

# Challenges and Opportunities of Youth in Africa

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The issue of youth is the most pressing matter for Africa due to various factors including the demographic fact that the continent is mostly inhabited by young people. Sixty percent of the African population is below the age of 25. Yet the youth in Africa are alienated and marginalized and they are not involved in policy formulation and less consulted in the decision making process, many are underemployed and with no jobs and the continent is having an energized youth with most of its energy invested in stirring-up conflicts and violence. Proper engagement of youth at all levels of development is of paramount importance. African governments need to be aware that if they do not reform and are able to integrate the youth in their development effort they will face in adverse situations such as revolting and restless youth. Therefore, the issue of youth participation and youth representation needs to be scaled up at the level of government-local, regional, and national levels as well as at the level of international organizations. But the key responsibility rests with young people to get organized, to achieve the skills, to face up to the adversity and the frustrations that will eventually come when moving from protest to participation. The basic purpose of the paper is to analyze the challenges and opportunities of youth in Africa. The method of data collection relies on secondary sources.

*Keywords:* youth, unemployment, Africa, policies

## Introduction

There is no agreement upon definition on the term youth across countries of the world. The UN (United Nations) defines youth as individual aged between 15 to 24 years old. The African Union defines youth as individual aged between 15 to 35 years old. For the sake of international agreement, this document employs the UN definition of youth. The African population is estimated to be more than a billion people, among whom more than 65% are young under the age of 35, and the youth make up 40% of Africa's working age population. In Africa, young people aged 15-24 account for 20.2% of the population. The demographic significance of this large young people is increasingly taking centre stage in discussions to achieve socio economic development agenda of the continent. For instance, five of the eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) speak to improving the situation of young people (The United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA), 2011; African Union (AU) & United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), 2011; UNECA, 2009). Youth has been at the centre point on the struggle for democracy and good governance in Africa. Most recently as attested in the North Africa and Middle East revolution, youth played important role in the democratization process of Africa. In Sub Saharan

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African countries, youth has been at the centre of democratic struggle. In South Africa, youth were crucial in the fight against the apartheid regime.

Nonetheless, high unemployment rate remains a security issue in Africa, driving youth to violence and crime. Uprisings of young people in Africa are clear manifestations of youth claims against unemployment, socioeconomic marginalization, unsound economic and social policies, corrupt governments and exclusion, political dictatorship and denial of basic rights. The need to act now and develop a strategy emphasized on employment, entrepreneurship, education, political inclusion of the youth is important. Moreover, quality schools, intelligent government policies, nurturing homes, and community environments help the youth to participate and claim their destiny. Young people are also keen on democracy's promise. They want political equality, they want social and economic inclusion and opportunity and they want accountable rulers. The method of data collection relies on secondary sources. With regard to the analysis of the research, it adopts analytical, descriptive, and critical approaches. The paper is organized in such a way that the first part analyzes the challenges of youth in Africa. The second part looks at opportunities of youth in Africa. The final part addresses on conclusions and way forward.

### **Challenges of Youth in Africa**

The spread of democracy in Africa has increased chances for young people to participate in political life and civil society. Most African countries have government ministers or departments with the explicit mandate to address youth issues, and many have national youth policies and councils pursuant to their obligation under the African Youth Charter<sup>1</sup>. The youth councils have been actively seeking opportunities for young people to be involved in policy development yet it is hard to find success story as indicated in the 2009 UNECA Youth Report. Youth participation in political process may even be declining in the continent, which is reflected in the low proportion of youth who register to cast their ballot. Hence, youth in Africa remain very marginal at the political process as is evidence by 2011 AU report on youth. The report noted that African youth have been only marginally involved in civic participation, electoral participation, and political voice. This can partly be because of lack of quota system in the political process and party systems in Africa. Accordingly, youth associations and councils in most African political process remained a wing to the political process. Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, the late, of Ethiopia at the 17th ordinary AU Summit at Malabo, Equatorial Guinea, noted that "youth lack political space to make their contribution to society and it is political, social and economic alienation that is leading youth to social and economic problems" (AU, 2011b).

