Aspirations and sex: Coming of age in western Kenya in a context of HIV
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Chapter 8

Conclusion

1. Introduction

O nyango, Joel, Adhis, Rambo, Otieno, Enoka, Atieno, Lucy, and Omosh were some of the youngsters we met at the disco matanga in August 2005, when my research assistant Petronella, my boyfriend (now husband) Sven, and I were still pretty new to the field. During the course of my fieldwork period of 20 months, with the enormous help of Petronella, I was able to gain some insight into their young lives, which I have tried to present in this dissertation.

Since a funeral brings together people from near and far, the disco matanga was an ideal place for the youngsters of Winam to meet and interact. Before the HIV/AIDS pandemic, when people began dying in such large numbers, there were few disco matangas in Winam. Well into the epidemic, at the time of my fieldwork, young people had many opportunities to experiment with sexual relationships and perhaps find their future spouse. The disco matanga is an event where fun and pleasure have no limits, but also, at the same time, where life and death are shaking hands.

People in Winam go to a disco matanga for many different reasons. Close relatives may be in mourning, and comforted by the sharing of food and the drinking of chang’aa with relatives and friends, while music plays and people dance. Many youngsters go to a disco matanga to hang out and dance with their girl- or boyfriend, or to seduce (another) one. Some young women try to get young men’s attention by dressing in tight shirts and trousers. I often heard JoWinam say: the “disco matanga is where girls get married”. While many youth did begin sexual relationships at disco matangas, during my fieldwork most youth delayed both formal and informal marriages and, if they did marry, their unions did not last long. This was the setting where I met many of the key persons of my research for the first time.

What has happened to Onyango and the other youngsters since I left the field? Prior to my last visit, in July 2007, I thought that all of the youth I had come to know would have moved to another place, developed a severe illness, or, in the worst scenario, died. I did not have much hope that I would be able to keep in contact with them and to find them once more when I returned. Some of my worst fears have been confirmed: two
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youngsters from the small group that I met at the *disco matanga* have already died, along with many other youngsters whom I came to know in Winam who were not part of my research group. Onyango has kept me informed about many of these tragic deaths, mostly through emails. At first, I kept in touch with many youth by mobile phone, an important tool that allowed me to stay connected to the lifeworld of Winam (see also De Bruijn et al. 2009). Unfortunately, in 2010, due to a yearlong illness and my family moving to Peru for my husband’s job, I lost contact with most of them. When I had recovered from my illness, many of the phone numbers no longer worked: my number had changed as well, so they could not phone me anymore. Onyango was the only one who had made a habit of writing me emails on a regular basis, so every time he went back ‘home’ to Winam—he was living in Mombasa and Nairobi—he informed me about the whereabouts of my Winam friends. I am really grateful for this, and I long to see them all again.

Omosh died from HIV-related opportunistic infections in February 2012. He was one of the few youngsters I followed closely who finally decided to learn his HIV status. He did so in 2008 in order to be able to be admitted to a CDC study, which provided ARV drugs to HIV-positive people. Nevertheless, he died four years later. So what happened? Was he no longer part of the research study? Was he not informed about where he could get free access to ARVs? Did he take his medication as indicated, or irregularly? Did he lack the means to follow a vitamin-rich diet? Or even worse, did he give up hope and just stop taking them? I have no answers to these questions but I hope to learn more if I get a chance to go back. Omosh was only 23 years old when he died.

Enoka, who was around 16 years old when we first met in 2005, died in September 2012, when he probably was about 23 years old. In an email to me, Onyango wrote that the news of Enoka’s death was “devastating” to the community. According to Enoka’s younger sister, Enoka was probably bewitched in Nyanza. On the phone, she told me that Enoka’s limb had begun to itch and was swollen, and he was groaning in pain. He died before he could be taken to a witch doctor. According to Onyango, Enoka was the breadwinner of their family at that time, paying the school fees for his younger brother and sister. He no longer worked on the fishing beach, but as an unskilled worker for the road contractors in Bondo. Enoka had made sure that his older brother Otieno also got a job there. When Enoka died, Otieno left his job and moved to Siaya as the job reminded him of his younger brother.

