of fish according to size. The price of each boat’s catch is then agreed upon and sold accordingly. The larger *ngege* and *mbuta* are usually immediately sold to male or female middlemen, who then sell them to markets in Kisumu or Nairobi.

When the fishermen and traders return from the beach between 7 a.m. and 9 a.m., Dhonam’s market centre becomes very crowded. Until noontime, kiosks serve freshly made *mandazi* and *chapati* (Indian flatbread), and sell small bits of *mbuta*, *ngege*, and *omena*. Most of the available fresh fish are small, and locals complain: “Nowadays there is no fish—you cannot even cook for your visitors”. Locals do try to reserve the few big fish that are available for funerals, of which there are many. One important restaurant in Dhonam, which serves employees of governmental and non-governmental organisations, also reserves a certain quantity of fish each day. At the market, there is a small variety of local vegetables like *sukuma wiki* (a Swahili term meaning ‘pushing the weak’), a spinach-like vegetable that can be harvested at any time; traditional green leaves such as *bo* and *mto*; and vegetables imported from Kisumu including cabbage, tomatoes, carrots, and avocados, which can only be found now and then. In addition to a wide variety of beans, including green and black lentils, pigeon peas, and cowpeas, some traders also sell sweet potatoes, white potatoes, and cassava, also imported from Kisumu. When there is less capital this is reflected in the variety of food, as fewer traders can travel back and forth to buy goods. It is rare to find fruit at the market. Since the local soil is not adequately fertile, only a few people are able to grow bananas, mangoes, and citrus fruit, and only for their own consumption.

The market centre, made up of wooden stalls, is surrounded by cement houses built in the 1960s by Asian migrants (referred to as the “Indians,” see Chapter 3). At the
time of my fieldwork, these buildings belonged to prosperous African businessmen who were living in Kisumu and Nairobi. Most of these cement buildings house shops with a surprisingly large range of products for such a poor area, which, according to Ochieng’ (1974), indicates the importance of remittances sent from the cities. Among the local shops, there are three tailors, two chemists, and a posho (maize) mill. A bit further away, a butcher, carpenter, hair saloon, hardware shop, soda depot, and video hall, all present their goods and services. Among these, grinding and selling maize seems to be a lucrative business, as the number of such enterprises increased from one to three during the course of my fieldwork. However, starting up such a business requires financial resources and there is a limit to the number of viable mills in a single marketplace.

In the afternoon, a handful of male youngsters roam about or idle around the market centre, or go to the lake to kill time. Near the hair saloon, between the boda boda (bike taxi) stop and the hardware shop, young men gather to play karata, a card game in which you can earn or lose money. The Kenyan Government prohibits this game because it supposedly encourages idleness and laziness, and because those who play it do not work and waste what little money they have. At the boda boda stop, young people and elderly folks meet up for a drink of chang’aa (a strong, local, illegally brewed liquor). It is a great place to sit and watch the activities of the day: fishermen coming in from the shore; people going to and coming from the market; travellers getting out of the matatu (public mini-buses) and others embarking to go to town; and the big white CDC Land Rovers, passing by. This is the daily scenery of Dhonam.

The local economy of Dhonam revolves around the fishing industry of Dhonam’s beach. Although overfishing and the collapse of Lake Victoria’s ecosystem have dramatically reduced the fishing stock, affecting the local economy (Shege 1995), the beach still attracts many young fishermen, not only from within Winam but also from different places, including Kisumu District and Siaya District. When fish are scarce in these men’s own localities, they move and temporarily rent rooms in places away from home. Despite the meagre catches, the fishermen still preferred it to “idling around” since there was little other work in Winam.

The youngsters often said: “Wabayo abayo”, a phrase that has multiple meanings. It can translate as “We are just strolling”, indicating a level of relaxed-ness when visiting friends, relatives, or lovers, but in a context of high unemployment, it often indicated the lack of direction in their lives. “Wabayo abayo” can mean “We are moving around”, referring to moving repeatedly, looking for work or lovers, and having
the sense that, on this journey, they often lost their way. At the same time, youngsters also used the expression to comment on women who ‘moved around’ too much, a euphemism for having too many sexual relationships (see Chapter 6). Young people sometimes described moving around as “tarmacking”, which meant travelling on the tarmac roads of Kisumu, Nairobi, and Mombasa (see also Prince 2005). What motivates all these forms of wabayo abayo is young people’s aspirations, hopes, and ambitions to find a better future, one different than their parents’, different than the one experienced at ‘home’.

Part II—starting with this chapter—focuses on the daily lives of the young people of Winam. This and the following chapters demonstrate that the ‘structural violence’ discourse—described in the previous chapter on Winam—is only one side of the story. The youngsters with whom I worked in Winam are not simply passive victims of structural forces, but ‘tactical agents’ (as defined in Chapter 1). Despite living in a marginalized, impoverished environment, most of the young people demonstrate tremendous creativity in making a living for themselves, as will be shown in this chapter. At the same time, they are also constrained as they act within an environment characterized by ‘enduring uncertainty’.

In this chapter, I elaborate on the different ‘livelihood tactics’ that young people employ in the hope of moving up the social ladder and finding security, including the importance of urban mobility as a tactic. Young people hope to move out of rural areas to urban areas not only for education or jobs, but also to expand their social and sexual networks. Due to the instability of their social networks, some of the youngsters increase their sexual networks—including, sometimes, sexual liaisons with multiple, concurrent partners. In exploring why and how some of the youngsters expand their sexual networks, I review Thornton’s (2009) work and further develop his argument that sexual relationships with multiple partners serve to increase an individual’s social and sexual network. Thornton’s (2009) analysis, however, is lacking a more nuanced view on gender-specific effects. As I will elaborate in this chapter, climbing up the social ladder and finding a better way of living through sexual liaisons was more prevalent among young women than young men.

In order to follow this line of thought, we need to take a closer look at the theoretical concepts of ‘livelihood’ and ‘social capital’. Starting with a brief discussion of these concepts, I point to their key limitations. Taking the criticisms of the ‘Sustainable Livelihood Approach’ (SLA) into account, I present the different livelihood opportunities
of the young people of Winam. I subsequently discuss the youngsters’ aspirations for urban mobility. An in-depth look at the life story of Akinyi, including her previous pathways and her future aspirations, shows that ‘moving around’ is a common feature throughout the young people’s lives, from childhood to early adulthood, in Winam.

2. Theoretical concepts: ‘Livelihood’ and ‘social capital’

2.1. ‘Livelihood’: Strategies, practices, and tactics

The concept of ‘livelihood’ means more than just having a job or an income. Following Chambers and Conway (1992), Chambers (1995), and Carney (1998), ‘livelihood’ includes five types of capital, or ‘livelihood resources’—“the basic material and social, tangible and intangible assets that people use for constructing their livelihoods” (Krantz 2001: 8). These can be grouped into the following categories: natural (land, water, biodiversity), social (networks, group membership, access to other societal institutions), human (knowledge, access to work, health, skills, creativity), physical (livestock, food stock, basic infrastructure and production capacity), and financial (savings, access to credit) (Carney 1998: 6–7). The concept of ‘sustainable livelihood’ moved away from this conventional approach towards a framework of poverty reduction. In so doing, the concept took into account not only the various capital assets of the poor, but also emphasised the wider context (i.e., the institutional processes and organisational structures) that either constrain or enhance poor people’s ability to make a living (De Haan 2012).

The original definition of a ‘sustainable rural livelihood’, developed by Chambers and Conway (1992), was accepted by the British Department of International Development (DfID) after some small modifications:

A livelihood comprises the capabilities, assets (including both material and social resources) and activities required for a means of living. A livelihood is sustainable when it can cope with and recover from stresses and shocks and maintain or enhance its capabilities and assets both now and in the future, while not undermining the natural resource base (Carney 1998: 4).

Although the concept can be used at various levels, it is most commonly applied at the household level. In general, the concept of ‘household’ is problematic because it focuses on economic aspects, seeing the household as a utility-maximising unit with one distinct head, a conceptualization that ignores gender-based, intra-household power relations and inequalities. For practical reasons I make use of the concept of household notwithstanding its limitations, since it still has empirical significance (see also Niehof
2004). In this dissertation, I use the definition of ‘household’ articulated by Rudie: “a family-based co-residential unit that takes care of resource management and the primary needs of its members” (cited in Niehof 2004: 323).

The SLA understanding of ‘livelihood’ rapidly became utilised in approaches to rural poverty reduction in marginalised regions. Its approach is actor-oriented and mainly focuses on poor people’s opportunities and agency (De Haan 2012). One of the underlying assumptions of this approach is that economic growth might not automatically lead to poverty reduction, because “all depends on the capabilities of the poor to take advantage of expanding economic opportunities” (Krantz 2001: 2). The SLA also stresses the importance of participatory interventions in order to integrate the ‘local knowledge’ of poor people into project designs, implementation, and monitoring—a bottom-up rather than top-down approach (Krantz 2001; De Haan 2012).

The concepts of ‘livelihood strategies’ or ‘livelihood practices’ refer to individuals’ and households’ attempts to secure and improve their lives, i.e., beyond mere survival (UNDP 1997: 5–6). Zoomers (1999: 18) defines ‘livelihood strategies’ as “the way families respond to change, handling opportunities and limitations”. An important addition to this definition of ‘livelihood strategies’ comes from Ellis (1998a: 1): “the process by which rural families construct a diverse portfolio of activities and social support capabilities in order to survive and to improve their standards of living”. While Zoomers focuses on the fact that external factors constrain possibilities for action, Ellis’s definition suggests a more proactive process of assembling diverse actions to improve a situation. Both definitions ask us to focus on what drives families to adopt certain strategies and not others, such as improving income, reducing risk, or improving prestige in the community, and to recognize that they may adopt different strategies at different times, focussing more on accumulation at one point and survival at another (Zoomers 1999: 46–48). Whatever pathways people pursue, it is not always the result of well-thought-through, ‘strategic’ actions. The term ‘strategy’ refers to “conscious and coherently structured actions that are aimed at achieving something in the future” (Niehof 2004), covering a long-term period: indeed, Zoomers chooses to use the term ‘livelihood practices’ in describing actions taken within a short-term study.

Although ‘practices’ is a more accurate term than ‘strategies’, the notion of ‘tactics’ (De Certeau 1984) even better captures the situational navigation that is embedded in everyday struggles of ordinary young people. This concept not only aims to account for the external factors that influence young people’s livelihood practices (see Chapter 3), but also attends to how young people spend their days. The external context
and the actors mutually influence each other. It is important to analyse how specific groups or individuals create space for realising their own projects, which run parallel to, and are often hidden in the shadows of, interventions by the government or other entities, such as NGOs (Long 1990: 14–17). In this dissertation, I therefore focus on young people’s ‘livelihood tactics’ to show how, in their everyday lives, young people try to deal with their immediate conditions in order to maximise the circumstances created by their impoverished environment.

When we try to understand ‘livelihood tactics’, it is important to analyse them as situational since their path and direction of development are hard to predict. We cannot generalise for groups of people, such as young people who might be fishermen or farmers, since they are not sufficiently homogenous to be regarded as having common characteristics and interests. Nor are they static categories: poor farmers can through luck and circumstance work their way up to become rich, and rich businessmen can come into a crisis and tumble into poverty (Zoomers 1999: 46–47). Young people are members of households with histories: what has happened in the past has an influence on decision making in the present and in the future. Households are also affected by their very composition: the expenditures and inputs differ between a household with young dependents and a household with ageing dependents (Niehof 2004). Therefore it is important to take into account that time and the division of labour are also important factors in the management of resources within a household. The roles of the different actors might be well defined but may also change. There is also diversity across households as some have a high degree of internal specialization while in others all the members participate in nearly all the tasks (Zoomers 1999: 46–47).

2.2. ‘Social capital’: Social and sexual networks

‘Social capital’ is a livelihood asset that I wish to dwell upon since it was of great importance in my research. The concept has become more widely used since the late 1990s in association with poverty alleviation (Shepherd 1998) and health-enhancing behaviour (Campbell 2000). Generally, social capital consists of social norms and social networks (Niehof 2004; Nombo and Niehof 2008), a resource that people can rely upon to bolster or improve their situation. The concept was first widely discussed in Putman’s (2000) landmark book *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. According to Putnam (2000: 24), social capital refers to “the collective value of all social networks and the inclinations that arise from these networks to do things for each other”, associated with increased trust, reciprocity, and support. For Putnam
(2000), the act of ‘bowling alone’ is a metaphor that illustrates the decline of social capital in the United States. The Social Capital Foundation asserts that social capital is not primarily about the networks that a person possesses but is more a collective, shared, and reciprocal disposition to generate, maintain, and develop congenial and social connections. Social capital is thus a relational concept; it exists only as far as it is shared (Portes 1998).

Social capital can often act as an informal safety net during periods of insecurity. Nombo and Niehof (2008: 241) write that social capital might be “a last resort resource to the poor and vulnerable for its ability to provide a buffer to shocks such as death in the family”. Such buffers against shocks are very important for rural households, taking many different forms: shared food stores, helping out in crop cultivation, and community savings-and-loan groups. In the context of non-existent official safety nets as well as the general vulnerability of rural subsistence, these buffers are essential for individuals or households to respond to unforeseen circumstances (Zoomers 1999: 35). Mobilizing social capital may create a supportive context, which in its turn may have a positive impact on people’s health (Campbell 2000; Campbell and McLean 2002; Hawe and Shiell 2000). According to Catherine Campbell (2000: 184), the most important dimension of health-enhancing social capital is ‘perceived citizen power’. This is a characteristic of communities where people are participating in local community networks and where people feel that their needs and views are respected and valued.

