Agency in Adversity: How Long-Term Unemployed Youth Construct Survival Pathways in Hosanna City, Ethiopia

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Abstract

Youth unemployment is not only widespread but increasingly prolonged, posing complex challenges for community well-being and sustainable development. Nevertheless, it is often measured in statistics rather than understood through the lived experiences of youth themselves. Moreover, research and policy debates frequently frame long-term unemployed youth as passive, dependent, and vulnerable, overlooking the resilience, creativity, and adaptability they display in navigating everyday survival. Addressing this gap, this study explored the survival strategies of long-term unemployed youth in Hosanna City, Ethiopia. Using a phenomenological design, we conducted semi-structured interviews with 21 participants and analyzed the data through Colaizzi's method to ensure analytical rigor and thematic depth. From 45 significant statements, four interrelated themes emerged: economic and material survival, social and collective survival, psychological adaptation, and aspirations for migration and self-improvement. The findings show that young people actively develop practical and context-specific strategies to cope with prolonged unemployment. However, these strategies are largely reactive, shaped by structural constraints within labor markets, education systems, and social protection frameworks. Consequently, survival often entails significant personal trade-offs, including delayed transitions into adulthood and the normalization of precarity. While resilience is evident, it should not be romanticized as a sustainable solution to structural unemployment. Instead, policy interventions should move beyond supporting mere survival and instead promote sustainable livelihood pathways by expanding access to decent work, state-funded mega projects such as industrial parks, airports, and railways, entrepreneurship and agro-processing initiatives, skills development, and safe, legal migration opportunities.

Keywords: Adversity, Youth Agency, lived experience, Long term youth unemployment, Survival strategies, Sustainable livelihoods, Resilience

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1. Introduction

Youth unemployment is not only widespread but increasingly prolonged, posing profound challenges for social cohesion, community well-being, and national development. Despite this reality, research and policy debates frequently frame long-term unemployed youth as passive, dependent, and vulnerable. Such deficit-oriented narratives risk overlooking the resilience, creativity, and adaptive capacities young people mobilize to navigate prolonged joblessness. In response, this study shifts the analytical lens from vulnerability to agency by examining how long-term unemployed youth actively construct survival pathways in contexts of economic precarity. Understanding these strategies is essential not only for appreciating youth resilience but also for advancing inclusive and sustainable development agendas that recognize the importance of social capital and locally embedded coping systems (ILO, 2022).

Long-term unemployment (LTU), defined by the International Labour Organization as joblessness lasting 12 months or more, constitutes a persistent socio-economic and political challenge worldwide(ILO, 2022; OECD, 2023). Beyond income deprivation, prolonged unemployment erodes skills, weakens social networks, heightens psychological distress, and increases exposure to poverty and social exclusion (Gallie et al., 2017; Paul & Moser, 2009). In the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, labor market disruptions have intensified these vulnerabilities, disproportionately affecting youth, women, low-skilled workers, and those in informal employment (ILO, 2023). Globally, more than 30% of unemployed individuals remain jobless for over a year, reflecting structural weaknesses in labor absorption and recovery processes (ILO, 2023).

The challenge is particularly acute for youth. In many high-income countries, welfare systems and active labor market programs provide partial buffers against long-term unemployment (OECD, 2022). However, even within these contexts, extended joblessness can leave lasting "scarring" effects on well-being and future prospects (Mascherini et al., 2017; Giugni et al., 2020). In low- and middle-income countries, where formal safety nets are limited, survival depends heavily on informal support systems, including family assistance, casual labor, subsistence activities, and micro-enterprises (Nguyen & Le, 2022). Although digitalization has opened new avenues such as online gig work and e-commerce, access remains uneven due to persistent digital divides (Graham & Woodcock, 2021). Across much of Africa, where over 80% of employment is informal, structural unemployment and underemployment further entrench long-term joblessness (AfDB, 2022).

Ethiopia reflects many of these structural constraints. Youth unemployment remains persistent, particularly in urban areas where competition for limited formal employment is intense. National statistics indicate that urban unemployment disproportionately affects individuals aged 15–29, with a significant proportion remaining unemployed for more than one year (ESS, 2023). Gender and regional disparities, skills mismatches, limited industrial diversification, and constrained access to finance compound the challenge (UNDP, 2023; World Bank, 2023; EDRI, 2023). In such conditions, prolonged unemployment often reshapes daily routines, social roles, and aspirations, forcing young people to prioritize immediate survival over long-term occupational goals.

Hosanna City illustrates these dynamics in concentrated form. Rapid youth population growth, limited industrial development, and constrained formal job creation have intensified employment pressures. The absence of robust social protection mechanisms further compels young people to rely on informal and self-constructed survival strategies. Rising youth unemployment rates and extended joblessness signal not only economic stagnation but also broader risks to social stability and sustainable urban development. At the same time, the city's expanding youth demographic represents significant untapped potential.