This dissertation has tried to frame young people’s hopes, aspirations, and expectations
within the context of everyday hardship in Winam. I have sought to shed light on the
dynamics and ambiguities of young people’s sexual relationships and livelihood
networks. In particular, I have attempted to explain why the young people of Winam
continued to engage in ‘risky sex’, despite their knowledge that this could lead to their
death. I emphasized that young people’s aspirations need to be viewed from an
‘intergenerational matrix’ (Cole 2007), as young people cannot be separated from the
different generations with whom they live. In young people’s lives, what seems to be of
relative importance is finding a ‘good’ sexual partner and reliable financial resources.
Dating and income are what brings them closer to their aspirations. But the conclusion
to this dissertation is still somber: in a time when ARVs are supposed to be available
and free, and AIDS is no longer a deadly but a chronic disease, people in Winam are still
dying. Why? What were the obstacles that prevented Omosh from receiving treatment in
time? What about Enoka? What had happened that people imagined that witchcraft had
affected him? And is there something I could have done? I am aware that thus far my
contribution has been small, but I hope that this dissertation will find its place in our
common struggle against HIV.

2. My contribution to the fight against HIV

The way young people shape their lives within an insecure and unpredictable
environment in Winam, like a microcosm, presents a picture that raises important
questions for HIV prevention as well as broader development work. My findings
challenge many of the foundations on which HIV interventions are built, and
unfortunately, I do not have an easy solution to this. The youngsters in Winam are
enormously at risk. Their stories within a context of ‘enduring uncertainty’ are
unsettling, sad, and shocking, but also funny, full of love, hope, and friendship. I feel
privileged that they have allowed me into their lives and that I can give them a voice
here. The ‘million-dollar question’ for me is: what do they need to avoid becoming
infected? Answering such a question would mean providing a complete list of practical
recommendations for HIV/AIDS prevention. As such is expected by my medical
colleagues and other policy makers, I will provide a separate document of policy
recommendations to them. However, reducing my ethnographic ‘thick description’
(Geertz 1973) to a rather ‘thin prescription’ in this conclusion would bring me into a
different logic of reasoning, going against what I—with the help of Mosse (2003, 2004,
2006) and Ferguson (1990)—have been trying to argue so far.
In Chapter 7, which focused on a HIV/AIDS prevention project implemented in Winam between 2003 and 2008, I explained that many such projects start from a logic—dominated mainly by public health workers and epidemiologists—that is different than that practiced by the people of Winam. This public health reasoning can be described as ‘instrumental’ in that it sees policy as a rational, measurable means for problem solving. However, taking Mosse (2003: 1) as reference, development work is not produced by theory or policy models, it is, instead, produced by “the institutional realities of development funding and ‘cooperation’”. This means that there is no direct link between policy and practice, and therefore no need to discuss whether practices lead to desired impacts. Instead, following Mosse, by explaining how predictable results are created and how ‘success’ and ‘failure’ are produced by local actors, we come to a better understanding of what is really at stake on the ground. Not only at the management level, where a main preoccupation is securing continued funding, but also at the local level, where the youngsters try to shape the project to their own benefit, typically bearing little relation to HIV prevention messages.

Although many HIV prevention projects have tried to enact ‘structural changes’ as an answer to the ‘structural violence’ confronting many projects’ beneficiaries, this approach has not demonstrated a big impact so far. Social structures are not easy to change as they are based on a certain division of labour, a certain class hierarchy in an economic system, and a certain political climate. Such a change implies much more than, for instance, just providing a microfinance project for the poor. In Winam, as in many other places over the globe, people are confronted with social injustice and inequality on all levels. As Ferguson (2006: 19) states: “inequality is thus not only a matter of ‘political economy’; cultural differences may in practice be just as ‘stratified’ as income or wealth”. The differences in dress code or language might “index membership in different and unequal social groups” since many of the global goods are largely not within most Africans’ reach (Ferguson 2006: 20). Social structures are hard to change and if they can be changed at all, this takes more time than any development project might have. Social structures also explain why some people get ARVs or can send their children to primary school while others cannot do so even if this is for free. Although the disease is treatable and every child is provided a place in the primary school, people are still at risk, and they continue to take risks on various fronts, including in sexual relations. This brings me back to my main framework for this dissertation: The relevant question is not ‘Why do young people take risks when they engage in sex?’, but ‘Why should youngsters not take risks if this holds the promise of a better life in the
future?’. This is not to say that HIV interventions are superfluous, or that young people are inherently sceptical about interventions. Indeed, they would certainly welcome interventions that arise from an understanding of their aspirations and then try to work out ways to realise them. However, many HIV-prevention programs still start from the wrong logic in that they primarily respond to the bureaucratic needs of the funding agencies and implementers rather than going to the potential beneficiaries with a truly blank slate, and designing the intervention together with them from scratch. In order to understand the different logics, development practitioners, funders, and researchers across quantitative and qualitative disciplines need to work together with the beneficiaries of these programs on an equal basis. However, given the institutional realities in the context of global economic crisis, and scarcer resources where only ‘success models’ offer access to funding, the political economy of the development industry means that we still have a long, long way to go before this can happen.