2.3. Limitations of the concepts of ‘livelihood’ and ‘social capital’

The SLA has received a number of criticisms (see Hoon et al. 1997; De Haan 2000; Moser and Norton 2001; Small 2011). One is that the SLA is based upon a vulnerability-driven ideology: SLA’s use is focused on the poor who are assumed to be most vulnerable to contextual changes, and typically the actions of wealthier people are not taken into account (Small 2011: 31). Others also argue that the SLA is ahistoric (see Small 2011) and that power relations have for a long time not been taken into account (Moser and Norton 2001). However, the initial neglect of power relations in the SLA was quickly overcome by a new generation of livelihood studies that demonstrated the operation of power in livelihood strategies (see overview in De Haan 2012). Nevertheless, the SLA continues to emphasize an actor-oriented perspective in development studies and starts from an “unconditional belief in the adaptive capabilities of man, i.e. the human capacity to adapt repeatedly to changing circumstances and still to guarantee a sustainable exploitation of scarce resources” (De Haan 1999: 13). The livelihood
approach seems to be inspired by the work of Sen (1999) and Giddens (1984) in which it is assumed that the expansion of agents’ ‘ability’ or ‘capacity’ can bring improvement to their standard of living (see also Chapter 3). As De Haan (2012: 348) also highlights, the SLA “tended to focus more on opportunities than on constraints, more on actor’s agency than on structure, more on neutral strategies than on failed access due to conflicts and inequalities in power”. The livelihood concept indeed emphasises the individual’s responsibility to act over the societal task to create employment and facilitate upward mobility. It is the youngsters’ responsibility to earn their daily bread, something often accomplished through enormous creativity. Although the SLA takes into account wider contextual factors as a potential constraint to the livelihood tactics of poor people, it also stresses the potential ability of agents to employ livelihood strategies that can influence and even change structures. The SLA stresses the capacities, abilities, and opportunities of human agents, and leaves little or no room for a situation where actors are not capable, unable, or without opportunity to act. While some actors might have a certain amount of power to act in certain regions and in certain social groups (those with more education, with more access to land, with fewer health risks), for others this might not be the case. It is important to take into account these enormous regional and social disparities (Christiansen et al. 2003). In an environment severely affected by persistent poverty and HIV/AIDS, we cannot ignore the impact of the epidemic when talking about the livelihood tactics of young people. According to Niehof (2004: 333), there are two factors that complicate the ability of rural households to cope with AIDS. The first is related to what Loevinsohn and Gillespie highlight (cited in Niehof 2004: 333), that impacts are not one-time events but processes that are “often hidden, slow-moving, but destructive”. The second factor—which was mentioned by Barnett and Whiteside (cited in Niehof 2004: 333)—is the clustered nature of these impacts, since HIV/AIDS usually affects more than one person within a household and several households within a community. Thus when livelihood tactics are viewed through the lens of enduring uncertainty and HIV/AIDS, a downward spiral becomes apparent, one that leads to the depletion of household resources and the splintering of social capital.

The concept of ‘social capital’, which points to one of the livelihood tactics that young people employ in order to improve their livelihood networks, holds the same limitations as the ‘livelihood’ concept. It starts with a presumption of ‘ability’. However, we cannot take for granted that all people have social capital or can acquire it. Social capital can also have negative consequences. There is evidence that social capital transforms and reproduces unequal relations since it is often unequally distributed
Campbell and McLean (2002) question if social capital is a useful tool for exploring community-level influences on HIV infection, given that substantial social capital is most likely to exist among the wealthiest and most educated members of a community (see also Chapter 7). Thus, in a context where the possibility of creating or benefiting from social capital is constrained by poverty or other forms of inequality, the lack of social capital may serve as a cause of exclusion. These considerations demand that we examine the economic and political dimensions of social capital, not taken up by Putman (2000) in his analysis, in order to recognize other factors in HIV infection, such as poverty and racism (Campbell and McLean 2002).

Importantly, these issues are not temporary problems. For those who are subject every day to unpredictable, tough living conditions, the conventional understanding of human vulnerability and resilience—where crisis is understood as a temporary abnormality related to a particular event such as rape, the loss of a relative, or a disease such as HIV/AIDS—seems to be inadequate, since crisis becomes ‘normalized’ and embedded in the very social fabric of life (Vigh 2008: 7–8). The concept of social capital fails to account for situations where crisis is perpetual; lacking the stable preconditions required to build social capital, there is little to draw upon when problems arise.

Throughout this dissertation, I acknowledge the limitations of the concepts of ‘livelihood’ and ‘social capital’. While taking these criticisms into account, I value the concepts of ‘livelihood’ and ‘livelihood tactics’ because—from an actor-oriented perspective—they assist me in framing a holistic analysis of how youngsters organize their daily lives in Winam. While I demonstrate in this chapter how youngsters try to improve their life chances and work towards a better future for themselves, I stress the limitations of their abilities within a context of persistent poverty and uncertainty.

3. Livelihood opportunities for young people in Winam

In Africa, young people are actively participating in socioeconomic developments. Thomas (cited in De Boeck and Honwana 2005: 3) writes that portraying young people as dependent, immature, innocent, vulnerable, in need of adult protection, and incapable of taking on responsibility is inaccurate, since many of the youngsters in Africa already contribute at an early age to the productive work of the family. Among the middle class in Europe and North America, as Honwana (cited in De Boeck and Honwana 2005: 3) has noted, young people are often described as “people in the process of becoming rather than being”. This Western view of young people has been
universalised by several international agreements establishing global standards of child protection. And it is a powerful conception of youth: “youngsters who do not follow this path are considered either to be at risk or to pose a risk to society” (De Boeck and Honwana 2005: 3).

In Kenya, the Kibaki administration has made primary education compulsory and tuition-free since 2002, which has led to a significant increase in enrolment, especially among young women. As a consequence, some forms of child labour that had prevented children from attending school are now viewed as violating children’s rights to go to school. Most of the youngsters in Winam have put their hopes in higher education (including secondary school) since they believe that it will enable them to find employment later in life. But school fees for secondary and higher education are disproportionately high, and while parents can pay in instalments, some are forced to sell their goats or a cow in order to be able to pay the fee. Many youngsters dropped out between terms, and stayed out of school as long as three or four years until they could find a scholarship, or until a Member of Parliament or distant relative was able to help. When not in school, they tried to save money by working on farms or starting a small business. Some youth dropped out even before completing primary school, pregnancy ended school for some young women, and ongoing poverty at home meant that some never could return to school. Family resources were mostly invested first in the eldest son, whereas daughters were expected to wait or to repeat a primary education grade while their brother proceeded (see also Hughes and Mwiria 1988: 180–181). Parents reason that their sons are the ones who will inherit from them and who will take care of them later. They assume their daughters will marry and move to their husband’s home; investing in sons is seen as an investment in the ancestral homestead. On the other hand, investing in higher levels of education leads to expectations of white-collar employment, not typically forthcoming in Winam, at least during the time of my fieldwork. Secondary school graduates who were unable to continue their studies into college usually ended up doing the same kind of jobs as the ones who had dropped out of school much earlier on.

The nation’s economic decline began when Kenya and several other African countries were undergoing economic recession and subsequent structural adjustment in the late 1970s. During the Moi’s era, in 2002, the percentage of Kenyans living under the poverty line rose steadily and economic growth slumped (BBC’s News Online, ‘Moi’s legacy to Kenya’, Phombeah Gray, 5 August 2002). The International Monetary Funds (IMF 2007: 3) notes that “Poverty in Kenya increased sharply during the early 1990s,
declined during the mid-1990s and rose steadily after 1997”. The figures for Nyanza Province are even worse than for the nation. The International Monetary Funds (2007: 4) ranks Nyanza with 64.6 per cent as the poorest province in its 2005 Economic Survey. Unemployment has risen rapidly, not only in Kenya but all over sub-Saharan Africa, especially among youth, with 21 percent youth unemployment in 2003 (ILO 2004). Many young migrants in Kenya cannot obtain formal sector work anymore, and instead try to become self-employed or employed in the informal sector.

As the International Labour Office (ILO) states in its 2004 report, “[B]eing without work means being without a chance to work themselves out of poverty”. They argue that there is a link between youth unemployment and social exclusion (ILO 2004). Social exclusion is even more so in the households that are hit hard by the HIV/AIDS pandemic and where orphans are left to fend for themselves or are sent off to live with other relatives. Moreover, rising parental death rates due to HIV/AIDS reduces the transfer of skills from parents to youth and may result in an overall loss of traditional skills. This is definitely the case with fishing practices and with farming experience, for instance with knowledge about crop rotation and irrigation (UN 2003). Such reports, like these by the ILO and the UN, however, only take into account formal employment and are unable to measure the wide variety of informal jobs young people are actually carrying out. Allen (1998) calls these ‘hidden livelihoods’, and asserts they are ‘real economies’ and that the agency of the participants in the informal sector should not be underestimated. Despite their marginal position in society, young people have demonstrated tremendous creativity in making a living for themselves in the midst of social and economic instability. They are not, of course, always successful, but through falling down and rising up again, young people organise and make sense of their daily lives.

### 3.1. Young people and the household economy

In order to make a living, young people still depend to a large extent on the household economies to which they belong. While they may stay with their grandparents or related kin for long periods of time, their parents usually continue to play a strong role in decision-making regarding education, vocational training, and employment. Often, the youngsters stay within the family household much longer than the family can actually afford. This financial burden on the household makes it hard for the family to get out of poverty and often hampers younger siblings’ chances to gain access to education. However, young people may also contribute a great deal to the household economy, and
be expected to work at an early age to help make ends meet. Even if they are attending school, they are supposed to help with domestic chores, care for siblings, and even take part in small-scale businesses or agricultural work. Their income is not only needed to meet household expenses and to pay school fees, but also to help pay for fashion and cosmetic needs such as body lotion, shampoo, clothes, and necessary luxuries like mobile phones or phone credits. For the young men in particular, masculinity and appreciation for girlfriends needed to be proven by giving gifts or money (see Chapter 6).

As I explain later when discussing the splintering of social networks, many youngsters were part of a household where one or more siblings were sick or had already died. Some were orphans and stayed with their paternal or maternal grandparents. Due to the lack of financial resources, many youngsters were sent to work. Earning money gave them substantial power in their adoptive families. According to Nyambedha (2003b: 41)—who also carried out research in Bondo District in Nyanza Province—this led to several intergenerational conflicts within the household because the youngsters had some resources at their own disposal and, as a consequence, commanded more authority within the household. On the other hand, the exploitation of orphaned children was also very common in households led by elders. According to Nyambedha (2003b), youngsters who refused to assist in the subsistence production and domestic household chores of the household were often punished through denial of food. This often led to problematic situations where orphans might even decide to leave the household. Elders also chased the children and youngsters away when they did not agree with their sexual behaviour. Intergenerational conflicts were more common among the urban-raised orphans than among the orphans who were socialized in a rural environment (see also Nyambedha 2003b). Few elderly people followed up on those children or youngsters who went astray (Nyambedha 2003b: 42), and were consequently left to fend for themselves.

3.2. Gender discrepancy in livelihood options

The division of labour is based on gender: men and women have different—often culturally grounded—roles in processes of livelihood generation. During my fieldwork, young men in Winam were experiencing a decline in livelihood options, but young women often felt even more disadvantaged. For young men, declining opportunities for formal (skilled) employment led them to mobilize their own labour, utilizing their access to family resources to acquire capital to invest in business. While older women can acquire start-up capital through their husbands, most young women lack access to
capital. This affects their capacity to meet basic needs, launch entrepreneurial livelihood activities, and develop independent livelihood options for the future. As a consequence, I observed that many of the young women depended heavily on social capital. A young woman might not have her own business, but instead help her mother or older female relatives in their businesses, and in so doing, acquire contacts and networks and sometimes even starting capital in the process. Some of the young women were involved in petty trade ventures on their mother’s behalf, such as selling sugar cane, flour, and other foodstuffs, or paraffin for lighting lamps. Others helped in their mother’s restaurant, cooking *chapatis* and *mandazis* and serving the customers. In addition to small-scale trade, the other livelihood option for young women was working as a maid or nanny, which meant emigrating to Nairobi or Kisumu. Young men on the other hand, had more options for unskilled employment than young women. Youngsters, both male and female, who had been able to complete one or two years of secondary school or who managed to finish secondary school had other expectations, linked to their aspiration to move out of the village. However, their higher educational level did not necessarily mean that they had more livelihood opportunities.

Access to family land was also important as a potential source for supplementary livelihood activities to fall back on, including subsistence agriculture. However, due to Winam’s high population density, there remains little family land available, and young people must share it with their siblings. In the long term, young men inherit family land, while young women only have usufruct rights as long as their parents are alive. When young women marry, they lose their rights to family land but get access to their husband’s land. Young women face pressure to bring wealth to their natal home by marrying a wealthy man, someone who can pay a good bride price. Few young men are able to provide a bride price to their bride’s natal home, however, and this can remain a topic of discussion between the families throughout their marriage.

Although it might at first sight seem that young women have fewer livelihood options and assets with which to change their livelihood than young men, some young women in Winam still manage to become economically independent. In order to diversify their livelihood tactics, youngsters depended heavily on social capital, which they maximized (Thornton 2009) by extending their social network through sexual liaisons. This was more prevalent for young women than for young men (discussed further in section 4 of this chapter).
3.3. Livelihood options for young people in an HIV/AIDS-affected area

Winam’s economy principally consists of fishing, petty trade, subsistence agriculture, and remittances sent by relatives. For trade and supplies, the village depends on larger towns, such as Bondo and Siaya, and the provincial headquarters, Kisumu, the third-largest city of Kenya. There is easy access between Kisumu and Winam via a good, tarmac road, but roads to other locations were of poor quality during the time of my fieldwork, especially after a rain. Beyond boda-bodas (bicycle taxis), little transport is available between different locations. New roads were being developed in 2007; with better connections to Kisumu and, by extension, to the rest of the country, an influx of new opportunities and people was expected.

The majority of the households in Winam lived in ‘traditional’ houses, made of mud walls and grass roofs. However, iron sheets for roofing were also very common at the time of my fieldwork and were often used as an index of wealth and enhanced social status (see also Suda et al. 1991). None of the houses in Dhonam had access to piped water or electricity and only towards the end of my fieldwork were some houses close to the market centre (including the room that Petronella rented) connected to electricity. This was to the benefit of certain businesses such as the barbershop and maize mill, but simultaneously increased the rent in these houses. The construction of ‘modern’, permanent houses at the same time was often a major source of jealousy. Ownership of such houses tended to lead to accusations of witchcraft, making city-dwellers reluctant to invest in their rural homes (Suda et al. 1991).

