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## **Waiting: Elements of a conceptual framework**

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Waiting has become an important topic for the social sciences and a metaphor for the situation of young people in a variety of regions. This essay proposes to take a step back from metaphors of waithood, stuckedness, timepass or boredom to newly ask what waiting is and what social consequences it has. I see waiting as the evaluation of a situation; by social framing, this evaluation can coagulate into a specific action. Both evaluation and action are characterized by future orientation, passivity, uncertainty, stasis, and absence of intrinsic value. Waiting, I show, is an important medium of social cooperation on the one hand, of the allocation of resources on the other. Both lead to the unequal distribution of waiting. Those who have to wait can wait in competition to each other or jointly, and joint waiting can become a seed of social critique.

Building on these elements of a conceptual framework, I ask if there is anything specific about waiting in Africa. I argue that contemporary waithood is produced and reproduced by global economic structures, and I describe ways in which these can translate into an unequal distribution of waiting – in Africa and beyond.

Keywords: Waiting; social theory; waithood; youth

## **Waiting: Elements of a conceptual framework**

### **Introduction**

This essay on waiting does not do many of the things readers might expect of an article in an African Studies journal. I do not present an ethnographic case study, and I do not attempt to give an overview of the existing literature (for such overviews, apart from the introduction to this volume, see e.g. Bandak and Janeja 2018; Kleist and Jansen 2016). Instead, my essay is broadly conceptual in nature. I build on both the existing literature and my own ethnographic research to structure the field of waiting as it has been addressed (or, in a few instances, as I think it should be addressed) in the social sciences. In constructing this analytical framework, I lay no claim to either originality or completeness, but I hope the reader finds the essay useful for developing her or his own take on waiting. Ideally, I provide both a reference point for conceptual discussions and questions to orient further research.

I was tempted to use many more examples from my own empirical work on waiting in northern Namibia (e.g. in Dobler 2014 and 2017), but I could not have kept the conceptual approach and done justice to the individual case within the space of a single article. In the context of this special issue, the rich and nuanced material offered by the other papers let me choose to privilege structure instead of empirical content.

I first propose a simple working definition of waiting as an attitude towards our situation and sometimes an action in itself (1). I then describe social effects of waiting (2), concentrating on waiting as a means of coordination and a means of allocation. I then ask when people stop waiting if their wait does not have the desired outcome (3). Building on these parts, I then ask whether and in what sense we might possibly describe waiting ‘in Africa’ (4). I do so by relating what I see as broad agreement about the current situation in many African countries to reasons for and attitudes of waiting.

## **Waiting as an Evaluation and Waiting as an Action**

What do we do when we are waiting? Is waiting an action in itself or rather the absence of action? These questions have puzzled social theorists for a while. ‘To wait’ is an active verb used to describe a passive state (Klapproth 2010: 179). If waiting is an action, it is a helpless action that has no power to actively bring about what it aims at. In consequence, waiting oscillates between activity and passivity. At the same time, waiting also oscillates between patience and impatience (Gasparini 1995). When we wait, we resign ourselves to the fact that our anticipation cannot bring us closer to the future, but the time that has to elapse seems longer to us than it should be.

To resolve both tensions, I propose to differentiate between *waiting as an attitude* and *waiting as a specific action*. Both can and often do exist simultaneously, but it is necessary to separate them conceptually.

As a general concept, ‘waiting’ is not a specific mode of action, but a specific evaluation of our actions. If we say that we are waiting, we do not necessarily speak about the specificity of our actions in a particular moment; we evaluate those actions as detached from the state of being we are waiting for. Our attention is turned towards a future we anticipate, not towards the intrinsic value or the instrumental aims of our actions in the present.

The attitude of waiting can coexist with many different actions. As the ethnographic examples in this volume make very clear, people can do quite a lot of different things while they wait. We might look at our watch, pace through the waiting room, or use a pen to doodle on a notepad while holding a line. We might start to write an article while waiting for our bus to arrive. We might even go about our daily

activities for years while waiting for an illness to pass or a person to come back. In all these cases, waiting is not in what we do, but in how we evaluate what we do.