3. The limited room for ‘tactical agency’ in times of enduring uncertainty

I used the term ‘tactical agents’ to describe how youngsters try to create their livelihood networks in Winam. Their power is constrained and they lack direction in life, but this does not mean that they give up. They try to capitalize on opportunities when these arise, or as De Certeau (1984: xvii) articulates: “the ingenious ways in which the weak make use of the strong”. These ordinary youngsters of Winam have a certain amount of freedom to act and tremendous creativity, which they use to explore alternative pathways. They definitely have a ‘talent for life’ (Schepers-Hughes 2008). They are attentive to incoming possibilities, such as certain contacts or networks of people, which might help them to move beyond the difficulties at that certain moment. They won’t wait for the Kenyan government or a member of parliament to make an improvement in their lives. They have already learned from the case of Raila Odinga that it seems impossible for a Luo to become president, and that both the future president and the (local) members of parliament only seem to care about them when elections are near. Thus, as youngsters still have their entire life in front of them, they do not give up, and keep on searching and accepting any opportunity offered to them. They ‘navigate’ or manoeuvre their way along the few livelihood options that Winam offers.

While the notion of ‘tactical agency’ tries to capture the dialectic interplay between agency and structure, the concept has its limitations in a context of enduring uncertainty. In such a context, the question is not what are the capacities of agencies to
act but rather what are their possibilities to act (Vigh 2008). Given the social injustice experienced on a daily basis in Winam, the livelihood networks that these young people carefully create and try to maintain are often ineffective at improving their lives. They cannot diminish the power of those external forces that determine what choices are available to them in a context of persistent poverty (see also Vigh 2008; De Bruijn and Both 2011).

Recent research on youth has extensively focussed on ‘social navigation’ as an option for agency and the levels of creativity of young people to deal with difficult circumstances (Honwana and De Boeck 2005; Christiansen et al. 2006; Vigh 2006). Vigh’s (2008: 15–17) current work, Crisis and Chronicity, picks up this point, highlighting that in situations of prolonged crisis, there is a loss of stability and security and uncertainty becomes the expected norm. When poverty, unemployment, disorder, and uncertainty are ever-present, when ‘chronic crisis’ becomes the continual context, we talk of a very different reality, one which implies a very different way of understanding the world and a very different way of acting in it (Vigh 2008: 13). Therefore, the question that Schepker-Hughes (2008: 37) asks, “What is required to survive and even to thrive where terror and trauma are ordinary and usual events?”, helps us to focus on “how agents act in crisis, instead of through it” (Vigh 2008: 17). I argue that the subject of my analysis is not so much ‘young people’ as a particular social category but rather young people operating in perpetual crisis. By moving our attention from category to context (see also Amit and Dyck 2012), this ethnographic dissertation contributes to a more realistic understanding of how young people of Winam deal with a situation where crisis is the norm.

This particular focus on crisis as a context rather than a singular event challenges our regular analytical, anthropological categories. Whyte (2008: 98) rightly states that it is a challenge for most anthropologists—born into a world with a social security system for all its citizens—to go beyond the notion of crisis as singular event. Although it is important to acknowledge young people’s sense of frustrations, their unrealised dreams of a ‘better life’ with more resources and more security, ethnographic richness lies in both “discriminating the particularities of fragmentation and instability in the case at hand, and showing how people draw on resources in that place and time” (Whyte 2008: 98).