While existing research has extensively examined the determinants, rates, and macro-level consequences of youth unemployment, considerably less attention has been paid to how long-term unemployed youth actively navigate their everyday realities. Too often, policy discussions emphasize structural constraints without exploring how young people interpret, negotiate, and respond to those constraints. This study addresses that gap by investigating the survival strategies of long-term unemployed youth in Hosanna City. By foregrounding lived experience and youth agency, it contributes to a more nuanced understanding of unemployment as both a structural condition and an everyday social process. In doing so, it seeks to inform policies that move beyond short-term coping toward sustainable livelihood pathways grounded in dignity, resilience, and inclusion.

2. Review of Literature

Long-term unemployment commonly defined as joblessness lasting 12 months or longer has become an increasingly significant socio-economic and political issue worldwide (OECD, 2023). It is mainly associated with structural labor market challenges, macroeconomic fluctuations, and individual-level vulnerabilities. Research has predominantly investigated three aspects, the causes and risk factors, the trends and dynamics, and the consequences of long-term unemployment. However, there remains a notable gap in exploring the adaptive survival strategies that long-term unemployed individuals, particularly youth, employ. This review synthesizes existing literature on these three dimensions before identifying the research gap that motivates the present study.

Scholarly consensus indicates that long-term unemployment is driven by both structural factors in the labor market and individual characteristics. Economic downturns, such as the 2008 Global Financial Crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic, significantly raised the incidence of long-term unemployment (Blanchard & Summers, 2019; Verick, Schmidt, & von Wachter, 2022). Besides, labor market mismatches between workers' skills and employers' demands are also central. Automation, technological change, and shifts to service-based economies disproportionately affect low-skilled workers (Brynjolfsson & McAfee, 2017). Furthermore, institutional factors, such as rigid employment protection laws or inadequate unemployment insurance, may inadvertently discourage rapid re-employment (OECD, 2021).

Pertaining to individual-level factors, age, education, and health are key predictors. Older workers face skill obsolescence, while younger workers often lack sufficient experience to compete (Bell & Blanchflower, 2021). Besides, health issues and disability increase the likelihood of long-term unemployment, creating a vicious cycle of reduced employability (Cottini & Lucifora, 2020). Moreover, social inequalities, including race, gender, and immigrant status, also intersect with labor

market exclusion (Kuhn & Shen, 2022). Collectively, these factors show that long-term unemployment is not a result of individual failings alone but emerges from a complex interaction of macroeconomic structures and personal vulnerabilities.

Research shows significant variations in long-term unemployment across countries and time. According to OECD (2023), nearly 30% of unemployed youth remain jobless for over a year, a situation worsened in regions with limited vocational training. Although overall unemployment rates declined after COVID-19, many workers remain trapped in long-term unemployment due to structural industry changes and skill mismatches (Verick et al., 2022). In Africa, long-term unemployment is a growing issue, especially among youth and educated workers struggling to find stable, formal jobs (African Development Bank, 2022). Ethiopia reflects this trend, where official unemployment rates are relatively low, but underemployment and long-term joblessness are high among urban youth and graduates, due to limited formal sector opportunities and structural labor market challenges (World Bank, 2020).

Long-term unemployment has wide-ranging impacts on individuals, families, and society. For individuals, it leads to income loss, depleted savings, and higher poverty risk (Kuhn & Shen, 2022). At the macro level, it lowers labor productivity, reduces tax revenues, and raises welfare costs (OECD, 2021). Psychologically, long-term unemployment is linked to depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, and physical health decline (Paul & Moser, 2009; Cottini & Lucifora, 2020). Socially, it increases the risks of social exclusion, family stress, and weakened community ties (Gallie et al., 2017). Economists also note the "scarring" effect, where prolonged unemployment harms future employability due to skill loss and negative employer perceptions (Blanchard & Summers, 2019). This is especially severe for youth, as early-career unemployment can have long-term impacts on earnings (Bell & Blanchflower, 2021).

Existing literature on long-term unemployed youth has primarily examined their survival strategies from an economic perspective, focusing on income generation and reliance on welfare systems (MacDonald & Giazitzoglu, 2019; Furlong, 2021). Recent studies continue to emphasize financial coping methods such as precarious gig work and participation in informal economies (O'Reilly et al., 2022; Bol et al., 2023). While these insights are valuable, they limit the understanding of youth precarity to material survival, potentially overlooking other important ways young people navigate prolonged unemployment. This study addresses this gap by adopting a broader, more holistic view of survival strategies.

While extensive research exists on the causes, trends, and impacts of long-term unemployment, comparatively little attention has been given to how individuals, particularly youth, adapt and survive during extended periods of joblessness. Studies have largely focused on structural and economic explanations and policy implications, but they fail to adequately explore the multiple survival strategies employed by the long-term unemployed. Understanding these strategies is crucial, as they illuminate not only resilience but also the hidden costs and inequalities of unemployment. Thus, this study departs from prior work by shifting focus toward the survival strategies of long-term unemployed youth, filling an important gap in the literature. Besides, the present study advances a more holistic

scrutiny of survival strategies by moving beyond the economic lens to include social, psychological, and aspirational dimensions.