Employment creation is another formidable challenge that confronts all African countries regardless of their different socio-economic development. In Africa, the youth accounted for 60% of total unemployed and three in five of Africa's unemployed are youth. According to a study by the International Labour Organization (ILO), the youth unemployment rate in North Africa amounted to 23.7% in 2009 and it is estimated to have remained at around the same level in 2010. This is twice as high as in Sub-Saharan Africa, where the youth

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<sup>1</sup> The Charter was adopted in 2006 and as of February 7, 2014, 42 of the 54 African Union Member States signed the Charter and 35 had ratified it. The Charter entered into force on August 8, 2009. See [http://www.au.int/en/sites/default/files/youth%20Charter\\_0.pdf](http://www.au.int/en/sites/default/files/youth%20Charter_0.pdf). The legalization of the Charter by all countries will formally enshrine the basic rights of young Africans and provide the framework for an accelerated youth development agenda in Africa.

unemployment rate was 11.9% in 2009 (International Labour Office, 2010). Youth unemployment remains a security issue for Africa driving youth for violence and crime. In such instance, as youth are instrument of democratization youth can be instrument of violence and vulnerable to become involved in armed conflict as child soldiers like the case in Central Africa, Liberia, Sudan, Uganda, Sierra Leone, DRC, and other Africa countries. As the UNECA Youth Report (2009) attested, "Where young people are prominent in the adult population and the economy is weak and governance poor, the country is more likely to experience an outbreak of rioting and internal armed conflict" (p. 83). One in two young people who join a rebel movement cites unemployment as the main reason for doing so.

High unemployment rate was the powerful catalyst contributed to revolution in North Africa, which led to the overthrow of governments in Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt. Youth unemployment stands at 31% for Tunisia and 34% for Egypt (International Labour Office, 2010). It is also well known that the Arab revolution was sparked by a single incident of one young Tunisian named Mohamed Bouazizi, a 26-year-old unemployed street vendor setting himself on fire in protest to his condition and work related dispute with the police. The protests triggered by the death of one man and subsequent death created enormous outrage, and thousands of young men and women came out to the streets in solidarity. Complaining about massive unemployment and the high cost of living, they demanded jobs and a decent life. The demonstrations spread across the country as young unemployed people came out in force to confront the regime, which turned into a countrywide youth protest.

The spark lit by Mohamed Bouazizi inspired many youths across the continent, the Arab world and beyond. A few weeks later, young Egyptians occupied Tahrir Square in Cairo and staged protests that led to the removal of Hosni Mubarak. In Libya, the overall unemployment rate was 30% and youth unemployment rate estimated as high as 50%. Accordingly, dissatisfied youths defeated the well-armed security forces of Mohamar Ghadafi who was killed in October 2011. Youth also led protests in Sudan, Bahrain, Yemen, Senegal, Syria, Portugal, UK, Chile, and United States. Thus, addressing youth unemployment with appropriate policy should be a major policy initiative of governments and political parties across Africa and beyond (International Labour Office, 2010; Shepler, 2010; Winer, 2011).

### **Opportunities of Youth in Africa**

Being cognizant of the above challenges, efforts have been made at international, regional, and country level to address the plights of youth in Africa. At global level, the United Nations Programme of Action for Youth seeks to assist governments in 15 priority areas, which has clear relevance for youth agenda in Africa. At continental level, the African Union has adopted and entered into force the African Youth Charter. The charter provides a framework for developing and implementing more tangible youth policies and programmes for young people in a number of areas that include employment, sustainable livelihoods, education, health, youth participation, peace and security and law enforcement among others. It also calls on government to guarantee participation by young people in parliament and other national decision making bodies at national and regional level.