In Winam, the HIV/AIDS crisis, political corruption and instability, the many infectious diseases, the lack of job opportunities, and the struggle to secure for themselves one meal per day and to simply survive the day are only some of the aspects
that colour young people’s everyday feelings of insecurity. In such difficult circumstances, the boundaries of their resilience are felt and the room for agency becomes very limited. While many youngsters of Winam still have hopes and dreams, they often feel stuck within the structural violence that is embedded in their daily life struggles. For many of them, as already mentioned, Winam is perceived as a “bad place” to live. They often reflected upon their environment and compared it unfavourably to other places, both imaginary and real. They observed the people around them, including their parents, and tried to reason why some people were doing well while others were suffering. They speculated on how things should be. They often blamed their parents for what they were going through, certainly when one or both of their parents had died due to HIV/AIDS. They were left to fend for themselves and their siblings. Many, certainly the unemployed young men, are “just strolling” (wabayo abayo) or “tarmacking”: moving back and forth along the tarmacked and potholed roads without any direction in their lives.

Doubt and uncertainty are not necessarily a result of a changing global context, or inherent to modern or postmodern lives, as Whyte (2002) argues. Such an assumption would imply that life was more certain in the past, which is not the case. According to Dewey (cited in Whyte 2002: 174), uncertainty has always been there as “existential problems always present uncertainties to social actors”. However, as Whyte (2002: 187) also states, uncertainty is not a characteristic of the times: uncertainties themselves change, as do the means available for acting upon them.

4. Dealing with enduring uncertainty: Pragmatic actions

The lens through which youngsters look at life focusses on what they need to do to make their aspirations happen. Despite their limited room for agency, young people do not give up but are very inventive in terms of creating different livelihood networks under constantly changing difficult circumstances. They are full of dreams and plans to find some amount of security in their lives. They want to make progress in life, to have a better life than their parents had. A number of analyses on the high youth unemployment all over the world, however, assume that youth unemployment might lead to crimes or might encourage them to join violent gangs. Amit and Dyck (2012: 16–17) instead ask why young men are not angrier and more violent, looking at the persistently depressed socioeconomic context. Young people continuously have to cope with their sense of social exclusion in the world market, yet the majority “remained
committed to mainstream values about the value of work, domestic respectability, and adult independence” (McDowell cited in Amit and Dyck 2012: 17). Many of the youngsters are confident that one day they might be able to improve their living conditions. Thus even though they may have felt ‘stuck’, they still manage to sustain themselves (Vigh 2006).

Whyte’s (2002) term of ‘subjunctivity’ (see Chapter 5) helps to describe how young people are negotiating and dealing with their life conditions and how they act upon them. The ‘subjunctive’ is “the mood of doubt, hope, will and potential” (Whyte 2002: 175) to deal with misfortune. Youngsters not only undergo suffering and distress, but they also try to act in order to alleviate the sorrows associated with misfortune. They are ‘intentional agents’ who “struggle towards an ending that is not yet certain” (Whyte 2002: 174) as they believe in the possibility of improving their standard of living, despite the fact that life with a ‘chronic disease’ means that they are often confronted with oppressive institutions (Vigh 2006).

Finding a ‘good’ partner and having a stable income are the most important motives behind young people’s livelihood tactics. Their ‘choices’ of a sexual partner depend on the context in which they grow up and live in. In contrast to other accounts that find that the religious institutions (mainly Pentecostal churches) and the counselling they offer are important for youth (see Van Dijk 2006, 2009), among the youngsters I studied, church was just another place to meet potential partners. Religious life had some value to enhance social mobility but not to the extent it did in town, where people frequented church with intentions to get married (see Van de Kamp and Van Dijk 2010). For the youngsters in my study, experimenting with sexual relationships was paramount, but none participated in pre-marriage counselling sessions. Marriages happened informally, and were not always planned. Those relationships and informal marriages, furthermore, were shaped by a high level of distrust, which caused the young people of Winam to act in an ad hoc manner, and pragmatically.

4.1. HIV risk and sexual networks

Contrary to the thinking that underlies many HIV/AIDS prevention efforts, young people are well aware of HIV, how they can get it, and its consequences. They are aware of the risk of contracting HIV when engaging in unprotected sex. The issue is not knowledge but rather what is important to the youngsters—what their primary, daily concerns are. Facing many other pressing problems, while also just being young and
wanting to have fun, the risk of HIV usually is not very relevant to their daily life and is thus not in the forefront of young people’s minds.