To make a living in rural Nyanza Province, most households practice livelihood diversification since relying on just one source of income is insufficient (Niehof 2004). Farming alone does not provide adequate resources since few households are able to grow enough food to provision themselves through the year. Combining income-earning activities is a way for rural people to spread their risks (Francis 2000), which is not unimportant in an area where HIV/AIDS is rampant. Scholars have emphasised the serious impact of the HIV/AIDS epidemic on African rural livelihoods (Koestle 2002; Barnett and Whiteside 2002; Rugalema 1999; Barnett and Blaikie 1992). AIDS in a household not only leads to the loss of the sick person’s labour but also to that of the caregivers. Then, as agricultural production and non-farming income declines, households attempt to increase labour participation in a number of ways. One way is to withdraw children from school and another way is to take up income-earning opportunities at the expense of the agricultural production. Relatively labour-intensive crops are replaced by less labour-demanding crops. Furthermore, changes in household
composition due to mortality puts a strain on the performance of gender-specific activities. Exacerbating these effects on labour availability and productivity, AIDS also affects agricultural production through the disposal of productive assets, as cash, livestock, trees, land and furniture, which are sold to pay for medications and funerals (Rugalema 1999: 5–12).

In the following section, I describe the different livelihood tactics of Winam’s young people: nonfarm labour, self-employment, participation in NGO-funded programs, and land-based income-generating activities. ‘Mobility’ or migration as another type of livelihood tactic will be discussed in the second half of this chapter, due to its greater complexity and importance.

3.3.1. Nonfarm labour: Formal, informal, skilled, and unskilled

While many of the young people I met in Winam aspired to secure formal-sector, skilled employment in an urban area, and valued higher education as a route to achieving this, such opportunities were very rare at the time of my research. The market for formal employment, whether skilled or unskilled, in Winam and outside Winam was limited compared to the 1970s–1980s when “graduates were absorbed as readily as they could be produced” (Hughes and Mwiria 1988: 189). Even among highly educated youth with university degrees, it was hard to obtain skilled employment, as competition was very high. Those who acquired skilled jobs were often from wealthier families who could afford to invest in education and, more importantly, could open more employment avenues through their social networks.

CDC/KEMRI offered few formal jobs to people from Winam, recruiting the majority of their employees from Kisumu and Nairobi, and causing serious discontent among JoWinam about CDC (see Chapter 3). Only some JoWinam were employed as ‘community interviewers’ and ‘community health workers’. When the HIV/AIDS Youth Intervention Project (YIP) in Winam, entitled ‘Youth’s Economic Skills and Health Improvement Centre in Winam’ (Yeshica), was announced in 2003, JoWinam had great hopes that they might benefit from the project, and even calling far-flung relatives to tell them that Yeshica was looking for employees who had completed secondary school. In the end, only four people—the concierge, a youth facilitator, an adult facilitator, and the liaison officer—were recruited from Winam. When JoWinam realised that people from outside Winam were being hired, rather than locals, they were really disappointed and frustrated. People criticised the CDC as corrupt, believing that only relatives of CDC employees
were able to get CDC jobs, and CDC staff working in Winam were often regarded with envy and jealousy.

Due to the high competition, many secondary school graduates in Winam were without formal employment. Many of them thought they were “too good” for certain informal jobs, such as domestic work, cattle herding, or doing agricultural work for others, perceiving such jobs as below their status. They believed that once they had become educated, they no longer would have to do agricultural work or domestic work for others. Instead, they preferred to hang around in the hope that some formal job would come their way or they might have the chance to study further and be admitted to college or university. Opiyo, a former anthropologist of Yeshica, explained:

The problem we have in Luoland is that we have an excess of people who have gone up to secondary [school] but they are not working. They thought by the time they reach class six, you go to [class] eight and you go to secondary [school], you should not be doing traditional jobs of fishing or farming, so these people don’t do any productive work. They want to have direct cash (in-depth interview, September 2006).

Unskilled employment was more available to young men than young women. Young women could take jobs as unskilled labourers as maids or nannies in Kisumu or Nairobi, but in rural areas, there was little demand for such services. Some young women found work in tailoring shops, usually located around market centres: to get such jobs, they first had to complete some training, and would be hired to remain if they were skilled enough. Although often not explained as such, working as a sex worker was also a form of informal employment, both in rural areas and in urban centres. Young men, on the other hand, had more options as casual labourers, in building, farming, fishing, herding, and “touting” (i.e., being a conductor in local buses). During my fieldwork, a road construction company (Put Sarajevo) recruited casual workers on a daily basis. Every morning, young men would line up along the roadside of Kalandin in the hope of being picked for some small, temporary, unskilled job. Augustin (a 22-year-old, secondary school graduate who was a conductor on a local bus), one of the young men I followed closely, used to line up every day but was only picked once.

Other casual labour opportunities included fishing, which provided both income and food. Fishing used to be a lucrative business until the 1980s, and in the last two decades fishing income has become minimal, worsened by ineffective government regulation and tough competition for a depleted fish stock. The ecological balance of Lake Victoria has deteriorated dramatically, to the point where some biologists fear the change is irreversible. According to Shege (1995), this is due to “a rapidly growing population, clearance of natural vegetation along the shores, a booming fish-export
industry, the disappearance of several fish species native to the lake, prolific growth of algae, and dumping of untreated effluent by several industries”. Much of this ecological damage is massive and irreversible. The Nile Perch had an unexpected explosion of its population in the 1980s, which has negatively affected native species, and the population of smaller fishes like *omena*, which most local fishermen depend on for their livelihood, consequently has dramatically reduced.

Another aspect that is believed to threaten the livelihood of many fishermen around Lake Victoria is the high prevalence of HIV among its fisher folk. According to Gordon (2005) from the World Fish Center, because fishermen are very mobile and have a transient style of living, they are among the populations most at risk for contracting HIV in low- and middle-income countries worldwide (Gordon 2005: 3). Similarly, the UNAIDS report on ‘Population, Mobility and AIDS’ notes that due to their high mobility, fishermen are particularly vulnerable, like other mobile groups such as truck or bus drivers and seasonal workers (UNAIDS 2001). In very poor coastal or lakeshore villages, fishermen are also among the few people who have access to regular cash income (Béné and Merten 2008: 880; Gordon 2005: 3). Gordon (2005: 3) concludes that “irregular working hours and being away from home places fishermen in a group with disposable income and time off (when not fishing), that favours the consumption of alcohol and prostitution”, which allows them to engage in ‘risky sex’.

Not only are the livelihoods of the fishermen threatened, but also those of many female fishmongers and the larger population of Winam. Gordon asserts (2005: 3) that women who have limited financial resources are drawn to fishing ports because of the opportunities to sell food, alcohol, and sex. Béné and Merten (2008: 875) write that fish processing and trading is recognized as an important safety net for the “poorest of the poor” in rural communities in developing countries. Female fish traders are often widowed, divorced, or single; little capital is needed to start a business. Moreover, in places where the fish catch is meagre, and women need to compete a share of it, “fish-for-sex” seems to be a very common phenomenon, though not all female fishmongers engage in such exchanges (Gordon 2005: 3; Béné and Merten 2008: 875). In the fisheries literature on HIV/AIDS, according to Béné and Merten (2008: 881), the active role that many women play as fish processors is often overlooked: studies too often position them as subordinate. Béné and Merten (2008: 883) argue further, that “assuming a systematic link between extreme poverty and transactional sex may be too simplistic to capture the complexity of the factors leading women to engage in fish-for-sex” (see also Chapter 6 for a critical analysis of the concept of ‘transactional sex’).
Some of the earliest cases of HIV/AIDS were recorded in a fishing village on the Ugandan shore of Lake Victoria in 1982, and many HIV/AIDS interventions in the area have since described fishermen as a ‘risky group’. Consequently, during the time of my fieldwork, JoWinam strongly associated the mobility and the ‘risky behaviour’ of fishermen with the increase of the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the area. The fishermen of Dhonam moved with the flow of fish, i.e., they moved to the places where fish were suspected to be. According to Cohen and Odhiambo (1989: 49), in the 1960s–1970s a number of Kenyan fishermen, particularly those of Nyanza Province, found good fishing grounds in the vicinity of large markets in Uganda, where they could also sell their catch without the intervention of middlemen. In 1968, the Ugandan government expelled many Kenyans, including the fishermen, because “the Luo presence in southern Uganda was so strong” (Cohen and Odhiambo 1989: 50). During my fieldwork, a number of fishermen from Winam also migrated to the lakeshores of Uganda for a short period of time when there was lack of fish, but this was not without risks since it remained illegal for them to do so.

While Nyanza people have long been temporarily mobile fisher folk, following the fish, it is only recently that their livelihood has become linked to ‘risky behaviour’ in the HIV/AIDS literature. Yet, there is no epidemiological evidence that confirms this assumption; still, it definitely has contributed to the stigmatization of fishermen. At the time of my fieldwork, the fishing practice was no longer perceived as a productive job but rather as a low-status job. Nevertheless, the fishermen still attracted a number of young women, not only because they were one of the few people who had access to cash money, but also because their way of dressing was very urbanized and fashionable. For this reason, it is important to have a closer look at the cash income, the work, and lifestyle of fishermen in Winam, and at the secondary impacts of fishing, an industry that creates small-scale trade and work for some of Winam’s women, and allows for a number of local restaurants.

The life of a fisherman in Dhonam

During my research, most of the fishermen were between 14 and 30 years old, though a few were older; most had learned about fishing through a friend or family member. Local fishermen from Dhonam lived at their ancestral home, while fishermen who came from outside Winam rented small, cement houses close to the lake and market centre. In the minds of many JoWinam, fishing was associated with “getting easy money” because, at the best of times, they could earn up to 1000 Kenyan shillings (12.5 euro) in one night.
of fishing. But the best of times were long gone, and the average catch was much less: fishermen were earning only an average of 200 Kenyan shillings (2.5 euro) every four days. While their job was assumed to provide ‘easy money’, their work was extremely hard, tiring, and not without risks.

Every evening around 6 p.m., fishermen who wanted to go fishing that evening would assemble at the lake where a boat leader and the karan (secretary or clerk), both appointed by the boat’s owner, selected those who would go with each boat. In Dhomam, the fishermen usually fish with the same, tight-knit group of three to four people, including the karan, in a rented boat. Before casting off, the boat leader would give a boat’s fishing team an advance (usually about 800 Kenyan shillings, or 10 euro), to buy bread, soft drinks, cigarettes, and sometimes bhang (marihuana) and chang’aa (a locally brewed, illegal, strong spirit), to keep the men awake and happy during the night’s work. Most fishermen could only go fishing every fourth day because there were not enough boats for the number of available fishermen. In addition, due to the intense physical exertion of the work, the fishermen did not feel able to fish every day.

The fishermen mostly used sleek sailing canoes, not too different from the type used traditionally by the Swahili traders along the coast of the Indian Ocean. Working together in one boat meant that the fishermen placed their lives in each other’s hands: fishing from these small wooden boats was already a dangerous affair, even more so since some fished while drunk. Although no safer than a hundred years ago, boat owners were at the time of my fieldwork required to secure licenses, pay fees, and prove the use of proper equipment. However, there have always been fishermen without licenses. Since most of the fishermen at Dhomam’s beach were catching omena, they used nets that were far smaller than what is legally permitted, which meant also catching other species of immature fish that had not yet reproduced. Since most fish breed during the rainy season, the government introduced a recovery period by prohibiting the joamuok (people who fish and trade omena) from fishing between June and August. Joamuok are easily recognizable on the lake during the night, because they use bright lights to find omena, creating a spectacle of a “city on the lake” (Shipton 2005: 62). Whenever joamuok noticed maritime policemen patrolling the lake, they would switch off the lamps and attempt to hide from the authorities. Sometimes they would even jump into the lake, holding onto the boat because almost none of them could swim. Ugandan and Tanzanian patrolmen, making sure the Kenyans did not fish outside their own borders, were also among the hazards fishermen faced. It was hard for local
fishermen to detect if they had crossed the Kenyan borders of the lake—even more so at night.\textsuperscript{10}

The final amount each fisherman received from the sale of the fish was calculated carefully by the boat’s karan. Each fisherman was allowed to take home two medium-sized fish (worth approximately 200 to 250 Kenyan shillings (2.5 euro to 3.125 euro). The rest of the fish was sold: the higher the sale, the higher the commission was for each fisherman. The amount collected was divided, with 50 percent going to the owner, and the rest shared equally among the fishermen. If the catch sold for a total of 4,000 Kenyan shillings, then the boat owner would receive 2000 Kenyan shillings (25 euro), and each of the four fishermen would receive 500 Kenyan shillings (6.25 euro). The downward spiral of fewer and fewer fish and more and more fishermen has influenced the local economy around the lake. Fewer fish means less work for the local women, who bring the fish to nearby rural markets, and when fishermen earn less, they spend less in the local market centre, restaurants, and bars.

Despite this downward spiral, the people of Winam continued to believe fishermen had money, in large part due to their almost-daily access to cash. The fishermen’s access to cash was expressed in their way of dressing. When the fishermen were not working, they were clothed differently, in an ostentatious ‘blingbling’ style, which stood out especially compared to other young men who worked in jua kali (unskilled, manual labour). They tried to keep up with urban trends, wearing jeans, T-shirts printed with images of famous rap artists (e.g., 50 Cent) and reggae musicians (e.g., Bob Marley), caps, and chains. With a noticeable swagger in their walk, their movements and dress resembled the local Rastafarian men, called ‘beach boys’, but without the dreadlocks.