3. Method

3.1.   Research Design

Guided by a constructivist worldview, this study employed a qualitative phenomenological research design to deeply explore and understand the survival strategies of long-term unemployed youth in Hosanna City. Phenomenology is well-suited for this inquiry as it focuses on capturing participants' subjective realities, meanings, and interpretations of their experiences with unemployment (van Manen, 1990). This approach requires the researcher to transcend or suspend prior knowledge and assumptions, allowing for a fresh, immersive engagement with the phenomenon (Merleau-Ponty, 1956). Central to phenomenology is the concept of bracketing the deliberate process of setting aside personal beliefs, feelings, and preconceptions to remain open and faithful to the participants' lived experiences (Colaizzi, 1978; Streubert & Carpenter, 1999). Colaizzi (1978) emphasized that the effectiveness of phenomenological research relies on formulating questions that elicit lived experiences distinct from theoretical constructs. By seeking the richest and most descriptive data (Streubert & Carpenter, 1999), phenomenology enables an in-depth exploration of how long-term unemployed youth navigate their circumstances and the meanings they attribute to their survival strategies (Crotty, 1998). This design thus facilitates a nuanced understanding of the survival strategies underlying long term youth unemployment in the local context.

3.2.   Participants and Sampling Technique

Aligned with the epistemological foundations of phenomenological research, this study employed purposive sampling to identify participants capable of offering deep insights into the survival strategies of long-term youth unemployment. As Miles et al. (2014) emphasize, qualitative inquiry prioritizes depth over breadth, making purposive sampling a methodological imperative rather than a practical choice (Creswell, 2007). A criterion-based selection strategy was adopted to ensure that participants met specific inclusion criteria relevant to the phenomenon. Participants were eligible if they: (1) were aged 15 to 29 years; (2) resided in Hosanna City; (3) had been involuntarily unemployed for at least one year; and (4) were willing to participate voluntarily in the study. In qualitative research, sample size is guided by the principle of data saturation, the point at which no new themes emerge (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Guest et al., 2006). While saturation cannot be precisely defined in advance, it serves as a benchmark for ensuring thematic completeness. Consistent with recommendations from Creswell (1998), Morse (1994), Morrow et al. (2015) and Polkinghorne (1989), who suggested sample sizes between 5 and 25 participants in phenomenological studies, this research proceeded until saturation was observed at the 18th interview. To confirm this, three additional interviews were conducted, resulting in a final sample of 21 participants (12 female, 9 male). This purposive and criterion-based sampling approach ensured the inclusion of participants with rich, firsthand experience of long-term unemployment, thereby enhancing the depth, relevance, and authenticity of the data collected.

3.3.   Procedures of Data Collection

Data collection was conducted through a structured series of steps aligned with the study's objective. A semi-structured interview guide was developed to elicit in-depth and honest accounts of participants' experiences. Ethical Review approval was obtained from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of University of Gondar prior to data collection. Participants were purposively selected and contacted individually to explain the study's purpose and obtain informed consent. Participants chose pseudonyms to protect their identities and scheduled interviews at times and locations convenient for them, most interviews were held in their homes to ensure comfort. The researcher conducted all interviews personally, maintaining privacy and confidentiality by ensuring merely the participant and interviewer were present. At the outset of each session, participants were reminded of their right to withdraw at any time and were encouraged to express themselves freely. Interviews were audio-recorded with permission and supplemented by detailed field notes to capture non-verbal cues. Follow-up interviews were conducted when needed for clarification. All interviews were conducted in Amharic and later transcribed verbatim and translated into English for analysis. Data collection occurred over three months (January 2025 to March 2025) and continued until data saturation was achieved, when no new insights emerged. Each interview lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes.

3.4.   Method of Data Analysis

Colaizzi's (1978) phenomenological method was employed in analyzing participants' transcripts. In this method, all written transcripts were read several times to obtain an overall feeling for them. From each transcript, significant phrases or sentences that pertain directly to the lived experience of being youth and long term unemployed were identified. Meanings were then formulated from the significant statements and phrases. The formulated meanings were clustered into themes allowing for the emergence of themes common to all of the participants' transcripts. The results were then integrated into an in-depth, exhaustive description of the phenomenon. Once descriptions and themes have been obtained, the researcher in the final step may approach some participants a second time to validate the findings. Methodological rigor was attained through the application of verification, validation, and validity (Meadows & Morse, 2001). Verification is the first step in achieving validity of a research project. This standard was fulfilled through literature searches, adhering to the phenomenological method, bracketing past experiences, keeping field notes, using an adequate sample, identification of negative cases, and interviewing until saturation of data was achieved (Frankel, 1999; Meadows & Morse, 2001). Validation, a within-project evaluation, was accomplished by multiple methods of data collection (in depth interviews as main and observations as supportive), data analysis was done meticulously by experienced researcher, member checks by participants, and audit trails.