When crisis is part of the social fabric of every day life, as Whyte (1997) notes, “social life unfolds within a terrain of risk and uncertainty” (cited in Vigh 2008: 12). In order to deal with HIV risk, young people have devised their own way by “doing research”, which may strike outside observers as risky, but which makes a lot of sense to the young people themselves. They believe this tactic allows them to avoid HIV/AIDS or at least minimize the chances of getting it. In “doing research”, they use various communication channels, most commonly their gender- and age-based social networks, to obtain gossip and observations in order to profile a potential partner. It comes then down to a binary division: either a partner is likely to have been infected by having many partners or (s)he is potentially trustworthy because (s)he has not had many sexual relations. The young people also try to determine whether their sexual partner shows physical symptoms of HIV infection (for example, change in hair texture, rashes, and the colour of the skin or lips). They trust their ability to diagnose AIDS by figuring out their partner’s background and past sexual relationships using local knowledge.

While understanding this, I argue that we must also be careful not to demand rationality from their actions. As everywhere, people sometimes act spontaneously, driven by emotions and constrained by context. Although this tactic of “doing research” was often used by the youngsters I worked with, my data revealed that it could be altered or abandoned if a youngster felt the benefits of having a relationship with a particular person outweighed any potential risk, for instance because the partner was offering city life or had a decent job. This explains the inconsistencies and ambiguities that plague the lives of young people. Their actions are pragmatic and are constantly renegotiated, depending on the particular situation. What they actually do is quite the opposite of what is advocated by international public health campaigns: their diverse and ambiguous actions can hardly be transformed into one static pattern of sexual behaviours among young people. The youngsters by far preferred their own tactic to the international and national HIV prevention strategy of ABC (Abstain, Be faithful and use Condoms), which did not fit very well with the daily aspirations of the youngsters.

The young women and men were aware that they may not know the entire reach of the network to which they belong, because their sexual partners might have been “unknowing participants” (Thornton 2008: xx) of other sexual networks. We are all part of an “unimagined community” (Thornton 2008: xx), which makes it impossible to know all the linkages between clusters and sexual networks. In my analysis of the sexual
networks of the youngsters with whom I worked, it became clear that there were several
dense clusters that were actually all linked to each other, which meant that there were
effective transmission lines of HIV. Hence, the virus was very likely to have spread to
most of the youngsters I followed and other people in their networks. Individuals could
escape infection by chance, but the clear finding was that all were structurally highly
likely to get HIV. This means that even the best form of “doing research” might only
decrease risk temporarily, but it would not change the fact that the structural conditions
severely affected young people’s lives.

Young people’s tactic of “doing research” allows them “to remain in the
subjunctive mode of possibility and hope” (Whyte 1997: 215) instead of actually learning
their HIV status, a fact that could ruin their aspirations. However, this uncertainty
regarding HIV status can prove deadly for others. My findings confirm that ‘zero-
grazing’ can be deadly on a local level when migration is very common, as in Winam.
Someone from Winam who moves temporarily to town, becomes infected, and then
returns to the village, introduces the virus to the densely linked local networks, through
which it then spreads like wildfire. One important conclusion of my work is, therefore,
that trying to grasp the possible structure of the sexual network at stake is critical for
understanding the potential for disease transmission and the determinants of individual

At the time of this writing (August 2013), AIDS is no longer a deadly disease, but
a chronic disease, because there is access to HIV testing and ARVs, even in Winam.
When people are found to be HIV positive, there is a ‘plan of action’ (see Whyte 1997)
and people no longer have to die. ARVs were not easily accessible during my research,
but I imagine—now that treatment is readily available—that preventing HIV now ranks
even lower on youngsters’ priorities. The way they make choices about their sexual
partner remains pragmatic. They might prefer to marry an HIV-positive person with a
good job than an HIV-negative person who is unemployed. Moreover, being HIV positive
is no longer the end of the world, because the disease gives access to all sorts of benefits,
including, for instance, jobs at local NGOs to participate in awareness-raising
campaigns. ARVs have a further unintended consequence: they make ‘doing research’
more difficult since they eliminate many physical signs of the disease. The youngsters
are therefore not entirely happy about ARVs because they may make people gain a bit of
weight, which appears as a sign of good health. While the availability of ARVs is
generally a positive development, in practice there are unintended consequences, which
need to be dealt with. Otherwise there is a risk of people becoming resistant to the drugs, and much of the progress against the disease will be destroyed.

**4.2. Gender inequality and the transactional sex paradigm**

In the transactional sex paradigm, it is argued that young women are economically dependent on male support, leading them to engage in ‘risky sex’ situations. Since women have fewer opportunities to diversify their livelihood tactics than young men, they are believed to exchange money or gifts for sex with their sexual partners. This is however a very simplistic assumption as the real picture is far more complex.