Sometimes, however, waiting becomes a specific action: a socially framed activity whose defining element is to correspond to (and sometimes to enforce) the evaluation of a situation as ‘waiting’. These typically are situations of emphatic waiting: standing in the line at an ATM on payday, staring at a screen while a website is loading, or sitting in the antechamber of a politician. Even in such situations, waiting is rarely all we do, but it becomes sufficiently distinct an activity to see it as a social action.

Waiting as an attitude and waiting as a social action often correlate, but they are sufficiently independent from each other to justify keeping them apart conceptually. When we do different things while waiting for an outside event, waiting shapes our attitude, not our actions; when we are in a situation socially framed as waiting while not actually having the feeling of waiting (say, watching other people in a dentist’s waiting room or listening to music at a boarding gate), waiting shapes our actions, or at least our behaviour, but not our attitude. – It might be good to point out that the difference I make is not the same as Dwyer’s (1995) distinction between situational and existential waiting. Waiting as an attitude, just as waiting as an action, can be both situational and existential.

These examples already imply that waiting, both as an attitude and as an action, can alternatively become the focus of our attention or recede into the background. When we wait for news that is important to us – say a letter that tells us whether our job application has been accepted –, we might spend the day doing something else, only thinking about the letter from time to time. When the moment gets closer at which the day’s mail usually arrives, waiting might become the focus of our attention and even the defining part of our actions, only to recede into the background when no letter comes.

These differentiations allow us to use the concept of waiting in a more precise manner, but they do not yet offer any definition of the concept itself. What specific attitude or what action should we call ‘waiting’ – as opposed to, say, being bored, anticipating, dreading, meditating, lobbying for change or working? I am not sure how far we can separate these and various other neighbouring phenomena into clear defintory classes, but taken as an ideal type, I see the following criteria as the conceptual core of waiting: *Future orientation*, *passivity*, *uncertainty*, *stasis*, and *absence of intrinsic value*.

We wait for an event or a state of being that has not yet arrived, but that nevertheless becomes the focus of our attention (*future orientation*). The anticipated outcome does not solely depend on us. Until its time comes, we might be able to create the right conditions for it to happen, but we cannot actively bring it about (*passivity*). Since the anticipated future has not yet happened, an element of *uncertainty* is present in waiting. We might be reasonably sure an event will occur (sunrise, rain, or our death), but in most cases we do not know when exactly it is going to happen, or at least how long the time span will feel to us. As long as we focus on the future event, all other changes appear as secondary to us: nothing of import is going to happen before our wait has an end (*stasis*). Finally, waiting usually *does not have an intrinsic value*, but appears as the mere passing of time before something of note is going to happen.

All these points are defintory rather than analytic; they describe my own use of the concept of waiting, which I hope is to a large degree consistent with that of most readers. It is very easy to find counterexamples to each of the criteria offered here. Waiting might, for example, turn into pleasant anticipation and thereby acquire intrinsic value. In some cases (say, when waiting to give birth, but also when waiting for the right moment to finally act), changes that come before the event might become focal

points of their own and counter any feeling of stasis. To my mind, however, such examples rather highlight the common-sense conceptual normality than dissolving it.

If we agree that waiting is an attitude that can coagulate into an action and that is defined by certain characteristics, we can understand waiting as a specific relation to the future. Waiting simultaneously brings the future into the present by anticipating events and removes the future from the present by negating activity as a possible means to achieve it. Within the same evaluation or the same action, waiting enables people to shift their evaluation by concentrating either on the ‘almost’ or on the ‘not-yet’. This allows to alternate more active and more passive states and, generally, to keep the future at bay. I will come back to this point later.