3.3.2. Self-employment activities around Dhonam market centre

Young women in Winam undertook small-scale trade activities, such as opening a shop for selling vegetables, mandazis, or chips, or selling paraffin or sugarcane along the road. The selling of fish, whether fresh, smoked, dried, or fried, was mostly done by fishermen’s girlfriends or wives. Others carried out illegal activities such as burning charcoal or assisting in the brewing of chang’aa. Most of these activities were fast-turnover, low-capital businesses, as they typically had few resources to begin with. Only a few young women engaged in capital-intensive businesses, such as trading second-hand clothes, bananas, or opening a simu ya jami (community phone operation),\textsuperscript{11} since these businesses required larger amounts of starting capital and a large social network.
(usually developed through contacts with older female relatives). While some income could be generated through low-capital activities, it was often barely enough for subsistence. Most of the young women with whom I worked and who carried out such income-generating activities were still living with families or relatives, and viewed their small-scale business as a means to contribute to their homes or, more importantly, to allow them to buy fashion accessories and cosmetics. In some cases, young women acquired their starting capital through their mothers or aunts, who were more experienced in carrying out businesses. A few also participated in ‘merry-go-round’ funding, a rotating savings and loan group with older women, in order to obtain finances that would enable them to move into more lucrative businesses.

Young men, on the other hand, worked as barbers, tailors, welders, carpenters, or brick makers. These were slow-turnover, capital-intensive activities, requiring long-term asset investments (e.g., skills training and the purchase of materials). For such businesses—especially for carpenters and brick makers—there was generally an unmet demand. For instance, due to the many funerals for people who had died of HIV/AIDS, there was a large demand for wooden sarcophagi. Other young men operated boda boda (bicycle taxis), which required buying or leasing a bicycle. Those with the means to do so could invest in multiple bikes as a productive asset, and lease them out. Young men were usually not yet able to do this: most just owned or leased one bike. At each marketplace in Winam, there was a surplus of boda boda operators, waiting for customers from morning to evening. One elderly person commented on boda boda drivers: “Sometimes they even lose direction because their mind is not clear [because they are drunk]”. Only a few of the youngsters of Winam went to Kisumu to work as boda boda operators, because the job did not bring enough income to survive in the cities. A few male youngsters that I came to know also became church assistants, mainly in the Anglican and Evangelist Church as few Pentecostal churches were operating in the area (in contrast to the cities in Kenya). A common saying in Winam, and perhaps also elsewhere in sub-Saharan Africa, was: “If you do not find a job, open your own church”.

3.3.3. Yeshica initiatives to encourage income-generating activities

In order to address the livelihood needs of young people of Winam, the designers of a HIV-prevention project called ‘Yeshica’ offered the ‘livelihood intervention’, which included vocational trainings and a microloan program in which young people could participate as a step toward poverty reduction. The implementation of this intervention
led to less than optimal outcomes (see Blommaert and Oluoch 2007; Parott and Heyer 2007).

**Vocational training**

Between 2003 and 2007, more than 700 youth participated in vocational skills workshops in different fields, including tailoring, bicycle repair, masonry, hairdressing, textile crafts such as tie and dye and batik, bee-keeping, carpentry, tile and brick making, and organic farming, with the goal of improving young people’s skills and encouraging self-employment (Yeshica 2007). Local trainers were hired to teach one-week courses, with the exception of tailoring and carpentry, which were organised over a six-month period. While the project offered a variety of vocational trainings that could inspire and motivate youth to think about possible vocational pursuits, it fell short of its goals in two ways. First, the intention of the YIP’s Belgian program coordinator was for young people to focus on only one kind of vocational training, the one that appealed to them the most, but young people often hopped from one training to another. Most did not have a particular interest before starting a course; rather, they participated because they thought they could never learn enough skills. They could not discern beforehand which vocational training they would like more, since, as they explained to me, they would take any workshop that could give them a job. Second, Yeshica staff members were unable to fill the workshops in the way they had planned. Staff were unable to recruit ‘hard-to-reach youngsters’—who were an important target—to participate in the workshops, and the program coordinator pushed local staff to meet the required number of participants to be trained, shifting the focus to filling classes instead of choosing those most apt for a particular training.

In the end, not much was done with the knowledge the youth had obtained during the vocational trainings, since they were only one week long (except the tailoring and carpentry course), not enough to allow the youth to have the acquired skills and confidence to start their own businesses. In late 2007, the vocational skills training was reoriented towards developing skills for employment with research and NGO health projects, such as conducting interviews, counselling, educational theatre, and using computers. Yeshica suggested that successful youngsters might be able to obtain employment within CDC/KEMRI. Youth complained, however, that the training was rushed at the end of the year, without good publicity or a clear selection process. Most of the selected participants were from outside Winam, and none were ‘hard-to-reach’
youngsters (primary school dropouts), the original population Yeshica was supposed to target (see Chapter 1 and 7).

**Microfinance: Savings and loan groups**

The ‘livelihood intervention’ of Yeshica also aimed to provide access to savings and loan services, in order to stimulate income-generating activities and small-scale businesses for young people in Winam. To implement this part of the livelihood intervention, the Belgian team worked with a Kenyan NGO, the Kenya Rural Enterprise Program (K-Rep), that specialises in microfinance services. Young people could acquire a group loan through K-Rep that was especially meant for those who had participated in the vocational trainings. Since most of the youth who had benefitted from the trainings did not remain affiliated with Yeshica after training—mostly due to migration, marriage, or discontent—other youngsters from Winam were also encouraged to join K-Rep groups.

As of November 2007, more than 500 youth were participating in the K-Rep program as ‘savers’, and 279 youth, slightly more than 50 percent, were receiving loans (Yeshica 2007). Although Yeshica and K-Rep reached their target of 50 percent, the figures about participation and the number of loans disbursed do not tell us much about the effectiveness of the microfinance project in terms of improving the youths’ livelihood situation.

According to the participants, the conditions set by the microfinance program for the young people to get a loan were very strict. First, youngsters were encouraged to form a group that would register with K-Rep. Within each group, they had to form watano groups (subgroups of five people). Each watano group guarantees any loans taken out by any member of the group: to ensure this, 10 percent of all savings were reserved. If an applicant failed to meet the monthly instalments in repaying the loan—becoming a ‘defaulter’—the watano group had to pay all the missed payments with their current and future savings. Each K-Rep participant was required to have an adult guarantor, as well, which was a problem for most, and especially so for orphans, since it was hard to get a relative other than a parent to act as guarantor. The adult guarantor in most cases also asked for a percentage of the loan. Some of the loans were also taken on behalf of brothers, sisters, aunts, or uncles; in these cases, they were usually the adult guarantors. The K-Rep participants expressed how it was difficult to save the mandatory amount of 20 Kenyan shillings (0.25 euro) per week, because the money they earned with casual jobs usually went, as they said, “from hand to mouth”. As an alternative to taking out a loan, participants could also obtain product assets, such as beehives, electric razors for barbers,
or bicycles on credit. The interest rate for both loans and products was 16 percent, which is low compared to most microloans, owing to subsidies, but still unaffordable for these young people. Although Anuka, the local field officer of K-Rep, realised that K-Rep’s conditions for obtaining a loan were difficult to meet, she could not change them since it was her responsibility to make sure that the youngsters paid back the borrowed capital with interest. As is common among traditional microfinance organisations, her job did not entail finding out how youngsters would pay back the money, or if their livelihood got better or worse from having access to this capital in the first place.

This excerpt from my fieldnotes depicts the costs and benefits of getting a beehive as a product asset through K-Rep:

Anuka informed the Meso Youth Group members that registration fee [for signing up with K-Rep] is gratis; passbook is 100 shillings; 4700 shillings for 1 hive (4500 shillings for a hive + 200 shillings transport costs); 470 deposit on each hive; grace period of 2 months; payment in monthly instalments; repayment period of 2 years; interest on 4700 – 470 = 4230 shillings at 16 percent flat rate.

The youth were very attentive but I noticed that they got very disheartened with the information that Anuka had given to them. P. just asked briefly again how much the deposit was and he looked very dismayed. He wrote down in the sand with a wooden stick ‘470’ and just stared at those numbers he had written on the ground. There was a lot of silence. There were no questions any more from other group members.

Anuka admitted that these were hard conditions. She told them that she could organize the beehives for them but they should at least try to find some other persons that are interested so that they can form a watano group. I asked why they needed five people. She explained to me that it is too costly for K-Rep to transport only one beehive. [...] But I reasoned that if there are five participants having the same asset, they will compete with one another so then the profit will be small. I also realised that it is very hard to form a watano group: first not all the five members want the same asset and second, there is so much jealousy around and they have no confidence in each other.

Anuka later also explained to me that you can only harvest honey after a minimum period of six months and each hive would give you about 10 kilograms of honey. For me, this project sounded very unrealistic. How would one be able to pay back the loan if they only start to earn money after the sixth month? It would be very hard to repay this product asset (fieldnotes, 23 June 2005).

Many of the youngsters who obtained a K-Rep loan had no idea how best to invest the money. They had never handled an amount of 5000 Kenyan shillings (62.5 euro). They could only dream of having it one day. Certainly those who never finished primary school, and those who had no support from an adult, did not know what kind of business they could use the loan for. Some bought a cow with it, others opened a small shop, others repaid their debts, or bought a goat: many of them used part of the loan for personal items such as new pants or a skirt, or a box to put their clothes in. Others actually asked for a loan on behalf of a mother or aunt who would use it for her own business. The following
anecdote, recorded in my fieldnotes, recounts what Ouma (a 22-year-old young man who had only attended primary school for three years) did with his first loan—and his last since he was never able to repay it—of 5000 Kenyan shillings:

A few days before Ouma received his loan, he already told his current girlfriend (who might become his wife) that she already could buy on credit the material to make a traditional dress. Once he got the loan, he felt as if he was in heaven and had the most wonderful ideas of what to do with the money, since he had discussed with us weeks prior to his receiving the loan what would be a profitable business to run. A little of the loan was immediately used for some daily needs, such as some sugar and milled maize, and at home, they enjoyed one big meal with fish and meat. The same day he got his loan, he had contracted a carpenter to make three sofas for him. One of his relatives, who had heard that he soon would get his loan, also came and wanted his part since Ouma owed him a lot. There was still some remaining money with which he bought a new pair of trousers, two new T-shirts, and a sheep. He used a little money to go and play karata. The rest of the money he kept as he wanted to go and buy maize in south Nyanza. Some days later his current girlfriend got seriously ill. She was admitted to hospital for three days. The remaining money that had been saved for the maize business was spent on hospital fees (fieldnotes, August 2005).

Although in scholarly articles on microfinance, it is common knowledge that “the poorest of the poor use their loans to meet their basic needs first instead of investing in a business or other self-employment that may increase their income and bring them out of poverty” (Yang and Stanley 2012: 8; see also Stewart et al. 2011), few staff members of Yeshica were aware of this. The YIP program coordinator hoped that the business training and leadership skills training, which were provided at the beginning of the loan’s term in May 2005, would provide the youngsters with the necessary knowledge of how to invest their loan. However, only the group’s leader, treasurer, and secretary could participate in these trainings. Furthermore, because these trainings were only organised once, new members and new leaders, treasurers, and secretaries were never trained. There was a general lack of follow-up with the youngsters who had obtained a loan, and there was no monitoring system in place to look at the changes or improvements to livelihood opportunities at the individual and group level.14

An evaluation of Yeshica’s livelihood intervention carried out by two external consultants, Parott and Heyer (2007), who were hired by the Institute of Tropical Medicine (ITM), confirmed that although potential existed to build the youth’s capacity to engage in income-generating activities as a step to mitigate poverty, there was a general weakness in the information system since the project failed to track the progress of the youth who participated in the livelihood intervention. Moreover, their evaluation report noted that no market assessment was carried out, and therefore the trainings offered did not necessarily match up with realistic, existing livelihood opportunities (Parott and Heyer 2007). The project was input driven and not outcome oriented, which
meant that feedback and evaluations to increase youth and staff ownership were not responded to, and the project was not adjusted as it developed (Blommaert and Oluoch 2007) (see also Chapter 7). Campbell (2003: 171) who was evaluating an HIV/AIDS-prevention project in South Africa, confirmed that “projects of this nature seldom make proper use of evaluation reports”. In the case of Yeshica, even before Parott and Heyer’s (2007) evaluation was carried out, it was already decided that the livelihood intervention would be taken over by another NGO that had other objectives (for instance, targeting adults as well as young people). In this way, the evaluation was not intended to contribute to the improvement of the current livelihood intervention, but was rather a formal fulfilment of what had been promised in the donor proposal. This meant the end of a short-lived project—one of many ‘pilots’ tried out on the backs of young people, quickly forgotten by project management, that contribute to the accumulation of frustrating experiences for the young people of Winam (see Chapter 7). Overall, it was a missed opportunity for the improvement of young people’s livelihoods.

3.3.4. Land-based income-generating activities

Few of the youngsters with whom I worked engaged in farming as an income-generating activity because the farming system in Winam was mainly for subsistence and not oriented towards profit maximisation through sales, although they occasionally exchanged part of what they produced on the market. Compared to the other districts of Nyanza Province, Winam and the rest of Bondo District were not endowed with fertile ground for the production of cash crops (Suda et al. 1991: 66). In addition, farming was made difficult due to a general lack of land and high population density, and the seasonal shifts that make agricultural income unpredictable. Certainly most horticulture (if possible at all given insufficient infrastructure) required high levels of inputs such as fertiliser and irrigation, and only the land by the lake had unlimited potential for this. Maize, a staple crop, on the other hand required lower inputs and incurred lower risks than other crops, but faced more competition and much lower revenues per plot (Francis 2000: 104–105).

Many youngsters thought of agricultural work as “hard work” with low benefits, and therefore did not value it. Secondary school graduates considered it beneath their status to work on the farm. If they were found working on the farm, it was mainly to assist their family or to do a favour for their friends. Only very poor youngsters would go
and work in the fields for other people, weeding or harvesting maize, to earn some cash, and only when no other informal jobs were available.

