

Article

# Thinking about the Future: Young People in Low-Income Families

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**Abstract:** This paper examines the orientations to the future of young people living in low-income families in the U.K. and Portugal following the 2008 Global Financial Crisis and the contexts in which they are socially reproduced. It is based on data from comparative research on families and food poverty, funded by the European Research Council. The study focused on parents and young people aged 11–16 living in low-income families in three European countries (the U.K., Portugal and Norway); only the U.K. and Portuguese data were analysed here. Given the study was concerned with the consequences of low income for food insecurity, we primarily sought to understand how young people manage in the present; however, the project also affords a theoretical and methodological opportunity to explore young people's thoughts about the future as they begin to transition to adulthood. We found that, when asked about the future, young people responded in different ways: some said they did not think about the future; others mentioned their dreams, but considered them unrealisable. while others expressed hopes that were more concrete and achievable. Precarity constrained the control that young people and their families exercised over their lives. We argue that young people's aspirations and time horizons are framed in relation to the present and the temporalities of the life course, the public discourses to which they are subjected and the limited access of their families to resources provided by the labour market and the state.

**Keywords:** orientations toward the future; young people; low-income families; U.K.; Portugal



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*"To desire, in a sense, was to know or think one knew what one wanted, to know or think one knew the paths by which it might be reached, even if those paths turned out to be too difficult to follow . . . To yearn on the other hand was to be lost, to lack bearings in the world because one did not know what one was seeking or where it could be found . . ."* [1] (p. 285).

## 1. Introduction

This paper sets out to examine the orientations towards the future of young people living in low-income families in the U.K. and Portugal following the 2008 Global Financial Crisis and to examine the contexts in which they are socially reproduced. It draws on international comparative research with parents and young people aged 11–16 living in households who were at risk of food poverty. The socioeconomic situations of these households were exacerbated by the austerity measures of their governments. The study, carried out between 2014 and 2019, involved three contrasting welfare states, the U.K., Portugal and Norway, and an embedded multi-level research design that drew on a mix of research methods [2].

We begin the paper by discussing some of the literature concerning the growth of social inequality in modern European societies and its consequences for food poverty. Next, we consider some concepts that are germane to understanding orientations toward the future, in particular temporality, the life course and agency. After describing the study's methodology and methods, we then go on to analyse young people's views of the future,

drawing on cases from the U.K. and Portuguese data. In the Conclusion, we reflect on the results in relation to the study's focus on food and the context of crisis. We end with some policy recommendations.

## 2. Background: Crisis and the Growth of Social Inequality and Food Insecurity

At the heart of concerns about orientations toward time is social change, both its rapidity and the material inequalities it brings with it. In recent years, the hegemonic narrative of social progress of the Mid-Twentieth Century has been increasingly questioned. Dominant theoretical ideas such as the privatisation of happiness [3] and individualisation in which agents are “free” to make choices [4] have been modified in recognition of a return to the levels of deprivation and inequalities of a century earlier in the Global North. As Thomas Picketty [5] and Eric Hobsbawm [6] argue, the period in which material and wealth inequality diminished in Western countries is a blip in the longer timespan of history. In understanding social change, therefore, as Savage [7] puts it, we have to examine the ways in which future possibilities are constrained by “the weight of the past”. This means examining access to resources by different groups in society, while taking account of the multidimensionality of change—material, social and cultural.

The research on which this paper draws was undertaken in the aftermath of the 2008 Global Financial Crisis, a period that has since been succeeded by the health crisis of COVID-19, by the war in Europe and by mass migration. At the same time, as the world is becoming increasingly aware, climate change is causing major environmental havoc and disruption. In these contexts, the prices of fuel, food and other basic goods are rising, with catastrophic implications for lives and livelihoods. While governments and economists have contended that crises are exceptional and temporal, this argument is increasingly difficult to sustain. As Narotsky and Besnier [8] (p. 58) argue, “(the) temporality aspect of crises ( . . . ) needs attention both in its popular and expert understandings, whether it appears expressed as a punctuated time of significant turning points [9,10] or as an enduring time of waiting [11], whether the breakdown is situated at the systemic or at the subjective level”.