Different variants of waiting very often co-exist and overlap with each other. We can simultaneously wait for a text message, for the weekend, for the harvest and for a better life. Our attention often shifts between such different kinds of waiting on different time horizons. The wait for short-term aims can distract us from the wait for more important long-term aims, particularly if the short-term wait occurs in a situation of waiting as action: we will not focus on the turn of the seasons while impatiently holding the line and waiting for customer care to pick up the phone.

Different variants of waiting are thus woven through our everyday lives. They recede into the background of our attention or move back into its focus. Waiting sometimes becomes our main activity, only to be temporarily or definitely replaced by other actions we engage in. All these different variants of waiting shape our relation to the future and link it to the present and the past; and they link us to other people who wait for the same or different things, in the same or different time horizons.

### **Social Effects of Waiting**

So far, I have mostly been concerned with the individual and subjective side of waiting – with what it feels like to wait. The interweaving of different people’s different ways of waiting already moves beyond this to the social side of waiting. What are the social effects of waiting?

Much of the recent literature on waiting has stressed the role of waiting in the creation and reproduction of social hierarchies (e.g. Auyero 2010; Jeffrey 2010; see also Bandak and 2018, 4 ff.). Wherever people wait – in queues in front of an office, in antechambers, in hospitals –, the powerless wait that the powerful have time for them. Waiting indeed plays an important role for the reproduction of hierarchies, but in order to understand why this is possible and how hierarchies are reproduced through waiting, we have to take a step back and ask why waiting is sometimes necessary in the first place. Waiting, I will argue, is an important medium of both social coordination and the allocation of scarce goods over time.

### ***Waiting as a Medium of Social Coordination***

All waiting is social, but not every variant of waiting has its origins in society. Natural cycles – seed and harvest, day and night, birth and death – generate many waiting periods. Fishermen wait for the tide to turn, and hunters lie in wait for their prey. How and why different people wait under these circumstances is socially framed, but the need to wait originates outside of the field of human intervention.

Very frequently, however, people have to wait for other people. This is simply a consequence of our sociality and our ability for joint action. When two or more people act together, waiting makes it easier for them to coordinate. Robinson newly arrived on his island probably spent a lot of time waiting for a ship, or for fish to bite, but he could sleep, hunt, build a hut or rest without waiting for other people’s convenience. The same goes for many situations in which we are on our own and can act without reference to

others. Much more frequently, however, we have to take other people into account and have to synchronize our actions with theirs.

Our ability to wait makes synchronisation and scheduling much easier. Without the social technique of waiting, two people would have to arrive at exactly the same time to engage in a joint task; for this to happen, they would have to finish their previous actions in exactly the time they had anticipated them to take. If, however, one of the people can wait for the other, synchronisation does not have to be perfect from the start. Waiting periods facilitate joint actions by allowing us to readjust our planning. The more complicated the social division of labour, the higher the need for planning and waiting.

Evidently, not all planning directly occurs as coordination between two people. Very often, social rules, institutions and technologies frame or replace such coordination between individuals. Waiting rooms, queues and traffic lights are institutions framing people's waiting – as are, less obviously, answering machines, public holidays or voting age regulations. Such institutions anonymize social relations of waiting to a degree that people often no longer know whom they are waiting for – like Kafka's Joseph K. waiting for a verdict whose author he cannot identify.

Against this background, it becomes clear that practices of waiting are socially organized and affected by norms, expectations, values and power relations. If two people have to coordinate their actions, the burden of waiting is usually distributed unequally. Within hierarchies, those of a higher rank typically have to wait for shorter periods than those of a lower rank; in capitalist societies, waiting time is allocated in respect to the opportunity cost of one's labour; cultural values can make waiting more acceptable for one group than for another. Waiting is a lopsided practice, and the



differences attached to waiting can find their expression in technologies and institutions of waiting that in turn reinforce such differences.

### ***Waiting as a Medium of Allocation***

Besides being a medium of coordination, waiting also is a medium of allocation of scarce resources. If a given amount of goods is not sufficient for the demand by a given number of people, stretching the allocation over time by introducing waiting periods can alleviate the situation. The expectation for getting one's share then temporarily serves as a substitute for the share itself.