The organic farming training offered at Yeshica encouraged and supported youngsters to enter into agriculture, promising that there would be a market for their products. At first, few youngsters were interested in the training but the promise of getting cooked food, travel costs, and post-training employment were good motives to join (see Chapter 7). The group planted trees, mangoes, maize, tomatoes, and red peppers. In the end, there was no ready market for their products and the youngsters felt misled by the project. A number of the trainees were very disappointed with the outcome of the training because only a few members of their group, in particular the leader, treasurer, and secretary, were enjoying the proceeds from the sale of their farm produce. There was no proper reporting to the young people about the yield of their harvest, and rumours spread that the management of Yeshica had taken advantage of the youths’ work. Therefore, they decided to sell the harvests of vegetables and maize locally to the local staff of Yeshica and to the local market in Kisumu (Blommaert and Oluoch 2007).

In contrast to vegetable production, the youngsters highly valued ownership of livestock in Winam since it had a significant market potential, and these assets could be sold to absorb shocks to income (e.g., failing harvest) or unexpected expenditures (e.g., death of a family member). Cattle were generally perceived as a higher status animal than sheep and goats (see also Suda 2000). Given the status attached to owning livestock, it was not surprising that young people immediately thought of buying some when they received a K-Rep loan. While it seemed to them a good investment, they did not take into account that owning a very small number of livestock, usually just one animal, does not generate sufficient revenue to repay the loan’s monthly instalments. Having only one goat, cow, or sheep also did not require their time as a herder, and a solitary animal was usually left with a relative who owned several livestock so that it could be in a herd. None of the youngsters had a local poultry business, although it could generate small amounts of cash through egg sales and could provide a form of insurance for emergencies through poultry sale (see also Parott and Heyer 2007). Instead, every family had chickens and eggs for their own consumption, which meant there was very little market for such. Working at a somewhat larger scale also increased the risk of being affected by common poultry diseases.
3.4. Conclusion

The various livelihood initiatives did not bring much development to the people of Winam. Young people who sought employment in Winam ran into limitations and learned that many promising paths were thwarted by inequality and poverty. The gendered division of labour corresponds to a marked gender inequality in terms of opportunities for having a cash income. Young women depended more on social capital than young men. Nevertheless, also for young men, livelihood options were scarce.

Both male and female youngsters tried to set up small-scale businesses at home, but the little they earned with these casual jobs was hardly sufficient or regular enough to rely on. As they lacked capital to set up a small-scale business, they learned that their social network was probably the most important source of opportunities, and they consequently tried to expand their network as much as possible. In a reflection of the structural limitations of Winam, all too often the network was composed of people in very similar circumstances, and therefore networks did not allow youth to use contacts to get a job or starting capital. This meant that many youngsters still depended on the household economy to which they belonged. Only the fishermen managed to some extent to have a reliable, if small, cash income that made it feasible to become independent. The livelihood initiatives of Yeshica were set up to improve this situation and give young people opportunities to improve their future. At first sight, it did not bring much positive change for the youngsters, although we might say that the only youngsters who benefitted from the savings and loan program were those who defaulted on the loan repayment: once Yeshica stopped functioning, nobody chased them to repay the loan. However, when we take a closer look to the project, which I do in Chapter 7, the assessment becomes more nuanced as “failure as much as success can reconfirm theory and its models” (Mosse 2003: 3).

4. Young people’s aspirations towards urban mobility

Most youth in Winam are highly mobile, traveling to and from town and other villages, drawing on their social connections and networks. Many youngsters of Winam perceive their rural environment as a “bad place” where they cannot make progress. They want to escape the hard rural life, but the suffering at home, mostly due to HIV/AIDS, holds them back or draws them back. In some cases, fathers who worked in town and sent remittances home, came back to Winam very sick, or dead: mothers declined in health, and younger siblings at home still needed care. Youngsters’ aspirations were complicated by family
obligations. At an age when youngsters should grow, learn skills, and experiment in sexual relationships, they become caretakers for their parents and their younger siblings.

The youth of Winam imagine that their livelihood prospects would be much enhanced by moving to town. To capture this aspect of the life world of Winam youth, I use the term ‘mobility’. Mobility was common not only in Winam, but also other rural parts of Nyanza Province. For the young people of Winam, mobility—especially toward the urban areas—was another livelihood tactic employed in the hope of moving up the social and economic ladder.

In the next sections, to situate youngsters’ urban aspirations, I first clarify what the notion of ‘home’ means in Winam. Secondly, I explain that due to the HIV/AIDS epidemic and increased poverty levels in Winam, the patterns of shared child rearing have changed. Recounting the life story of one young woman, Akinyi, I show how expanding sexual liaisons can be a response to the splintering of social networks, and a way to enable youngsters to move out of the misery of home in Winam. However, her story also demonstrates that the pathways she had chosen were rarely straightforward. Then I discuss the world of the “dot.coms”, the urban-raised youngsters who for various reasons move back to Winam. I conclude by explaining that one of the livelihood tactics of the youngsters of Winam was the creation of a sexual network, which seems to be more prevalent for young women than for young men.

4.1. Defining a Luo home (dala) and the importance of chike Luo

Evans-Pritchard (1949) wrote that the Luo word ‘dala’ means the residence of either an elementary (or nuclear) or joint family. In this way, ‘home’ signifies a physical place with kinship ties and patrilineal descent in ‘Luo society’. According to Prince (2005: 143), the centrality of ‘home’ among the young people of Winam was “not only for identity and belonging but also for being (the constitution of person and relations, gender and kinship), for growth and the continuity of life”. President Obama is a good example of what the notions of dala mean to a Luo, as he is imagined by the people of Nyanza as being part of ‘Jodala’ (the people of home). In this way, “overlapping spaces of identity” (Luongo and Carotenuto 2009: 15) are an imaginary stretching beyond the boundaries of Nyanza, and even beyond Kenya. Although President Obama has never lived in Nyanza or Kenya, and has visited it only twice, his connections to ‘Luoland’ through his father enables an imaginary representation of him as ‘belonging’ to Kenya (Luongo and Carotenuto 2009). ‘Home’ is thus more than a physical place but is a
relational and imaginary concept going beyond kinship ties, produced discursively as well as through relations between people.

Instead of ‘kinship’ I employ the concept of ‘relatedness’ articulated by Carsten (2000), which better describes this process, and facilitates a broader analysis of local connections and the dynamics of everyday life. Social relations are continuously under construction through everyday acts since people are constantly connected to other people, socially, materially, and affectively (Carsten 2000). Geissler and Prince (2010: 13) write: “Social relations are made in substantial practice rather than simply given by formal affiliations”. Or, as Cohen and Odhiambo (1989: 127) summarize, “Wat imedo ginosiep (Friendship fortifies kinship)”, describing how friendship has become central in urban localities. Thus notions of ‘home’ and ‘belonging’—whether among kin or among friends—emerge with the social relations that underlie them.

According to Geissler and Prince (2010: 114–115), home is “a movement, a process that unfolds over time and in space. Home is the core of ‘Luo culture’, kinship and social order; its creation and sustained growth require rigid adherence to the Luo rules”. We can see how this definition applies in the way that every son is required to construct his own dala. The appropriate rituals have to be performed to establish a dala, which is only allowed after marriage rituals have been completed. Ideally, homesteads consist of three generations: the grandparents, their sons and co-wives, and their grandchildren. The Luo are polygamous and each of the co-wives has her own household: the grandparents have a separate home (see, for example, Evans-Pritchard 1949; Cohen and Odhiambo 1989; Nyambedha et al. 2003b; Geissler and Prince 2010). Okoth-Okombo (1989) writes that constructing a dala in the rural setting in the way prescribed by the ‘Luo tradition’ not only entails building a house, but carrying on an ancestral attachment to the family land (cited in Nzioka 2000: 11).

The failure to follow the rituals in establishing a dala was a common concern voiced among the youngsters, their parents, and their grandparents during the time of my fieldwork. Due to the colonial migration of rural men to work as wage labourers in town (see Chapter 3), the residential composition of many Luo homes has changed (Parkin 1978; Cohen and Odhiambo 1989). Since many of the men were working and living outside their ancestral home, they delayed establishing their own dala—and if a person dies before their dala has been constructed, their family members do not know where to bury them. Failure to follow rituals can also arise from a general lack of knowledge, as was the case for many town-raised Luo children who were not aware of all the chike Luo (customary law, or the rules of ‘Luo society’).
The *chike Luo* are prominent among the Luo people in private and public discourse. They order everyday life and kinship relations, practices that include cooking, eating, sleeping, sexual relationships, marriage, building a home, and dealing with death (Geissler and Prince 2010: 91). These Luo customs have been codified as ‘rules’ or as ‘Luo moral codes’ (Ocholla-Ayayo 1976: 146) in Paul Mboya’s (1965) handbook *Luo Kitigi gi Timbegi* (Luo Customs and Beliefs), which was published for the first time in 1938. This book was especially written in order to prevent the vanishing of ‘the Luo tradition’ since many youngsters and parents who have been brought up in town or have spent most of their time in town are not well enough informed about Luo customs. In this way, Luo elders and elites, who were mostly trained in missionary schools, took the authority and power to “make tradition” (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983) and decided what is right and what is wrong. These absolute rules are passed from the older to the younger generation, which is a key aspect of any gerontocracy (see for example, Middleton 1960 on the Lugbara religion in Uganda). The many wage labourers who left their home to work in town consulted this book as an equivalent to the Christian Bible. The book was further used for cultural education in primary schools in the 1950s (see also Geissler and Prince 2010: 88–91). In general, ‘the Luo tradition’ is regarded as unchanging and fixed. However, the context has changed and Luo elders continue to debate how ‘the Luo rules’ should be followed and what can be done in case the person has sinned. During my fieldwork, it was interesting to listen to the program of the local radio station (Ramogi FM) where different cases were presented to a Luo elder, who is asked for advice on issues related to ‘the Luo tradition’. If family members do not follow the *chike Luo* that structure kinship and social life, it is believed that *chira* might strike—not only the person who has strayed from *chike Luo*, but also other people at home. *Chira* is a local illness resulting from violations of *kwer* (rule or prohibition, or *chike*). These violations cause ritual impurity, which in turn produces consequences such as illness or other misfortunes (Ringsted 2003: 16–17). People usually cite *chira* in explaining why a certain person became ill or died. *Chira* has become more ‘visible’ in situations of stress and uncertainty: since the 1990s *chira* has been attributed to the many deaths occurring among the Luo (see also Prince 2005; Geissler and Prince 2010) (see also Chapter 5).

A well-known public discussion about the meaning of ‘home’ and ‘belonging’ in Luo customary law arose when a prominent Luo lawyer, S. M. Otieno, who was born in Siaya (western Kenya) and died in Nairobi, wanted—against customary law—to be buried at his farm in Ngong (Nairobi) where he had long lived with his family. Otieno had ignored *chike Luo* or his customary obligation to build a house at his ancestral
home in western Kenya, and had testified before Kenya’s High Court that he would emerge from his coffin and beat all those in the funeral procession towards Siaya if his body was not buried in Nairobi (Cohen and Odhiambo 1989: 135). The members of his lineage nevertheless demanded that Otieno’s body be buried at his ancestral home, and after a more than five month of dispute, Otieno was buried, against his wishes, in western Kenya (Cohen and Odhiambo 1989: 134–138). And this incident was not unusual, for even though some urban Luo rarely visit their rural home, their bodies are still buried at ‘home’ in western Kenya, because, it is perceived, this is the place to which Luo people will always belong, notwithstanding their mobility in the past, or present-day.

4.2. Changes in the ‘shared social support’ system: Splintered social networks

Young people typically have connections to and experiences of urban areas, as members of their extended families often live in town. Rural–urban migration during colonialism facilitated the sharing of family resources over rural–urban distances (Weisner 1997; Christiansen 2005). The introduction of formal schooling during colonialism also contributed to the high mobility of children since better schools were not available at local levels (see also Nyambedha 2006). At the time of my fieldwork, parents sometimes sent children to reside with a family member in order to attend a better school, or relocate their family to town in order to seek out a better livelihood. Paterson (cited in Hughes and Mwiria 1988: 189) writes that people’s search for education and a job depend on “the size and the quality of one’s social network and how well one is able to utilize those social linkages”. This phenomenon of ‘shared social support’ (Weisner 1997) in childrearing, which refers to how children are taken care of by relatives who live in another village or town, is very common in eastern and southern African countries (Weisner 1997; Kilbride and Kilbride 1997; Christiansen 2005; Nyambedha 2006).

According to Ominde (1952) and Ocholla-Ayayo (1976), it is the responsibility of the entire lineage to assist in child-rearing practices and in children’s education. During my fieldwork, when a mother or father became unable to provide for their children due to illness, lack of economic resources, or death, better-off relatives often took children into their households. At times, the youngest children had already been sent, at an early age, to stay with their more affluent older brothers or sisters in town, because they could provide a better education for their younger siblings than their parents could in a rural area; some children also attended boarding schools. Firstborn sons and unmarried daughters especially were obligated to support their parents financially, and to help pay
“MOVING AROUND” AND LIVELIHOOD TACTICS

for their younger siblings’ education (see also Simpson 2009 for Tanzania). Some
youngsters live with nonrelatives, like Onyango, who stayed with a church-related
friend of his mother for a year while attending a secondary school away from home.
People’s social networks help impoverished families to cope with feeding all the mouths
in their household. During school holidays, most urban children and boarding-school
children visit their parents, older siblings, or grandparents in the villages. But not all
the movement was toward urban areas: Some urban children lived for short periods
with older sisters or their maternal grandmother in rural areas, to help them with daily
chores, while attending a school nearby. Sometimes they were sent to their
grandparents’ home to keep them company or to learn about the traditional rural life.
However, children belong to their father’s kin and live primarily with them: only in
special circumstances, such as children born out of wedlock, where patrilineal affiliation
has not been established through paying bride wealth to the mother, do children live
with their mother’s parents (see also Nyambedha 2006; for Uganda, see Whyte and
Whyte 2004; Christiansen 2005).