The growing gap between those at the top and bottom of the income scale is manifest in Western countries as an increase in “relative poverty”, defined by Townsend [12] (p. 31) as a situation in which “people lack the resources to obtain the types of diets, participate in the activities, and have the living conditions and amenities which are customary, or at least widely recognized or approved in the societies to which they belong”.

For many low-income families in Europe, the 2008 Financial Crisis and subsequent “austerity” measures introduced by some governments constituted another material burden on top of pre-existing hardship. As EU-SILC data [13] consistently show, rates of relative income poverty (living in a household with less than 60% median income) are higher among children (people aged under 18 years) than the general population, with a few exceptions [14]. Despite the popular rhetoric regarding individual responsibility for poverty, and the mantra that “work pays”, families in poverty are increasingly in paid work; across Europe, in-work poverty has grown significantly since 2006, from 8 to 10 percent [15]. Employed low-income families in countries such as the U.K. and Portugal depend on low-pay jobs, in the U.K. with zero-hour contracts, while the informal economy operates widely in Portugal. In the U.K., however, nonemployed or underemployed lone parents, who make up around 25 percent of all families with children in Britain, were hardest hit by the government's so-called “austerity measures”, which reduced the welfare state and social security benefits e.g., [16,17]. In Portugal, the family form appears to make less of a difference, with both lone-parent and two-parent households experiencing deep poverty following the 2008 Financial Crisis and the imposition of austerity measures by the TROIKA (the group formed by the European Commission, the European Central Bank and the International Monetary Fund).

In this context, household food insecurity has increased in many European countries [18–20]. Viewed by some as an indicator of severe poverty, many researchers and

policy actors draw on the Food and Agriculture Organisation's (FAO) definition of "food insecurity" as "being unable to consume an adequate quality or sufficient quantity of food for health, in socially acceptable ways, or the uncertainty that one will be able to do so" [21]. Analysing data from the EU Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC), Loopstra and colleagues [19] (p. 47) found rising food insecurity overall, particularly in the U.K., and concluded that "rising food insecurity within European countries was closely linked to rising unemployment and falling wages". However, they also found that, in countries where social protection spending had been high, rising unemployment did not lead to greater food insecurity. In the U.K., as elsewhere in Europe, rising food insecurity is also indicated by the exponential growth in food banks, as low-income families have increasingly turned to charity in the absence of adequate welfare support, while in Portugal, food aid has long been part of its large third sector [22]. In the U.K., young people are often doubly penalized; despite their working parents' low incomes, many lack access to free school meals because of the high threshold of eligibility. In contrast, Portugal's national school meals policy entitles all children to subsidised three-course meals that mitigate some of the effects of food poverty [23].

### 3. Key Concepts in Studying Young People's Views of the Future: Temporality, the Life Course and Agency

In understanding how young people orient themselves toward the future, several concepts are relevant. First, it is important to consider temporality. Young people and children can be conceptualised in temporal terms as both "beings" and "becomings" [24]. However, as Mayall [25] points out, the latter conceptualisation of children as "adults in waiting" is often prioritised to the exclusion of the former. For example, inordinate emphasis is placed on education as a route to future occupational careers and upward mobility. The transition to adulthood turns both on the conditions and status of being a child in the present, as well as the processes of becoming an adult over time [26]. This necessitates considering the way lives are constituted through social interactions, institutions and structures in the present.

We need to consider how young people "become", how their lives are enacted, and enacted on, processually, through the life course. The ways in which young people perceive their futures change over the life course as they accumulate experiences and access to resources necessary for future life chances [27]. Sociological research on young people's life course transitions has emphasised the concept of agency and mastery e.g., [28,29], with much of the literature in the field of social stratification and outcomes for specific social domains e.g. [30]. As Hitlin and Johnson [31] argue, a proper understanding of young people's potential power within the life course perspective necessitates moving beyond domain-specific expectations; using the concept of general life expectations, they examine the impact of optimism and pessimism about the future on a range of outcomes.