3.5.   Validity and Reliability of the study

Establishing trustworthiness in qualitative research is essential for producing credible and meaningful results. As Patton (2001) notes, both validity and reliability are foundational to rigorous qualitative inquiry. In this study, multiple strategies were employed to ensure the authenticity, consistency, and transparency of the findings. A key method was member checking, aligned with the final step of Colaizzi's (1978) phenomenological approach. After preliminary analysis, findings were returned to participants for validation, allowing them to confirm that their lived experiences were accurately captured. This not only enhanced credibility but also minimized researcher bias, as emphasized by Maxwell (2013). Prolonged engagement with participants further strengthened trustworthiness. Spending extended time in the field allowed the researcher to build rapport, gain deeper insights, and recognize recurring patterns, ultimately leading to data saturation, where no new themes emerged (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Peer debriefing and external audits were also employed. Selected peers and professional colleagues reviewed portions of raw data and provided constructive feedback, offering an objective lens through which to evaluate the analysis (Gay et al., 2006; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This process added rigor and helped refine thematic interpretations. Triangulation (in-depth interview and observation) was used to enhance the richness and scope of the findings. By incorporating diverse perspectives, such as including both male and female participants, both the experiences of those who have never entered the workforce and individuals who lost previously held jobs, the study captured a more holistic understanding of long-term unemployment among youth. Finally, rich, thick description was provided throughout the study. Detailed accounts of the research context, participant demographics, and data collection procedures allow readers to assess the transferability of the findings to other settings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Maxwell, 2013). By integrating these robust strategies, the study ensured methodological rigor and upheld the highest standards of qualitative research, offering findings that are not only trustworthy but also deeply reflective of participants' authentic experiences.

3.6.   Ethical Clearance

This study was conducted in strict accordance with established ethical principles, respect for persons, beneficence, and justice, to safeguard participant welfare and uphold scientific integrity. Ethical approval was obtained from the University of Gondar Institutional Research Ethical Review Board (IRERB) in March 2024 (Ref. No. VP/RTT/05/475/2024). The approved research protocol, including the study proposal, interview guide, and data collection procedures, was reviewed to ensure full compliance with ethical standards for research involving human participants. A copy of the ethical clearance certificate is attached as Appendix A. All participants were above 18 years of age. Prior to data collection, participants were provided with a clear explanation of the study's objectives, procedures, potential risks, and expected benefits. Written informed consent was obtained from literate participants. For participants with limited literacy, the consent form was read aloud in their preferred language, and verbal consent was recorded accordingly. Participation was entirely voluntary, and individuals were informed of their right to withdraw at any time without consequence. To protect confidentiality, pseudonyms were used in place of real names, and identifying information was removed from transcripts. Audio recordings and transcripts were securely stored in password-

protected files accessible only to the researcher. Given the sensitive nature of discussing prolonged unemployment, interviews were conducted with care to minimize psychological discomfort. These procedures ensured the protection of participants' dignity, autonomy, and well-being throughout the research process.

4. Results and Discussion

This section presents and discusses a multifaceted exploration of survival strategies of long term youth unemployment from the perspective of those who experience it, shedding light on the complexities and nuances of their daily survival realities. The narratives of 21 long-term unemployed participants (12 females and 9 males) revealed how long term unemployed youth survive without stable employment in this ever evolving inflated time. Long-term unemployment produces enduring scars that can impact young people's lives across their life course. From the 21 verbatim transcripts, a total of 45 significant statements were extracted. These statements led to the identification of 4 exclusive central themes that encapsulate the lived experiences of their survival strategies amid prolonged joblessness. Table 1 illustrates sample significant statements alongside their corresponding formulated meanings, while Table 2 presents the thematic clusters derived from significant statements and their formulated meanings.

TABLE 1: Selected Examples of Significant Statements of Long Term Unemployed Youth Survival Strategies and Related Formulated Meanings

Significant Statements	Formulated Meanings
"I borrow money from friends and I take any kind of temporary work, even if it pays very little. Just to survive, I left no stone unturned."	*Precarious work and borrowing*
"We support each other among friends who are also unemployed; sometimes we share meals or help one another with small needs."	*Mutual aid and solidarity*
"I tell myself every day that this is only temporary, even if deep down I don't know how long it will last. Sometimes I just detach emotionally; if I think too much about the future, I get depressed."	*Hope and emotional detachment*
"Even if illegal migration is risky, that's my only plan and hope now. I am willing to sacrifice because life here is meaningless and more than risk."	*Migration as future hope*
"Since I can't find a job, I'm trying to learn tailoring. At least I can use it to earn on my own. Besides, I watch free online courses to learn computer skills. I feel maybe it will help me get hired one day."	*Skill-building for employability*
"I cut down on everything, no more social outings, no new clothes, only what is absolutely necessary. I've learned to survive with very little. We recycle food, clothes, even old tools, because there's no money for replacements."	*Frugality and resourcefulness*
"Even if the state fails us, we rely on our unity to survive and make our voices heard."	*Agency through solidarity*