According to Whyte and Whyte’s (2004) study carried out in Uganda, ‘shared
social support’ has become even more widespread in the last two decades. AIDS,
unstable relations between parents, and poverty are often considered to be the main
factors leading to the increase in fosterage (Whyte and Whyte 2004; Christiansen 2005).
In Winam, the grandmothers were overwhelmed with the many orphaned grandchildren
for whom they had to care. Some of the grandmothers were too old to take good care of
themselves, let alone all the grandchildren who needed to be fed, clothed, and educated.
Relationships could no longer be based on reciprocal help, as the flow of support became
one-directional. The many deaths became a real burden for the rural families, as
terminally ill adults increasingly returned to their home areas or parents’ homes before
they died; at times, just the bodies of young people were sent back from town. Many of
the parents had put hope in the future development of their children and had sacrificed
a lot to ensure their children’s education, but recent newlyweds and graduates were
dying, and fathers and mothers of very young children were passing away. Many of the
migrating, breadwinning spouses returned from the cities, dead; younger men returned
in caskets before they had a chance to build their own simba (bachelor’s hut)19 in their
village. I will not forget the time an older mother sat with me, next to her hut, pointing
out the nine graves in her compound: her husband, her sons, her daughters-in-law, and
some of her grandchildren. The ubiquity of death caused by HIV/AIDS and poverty has
penetrated the private and public homeland of the people of Winam.
Weisner (1997) argues that the high mortality rates of prime-age working adults caused by HIV/AIDS in sub-Saharan Africa has resulted in the erosion of family solidarity and led to splintered social networks, which has affected the support for children. The study of Nyambedha et al. (2003a; 2003b) carried out in Bondo District (Nyanza Province) confirms that the high numbers of orphans due to the HIV epidemic has exceeded the capacity of the traditional caring mechanisms for orphans. Many old people are no longer in a position to support their orphaned grandchildren (see also de Klerk 2011). They are adversely affected by the loss of some of their children: they find themselves without the financial assistance of working-age adults, and are also left to care for terminally ill adults and parentless children (Dayton and Ainsworth 2004; Barnett and Blaikie 1992). Some of these elders even lose interest in their subsistence activities because of emotional distress (Nyambedha et al. 2003b: 38). Since the elderly relatives and the extended family can no longer meet the daily needs of the many orphans, a number of these children are likely to be moved from one relative to another in an effort to meet their basic needs (Nyambedha et al. 2003a).

Many of the youngsters who I followed in Winam told me that searching for alternative pathways and “the road to town” was not always easy. They could not just visit their relatives in town if they had no means to contribute to their relatives’ household. If their relative in town was married, youngsters found it particularly hard to cope with in-laws who usually did not welcome them. Monica, for example, a 21-year-old, urban-raised young woman, encountered difficulties when she stayed at her brother’s home in Nairobi, because his wife withheld Monica’s tuition money while he was away in Kisii (Nyanza Province in southwestern Kenya). Others were overloaded with domestic chores, and received less food than the other children in the family. Some were also put in risky situations, like NyarAlego (19 years old, completed primary school), who lived with her aunt throughout her primary school years. NyarAlego recalled how frightened she was when she and her cousin, a few years older than she, used to illegally ferry chang’aa—up to ten jerricans—for her aunt. They would travel with her aunt to distant places such as south Nyanza and Kisii: the two girls dressed in their school uniforms and carrying schoolbooks would take the bus home with a big bag full chang’aa in the storage compartment. Nyambedha’s (2006: 101) study of western Kenya demonstrated that most of the children missed their parents’ home when they were raised elsewhere, and although adults tended to consider children’s lack of food and their inability to attend school as basic dimensions of children’s vulnerability,
children and youngsters felt that “they were better off suffering at home than enjoying a better material standard of living in other places they considered not to be home”.

By the time most of the youngsters of Winam felt mature enough to live on their own, they had moved at least once, or had been moving back and forth between different places. Some youngsters blamed their parents for what they were going through, particularly when their schooling was interrupted, and held them responsible for the ‘immoral’ behaviour that brought HIV/AIDS to their home. Youngsters dropped out before getting a diploma because none of their kin or close friends could help them further, and the local MP was not available, the Catholic or Anglican Church did not respond, and the foreigner had already paid other people’s school fees. Once they had dropped out of primary or secondary school, some were taken to a trainer to learn a certain skill to enable them to become independent, such as carpentry, mechanical repair, driving, and tailoring (mostly for young women), during a period of one to two years. Yet, without formal education, supportive social networks, and starting capital, these youngsters had little possibility to gain a secure livelihood and to move to town.

4.3. Akinyi’s story

I summarize the life story of Akinyi here, emphasising the various places she moved to, and the different reasons for doing so, starting from her early childhood. I have chosen her story among the many others because I knew nearly her entire social network: her maternal uncles, her paternal relatives, her brothers and sisters, her mother, and also most of her female peers, her male friends, and her boyfriends, which allowed me to verify her accounts and fill in gaps. In addition, Petronella and I were able to visit her in the different places she moved to. Akinyi’s story is not exceptional but is rather a fairly good representation of how young people grow up in rural Nyanza and how they are connected to urban life.

Akinyi (and also her mother) tactically navigated different networks to make her daily life worthwhile. She chose pathways or persons that could enable her to move to town or at least to a much more promising place than her home area. The story illustrates that the social networks used during childhood were relied on later in life, when she was searching for ways to improve her standard of living by finding jobs. As her life story indicates, her social networks were splintered and hard to rely on, especially those that broke down due to unexpected shocks and the “hidden, slow-moving, but destructive” (Loevinsohn and Gillespie 2003: 12) impact of HIV/AIDS. While social networks were unstable, sexual networks could be employed as an
alternative or a complement.

Akinyi’s life story illustrates the significant consequences of her father’s irresponsibility for the entire family. Although MinAkinyi, Akinyi’s mother, tried to cover for her husband’s unreliability by acting as the head of the household, she also brewed chang’aa and sold bhang, letting her children grow up in an environment of illegal activities where they were surrounded by drunken people. Whenever MinAkinyi was imprisoned (which happened several times), there were only few people Akinyi could stay with and rely on, like her maternal uncles and her paternal aunt, since her social network was rather small. None of these relatives had a lucrative business. Her maternal uncles, for instance, were her age-mates, without any real prospects and just trying to make ends meet. MinAkinyi criticised her husband’s sister, saying she had not taken good care of Akinyi since she was surrounded by many drunken fishermen all day, and they often sexually harassed Akinyi. At home, Akinyi’s situation worsened once her father’s health deteriorated, and he became another responsibility for her to take care of. While Akinyi tried to assist her mother whenever she could, she also explored sexual relationships as she realised that it could open other livelihood options. She wanted to get out of the misery at home and wished to get a job or to start a small business in Bondo or Kisumu. At the same time, she hoped to find a financially capable husband away from home.

The movements of Akinyi
Akinyi was born at her father’s home in west Winam in 1989, the second of seven children. With the help of a fellow villager, Akinyi’s father had obtained a job in Garissa (an estate of Nairobi) with the meteorological department, however, he never sent remittances back home since, according to MinAkinyi, he usually spent the money on drinking and on women. In 1994, when Akinyi was five years old, her paternal grandmother sold a goat to enable MinAkinyi and her children to travel to Garissa to check on their father since he had stopped visiting them. They found him staying with another woman. The other woman left, and they then stayed for about three years with their father, but they experienced town life to be very expensive. Moreover, their father was misbehaving with different women and drinking a lot of alcohol, and, finally, he lost his job. Moreover, he was not in a good health any more, and for this reason, MinAkinyi, Akinyi’s father, and the children all moved back to Akinyi’s father’s home in west Winam. There, he became bedridden, and continued to drink chang’aa.
Soon after they arrived in Winam, Akinyi’s maternal uncle died, and, not much later, her maternal grandfather and grandmother both died. MinAkinyi was now the eldest of her family, with a number of surviving younger siblings. Since JoWinam gossiped that their land might have been bewitched, none of MinAkinyi’s siblings would stay there, choosing instead to stay with paternal uncles or renting a room in Dhonam.

Once the burial rituals were completed, MinAkinyi returned with her children to her husband’s home in west Winam, where their father remained. Since MinAkinyi needed cash money to pay the school fees of her children, she started a business brewing *chang’aa* and selling *bhang*. Although both activities are illegal in Kenya, they at least brought them some immediate cash. Akinyi dropped out in Class 3 (when she was about 12 years old) due to her family’s economic hardship. To make things worse, in 2003, when Akinyi was 14 years old, Akinyi’s mother got caught by the police and was sent to prison for about two years. Their father, who had always relied on the income from their mother’s business, moved with the children to his brother’s place in Kisumu. Soon after, he sent them to his sister’s place, a fishing beach on Lake Victoria, where Akinyi helped her aunt with selling fish and other domestic chores. During that time, a rich man from outside Winam had approached her, wanting to marry her. Akinyi and her older brother George only stayed with their aunt for about two months because George felt that Akinyi was being treated like a maid. Akinyi and George travelled to east Winam, where their maternal uncles lived, and stayed with the most responsible of them, named Canon. During that time, according to Akinyi’s maternal uncles, George behaved like a “prostitute”, inviting so many girlfriends to his uncles’ homes that they told him to leave. George returned to his father in Kisumu town, while Akinyi remained in east Winam until her mother was released from prison.

After some months at home, in April 2005, Akinyi returned again to her maternal uncle’s place while MinAkinyi travelled to Kisumu to learn the whereabouts of her husband and George. It was at that moment that I was introduced to Akinyi by her maternal uncle Ochien’g, and it was also around this time that Akinyi was introduced to Okoth (see Chapter 6), who would become her boyfriend. In May 2005, Akinyi returned home to west Winam since her mother needed her help with the household chores. Her father had been in hospital in Kisumu but was now home, still very ill: he was suffering from diarrhoea and stomach pains, and, as far I could see, he was probably HIV positive. George had impregnated a young woman in Kisumu, and then disappeared without a trace. While Akinyi helped her mother with the domestic chores, she occasionally
escaped to visit her boyfriend Okoth back in east Winam (about half a day’s walk or two hours by bicycle ride).

Akinyi’s mother was against their relationship, and played an important role in introducing Akinyi to a policeman from Mombasa, who had come to visit his home in Winam. Akinyi’s mother hoped that he would be a responsible and financially capable man who would marry her daughter, instead of misusing her, as she thought Okoth did. At first, Akinyi refused to date him, but since she was longing to get out of Winam, she told me she decided to give the ‘Mombasa man’ a try. With the approval of her mother, she travelled to Mombasa in July of 2005, but she only stayed there for about two weeks because she realised that the man from Mombasa, called Jack, had several girlfriends at the same time, and she did not love him.

Leaving him, however, proved a challenge, as Akinyi had to invent a story in order to obtain money to travel back home. She invented a story that I, a white European woman, wanted to employ her. Calling me with Jack’s mobile phone on a regular basis from Mombasa seemed to confirm this to him, and he gave her the money she needed. When I met her at the Kisumu bus stop, I almost did not recognise her: she came with a different look and new glamorous clothes. With such clothes, everyone in the village would know that she had been living in town and that her boyfriend had taken good care of her. However, Jack was not pleased with her leaving, and sent text messages quoting Biblical proverbs to Akinyi about how a woman should not leave her husband. Akinyi didn’t respond to him since she did not want to see him again, and continued visiting Okoth.

Her father’s health deteriorated fast, and he kept on wasting their little earnings by drinking chang’aa. In order to get some additional money, in October 2005, Akinyi left for Nairobi to work as a domestic servant for a fellow villager who was expecting a baby. Akinyi’s mother, who was saddened by the fact that her children could only be servants to people, explained: “Akinyi was not so keen about going to Nairobi. She only went because she knows that we need the money and because she does not want to see us suffering at home, because her father is also sick now”. Akinyi’s mother complained about Akinyi’s father: “The way you see baba Akinyi sitting down beside the house, that is all he does each day, and if he gets a job, like thatching people’s houses—yet my house is leaking and he cannot do it, he drinks the money. He has been like that throughout”. Akinyi left her job in Nairobi before Christmas 2005 since she was treated badly and not paid: the wife of the house withheld the money she had received from her husband. When Akinyi complained about this issue, the wife evicted Akinyi, and she had to spend
the night at a neighbour’s house. After this incident, Akinyi called her mother and asked permission to return home.

For most of 2006, Akinyi stayed in Winam with her parents, except for some visits to Kisumu, and she no longer wanted to work as a maid. Akinyi’s relationship with Okoth weakened and she got interested in other men. She had a short relationship with a young man she met at a disco matanga. Soon after, we found out that she actually had three different boyfriends at the same time: one from Bondo town, one from a nearby village who was still attending secondary school, and a third who was older and working in Nairobi but who, at times, came back to his home village in Winam. The relationship with the boyfriend from Bondo town did not last long since the young man was involved in a fight and got killed. She had favoured him above the one from the nearby village because he was already living independently, and she had little hope in the man from Nairobi since he came only sporadically to Winam. Akinyi realised that she could not rely only on men when she was in need of money because she found most of them untrustworthy.

At the same time, she got tired of staying at home, complaining to me: “There is a lot of work and it is boring”. She wanted to move to Kisumu, and her mother asked their cousin who lived there to help Akinyi with a driving course: a second plan was to raise enough money to sell second-hand clothes in Kisumu. But since there was no starting capital, Akinyi thought she would sell fish with her paternal aunt in a fishing beach in Siaya District. Despite her mother’s warnings that beaches are risky places for unmarried women, and she might get raped, Akinyi was sure that she could handle it. She imagined her success, telling me, “Once I settle, I will look for my own house. If I am doing well, I will not come home frequently because the villagers would get jealous and could bewitch me”.