Waiting in this sense can be very concrete, clearly defined and controllable. Factories might have a backlog, but be able to promise delivery within two months. In other instances (say, car allocation in the Eastern European socialist economies of the 1970s, or the allocation of RDP houses in today's South Africa), the waiting period becomes less defined and the expectation to actually receive the good less reliable. In again other cases, even the promise of fulfilment becomes vague and uncertain. The promise of new jobs if a new party is voted into power, the expectation of new possibilities of treatment for a certain illness or the hope for better opportunities after you finish a university degree – all these come without a clear due date and often without any real allocation. Still, they can serve to temporarily mitigate wants by defining them as fulfilment-in-waiting. Anticipating to have feels different from not having: now it is their turn, later it will be mine.

The problems of such deferral are obvious: one cannot live on tomorrow's salary, and one cannot eat promises. There comes a point at which waiting turns from the expectation of having into the experience of not having, and patience runs out. It becomes clear that waiting alone cannot solve the problem of scarce resources. When is

this point reached? When do people stop waiting? I will come back to that question below.

### ***Different Ways of Waiting***

Before that, it is necessary to further break up the category of waiting. The passages on waiting as a medium of coordination and of allocation may have read like waiting was a single, homogenous entity. Both as an attitude and as an action, however, people's waiting can take on very different faces which have consequences for waiting's social effects. Waiting can be *more active or more passive*; it can *reinforce or counter social roles*; and it can *separate people or bring them together*.

When we wait for things to happen, we might be completely resigned to our fate and passively wait for an event to occur. When we are waiting for other people to make things happen to us, however, this attitude is probably the exception. Very often, our wait becomes more active. Just think of people waiting in front of a public office at the town hall. They might patiently and passively sit for a while, perhaps distracting themselves from the elapsing time by reading, texting or talking. After some time, they will probably show signs of impatience: looking at their watches, sighing, complaining to others who are in a similar position. If even more time passes, they might ask a public servant who happens to come by how long this is going to take. Although they cannot really do anything to push the process along, their wait becomes less patient and more active.

In many other situations, especially in the more opaque situations in which waiting is more of an evaluation than an activity, people combine waiting with other actions. A graduate waiting for state employment will write applications, try to extend her network and establish new relations, nudge the more powerful or better connected

towards helping her; she might further her education, look for internships or otherwise gain new working experiences. All these actions might not affect her evaluation of the situation as ‘waiting for a job’, but they certainly change the social meaning of her wait. How active or how passive somebody is (and can be) during the time spent waiting crucially affects his or her tolerance towards waiting.

Whether people wait in a more active or in a more passive way, the fact that they are waiting pushes them in a new, ad-hoc social role. Everybody standing in a queue has the same role in that specific situation, even if their social roles outside of the situation differ widely. Obviously, not everybody will come into that situation in the first place. There are special lines for business class passengers, for citizens, or for those with hard currency; some people pay others to wait for them; some are invited to pass before everyone else; and some can simply ignore the queue. Yet if people wait for their turn, their social differences are temporarily bracketed, and people who are otherwise differentiated by power, wealth or status become similar.

If the wait becomes too long, however, such differences might quickly resurface and change people’s evaluation of the time spent waiting. It might appear normal to some that they have to wait for a long time, while others quickly feel offended in their dignity. This very much depends on the coherence between the role in the situation (one who has to wait) and the role outside of the situation (one who is used to waiting, or who should not have to wait for quite so long). Such differences are important to understanding the social effects of waiting: they affect whether joint experiences of waiting can create solidarity and lead to joint action.

That joint waiting might create solidarity is perhaps counterintuitive to some readers. After all, few people experience solidarity while standing in the queue at a supermarket checkout. The others – particularly those in front of us, but also those

standing in a neighbouring line that moves faster – might objectively share our situation, but they appear to us as competitors, as obstacles on our way and generally as a nuisance. In our mind, *they* are responsible for a situation in which *we* have to wait. Just as we experience ourselves as victims of a traffic jam, not as its perpetrators, we experience the forced passivity in the line as those others' fault. At the till as in a traffic jam, waiting brings us in competition to each other and isolates us from each other.