Brannen's and Nilsen's [32] work on the orientations of young people towards the future is instructive in its focus on the life course and the influence of social context. Carried out in the late 1990s, it involved young people who were negotiating the transition to adulthood via a variety of educational pathways. They examined orientations in relation to futures in education and employment, but also parenthood [32–34]. Based on focus group data collected in the U.K. and Norway, they identified three orientations [32]. There were those whose orientations were directed toward their present lives. They were caught up in the present, enjoying being young and vague about what the future might hold. This group consisted of working-class young women living in the U.K. who were in educational training having just left school. In another orientation, young people saw the future as full of possibilities and risks that they calculated they could control and tailor, enabling them to try out different jobs before eventually settling into stable employment and starting a family. These were young women at the start of university courses, which, in the cases of the young Norwegians, can last five years if they follow a Masters course, as many do. A third orientation concerned predictability, suggesting that some young people saw their

futures as already fixed, as leading to particular occupations and following predictable life trajectories. These young people included a group of British male law students who were expecting to pursue legal careers, together with a group of apprentices in Norway looking at a career in shipbuilding.

In life course theory, agency has been foregrounded as the life course has destandardised. This trend, referred to as a crisis in the “normal biography” [35], has occurred in the context of the extension of education and changing family forms. With the dominance of neoliberal discourses, “individual choice” has also become a leitmotif [32]. However, agency is not to be conflated with motivation, self-direction, planning, resilience, and rational choice. Moreover, ideas, wishes and desires are not always articulated, especially in research encounters. Bourdieu’s concept of habitus suggests internalised logics that lie largely outside the realm of conscious reflection [36,37]. Drawing on Bourdieu, Zipin et al. [38] distinguish between doxic and habituated social logics. Aspirations are rooted in discourse and practices that have “a taken-for-granted status” (doxic logics), but are, in fact, “grounded in populist-ideological mediations” (p. 232) as in “if you work hard enough you can attain your dream”. Aspirations produced through habituated logics consist of “possibilities-within-limits-of given social-structural positions”. (p. 234). As Brannen’s and Nilsen’s work suggests, orientations toward the future are shaped by past and present access to resources—material, social and cultural—provided by families and welfare systems. They are also influenced by dominant societal discourses, notably education as a route to upward mobility. However, they found that familial and societal contexts and discourses were not necessarily articulated by informants. Nonetheless, they play out differentially in how lives are lived.

Time horizons vary with life course phase, shaping the solidity of young people’s visions for the future. The longer the time horizon, the hazier the vision of the future is likely to be. Given the unpredictability of the conditions of the lives of the study’s participants in our study, *Families and Food in Hard Times*, we thought they would be present-oriented and, given the young people’s age, unlikely to have formulated clear aspirations; as Arudpragasam [1] suggestsephitet they do not yet have the “bearings in the world because (they) did not know what one was seeking or where it could be found.” Therefore, we draw on Nilsen’s [39] distinction between plans, hopes and dreams, which takes account of subtleties in orientations, while also bearing in mind the mutability and instability of meanings of time in everyday life and across history and space [40–42].

#### 4. The Study: Research Design, Methods and Analytic Strategy

*Families and Food in Hard Times* aimed to examine the extent and experience of food insecurity among families in three European countries—the U.K., Portugal and Norway. The study focused on how access and lack of access to resources shape food and eating in the current everyday lives of young people aged 11–16 years and their low-income parents. It adopted an ontologically realist approach to food poverty, while recognising the ways in which the study focuses and the interactive context of the interview influenced young people’s frames of reference. This is not to say that the social phenomena to which young people’s responses referred did not exist independently of their accounts [43].

The study adopted a mixed-method embedded case study design [44], which involved a multi-layered analysis of three intersecting levels in which to interpret families’ experiences:

1. The macro level of the state: the social structures and national discourses and policies related to poverty, food and nutrition;
2. The meso level of the locality: housing, services, schools, transport, shopping amenities;
3. The individual/household level of everyday family life including parents’ and young people’s access to resources, their everyday negotiations and practices related to food and support from social networks.

In the quantitative part of the study, a secondary analysis of several large-scale datasets was carried out of the EU Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU SILC), Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC) and Living Costs and Food Survey (LCFS).

In the qualitative part of the study, a case-based approach was adopted. Cases must be “cases of something” [45]: the households studied were analysed in relation to their social networks, their communities and cities where they lived and the countries’ national policies, cultures and institutions at the time. The aim was not to extrapolate from the individual or household to the country level. Instead, cases were treated as *emblematic* of particular social characteristics, conditions and structural contexts [46]. Matched low-income families, including young people and their parents, were studied comparatively with reference to the three intersecting, but distinct analytic levels set out above.