TABLE 2: Two Selected Themes with Their Associated Formulated Meanings

Themes	Associated Formulated Meanings
Economic and Material Survival	Prioritization of immediate income-generating activities
	Engagement in precarious or informal employment
	Multiple small-scale economic activities to diversify risk
	Sacrificing personal growth for financial obligations
	Financial decisions driven by necessity rather than choice
	Normalization of debt as a coping mechanism
	Daily life shaped by economic insecurity
	Dependence on remittances or external financial support
	Extreme budgeting and expenditure minimization
	Needs prioritized over leisure or luxury
	Reuse, recycling, and resourcefulness as survival practices
	Sacrificing comfort for income sustainability
	Consumption choices shaped by survival, not preference
	Frugality reframed as resilience and discipline
	Engaging in immoral and illegal activities
	Selling personal possessions
	Making ends meet at any cost
Aspirations for Migration and Self-Improvement	Looking Beyond the Present
	Migration imagined as a pathway out of stagnation
	Foreign opportunities perceived as more attainable than local ones
	Migration framed as family investment and security
	Willingness to endure risk or illegality for survival abroad
	Host countries idealized as spaces of opportunity
	Social prestige attached to migrant identity/remittances
	Migration aspirations shaped by peer/community success stories
	"Elsewhere" imagined as the only dignified option
	Pursuit of vocational training for employability
	Learning new skills as adaptation to uncertainty
	Self-education through accessible, low-cost resources
	Skill acquisition tied to migration or local employability
	Flexibility and adaptability emphasized in skill-building
	Self-improvement as empowerment and resilience
	Skills reframed as assets in precarious labor markets

Source: (Fieldwork, 2025)

Theme 1: Economic and Material Survival

A central concern emerging from participants' accounts was the challenge of economic and material survival in the face of prolonged unemployment. Participants described a patchwork of short-term coping strategies, heavy reliance on the informal sector, and the necessity of frugality as critical means of sustaining themselves. Long-term unemployment compelled participants to rely on fragmented and precarious means of survival, creating what several scholars term "patchwork livelihoods" (Saha, 2021; Jha et al., 2023). Street vending, petty trades, daily wage labor, borrowing, informal credit, and occasional remittances formed the backbone of these survival economies. As P02 (Male, 26,

unemployed 24 months) explained: *"I take whatever small job I can find, even if it pays very little, because I need to survive today… dignity becomes a daily negotiation."* His account highlights how scarcity shaped decision-making, echoing Mullainathan and Shafir's (2013) concept of the scarcity mindset, where financial insecurity narrows focus to immediate needs while limiting long-term planning.

Frugality emerged as another prominent sub theme. Participants described minimizing expenses, reusing items, and sacrificing social participation as necessary trade-offs. P08 (Female, 24, unemployed 26 months) reflected: *"I learned to cut down on expenses, reusing items whenever I can… at this stage, survival is a daily challenge, and I'm just trying to stay afloat, not to beg."* Such practices resonate with literature on "austerity resilience" (Fisher et al., 2022), where deprivation is reframed as discipline and resourcefulness. Yet, as scholars caution (Bhan et al., 2020), these coping mechanisms, while enabling endurance, risk reinforcing long-term vulnerability and restricting upward mobility.

These accounts underscore that economic survival was rarely linear or stable, but rather a constant negotiation between resilience and precarity. Borrowing, frugality, and ad hoc earnings not only provided immediate sustenance but also sustained social ties and a fragile sense of dignity (Banerjee & Duflo, 2019; Kesar et al., 2021). Together, the findings illustrate how unemployed youth navigate restricted labor markets through ingenuity and sacrifice, while also underlining the urgent need for structural interventions that extend beyond survival toward pathways of stability, inclusion, and dignity.

Theme 2: Social and Collective Survival

Prolonged unemployment disrupted not only economic life but also participants' social belonging, often producing isolation, shame, and withdrawal from family and community ties. In this context, many described turning to digital platforms as critical lifelines for maintaining relationships, sharing experiences, and searching for opportunities. As P17 (Male, 26, unemployed for 29 months) explained*: "I started using social media more actively, sharing my thoughts, connecting with friends, and even looking for job opportunities online… Sometimes, I also attend church gatherings and volunteer, which gives me a sense of purpose and keeps me socially involved."* His reflections capture the dual reliance on digital and faith-based spaces to reconstruct a sense of connection and meaning.

For others, online interactions became "substitute friendship circles," buffering loneliness and reinforcing solidarity among peers in similar situations. P20 (Female, 25, unemployed for 21 months) noted: *"Social media for me is like a digital safety net… talking to my friends on WhatsApp and TikTok makes me feel less alone… I also started volunteering, which helps me feel connected and useful."* These accounts reflect how unemployed youth gradually supplement, and in some cases replace, strained offline networks with digital communities, creating what participants recognized as their most consistent form of social protection.