In order to turn waiting into a joint experience that can become grounds for solidarity, people have to overcome this isolation. This implies ceasing to see the other as a competitor for scarce resources allocated by waiting. It is difficult to predict when such a shift happens, but I see a number of conditions which make it more or less likely.

First of all, people are more likely to develop solidarity if the other is not perceived as a direct competitor. If the end to our joint wait is far enough away that the other does not, for any practical purposes, stand in my way, I might be more willing to evaluate our situation as similar. The same is true if I do not see any direct link between somebody else's success and my failure. If pure chance or purely anonymous forces decide on the outcome, the other is less of a competitor, since no competitive action of ours can change our respective prospects.

Secondly, solidarity becomes easier if the social forces that make us wait can be defined as a common enemy. If an unjust system, a dysfunctional authority or a lazy officer make us wait, it is much easier to find more common ground in our experiences and to interpret them as common injustice.

Thirdly, it is much easier to develop solidarity with people we know and trust from situations outside of the realm of waiting than with people with whom we do not share anything but the wait. It is far easier to empathize with people we already know than with people who, to us, are solely defined as obstacles on our way.

These three criteria are by no means exhaustive, nor do I have the space for empirical material which could turn them into a convincing argument about the emergence of solidarity from joint waiting. I hope that they at least suffice to identify the question and to show that, under certain conditions, waiting can become the occasion for an emic analysis of people's joint situation. If this happens, such an analysis can create a group of waiting people who are conscious of their commonalities – the first step to joint political action.

### **Ceasing to Wait**

Most situations of waiting come to a natural end when the anticipated event occurs. Spring comes; a child is born; the doctor will see us. The period of waiting is over and leaves few traces while something new begins. African Studies, however, has been more preoccupied with a different kind of waiting – with the long and often endless wait for a situation to turn to the better. *Waithood*, in Alcinda Honwana's memorable expression, describes a state in which people cannot really expect to find a job or a better place in their society, but still see no option but to wait.

It is tempting to see waithood as the enduring condition as which it appears to many who have to live through it. In reality, however, few biographies end in a perpetual and futile wait. Most people are not like Vladimir and Estragon in Samuel Beckett's 'Waiting for Godot', who realize that Godot is not going to arrive, but who still never find the resolution to stop waiting for him.

At some point, most people cease to wait. Often, they simply lose hope that the wait will bring the desired event. (I am not going to get a government job; another PostDoc will not bring me tenure; my lost love is not coming back.) The period of

waiting ends in frustration, but life moves on. The individual consequences of such a decision can be huge, but its social effects often remain small.

In other situations, people do not altogether stop waiting, but as it were leave a particular queue and join a different one. After spending years waiting for a job in Gambia, somebody might try to leave for Europe instead. Very often, he or she will then encounter new queues to stand in, new hopes deferred, a new kind of wait (for perspectives on waiting and migration, see e.g. Andersson 2014; Bredeloup 2012; Conlon 2011; Elliot 2016; Gaibazzi 2012). Albert Hirschman (1970), focussing on a particular institution, described this as *exit* and the breakdown of loyalty, but it could just as well be described as the entry into a new loyalty and a different wait.

The third variant of abandoning the wait is perhaps the most effective, but also the most difficult: joint action to change the conditions which relegate some people to positions of wait. Many a collective wait has slowly turned from patience into revolt, and many revolts have had their origin in a period of waiting that finally appeared endless. I have outlined a few of the preconditions for such joint action above – most importantly the identification of one’s own wait as a joint and structurally caused experience, and the emergence of solidarity from this identification. Even where these conditions are met, it is very difficult to identify the point at which enough is enough and people jointly decide that this wait has just been too much to bear.