I argue throughout this dissertation that the exchange of money and gifts is part of any sexual relationship in Winam and is a sign of respect and appreciation. Women expect that their boyfriends will provide for them, as this is one of the social roles assigned to men. Within the transactional sex paradigm, the role of other dimensions of sexual relationships such as physical attraction, sexual pleasure, emotional attachment, and social norms are underestimated. It is not purely economic motivations that come into play when one chooses a sexual partner. As long as the giving of money or gifts from men, and the giving of domestic services from girls or young women, remains within certain limits, such actions demonstrate care and affection. Viewed from the intergenerational lens, young people’s urban aspirations, romantic self-expressions, and desires for new, foreign clothes and commodities were all part of being a youngster in Winam at the time of my fieldwork. Young women would be considered foolish if they did not try to tactically acquire financial support or even luxury consumer items from their boyfriends. Under certain conditions the transactional aspect can become defining for a relationship, but not always in the way the paradigm assumes, namely that it is the fundamental reason for the relationship. Instead, there are expectations for both partners to keep their part of the deal: women should not have extreme demands and men have to stick to their promises.

One can argue that this view of the transactional aspect confirms the importance of emotions and trust in the relationship for both young men and women. On the other hand, using the language of ‘love’ can be a tactical move to obtain money, sex, or other benefits. Young people are creative in their ways to deal with their difficult economic situation and to increase their chances for a better future. Although I explained that young women suffer from gender-related constraints in their livelihood options compared to men, my data has shown that young women have a relatively better chance to improve their lives by having sexual liaisons with financially capable men, preferably
‘townsmen’. They can even manipulate their so-called subordinate role and demand from young men more than the men actually can afford. Their relationships with wealthier men can bring short-term benefits such as an expensive dress, a drive in a car, or some body lotion—but it might also turn into marriage. Men, especially rural young men—who are expected to provide financial support for their girlfriends in order to be considered a ‘real man’—on the other hand, face difficulty in competing with those who are more financially capable, especially those from town. Nevertheless, just like the women, they employed creative tactics such as “sweet-talk” and a kind of provider discourse that emphasized their ‘imagined’ financial resources in order to conquer their sexual partners. Although sexual liaisons with ‘wealthy’ girlfriends or “sugar mamas” were not very common among the young rural men I worked with, I have heard from some of the youngsters in Winam that it is happening more often than before. In at least one instance, a young man, married and with children, was living with an “old and fat sugar mammy” under the same roof. In this case, the sugar mama was not from Winam but from abroad: having bought a piece of land in Winam and constructed a house, a young, married man convinced her he was single and introduced his wife as domestic help. This story is not as exceptional as it may sound and similar relationships are becoming more common. It signals that the young men of Winam face difficult challenges: they no longer can perform the role of breadwinner that society demands from them. Not only can they not live up to the high expectations but also they may become economically dependent on ‘wealthier’ women. In this way, they are stigmatized twice: for not performing their social role, and for being dependent on women who are supposedly weaker. In the ladder of the social hierarchy where gender inequality is normalized, these men fall down two steps at once: they are below ‘real men’ who can support a family, and they are even below women.

Thus, whereas young women to some extent can navigate between and maximize multiple ‘resources’ (men), rural young men usually cannot use a girlfriend for social advancement and have much greater difficulties securing a sexual relationship as they lack the financial stability. It is important to recognize the vulnerability of these young, rural men. However, it is also important, as we study sexual relationships, that we not only examine the forces that create structured inequalities between sexual partners, but also consider the notions of pleasure, emotional attachment, and love—despite these existing inequalities (see Wardlow and Hirsch 2006). At the same time, we must acknowledge that in times of enduring uncertainty, financial needs often reinforce existing gendered power imbalances in sexual relations. The crisis of poverty also wiped
out young people’s attempts to reduce their sexual risks. This is a symptom of the temporality of young people’s tactical agency: they are creative in their attempts to benefit from the few opportunities they encounter, including accepting unsafe sex if that appears to be the only way to secure a ‘good’ partner. All these actions are marked by their limited time horizon. To put it differently, the gains obtained are often very quickly lost or overshadowed by larger, long-term, negative effects. In the context of enduring crisis where lasting relationships can be a path towards socioeconomic improvement, the majority of the sexual relationships in Winam were casual due to the lack of stable and predictable income of young people. Very few sexual relations resulted in long-lasting relationships or (informal) marriages, fewer still with rich, urban men. In this perpetual crisis, marriage—formal or informal—is no longer a stable form of union. This is further impacted by young people’s aspirations to leave rural life, as we will see in the next section of the conclusion.