Such experiences resonate with scholarship on social capital and informal networks as survival strategies in contexts of weak welfare systems (Putnam, 2020; Adger et al., 2022). Participants' collective bonds also align with ideas of vernacular governance (Cleaver, 2021), where marginalized groups mobilize solidarity for identity, reciprocity, and occasional negotiation with authorities. Yet, while such ties provide resilience and recognition (Khan, 2022), scholars caution they may also reinforce cycles of dependency and delay structural transformation (Hickey & King, 2023). Taken together, participants' experiences show that survival was not only about individual endurance but also about collective practices of belonging and resistance, sustained through digital connectivity, solidarity, and community participation.

Theme 3: Psychological Adaptation

The consequences of long-term unemployment extended deeply into participants' psychological well-being, intensifying feelings of anxiety, depression, and diminished self-worth. Yet their accounts also revealed resilient coping strategies both traditional and digital that enabled them to sustain meaning and psychological balance. For some, maintaining daily routines, religious or spiritual practices, and family support provided grounding. As P01 (Female, 21, unemployed 18 months) explained: *"I cope by sticking to a daily routine, waking up early and helping around the house. My faith, parents, and close friends constantly remind me that this phase will pass, and their encouragement keeps me motivated."* Such reflections resonate with studies highlighting faith and structure as buffers against despair and pathways of meaning-making (Pargament et al., 2021; Abu-Raiya & Pargament, 2022).

At the same time, a gradual shift toward digital coping emerged. Participants increasingly turned to online platforms for free courses, virtual peer groups, and skill development, which afforded a sense of progress and future orientation. As P10 (Male, 26, unemployed 18 months) noted: *"I started using online platforms to learn new skills and join virtual communities… Even though I don't have a job, I feel like I'm still moving forward."* These practices illustrate a shift from mere endurance to proactive self-development, challenging what Sen (1999) terms *adaptive preferences*, where lowered expectations can normalize scarcity. By cultivating digital skills and connections, participants sought to resist stagnation through forward-looking resilience.

Overall, these accounts reflect what Ungar (2021) calls "psychological resilience pathways" adaptive responses that create possibility within constraint. Yet, while humor, faith, and lowered expectations helped youth endure, such strategies also carry hidden costs, potentially reinforcing long-term vulnerability (Nussbaum, 2021). The findings underscore that psychological survival in contexts of long term unemployment is not a romanticized toughness but a fragile, negotiated balancing act between sustaining hope and confronting systemic exclusion.

Theme 4: Aspirations for Migration and Self-Improvement

In this theme, long-term unemployed youth adopt two intertwined, future-oriented strategies migration and self-improvement to navigate structural precarity and uphold social dignity. Participants framed both regular and irregular migration as the only dignified escape from stagnation, infusing it with social prestige while fully aware of its dangers. This belief reflects a dual logic of migration as both a necessity and an aspiration. As one participant, P15 (Female, 23, High school, unemployed for 22 months), shared how her aspirations for migration, despite the risks, gave her strength and a renewed sense of purpose. she vividly expressed: *"I decided to go to Kuwait because I see it as a place where I can find stable work and improve my situation … I am aware of the risks of illegal migration, but the desperation to escape this cycle of unemployment pushes me to take that chance … The aspiration to migrate gives me strength and optimism."* This aligns with recent studies showing that youth and marginalized groups increasingly view migration not as a free choice, but as a survival imperative, fueled by peer success stories and global "dreamscapes" of life abroad (Carling & Collins, 2018; Bakewell, 2020; Bylander, 2022). Xiang (2021) describes this phenomenon as a "migration dreamscape" an imagined future abroad that sustains hope amid a harsh local reality.

Parallel to migration, participants emphasized skill development both through affordable self-education and supplemental courses as critical to resilience. One participant, P14 (Female, 26, Bachelor's degree, unemployed for 23 months), reflected on this tension between education and employability. She powerfully captured this: *"My university education gave me a good general knowledge, but … many employers want specific skills that I didn't learn … I had to take extra courses and learn new digital tools on*

my own to stay competitive. I see self-improvement as a necessary step to remain employable and secure my future." This mirrors the concept of "resilience capital" the flexible competencies and self-directed learning that marginalized youth employ to navigate precarious labor markets (Standing, 2021; Sultana, 2022). Studies also show that even low-cost online education can provide psychological empowerment, reframing limited agency as active self-investment (Robinson-Pant, 2020).

Participants' perspectives reveal a dual strategy for survival, looking outward through migration to access better opportunities, and looking inward through self-improvement to enhance resilience and adaptability. Together, these strategies demonstrate how unemployed youth navigate structural barriers by combining aspiration with action, seeking both external escape routes and internal transformations to secure a more dignified and sustainable future. In general, these findings suggest that survival under conditions of prolonged unemployment is multifaceted. Survival in this sense, is less a romanticized story of resilience than a reflection of structural failure one that demands policy interventions to shift youth from survival toward stability, dignity, and sustainable futures.