Stopping to wait, no matter in what variant, remains a difficult step to take. The longer people have waited for a particular outcome, the more of the time and energy they have already invested will be lost when they abandon the wait (Popitz 1992). The more focused they had been on an outcome, the more strongly they are defined by their relation to that outcome. Other people – their relatives, their friends – just as much expect them to succeed as they do themselves. Stopping to wait may be a step towards

liberation, but we rarely experience it as such. *Jointly* stopping to wait and ask for changes – turning from waiting to political action – is even more difficult, all the more so if the conditions which create the need to wait cannot be addressed on the national level that still is the prime field to negotiate political change. This is where the concrete factors influencing how people wait come into play, and the point at which I narrow my theme down: from waiting in society to waiting in Africa today.

### **Waiting ‘in Africa’?**

So far, I have treated waiting anthropologically, without any differentiation as to place and time. I have laid out analytical criteria which I think can be applied to all societies. We will certainly find huge differences as to how waiting works out and what social effects it has in a given historic moment and a specific social situation. These differences can then on the one hand serve to better understand what waiting is and does; on the other, they will allow us to better understand any particular society.

In the social sciences, the ways people wait have served to characterize quite a number of regional contexts. Indian youth doing timepass (Jeffrey 2010), Romanian homeless living in boredom (O’Neill 2017), Georgian young men (Frederiksen 2013) or Iranian youth feeling stuck in purposelessness (Khosravi 2017), Australians experiencing ‘stuckedness’ (Hage 2009) or African youth characterized by waitthood (Honwana 2012; see also Mains 2011; Schielke 2008; Sommers 2012; Ungruhe and Esson 2017) – all these variants of waiting, the authors argue, tell us something about the way global dynamics of our time play out in a particular society. In each work, a situation of waiting becomes representative for the ills of a social context, and all contexts are bound together by global dynamics which they share and which have very similar consequences in different regions.

This special issue treats temporalities of waiting from an Africanist perspective in an Africanist journal. Implicitly, it uses case studies on waiting to analyse contemporary Africa. This obviously brings the danger of oversimplifying and essentialising the continent. On the other hand, certain ways of waiting seem indeed characteristic for Africa today, even though they are not exclusive to it. Honwana's work with its broad and careful comparative outlook, for example, has often been taken to stand for youth 'in Africa'; Jean Comaroff's blurb to the book calls it one 'of the most comprehensive considerations to date of the situation of young people in contemporary Africa'.

In the remaining parts of this article, I am not going to argue that there is, or is not, anything specific to waiting in Africa. My question will be more preliminary: If we ask whether there is anything specific to waiting in Africa, where should we start looking for an answer? I will argue that particular variants of waiting are indeed characteristic for African societies today – not due to any specifically African dynamics, but because they are the outcome of the way African countries, like other countries in the global South, are integrated into the global economy and society.

For a long time (and often enough still today), answers to the question of waiting in Africa have been searched for in the realm of culture. Together with other people thought of as destined to be colonized, Africans were said to have a specific relation to time different from the one of European colonizers; as a consequence, waiting came more natural to them. This was either seen positively, as a sign of being close to nature and not as alienated by capitalism as people in Europe, or negatively, as a sign of laziness, want of dynamism and energy.

Culture certainly matters and should not be dismissed out of hand, but such essentialist explanations are obviously flawed. Culture it is neither an independent



variable which we can use to explain society, nor is there any evidence of a strong and shared ‘African’ culture. Instead, historic analyses clearly show how strongly people’s relation to time changes even over relatively short periods (e.g. Loimeier 2012).

Integrating culture into our analysis is essential in order to understand particular societies (see e.g. Cohen 1969; Appaduraj 2013) but culture is not a promising field to look for African commonalities.

If we turn to the social field instead, we find a number of possible explanations for commonalities across the African continent – and we simultaneously find that they are not exclusive to Africa. Without attempting an exhaustive analysis of the political economy of waiting, I want to highlight conditions which shape ways people on the continent are waiting, and make waiting a meaningful way of relating to the future.