The sample consisted of young people aged 11–16 years and at least one parent or carer, mostly mothers: 45 families in the U.K. (51 children) and 45 families in Portugal (46 children), together with 43 families in Norway (48 children). In each country, samples were recruited in two types of areas: areas of the capital cities and rural or semi-rural areas. In this paper, we focus on young people in the U.K. and Portugal, only. In the U.K. sample, mothers in 20/45 families and, in Portugal, 14/45 were first-generation migrants, almost all from outside mainland Europe. In the U.K. migrant group, there were several cases of families who lacked access to state support and who were in the (lengthy) process of applying for “leave to remain” in the U.K. The U.K. sample had more lone-parent families (30/45) compared with the Portuguese sample (21/45).

A range of methods was employed: semi-structured interviews, questionnaires and visual methods. The main focus of interviews with young people was on their everyday lives, particularly in terms of food and eating, and how they made sense of their experiences. The questions about the future were posed towards the end of the interviews. Young people were asked to think about the future for themselves and their families and/or in more general terms. Given the interview at this point was present-focussed, it underscored for young people the constraints in which they and their families currently lived, including the possible stigma associated with poverty and food poverty.

In the first stage of analysis, “case summaries” were written up from the interview transcripts and researchers’ field notes using a standardised template, the format and content of which were agreed upon and adhered to by the research teams in each country. The data were analysed using a case-based approach (see above). Consistent with a realist approach to analysis, the case summaries provided a “thick description” [47] of each household. The study’s comparative approach enabled us to compare young people and parents in similar situations in the different countries, and its multi-level analytic strategy allowed us to identify which conditions—national, local and family level—contributed to, or protected them from, food poverty.

## 5. Results: Orientations toward the Future of Young People at Risk of Food Poverty

Asking young people about the future assumes that they are capable of evaluating continuities, transformations and blockages as they reason about matters to do with future well-being and its achievement. Present and past experiences constitute the foundations on which social imaginaries are built [48] and aspirations and hopes for the future are configured [8,31,49]. Not surprisingly, given that these young people were still at school and that futures can be shorter or longer term, many found questions about the future difficult. Over the life course, futures are likely to be subject to revision and may never match original conceptions [50].

Some young people suggested they did not want to think about the future. Perhaps this was because they were engrossed in their present lives. Others may not have wanted to tell the interviewer, perhaps because they thought that the precarity of their current lives could prevent their ideas being realised, or simply, they may not have given thought to the future, either in general or their own futures. Most parents, by contrast, focussed on the present and their desire to ameliorate their current material circumstances, a perhaps unsurprising finding given the study focus and their difficulty feeding their families. For many parents, objectives centred on securing employment; others vested ambitions in their children. Despite their families’ financial constraints, however, some young people

looked toward the future with some mentioning dreams and others their hopes. Few had concrete plans. We selected the following cases of young people that are emblematic of those expressing these different orientations.

### 5.1. *Living in the Present*

Diogo, a white Portuguese boy aged 11, lives with his mother in a house butting on to his grandparents' home in a rural area outside Lisbon. Diogo's mother has been out of work for two months. The grandparents have some cows and sheep, a vegetable garden and some chickens that provide for the family and for bartering with neighbours. Although Diogo's mother does not have to pay for rent, electricity or water because they are covered by the grandparents, she has additional expenses relating to various therapies needed by Diogo.

Diogo found the question about the future hard to answer: "First, I don't know. I can't see the future, right?" Asked about the future, his mother's response is present oriented, referring to the family's current financial difficulties adding that other people are in a worse situation: 'It's not easy, but it's not easy in Portugal nor anywhere else (*laughs*). Regarding help, I haven't sought it, but I also can't say there is none or It's difficult to obtain. I also believe there are people with greater difficulties than me, the fact that I don't pay rent, the fact that I don't pay a number of things also allows me to manage better, right?'

Kasey, age 13, lives with her mother, in a two-bedroom privately rented flat in a poor part of inner London. The rent is very high. At her interview, Kasey's mother, a lone parent of African–Caribbean origin, had just started work as a receptionist, having lost her previous job. While out of work, she built up much debt. By the time Kasey was interviewed, three months later (In most cases young people were interviewed on the same day as their parents. This case was an exception.), the family's financial difficulties had increased, because her mother had resigned from her job and gone back to her studies. Asked about the future, Kasey said, perhaps defensively, "Um . . . I don't know to be honest. I don't really live by the future, I just live by the present and whatever comes. So, I'm not sure".