5. Conclusion and Policy Implications

This study explored the survival strategies of long-term unemployed youth in Hosanna City and identified four interconnected dimensions: economic and material survival, social and collective coping, psychological adaptation, and aspirations for migration and self-improvement. The findings show that youth are not passive victims of structural exclusion; rather, they actively mobilize informal work, strict frugality, kinship and community networks, faith-based resilience, and forward-looking aspirations to endure prolonged joblessness. Nevertheless, these strategies are largely reactive and necessity-driven, reflecting structural weaknesses in labor markets, limited local investment, fragile education-to-employment transitions, and inadequate social protection systems. Although survival is sustained, it often comes at significant personal cost, including delayed adulthood transitions, deferred aspirations, and the normalization of insecurity. Resilience, therefore, should not be romanticized as a substitute for systemic reform.

Transforming survival into sustainable livelihoods requires coordinated and locally grounded policy interventions. Expanding microenterprise support through small grants, microcredit, and financial literacy programs can strengthen youth-led initiatives, while aligning vocational and technical training with Hosanna's emerging economic sectors, such as construction, ICT, repair services, and agribusiness, can improve employability. Strategic public investments in industrial parks, transport infrastructure, airport expansion, and railway construction could stimulate job creation and broaden local economic opportunities. At the community level, strengthening youth cooperatives, savings groups, and mentorship networks, particularly those linking youth with local professionals and diaspora returnees, can reinforce social capital and collective resilience. Expanding psychosocial support through schools, religious institutions, and youth centers, alongside sports and cultural programs, can address the emotional burden of prolonged unemployment and restore agency. Finally, supporting skills development and safe, regulated migration pathways, coupled with reintegration assistance for returnees, can convert youth aspirations into productive contributions to the local economy.

Overall, addressing long-term youth unemployment in Hosanna City demands integrated structural reforms that build upon youth agency while creating stable, dignified, and inclusive opportunities for sustainable development.

6. Limitations and Future Directions

While this phenomenological study provides rich and in-depth insights into the survival strategies of long-term unemployed youth, limitations should be acknowledged to contextualize its findings. First and foremost, the sample size, though sufficient for phenomenological depth, the experiences captured reflect the perspectives of a specific sample (21), it may limits the transferability of the findings. Second, participants were primarily urban based, possibly omitting rural specific long term unemployment experiences. Third, temporal limitations may also exist, as the study captures a single point in time, without exploring how survival strategies evolve over longer durations. Given that unemployment is a dynamic and evolving condition, a longitudinal study would allow deeper understanding of how these survival strategies change over time. Finally, the study relied on self-reported narratives, which could be subject to individual bias or selective memory. Due to the emotional weight of the topic, some participants may have withheld sensitive information, which could affect the depth of data. Future research could expand the sample size, consider rural specific long term unemployment experiences, employ longitudinal design and include additional underexplored themes to deepen our understanding of the multifaceted nature of long-term unemployed youth survival strategies. Despite these limitations, the study provides valuable insights into the multidimensional lived experiences of long term unemployed youth resilience in precarity.

Declarations

Ethical approval

 Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Institutional Research Ethical Review Board (IRERB) of the University of Gondar (Ref. No: VP/RTT/05/475/2024). All procedures were conducted in accordance with IRERB guidelines, the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki, and relevant national research ethics standards.