As we have seen above, defining one’s own situation as waiting implies that one’s actions are insufficient to bring about meaningful change: I might be able to work towards such change, but I will not be able to bring it about on my own. As a consequence, I cannot fully plan my own life, but depend on factors which are outside of my own control and unforeseeable. Waiting, in short, is a method of planning what cannot be planned. Seen under this light, the prevalence of waiting as a mode of relating to the future – in Africa and elsewhere – is linked to a crisis of planning. Some reasons for such a crisis clearly lie in the structures of political economy rooted in centuries of unequal relations.

On a micro level, it is much easier to plan social cooperation when the social and physical infrastructures facilitating this cooperation work smoothly. Even where local authorities work well, power cuts in the office can bring networks down and make citizens wait for unforeseeable time spans. Unreliable logistics services make people wait for documents or spare parts. Too few banking counters make services slow and

keep people in queues for hours on end. In each of these examples, one element of infrastructural breakdown can have an entire chain of consequences and make quite a number of people wait.

Maintaining elements of the infrastructure that underlies social cooperation is costly and in itself dependent on a whole web of elements of other infrastructures. In many industrial countries, these infrastructures have been gradually built up by centuries of investment (often paid for with the proceeds of exploitation of other parts of the world). In times of austerity, their further upkeep is no longer a given (think National Health Service in Britain or transport infrastructure in the US), but generally, the high costs for their maintenance are borne by public or private means because the alternative would be even costlier.

The lower the opportunity costs of waiting are, however, the more difficult is it to justify the necessary investment. Waiting is often simply the cheaper alternative and replaces other, quicker ways of facilitating social cooperation. These low opportunity costs of labour are in turn linked to and sustained by productivity and employment structures.

In many African countries, a large part of employment is found in the informal sector. Here, low and casual wages are combined with irregular working hours and a high percentage of self-employment. Under these circumstances, the cost of waiting is mostly borne by individuals, not by companies whose owners have more bargaining power over infrastructure development. This hides and depoliticizes the cost of waiting hours. Adam Ferguson's (1995 [1767]) idea of an organized civil society as counterbalance to the state, representing the interests of societal groups and thereby, among others things, controlling the tax burden and channeling it into economically useful investments, works better where the interests of civil society are easily organized.

When a company employs many workers, the cost of their waiting hours aggregates. At question here is not so much the aggregation of wages paid for empty hours; the loss of productivity linked to waiting hours is usually priced in by companies, resulting in lower wages per productive hour. Yet waiting hours also cause delays in production or cash flows (e.g. when trucks with goods that could already have been sold on are stuck at a border) and therefore higher general costs. In the informal sector, these costs occur as well, but they occur individually; in order to become huge and loud enough to warrant changes, they first have to be aggregated by organizing individual interests into a collective. In large companies, costs occur in aggregate form from the start, which makes the bargaining power and bargaining interest of large companies much greater. As a consequence, international mining companies and other huge investors find it much easier to influence infrastructure development, which again channels investment into certain areas and exacerbates the unequal distribution of waiting time.

Low wages, precarious employment and bad working conditions in the informal economy often stand in sharp contrast to relatively secure, well-paid and distinguishing jobs in parts of the public administration, in larger international companies or in international NGOs. Such jobs are few, and even with the right qualifications it is difficult to find access to them. Many young people, especially those who are qualified enough to expect one of these jobs, conceive of everything short of such employment as temporary makeshift: time filled with many activities, but with nothing of real significance. The very concept of waithood therefore is linked to a stark divide in working conditions. This divide is global in nature. While it creates satisfying working and living conditions for many, few of those live in the global South. For the others, meaningless jobs that at best allow precarious lives and often make planning impossible merely fill the time and sustain one's body while waiting. Pursuing such jobs, many

young African identify more strongly with the possible future they are waiting for than with the real present they live through. Here, again, waiting to be allowed to participate to some degree attenuates feelings of exclusion by anticipating a future that might never materialize in fact.