4.3. Physical mobility versus social mobility

Mobility is one of the main tactics youngsters employ to escape the village life of Winam as they hope to find better grounds, close to busy town or city centres. Their urban aspirations, imagining that life is better in town, are similar to the unorchestrated dreams of millions of young people all over the world. The attraction of cities is also grounded in the experiences of their (grand-) fathers and older brothers who found some casual work in the cities. Ambition is still alive, but it is not really a realistic option as Kenya’s major cities are already overflowing with young people searching for jobs. They know this and hope that a good education will set them apart from other young job seekers, but they are also realistic enough to know that these days nothing much will happen without the right contact (see also Amit and Dyck 2012). The capacity of schooling to enhance social mobility by preparing students for white-collar jobs in town has remained in many parts of the world. Schooling not only raises aspirations and expectations among young people to escape rural poverty through an urban future, but also creates such expectations among their parents and other relatives (Amit and Dyck 2012: 13–14). Youngsters explore both social and sexual networks in order to search for a pathway to move up the social ladder, however in times of crisis such as the HIV/AIDS pandemic, such networks are not that effective anymore. Other members of their social and sexual networks are usually in the same condition of poverty and limited opportunities: the few people with a viable business or decent income are flooded by requests for assistance or adored by many potential lovers.
Without formal education, supportive social or sexual networks, or starting capital, youngsters have little possibility to gain a secure livelihood and move to town. What does this mean? The youngsters are trapped in a structure that does not give them many opportunities for advancement. They can try to escape the local structure of Winam, but they take these limitations with them to the city and there find themselves under the same constraints as before. The structure I am describing is not completely deterministic, but it does still limit young people’s options and is not easy to escape by simply moving to another place. Paraphrasing Gramsci (1971), this is a sort of social prison where release and/or escape is a possibility, but a very remote one that only very few will achieve. Just as in the prison metaphor, most people who get out find themselves back in prison sooner than later. In other words, social mobility is at best temporary: some young people may be better off for a time and believe they have moved up the ladder, but sooner or later, most are back where they started, or even further behind. Nevertheless, even this ‘one step forward, two steps back’ is enough movement to keep their hopes and dreams alive. Despite the energy, against-all-odds optimism, and creativity of young people, at the end of the day we need to ask ourselves: how many of them actually improve their lives through mobility (or any other tactics)? As far as I know, none of them.

4.4. An HIV-prevention project or an income-generating activity?

The motivation and goals of Yeshica were to improve the sexual and reproductive health needs of young people between 10 and 20 years old in Winam. To realise this, a number of interventions were put in place on the ground. Although the program managers from ITM could not count on substantial institutional support from the CDC, they believed in the importance of combating the structural forces that drive the HIV epidemic and therefore incorporated a structural intervention (the ‘livelihood intervention’ whereby youngsters were invited to enrol in vocational trainings and to take out microloans). Their theory was that an improvement of the livelihood of the youngsters would mean a decrease in ‘risky sex’. On paper, the project’s aims were good and appropriate: the focus blended prevention, vocational training, and loans. In the practical realisation, however, it unfortunately did not go as planned: the project was not able to reduce HIV risk among its participants.

By examining how HIV-prevention programs work and how diverse local actors produced and understood ‘success’ or ‘failure’ (Mosse 2004), it became apparent that while Yeshica could not be described as a success in biomedical terms, for the young people involved, the project was considered a success at first. To them, Yeshica was
more than an income-generating activity. Participating in Yeshica meant that they could improve their livelihood networks—not by being hired for formal jobs, but by acquiring material benefits and expanding their social capital, often through sexual liaisons. Yeshica was ‘city life in the village’, and a new venue to explore sexual relationships. The prominent men that young women could not find in Winam were within their reach at Yeshica!

Youngsters hoped that Yeshica would make a difference in Winam and would improve their livelihood, but this sentiment soon turned into frustration and malcontent. Their voices were never heard since Yeshica’s local staff made sure that only ‘success’ stories reached the program coordinator, as they were also concerned about their job security. Although Yeshica had provided some improvement for a happy few, they bore the consequences when others’ interests tweaked the actual content of the project.