Consent to participate

Written informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. As all participants were literate and above 18 years of age, written consent was secured following a clear explanation of the study's objectives, procedures, potential risks, and anticipated benefits. Participation was entirely voluntary, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any stage without consequence.
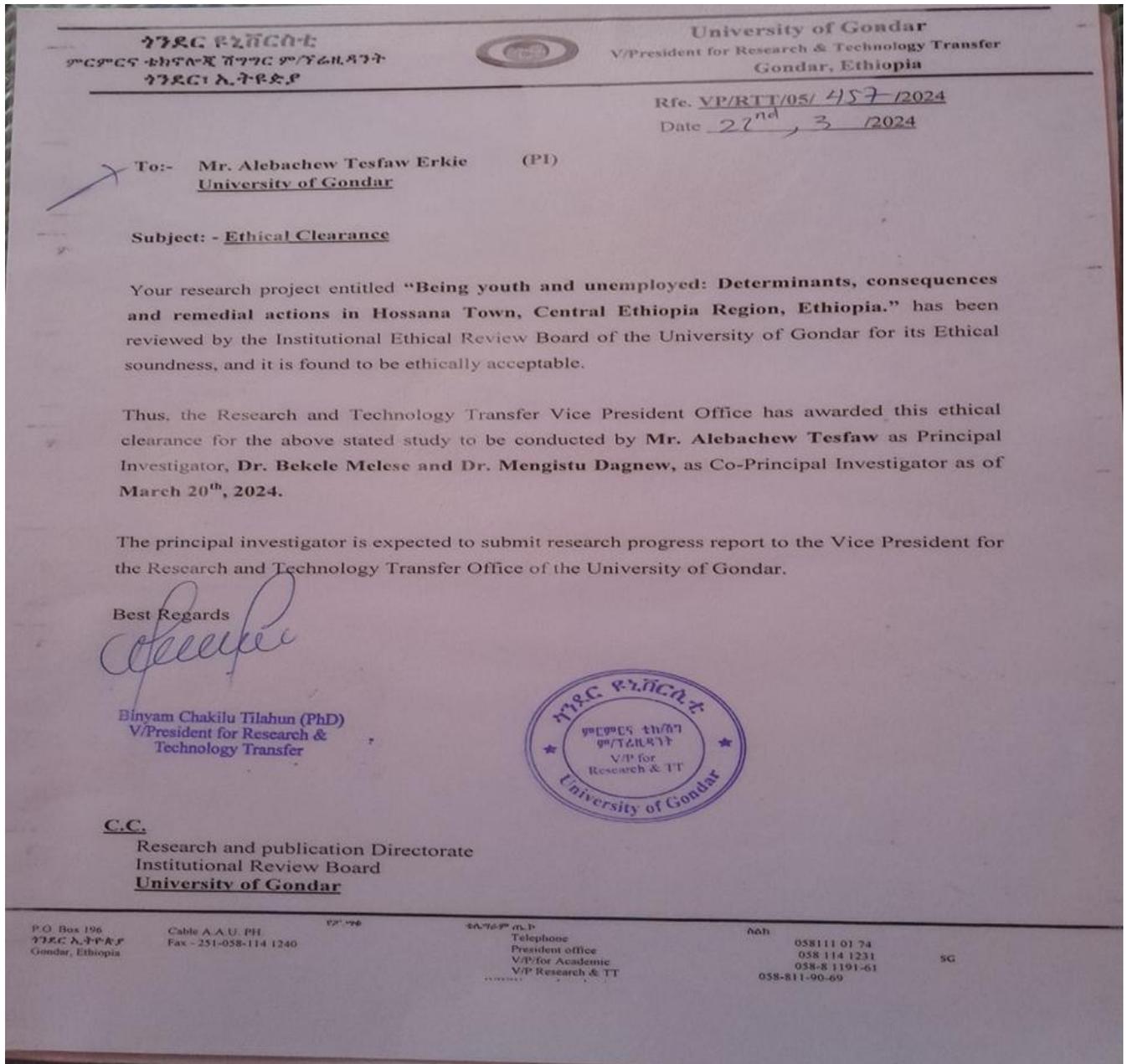
Consent to publish

All participants consented to the publication of anonymized findings. No identifying personal information is included in this manuscript.

Competing interest

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

Appendix A: Ethical clearance certificate

Appendix B: Socio-demographic characteristics of study participants (N=21)

P. I D	Pseudo Name	Sex	Age	Education Level	Duration of Unemployment	Marital Status	Living Arrangement	Previous Employment History
1	Nina	F	21	Preparatory school	18 months	Single	With parents	No Experience
2	Tirkaso	M	26	BSC Degree	24 months	Single	With parents	No Experience
3	Erlende	F	29	Elementary School	13 months	Separated	With grands	Waitress
4	Waluwa	M	26	High School	20 months	Single	With friends	Construction Work
5	Mishame	F	27	Bachelor's Degree	29 months	Single	With parents	No Experience
6	Genet	F	25	College Diploma	20 months	Single	With parents	No Experience

7	Fuad	M	26	BSC Degree	14 months	Single	With Sister	No Experience
8	Hana	F	24	TVET Diploma	26 months	Single	With parents	No Experience
9	Wadole	F	25	College Diploma	28 months	Single	With brother	Sales
10	Dinkicho	M	26	Bachelor's Degree	18 months	Single	With parents	No Experience
11	Lere	M	23	High School	15 months	Single	With parents	No Experience
12	Erbetto	M	27	BSC Degree	17 months	Single	With friends	Tutor
13	Kedir	M	29	Bachelor's Degree	22 months	Single	With Uncle	Black market
14	Aster	F	26	Bachelor's Degree	23 months	Single	With parents	No Experience
15	Meron	F	23	High School	22 months	Single	With Aunt	Waitress
16	Zebiba	F	25	College Diploma	19 months	Single	With parents	No Experience
17	Mulatu	M	26	Bachelor's Degree	29 months	Single	With Uncle	No experience
18	Dilame	F	25	Elementary school	14 months	Single	With parents	No Experience
19	Kaleb	M	29	MSC Degree	14 months	Separated	With parents	Part Timer
20	Beyame	F	25	Bachelor's Degree	21 months	Single	With parents	No Experience
21	Massame	F	23	Elementary School	13 months	Single	With grands	No Experience

Source: (Fieldwork, 2025)

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