But Akinyi did not go to the fishing beach in Siaya District. A woman from Nomiya Church (an independent African Christian church) prayed over her and told her that her paternal aunt had bad intentions toward her. Akinyi was told to become a Nomiya believer in order to avoid further hazards. In August, she joined the church, and from then onwards wore long dresses and a headscarf. Petronella, my research assistant, advised her to be careful since some churches force people to marry someone whom you do not like. Two weeks later, Akinyi told us that, after praying, the jaduong’ (male elder) of the church came to her with a man who wanted to marry her as a second wife. The man, who was a preacher on the famous local radio Ramogi, was not a member of Nomiya Church but had asked the jaduong’ to get him a wife. Akinyi asked him why
he needed a second wife and he told her: “because I am busy and with my job, I travel a lot with my wife so I want someone to look after my children when I am away with the first wife”. The jaduong’ further told her that he also wanted to marry her as a second wife because he wanted to be on par with his other brothers, who all had more than one wife. After hearing the intentions of the preacher, Akinyi left the church.

At home, life did not improve. Her older brother George finally returned but had another wife who was expecting—in addition to the pregnant girl he left in Kisumu. Without any real prospects, Akinyi tried her luck again in Kisumu since she believed that town life would give her more opportunities to find a job, moving to her paternal uncle’s place in in November. A few months after, in April 2007, she got to know one of her aunt’s male friends and moved with him to his home village, close to the border of Tanzania. However, when Akinyi realised that she actually would be his third wife, she hesitated, and later fell in love with his younger brother. MinAkinyi accused her husband’s sister of selling her daughter and reported the case to the police, even though she knew Akinyi’s whereabouts. Akinyi’s aunt was instructed by the police to find Akinyi, and sent her son to find her. Once found, Akinyi was sent back home. She had hoped to receive travel money from her ‘Tanzanian boyfriend’ to visit his village, but the boyfriend refused because he found it a shameful situation.

Akinyi was annoyed that her mother had interfered in her relationship with the Tanzanian man. She was no longer on good terms with her mother and tried on her own means to find another way to return to her Tanzanian boyfriend. When she heard that the granddaughter of a villager from Winam could use a nanny for her just-delivered baby girl, she quickly took this opportunity in Nairobi. Akinyi would receive a monthly salary of 1000 Kenyan shillings. During my visit to Nairobi in July 2007, Akinyi told me that she had been trying to reach her ‘Tanzanian boyfriend’ by phone, but he never responded. After my last visit, Akinyi continued to inform me of her whereabouts with regular phone calls. While in Nairobi, she got to know a young man from Kisii, who promised to take her to his home and marry her, but when she got pregnant in October 2007, he asked her to abort the foetus. She “flashed” me on my mobile phone in Belgium and when I called her back she asked me for advice about abortions, and for financial help to cover the expenses (about 50 euro). She decided to abort the foetus.

In April 2008, her older brother George died (probably from HIV) in Winam, leaving a wife and a newborn baby. Akinyi went home for the burial, and returned to Nairobi two weeks after the funeral. In May 2008, she had to go back again to her home village because her paternal grandmother died. In mid-July 2008, after completing the
burial rituals, and before she left again for Nairobi, she visited a new boyfriend in Seme, a bus driver whom she had gotten to know during the *disco matanga* organised for her deceased brother.

In September 2008, her father died, probably from HIV, and she again returned home for the funeral. MinAkinyi quickly realised that Akinyi was pregnant since Akinyi felt very tired all day. In this state, Akinyi could not work in Nairobi anymore, and MinAkinyi convinced Akinyi to keep the baby. The father of the unborn baby, the boyfriend from Seme, did not want to assume this responsibility because, according to Akinyi, “he had too many other girlfriends to take care of”. Akinyi was very worried because she wanted to have a father for her child, and so she got engaged to a teacher in Winam. She accused him of impregnating her, but he also did not want to take responsibility for the child.

In February 2009, about two months before the baby’s birth, Akinyi was admitted to the hospital for malnutrition. I helped her to cover the hospital bill (20 euro) and agreed to send her some money for food once in a while. Her daughter was born in April 2009. One year later, Akinyi’s situation had not changed much: her mother was again imprisoned, now with deteriorating health. I decided to help Akinyi with some start-up capital to begin selling second-hand clothes, because she told me on the phone, after hesitating, “My mother is not good”, not daring to say: “My mother is HIV infected”. Since September 2010, we have lost contact; her mobile number no longer works.

While at first, Akinyi just wanted to experiment with sex, later she tactically sought out different social and sexual networks for improving her livelihood situation. Mobility was not unfamiliar to Akinyi as, beginning even in early childhood, she had moved between many different settings. Akinyi’s mobility—and that of her brother—did not cause any problems for her family, as it was part of their parents’ daily struggle. Akinyi was also able to spend quite some time at ‘home’—the ancestral home where her parents were living—but now and then needed to live with some of her relatives, where she did not always feel ‘at home’.

Akinyi relied on a rather small social network and had no connections to better-off people who had stable jobs and who could give her a helping hand. Her education level was low, which diminished her chances of finding a secure job or a husband with a higher education who might be better able to find a stable job. Higher-educated men in Winam usually preferred marrying someone with the same education level or at least
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someone who had been able to finish secondary school (see next chapter). Thus Akinyi’s livelihood opportunities were few.

Left with her maternal same-age uncles while her mother was imprisoned, Akinyi became receptive to the attention she received from her uncle’s friend Okoth. MinAkinyi did not approve of this relationship because she felt Okoth did not have much to offer them. Okoth was ‘merely from Winam’ and his employment at Yeshica as a volunteer was not deemed highly. Due to the limited resources at home to assist Akinyi, it was MinAkinyi’s tactic to find her a financially capable husband who at least would be able to pay the bride price. JoWinam explained that parents usually preferred not to invest too much in their daughters compared to their sons, since a daughter, once married, would move to her husband’s home. Akinyi’s family thought that the bride price paid by Akinyi’s future husband would help them to improve their livelihood situation, but this was highly improbably as few male youngsters during the time of my research actually had the financial means. In addition, MinAkinyi hoped that the husband’s home would not be too far from Akinyi’s parents’ home since that would enable MinAkinyi to rely on her daughter now and then.

Akinyi did not share her mother’s reasoning but, at the same time, did not want to disappoint her mother. After Akinyi’s sexual experience with Jack from Mombasa, Akinyi realized the advantage of having sexual relationships with ‘town men’. Akinyi—like so many other youngsters of Winam—associated urban life with socioeconomic progress. In Mombasa, she had been able to witness the comforts of living in town (i.e., having for instance electricity and a gas cook stove and fashionable clothing). Each time she was pulled back to the village, she tried every means to move (back) to town, even though she did not want to work as a maid since she had been exploited many times. She believed that when she was in town, it was easier to engage sexually with ‘town men’ and maybe find the ‘right husband’ who would be able to fulfil her mother’s wish of paying the bride price. Although she realized that town life was very harsh, her sexual relationships with different men enabled her to have something to fall back on. There was an ongoing struggle between her aspiration to be independent from men, whom she considered untrustworthy; her ambition to improve her livelihood; and her mother’s goal of finding the right, financially capable husband for her.

She moved to Kisumu and imagined herself becoming self-employed one day, but she did not want to get married close to her home since she believed it would provoke envy among Winam villagers and risk bewitchment (see also Chapter 5). Consequently, Akinyi tactically choose her sexual partners from elsewhere, seeing a future with her
Tanzanian boyfriend, for example, until her mother pulled her back home, using the power of the police. Once back home, she again acted tactically: she escaped her mother’s will and sought the help of her village friends, trying to re-establish contact with her Tanzanian boyfriend, only to find the relationship had been spoiled by her mother’s actions.

Running the risk of getting pregnant was another tension she tactically tried to deal with. When she learned she was pregnant for the first time, she was overwhelmed with feelings of fear and shame since her boyfriend did not accept the pregnancy. She lacked the knowledge of abortion methods and the financial means, but, finally, relying on her network (me), she managed. She was too late to abort the second pregnancy when the biological father also denied his responsibility. This time, Akinyi’s livelihood tactic was to enlarge her sexual network and use her pregnancy to try to find a responsible father. In the end, she remained alone with the responsibilities of motherhood, at her maternal home. Neither her nor her mother’s wish had come true, or, at least, not yet. There is still a chance that maybe one day in the future, Akinyi will manage to find ‘a rich man’ who will bring her, her younger siblings, and her mother to town, away from the suffering.

Akinyi’s account represents, to some extent, the experience of youngsters who have spent most of their childhood in Winam and nearby villages; in the next section I present some examples of youngsters who were brought up in town and only later in life came to the village. The size of the social and sexual networks of these youngsters who have been brought up in town was wider than that of their village counterparts. In addition, while all the youth (both rural- and urban-raised) had urban aspirations, the urban-raised youngsters—referred to as the “dot.coms”—had other life expectations than their rural counterparts and faced difficulties adapting to rural life.

4.4. The world of the “dot.coms”

People in town were believed to be much better off than those in rural areas, and children were encouraged by their parents to leave and search for work in town. Parents and youngsters alike believed that living in town would improve young people’s opportunities and broaden their social network, perhaps leading to future employment. Having lived in town was also a kind of status symbol for most of the youngsters, as Axel, a 20-year-old young man who was finishing his last year of secondary school in 2005, explained: “People can say: ‘I have been to Nairobi, to Mombasa’” (in-depth
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interview, May 2006). Urban life was associated with escaping the hard work in the fields and difficult domestic chores. In town, houses usually have cement floors, which are easier to clean, and there is electricity, which results in more entertainment opportunities, such as television, bars, discos, cinemas, and supermarkets. These imaginings of urban life do not always correspond to the realities, as some of the youngsters ended up in the lower-class neighbourhoods or slums of Nairobi. Still, although someone might be living in a slum in town, they are still considered to be ‘urban based’ because they can enjoy the benefits of the consumer economy. The urban informants of Cole’s (2007: 84–85) study, in Tamatave, Madagascar, felt that they were always up-to-date about the latest “new things” and the latest fashions, and imagined that their rural counterparts, by contrast, were bound to a miserable life of planting rice, in which no progress or pleasure could be experienced.

At the time of my fieldwork, Adhis was a 20-year-old young woman who had been raised throughout her primary and secondary schooling by her paternal aunt. She spent most of her childhood in Nairobi and went to a boarding school in Bondo for her secondary school education. When she was graduated from secondary school in 2005, she returned to her rural home in Winam since she had no real perspective about what she could do in her future. She told us: “In town, people grow so fast”, meaning that people mature faster in town since they are more exposed to mass media than their village counterparts. Young people who have spent most of their childhood in town or who regularly stayed in town grow up with a broader worldview, and have different life expectations compared to those of their peers from the village. Moreover, in town, people also come from many different places and socioeconomic backgrounds whereas in the village, the differences are not as wide. Although the market centre of Dhonam was livelier (with its video hall, billiards hall, disco, and mobile cinema) than other parts of Winam, urban-raised youngsters said there is still much more “movement” in urban areas such as Bondo, the closest town, and the cities of Kisumu, Nairobi, and Mombasa.

Youngsters, especially young women like Adhis who had spent most of their childhood and adolescence in town, were often referred to as “dot.coms”. The nickname merits a closer look, because it shows how the youngsters of Winam were connected to the outside world and how they appropriated concepts to their own local context. Among these youth, the term ‘dot.com’ refers to modernity: the modern world of the internet, mobile phones, and new, foreign things. The term ‘dot.com’ originally referred to innovative online companies, often consisting of little more than a good website; the ‘dot.com boom’, and bust, in the 1990s made many of these fledgling companies very
wealthy, and then bankrupt. Hence in Winam, ‘dot.com’ stood for easy money and an unsustainable lifestyle. The dot.coms were, in the rural context of Winam, perceived to be ‘high-class people’ with habits and sophisticated dressing styles that rural youngsters viewed as being modern and urban, with connections to the modern life that is town life. Notably, ‘dot.com girls’ were also accused for having more than one partner at the same time due to their need for money (see Chapter 6).

Once the dot.coms were thrown back to their ancestral home due to unstable social relations, they suffered more than those who had been brought up in rural areas since they were not used to village life. They were not familiar with chike Luo and hardly could communicate in the Dholuo language. They were not used to food shortages and missed the luxuries that town life offered. Monica (21 years old) was also such a “dot.com girl”; she had enjoyed more educational opportunities, even attending college, than Akinyi since she had a stable social network at first, including an older brother who paid her school fees. Monica stayed with different relatives (her older brother, her older sister, her sister-in-law, her cousin) and lived in different places (Ahero, Nairobi, Homa Bay, Eldoret) during her school years. When left in the hands of her in-laws and other relatives, Monica often felt left out, and realised that she had to try finding her own means of making a living. One of her livelihood tactics was then to explore and expand her sexual network in the hope of getting easy access to goods. After getting pregnant, she left Nairobi, moving to her sister’s place in Winam. Although pregnancy could be a tactic in order to make boyfriends, it could also hinder urban aspirations. And so it did for Monica, whose boyfriend did not take up his responsibility as a father. Monica’s sister in Winam suggested she apply for one of the CDC vacancies there; if she got a job, her sister might take care of the baby. But without a job and unable to adapt to village life, Monica moved again to her stepsister’s place in Kisumu, where her baby girl was born. When the baby was three months old, Monica moved back to Winam, explaining: “My stepsister is very strict. Once you go inside that house, the gate is locked and there is no coming out—and she quarrels a lot, and me, I like going out a lot. I can’t stay all the time in the house and I don’t like being quarrelled with” (informal conversation, September 2005).

Back in Winam at her sister’s place, Monica further tried to apply for several CDC jobs. She realized that having a child put stress on her financial situation, and reduced her chances for pursuing further studies and finding a husband. In Winam, she had short-term sexual relationships with a number of boyfriends but none that could improve her livelihood. With her social network nearly exhausted, she believed that only
in Nairobi could she find a job and simultaneously enlarge her sexual network of well-salaried men. Thus her next livelihood tactic was to move back to town, again employing her nearly exhausted social network. Yet, she would stay only with those relatives who gave her a certain amount of freedom to enable her to get in touch with the ‘town men’.