Despite the dissenting voices of the young people, the project became a ‘successful model for replication’. How? Quite simply, the YIP program designers forgot about what happened on the ground—thus silencing the power relations on which the production of Yeshica depended—and only accentuated the one part of the story, the Families Matter! Program (FMP), deeming it a ‘success’. This was, as noted, an intervention that had already been chosen to be ‘scaled up’. The institutional priorities of the CDC, with its related ability to mobilize financial support, strongly influenced the chances for the ‘success’ of FMP. Thus, the main direction of YIP was already defined before FMP was actually conducted. Mosse (2003: 2) was right to state that “it is not the failure of development projects that needs to be explained, but rather their remarkable success’. With the implementation of Yeshica, the YIP designers were able “to produce and reaffirm theory and models of development” (Mosse 2003: 2). This “production of predictable results” is what matters in development work. It comes as no surprise that the program designers of YIP wanted to end on a positive note, as only this could secure future funding. However, for the local people of Winam, the intervention achieved very little—pretty much nothing, except for a pen and paper, a ‘one-night stand’ with a CDC employer, some transportation money, and a certificate that they can hang on their living room wall.
5. Conclusion: Choiceless choices

Does the lack of successful stories about achieving social mobility mean that there is no agency at all among Winam’s youth? No, as I have tried throughout this dissertation to highlight what young people do and have argued that they should not be regarded as passive victims. Then again, we have long since moved beyond a black and white discussion over structure and agency, and the interplay between the two is widely recognized.

We cannot discuss structure and agency in a vacuum and free of context. Winam is characterized by a context of perpetual crisis and enduring uncertainty, which means that any tactical agency is limited, above all by time. All gains achieved one day can be undone the next, any tactic that worked today may fail tomorrow, and all useful social contacts may either cease to be useful or vanish altogether. It is very difficult (sometimes impossible) to plan ahead, and any window of opportunity might close as soon as it has opened.

What this means is that young people have to be ingenious and attentive to new opportunities that come up unexpectedly. Agents practice ‘reflexive routinisation’, as they constantly need to be alert to changes in the environment in which they are moving (Vigh 2008: 19). To some extent, they do have choices, as they live in a relatively free world compared to young people in a dictatorship; there is also no ‘Hukou’, the Chinese family registration system to prevent rural-urban migration, for example. However, the choices young people make in life can be regarded as ‘choiceless choices’ (Scheper-Hughes 2008). Youngsters have the capacity to make choices but they do not have the possibility to act towards a certain desired outcome. The opportunities for improving their standard of living are based on choices that come with strings attached, such as leaving school to earn money as fisherman. ‘Choiceless choices’ also means that they already know the outcome of choosing a certain option. They can become boda-boda drivers, fishermen, or do some casual work in the shamba (field). None of these ‘choices’ will help them advance in their life. There are also no clear actions towards their objectives but rather a multitude of divergent ways, which may seem contradictory but which make sense for any individual actor at a given point in time. It does not matter which way they choose, as chances are they will end up the same as before, irrespective of what activity they picked.

When we pair the context of ‘chronic crisis’ with the understanding of ‘choiceless choices’, we have to be careful not to dramatize this situation. The entire African continent is constantly depicted in extremely negative ways in Western media as well as
by certain NGOs who use pictures of starving African children in their fundraising. Even if the money is not destined for Africa, the continent has become a symbol for poverty and perpetual crisis with notions such as ‘the African problem’, ‘hopeless Africa’, or ‘a failed continent’ (see also Ferguson 2006). If we characterize Winam as being in an enduring crisis, this runs the danger of perpetuating the notion of hopelessness and ultimately preventing any improvement to the region. We have to be mindful of stigmatizing the people living in Winam. Ferguson (2006: 10) points to the social and historical construction of the category ‘Africa’, and correctly notes that “we have to be suspicious of accounts that see in Africa only a lack or an incompleteness” while at the same time, we should not deny the manifold problems marring the many African countries. It is a fine balance we need to achieve. For this reason, I write not only about ‘enduring uncertainty’ in Winam, but also of young people as tactical agents, who find ways of getting by within difficult circumstances. While their ‘inventive bricolages’ might be regarded by anthropologists as a creative form of tactical agency, the young people might not describe it as such. They see it as “a sign of weakness instead of strength” (Ferguson 2006: 20) because it is not yet to what they aspired to reach. They do not perceive it as a kind of progress, but rather a ‘choiceless choice’.