The greater the mismatch between available resources on the one hand, aspirations socially framed as adequate on the other, the more important can waiting become as a means of allocation. Here again, the divide is global in nature and can only be attenuated, but not resolved on the national scale on which most politics play out. Since waiting for resources also turns structural conditions into individualized experiences, it becomes harder for people affected by such conditions to find meaningful ways to organize and voice their interests. Waiting fragments experiences of exclusion and makes joint action more difficult.

In short, the way many African countries are embedded into global economic structures creates waiting time in two separate, but interrelated ways. In everyday interactions, waiting emerges as a means of coordination, placing the burden of synchronization unequally on individuals; in the distribution of societal resources and life chances, waiting becomes a precarious means of allocation that hides injustices by allowing to define them as provisional. Here again, the costs of waiting are borne in a systematically unequal way by the less affluent and less powerful.

The rift between those who make it and those who do not creates the internal dynamics of dependence James Ferguson (2015) has recently analyzed. During waitthood, people partly live on others' money. This keeps them in a dependent and relatively powerless position. At the same time, it spreads waitthood around: the uncles, sisters or wives who feed those waiting for a better life in turn wait for change, and often pressure for it, reinforcing feelings of inadequateness and lack.

Taken together, if there is anything African about waiting today, it can only be understood if we see Africa as a part of the global South. Its articulations in different African countries and regions may differ from each other and from those in India, Romania or Venezuela, but they are part of the same dynamics of a global capitalist system. Hierarchies of waiting are globalized, and their rules and rhythms are not set in Africa. They affect how typical biographies can be lived and planned; they make waiting omnipresent in everyday life; and they reproduce different people's place in the global economic system.

## **Conclusion**

Waiting, as the articles in this special issue clearly show, is not just the mundane and essentially meaningless practice as which it might appear to us if we are standing in a queue. Waiting is both caused and framed by a society's organisation, and it is lived through and filled with meaning by individuals. As a consequence, it can become a lens through which social scientists can understand social structures and the ways people relate to them, subvert and change them, or, consciously or in spite of themselves, reproduce and reaffirm them.

I have tried to sharpen this lens by, first, clarifying what waiting is and differentiating between waiting as an attitude and waiting as a social action. Secondly, I have analysed different social effects of waiting building on a distinction between waiting as a medium of cooperation and waiting as a medium of allocation. I have then asked why and when people cease to wait, and under what conditions joined waiting can lead to joint action. Using these differentiations, I finally presented some ways to think about waiting 'in Africa', and have argued that any particularities and commonalities of

waiting on this continent, as on any other, have to be linked to the social facts created by its integration into global power relations.

All this was meant to structure the field, to facilitate discussions about it and to identify blind spots that might become the focus for further research. To me, the most important lacuna in the literature on waiting in Africa is the question at what point people stop waiting. How can people stuck in waiting identify their experiences as grounds for solidarity and joint action? Can past experiences of helplessness turn into impatience and finally into action towards the future (see Kesselring 2017, 133–166 for one example)? This question can only really be addressed through careful ethnographic descriptions of empirical examples – descriptions that so far are much scarcer than descriptions of waitthood and stuckedness.

Only at the end of this article do I realize I have exclusively been concerned with people waiting for positive change: with waiting as an expression of hope. Had I written about a different continent, I might have stressed waiting as an expression of fear and an anticipation of changes to the worse. Obviously, many Africans are individually waiting for things to get worse, and are dreading the future rather than hoping for it. Yet as a collective social experience characterizing societies, hopes for a better future are much more prevalent in African countries than the fear to lose one's comfortable position. There just seems much more to hope for than to lose. The difference between, say, Germany or the US and many African countries in this regard is not a coincidence. Just as in apartheid South Africa described by Crapanzano (1985), both types of waiting are flipsides of the same coin of injustice.

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