### 5.2. *Dreams*

Some young people talked about their dreams. Commonly, boys dreamt of becoming professional footballers, but understood this was unlikely to happen.

Emmanuel is 15, an African migrant to the U.K. who lives with his mother, a lone parent, and three siblings in privately rented housing in inner London. Because of their illegal status (no leave to remain), his mother is not allowed to work, and they have no recourse to public funds. The family therefore has no income from employment or benefits. They are totally reliant on charity.

Emmanuel dreams about being a footballer but says he cannot even go to training sessions. "But it's just that you need to pay £10 a month"; his mother has no money for food, let alone for this expense.

Castro, 16, is black Portuguese. He migrated with his father to Portugal from a former African Portuguese colony many years ago to get medical treatment. His reunited parents live in Lisbon with two sons in a small flat they are buying. The father's job in construction is very precarious. Castro's mother does cleaning work. The family depends on the local social centre and on relatives for food.

Castro responded first to the question about the future by saying jokingly, "I'll be a famous man", but went on to say he no longer dreams about being a footballer. Instead, he has to focus on the 'harder' decisions in life as he approaches the end of his schooling. ('It's) difficult to think. Before it was a footballer, because that was the dream of every child, but now it's more difficult. I have to decide what to do in 10th grade. That's going to be harder".

### 5.3. Hopes

Hopes, like dreams, are, by definition, optimistic. Some young people, especially those at the upper end of the study's age band, mentioned hoping to get "a good job" or the types of work, skilled or graduate, that they might do; some hoped to go to college.

Jorge, age 13, is a Portuguese boy of mixed heritage who lives with his mother, stepfather and brother in a small, rented cottage in a small town outside Lisbon. His parents were both unemployed at the interview. His stepfather was a gravedigger, and his mother's last job was cleaning, although she has a college degree. The family gets help from their relatives, as well as social security. Jorge knows that money is a problem for his parents. He mentioned that they had to give up the TV, as his mother could not afford to pay for it. Although Jorge thinks about these difficulties, he says he cannot make decisions about money. His contribution to making ends meet is to help his parents by not asking for money.

Asked about the future, Jorge refers to the present, "to be independent. Because it's bad to be asking money or receiving only on those special occasions". He also hopes to work in "movies or game graphics".

Amara is 15 and lives with her unemployed mother in temporary accommodation (a hostel) in London. They migrated from an EU country two years before the interview, but originally came from North Africa. Her mother has no job and no benefits. Their situation is precarious; for food, they are dependent on a food bank. Amara's response eloquently articulates the ways in which the precarity of daily survival inhibits her envisioning a better future. Nonetheless, she has hopes that, by studying hard, she will get good grades, study and, eventually, get a "good job".

"I have a few ideas. But I can't focus on the future if I don't know what's going to happen from now till—like from now to the next hour. I can't just go like . . . I can't, I need to think about *now*, like, think about the present. Then one day the future will come and we'll see what happens. But I *have* plans for the future, I mean I will study, I will do my best to get my grades and just have a good job, and not end up being poor and asking people for help".

Her goal, like those of other young people in the study, is to become financially independent, able to take care not only of herself, but also her mother, which is unsurprising, given she witnesses her mother's struggles and feels responsible for her, despite being powerless to help, "I want to be the man of the house, I mean having a job, taking care of my mum. Well if one day I will have children, my children and the family. That's it really".

## 6. Discussion and Conclusions

Asking young people about the future assumes they are capable of evaluating continuities, transformations and blockages as they reason about matters to do with their future well-being and aspirations. Present and past experiences provide a horizon in which aspirations for the future are configured [8,31,49]. Asking young people about food (and lack thereof) also takes into account that access to adequate nutritious food meets an immediate need and also has consequences for the future. Food provisioning sustains life over time and across the generations; food is central to material, social and cultural reproduction.