In October 2005, without her sister’s knowledge, she went to her cousin’s place in Nairobi, leaving her little daughter behind. Petronella, my research assistant, and I visited her several times in Nairobi. The first time, in February of 2006, Petronella went to meet Monica alone at the bus station, but soon after, Monica took Petronella to one of the bars on River Road, where Monica was meeting one of her boyfriends. River Road is a street full of bars, clubs, restaurants, and brothels, both overt and hidden, a famous street where, as “Nairobians” (people from Nairobi) say, “everything is possible, from illegal to legal”. There she met up with Charles, a man in his thirties who was already drunk when they arrived. Charles invited Petronella and Monica to have a Smirnoff Ice, and when Petronella left, he gave her 200 Kenyan shillings (2.5 euro). At first, Petronella did not want to accept the money but Monica insisted, as she wanted Petronella to buy something nice for her little daughter in Winam.

It is interesting to observe that Monica’s social network, having lived and studied for some time in Nairobi, was much wider than the one Akinyi could employ when she was working as a housemaid and nanny in Nairobi. Akinyi stayed in the same network as the people she knew from back home, and most of the people that she was familiar with in Nairobi were relatives of her neighbours in Winam. The people in her network also lived in the same neighbourhood; in Nairobi many neighbourhoods are known for being predominantly inhabited by a certain ethnic group. For instance, Kaloleni is an urban quarter in the eastern part of Nairobi that is referred to as another ‘homeland’ of the Luo. The two households that had employed Akinyi in Nairobi were from a higher-status household than her own, but since both places maintained the basic Luo environment as back home, she felt as if she was not really away from home. Weisner (1997) also found this pattern among the Kisa people in western Kenya: related families from certain subclans and lineages in Kisa also lived near one another in a certain neighbourhood in Nairobi. In this way, they continued to stay in the same social network, which enabled them to share information about housing and services and jobs (Weisner 1997: 28–29). Monica also had a wider social network than Akinyi because during her studies she had met many other people outside her close and distant relatives, and so her social network was composed of people from different ethnic groups and not only Luo people. When Monica stayed with her sister in Winam, she had
difficulty adapting herself to the hard circumstances of village life. When we asked Akinyi how life was in Nairobi after her first experience working there, she answered, “Nairobi? I do not like it”, whereas Monica said: “Nairobi is cheap, it is fun”. Although Monica was to some extent socioeconomically privileged when compared with Akinyi, both young women realized that the help they could expect from their social networks was limited. Therefore, they, like most of the (female) youngsters, tried to find a better way of living through the creation of a sexual network.

4.5. Young women and sexual networks

As my ethnographic data show, climbing up the social ladder and finding a better way of living through sexual liaisons was more prevalent among young women than young men. In his article on sexual networks and social capital, Thornton (2009) invites us to look at the ‘rational’ responses sexually active agents make in response to unstable social networks. According to Thornton (2009), people have sexual liaisons with multiple concurrent partners in order to build their social networks and social capital, which may result in an improvement in many other aspects of their life. Sexual relationships can give them access to goods and services that conventional social networks may not. Thornton (2009) further reasons that a diverse sexual network may help people to move out of their current situation. Thus, young people may have very good reasons to engage in ‘risky sex’ (Thornton 2009).

Due to the gender-related constraints in finding reliable income-generating activities for women, women remain dependent on men for economic resources. Many women in Winam tried to intensify their workload in the field and to obtain independent non-farm economic means to cover for the unemployment status of their husband or boyfriend. Although a number of unmarried young women still depended on the household’s economy, she would be considered ‘foolish’ if she did not take advantage of the material benefits a man could offer her. As Cole (2007: 85) in her study in Madagascar writes: “the girl who doesn’t go after what she wants [i.e., fashion, foreign items] is ridiculed”. At the same time, a (young) man is expected to provide (see also Chapter 6). Consequently, young women can legitimately leave their current boyfriend or husband if he is unable to meet her desired needs and get another one. They can also have multiple concurrent sexual partners in order to meet their different needs: a young woman might have a financial boyfriend who gives her money; a social boyfriend whom she goes out with and likes to be seen with; and an academic boyfriend whose role is just to do her assignments. She will make pragmatic choices, depending on her situation.
However, in Winam, young women had fewer choices as there were few desirable men around. Additionally, some young women did not always find the courage to leave their current boyfriend or husband as they had to perform what society or their relatives demanded from them. It was common that young women said: “I know he is polygamous but I cannot leave him because all men are polygamous”. Only some young women had the opportunity to engage in a relationship with a more desirable or financially capable man, who preferably lived in town, in the hope of escaping their daily hardships at home. For the (young) men on the other hand, it was considered legitimate to leave their current girlfriend or wife if she was cheating on him or was only after his money, but he could not easily put himself in a dependent position by seeking a ‘rich’ female sexual partner to provide for him, as this would be very shameful. Since men were expected to fulfil the role of breadwinner, it was hard for them to rely on women for their economic needs. Of course, it happened—and more than is publicly stated—that some men attracted ‘wealthy’ women for sexual favours, like the so-called sugar-mamas, but these relationships were usually just a one-night stand or for the short term. Such situations did not occur very often in the village due to its higher level of social control, but in the cities of Mombasa and Nairobi, such stories were common. On one occasion Ochien’g came to our house, disgusted because he had been locked in the house of an “old lady” who wanted to have sexual intercourse with him; she had offered him goods like sugar and milk in exchange. He was frightened of her and never wanted to walk through her neighbourhood again. He also told me of a mentally ill fisherman who often sexually engaged with older women for money. Thus while men were not culturally permitted to rely financially on sexual liaisons, women could do so. Men might have multiple concurrent partners, which could to some extent expand their social capital, but it did not necessarily improve their living situation—in fact, having multiple partners could deteriorate their living standard as they were expected to provide for all their girlfriends and wives. What about the ‘rich’ (young) man with many girlfriends? He might not need to expand his social capital through sexual liaisons. Thornton (2009) does not take into account that not all sexual agents are poor and want to enlarge their sexual network because they are in need of material goods. Although he puts forward a number of interesting ideas on sexual networking, his focus is too much on ‘the poor’ and he lacks a more nuanced view on gender-specific effects.
4.6. Pragmatic choices

Thornton (2009: 2) writes that “the dynamic properties of these networks-as-structures arise from persons acting in strategic ways”. However, I suggest that not all decisions that sexual active agents make arise from rational thought processes. Although Thornton wants to move away from the rational choice model on which most of the HIV/AIDS behavioural change literature is based, he actually further reinforces the dichotomy between the rational and the irrational person, assuming that people act with free choice, choosing a certain partner to extend their livelihood networks. In sum, it is never pure agency nor pure structure, but a complex, contextual interaction between both: young people tactically make pragmatic choices, acting within constraints but trying to capitalize on opportunities when they arise. In the stories of the youngsters of Winam, we see how HIV/AIDS affects networks. The old network ceases to produce the benefits it once did and other, often more modern networks emerge, which offer young people access to urban (night-)life and fashion. While this new urban world holds many promises, it has a dark side where nightlife turns into prostitution, and higher education’s promises of formal employment turn out to be an illusion that distracts people from using their time and energy to generate income in more humble positions.

5. Conclusion

People in Winam are very mobile, they will disappear—you won’t know where they go to because Winam is like a beach community: somebody goes to Sakwa or Gem or Nairobi so whether they die there, nobody cares.

– Opiyo, former anthropologist at Yeshica (in-depth interview, September 2006)

Examining the livelihood tactics of young people is useful in understanding how young people react to and deal with social and economic changes that are occurring in society. I have used the term ‘tactic’ instead of the commonly used ‘strategy’ in order to highlight this interesting blend of, on the one hand, short- to medium-term agency guided by hopes and dreams for a better future outside Winam, and, on the other hand, the reactive and opportunistic aspects of this agency, which is dependent upon changes in the environment. I pointed to the limitations of the concepts of ‘livelihood’ and ‘social capital’, which fail to capture the lack of certainty and predictability that make any strategy for action impossible. The youngsters of Winam were not in a position to plan their long-term future and had to revise whatever plans they had when opportunities
arose or vanished. Intentions to go to college, for example, might be disrupted by a relative’s death, since all available household resources would need to be spent on the funeral.

When young people sought a sustainable livelihood in Winam, they quickly ran into obstacles and limitations, and learned that many paths were thwarted by a context of gender inequality and persistent poverty. Experiencing their village context as a straightjacket, the livelihood tactics of the young people in Winam were characterized by a high degree of mobility. Their social and sexual networks were two of the most important tools they had to employ for their tactic of mobility. Leveraging connections to friends and relatives brought them to different places, and they constantly sought to expand their network to include people with connections to urban life. However, they had to be realistic: people compete for connections to town, and success in using these livelihood networks was infrequent. Many empty promises were made, and games of persuasion (described in Chapters 6 and 7) were employed, aimed at obtaining sex or promises of marriage. The ambition to establish new connections, and the dialectic between broken and ever-new promises, reveals a quest to find that one perfect opportunity that could elevate them from their misery. This is not a well-planned quest but a spontaneous, fragile, and often interrupted process. In this quest, youngsters move here and there, appear and disappear, sometimes seeming to roam around, while other times having a clear plan of moving to a certain location for good, only to be forced later to abandon that place. This reflects the fragility of their lives and the absence of many structures that protect the livelihoods and guide the lives of their peers in more developed countries. In stark contrast to the security and safety nets available in rich countries, and to rich Kenyans, these youngsters believe, with good reason, like Opiyo says above, “whether they die there, nobody cares”. People will grieve, but JoWinam have grown tough through the many shocks they have experienced, and they have no option other than to tolerate these hard conditions. Although the young people I met have experienced a lot of desperation around them, they did not give up hope, because they believed that they would manage to reach that ‘better life’ outside of Winam. They have learned to act within a context of ‘chronic crisis’ (Vigh 2008). By extending their social and sexual networks, young people saw opportunities and they acted to seize these options, which entailed many ‘health risks’, detailed in the next chapter.
1 The name *ngege* used to refer to *Oreochromis esculentus*, a type of tilapia found in Lake Victoria in the 1950s. This type of tilapia diminished in Lake Victoria and British officials introduced new kinds of fish, including Nile tilapia (*Oreochromis niloticus*) and Nile perch (*Lates niloticus*) (see [http://www.cichlid-forum.com/articles/lake_victoria_sick.php](http://www.cichlid-forum.com/articles/lake_victoria_sick.php)). Although today’s is a different type of tilapia than the 1950s, JoWinam still refer to it as ‘*ngege*’.


3 In general, they hope to attend schools with a high national ranking, which would improve their chances to find employment. Some youngsters graduated with good marks from a local school, but since their school is at the bottom of the national ranking, their marks were not highly valued, and university or college scholarships were out of their reach. Only with some luck and the help of a Member of Parliament or a rich relative could those youngsters gain acceptance to a provincial or national secondary school.

4 Depending on the level (local, provincial, or national) of school, fees ranged from 24,000–40,000 Kenyan shillings (300–500 Euro) per year.

5 Since many youngsters dropped out in-between and stayed out of school as long as three to four years until they could find a scholarship, I realised that it did not make sense to make a differentiation ‘out-of-school youth’ and ‘school-going youth’ (see also Chapter 1).

6 However, nowadays due to the scarcity of food and resources at home, parents prefer their daughters to get married to someone from a neighbouring area since that would allow the daughters to come to the parents’ assistance whenever they are in need. Parents also prefer to be able to check on how their daughters are doing.

7 Youth unemployment in the world has increased spectacularly between 1993 and 2003, from 11.7 percent in 1993 to its historical height of 14.4 percent in 2003, leaving 88 million young people without work (ILO 2004).

8 However, once they marry, women’s independence means greater precariousness for their husbands, for they are no longer the main breadwinners of the household (see Chapters 3 and 6).

9 The introduction of the Nile Perch— new species of predatory fish introduced by British officials in the 1950s—has caused enormous ecological damage, explained in the movie ‘Darwin’s Nightmare’.

10 Kenya owns only 6 percent of Lake Victoria’s surface (Shipton 2005: 59).

11 *Simu ya jami* is a system of sharing a community phone, creating an entrepreneurial opportunity for poorer people to set up a business selling airtime to the local community via a shared handset or calling card.

12 The 700 youngsters that participated in different vocational trainings was the total number of participants, but each youngster participated several times, so the number of actual individual trained was likely to be much lower.

13 It was not easy for the ITM to find a microfinance institution that was willing to work with young people in a rural setting. Most microfinance institutions regarded young people as lacking responsibility, and therefore the capacity to repay their loans. K-Rep is managed by the Kenyan Development Agency (see [http://www.povertyactionlab.org/partners](http://www.povertyactionlab.org/partners)).
The YIP program coordinator assumed that it was K-Rep’s task to keep track of their members, yet K-Rep did not have the time to do this, nor could they forgive debts as their purpose was giving loans and getting their money back.

When new models or best practices are published, it is often ignored that to arrive at one ostensible ‘model’, many other things were tried without success and with sometimes adverse outcomes for the participants involved.

Sugar cane and peanuts were also staple crops, but less marketable than maize.

At the time of my fieldwork, ‘Luo men’ who had not built their own homes were usually buried next to their mothers’ houses.

The ‘Luo elders’ were part of the ‘Luo Council of Elders’—dominated by men—that was established in 1990 in Kisumu. It refers back to the Luo Council, a group of elders who defended the Luo identity and culture during colonial time (White 1990; Geissler and Prince 2010).

The ‘Luo tradition’ requires that each boy who becomes mature builds his own simba (bachelor’s hut), with its door facing the direction of his father’s house. The firstborn son must be the first to build his house—loko ot—and the other siblings can follow one by one.

Petronella and I visited Akinyi almost twice a month in her paternal home in Winam, where we usually would spend a whole day. We also visited her when she was staying at her maternal uncles’ place in Dhonam, her boyfriend Okoth’s place in east Winam, her older boyfriend’s place in Nairobi, the Nomiya church, her uncle’s place in Kisumu, and the places in Nairobi where she was working as a nanny. We were not able to visit her in Mombasa, as at that time, I had not yet obtained my ITM supervisor’s permission to go and follow the youngsters to the places they moved.