At the beginning of the paper, we considered the concept of crisis in the context of the study's focus on the 2008 Financial Crisis for already poor families. Marxist theory argues that crisis is an inherent feature of capitalist society, where the drive toward profit-making results in the tendency of the rate of profit to fall, and through overproduction, overcapacity and over accumulation, the entire system is pushed towards its breakdown. For the poor, instability and uncertainty are the norm, rather than being exceptional or time-bound; they constitute the day-to-day reality with which low-income families have to contend in order to live.

The material practices of daily life have a temporal dimension: they shape horizons of expectation in the sense that they are constructed by past experiences and reconfigured by memories of that past [8]. Parents want to make the next generation's lives better than

their own lives, while their children hope their own lives will get better and improve upon the lives of their parents. Practical sense of the future and hopes of a “better life” are modified by the social and economic frameworks of current and past existence [51]. In Zipin et al.’s terms, aspirations produced through habituated logics are understood as “possibilities-within-limits of given social-structural positions” [38] (p. 234). In other words, orientations are conditioned by the possibilities for mobilization.

A conceptual starting point here was to see young people as “becomings” through their projections for the future, on the one hand, and to set them in the contexts of “beings” on the other. We found that young people aged 11–16 living in low-income families who suffered from food poverty expressed a range of orientations toward the future. First, some did not look to the future, perhaps not surprisingly given their age and life course phase. Some did not want to think about the future, perhaps reflecting their understanding of their families’ current precarity [2]. Some young people told us about dreams, while recognising they were unrealistic, for example, because they lacked sufficient talent or the necessary resources. As Huijsmans et al. [49] (p. 5) note, as young people grow up and “become aware of their gendered, ethnic, and/or class- and caste-based position in society, certain ideas about the future become seen as out of reach while others are deemed unrealisable ‘for the likes of us’”. A third group expressed hopes that are more concrete and easier to achieve.

Some young people mentioned studying hard in the hope of having “good futures”, reflecting the dominant discourses of “work”, neoliberalism and social mobility, that is occupational success achieved through education and learning [52]. Others wanted “good jobs”, mindful no doubt of their parents’ poorly paid jobs, with some mentioning the types of work they wanted. Others said they hoped to do better than, and to help, their parents, mindful of their low standard of living. Lack of efficacy in the present does not mean, however, that young people’s futures will not turn out well. As Hitlin and Johnson [31] found, hope is a strong positive predictor of future positive outcomes among those lacking a sense of efficacy in the present.

We assumed that young people’s framings of the future were conditioned by the study’s focus on food insecurity, but that their realities and social contexts existed independently of their accounts. A study of food insecurity provides a strong theoretical and methodological basis for examining young people’s views of the future in that it rooted young people firmly in the present, foregrounding the current socio-economic conditions within which they constructed their orientations and affording the opportunity to understand young people’s current capacities and life course positionings to mobilise their desires, dreams and hopes. In this way, it enabled us to take account of young people both as beings and becomings. However, this is not to argue that conditions and capacities will not change as individual young people escape economic marginalisation [53,54].

These young people have been hit by a new global crisis, COVID-19. The pandemic has shown that young people have been disproportionately affected in terms of their mental health and their education, leisure and access to school food [55], with likely long-term “scarring” consequences for their lives [56]. Those most affected have been young people from disadvantaged backgrounds (e.g., Woodrow and Moore on consequences for leisure [57]). In the U.K., the withdrawal of Universal Credit, which was temporarily increased in the pandemic, is presently having dire effects on low-income parents and their children, especially in the context of the escalating cost of living, with the Joseph Rowntree Foundation estimating that, in the U.K., half a million more people are set to be pulled into poverty, including 200,000 children [58].

As social scientists, we need to perform further research on the ways in which young people’s time perspectives are influenced by socioeconomic conditions and by global uncertainty, including disruptions in the food system [59]. We need also to consider the need for social science to review its potential contribution, in particular the feasibility of its methods given the constraints of global crises.

The focus of this research in the aftermath of a global crisis means that food poverty has huge policy relevance. It exposes the need for all governments to ensure that young people, parents and all citizens have an equal entitlement to a standard of living that enables them to access appropriate and adequate food as a basic human right, a view echoed by the young people in our study. Children living in poverty should be at the forefront of governments' strategies and political agenda. This is because young people are the future of our societies. "Good futures" should be made possible for every young person irrespective of their family's income and resources.

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