Other key developments with regard to youth in the continent include the approval of a plan of action for accelerating the ratification and implementation of the African Youth Charter, the declaration of the period 2009-2018 as a decade of youth development, and the approval of a plan of action to implement the priority activities

identified during the youth decade as well as the establishment of youth networks including the Pan African Youth Union to serve as a channel for youth engagement and platform for conveying youth perspectives (AU, 2011a). Agenda 2063 of the AU is also instrumental in promoting Youth Rights in the continent as the agenda was designed after the debates and consultations held with the Youth, women and Diaspora representatives, during the OUA/AU 50th Anniversary Celebration, held in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, in May 2013. The youth are a vital component of the Agenda 2063 as it links the past, present, and the future in order to create a new generation of Pan Africanists that will harness the lessons learnt and use them as building blocks to consolidate the hope and promises of the founding parents for a true renaissance of Africa.

At national level there is full recognition of the ominous challenges and great opportunities the youth presents and most African countries are making efforts to involve youth in political and decision making process. Several African countries are making progress in developing appropriate policies and allocating more resources to the concerns of their young people. Young people are also participating increasingly in political and decision-making processes, and in helping to raise profile of youth issues. Nonetheless, youth in Africa continues to face formidable challenges like unemployment, underemployment, lack of skills, relevant education, lack of access to decision making and political process, lack of political will to involve youth and the gaps between youth policies and their effective implementation among others. In all these areas, young women especially face heightened barriers and vulnerabilities across the continent. Youth movements also face several challenges like poor lobbying and advocacy skills, lack of political space for participation, shortage of financial and human resources, lack of platform for exchange of best practices, and fragmentation and lack coordination among others.

### **Conclusions and Way Forward**

The African Charter on Democracy, Governance and Elections, and the African Youth Charter as well as Agenda 2063 remain the primary normative frameworks to ensure the constructive involvement of youth and their effective participation in the debates and decisions making processes in the development agenda of the continent. Knowledge and experience sharing among countries and regions of the developing world on the role of youth on governance and employment creation is an important tool which could assist in managing the issues related to youth in Africa. To benefit from each other from the comparative experiences in terms of best practices, challenges and prospects experience sharing are needed amongst African countries including from other successful states. In this regard, African governments should accelerate the signing, ratification, and domestication of the African Charter on Democracy, Governance and Elections, and the African Youth Charter, and promote Agenda 2063. The regional economic communities must put in place appropriate regional frameworks on youth and ensure their effective implementation.

African government should adopt and promote youth employment schemes including education systems and curricula reforms, to ensure that youth are endowed with basic business skills and resources to minimize their economic marginalization and to building peaceful and democratic society. African governments should increase youth participation in governance at all levels including considering affirmative action for young people in governance structures like the parliament and the executive. Inter-generational leadership change is highly desirable and necessary in Africa. There should be inter-generational leadership dialogue with a view to ensuring that young people take over the leadership of each African countries. Youth leadership need to create

a new culture of national and regional solidarity in which the drive towards African citizenship devoid of the divisiveness of ethnicity, religion, race, color, and sectarian identities are emphasized.

African governments and the African Union should intensify efforts at creating free movement of people on the continent. The future of African can only be constructed on regional integration based firmly on the free movement of not only of goods, services, and capital, but of people across the continent. Africans especially young people must be allowed to move on the continent. On the contrary, the practice in many African countries indicates that they give easy and free access to western nationals to enter their countries while they close their borders or impose strong restrictions on fellow African citizens.

African governments must ensure the unleashing of youth development potentials through creating greater economic opportunities, incentives, and rewarding youth innovation and creativity in the economic sector. The involvement of the private sector in youth employment strategies is critical in this regard as the private sector has the resources, expertise, and capacity to generate wealth and the capacity needed to create employment opportunities. Governments should seek cooperation with the private sector to provide high quality technical education at both secondary and tertiary levels. Although the key motive is profit making, private sector can also intervene in a number of areas to contribute towards promoting youth employment. The private sector can facilitate school-to-work transition, supporting programmes of technical and vocational and on-the-job trainings.

African governments also need to ensure the expansion of the social and economic infrastructure necessary for coping with the rise in youth population in Africa, this should include quality, affordable and skills based education, health care services, recreation facilities and promoting labor market information. Labor market information is a key factor for better youth employment programs. The coverage of labor force surveys and evaluations of labor market programs in Africa is very low compared to other regions. As a result, policymakers and program designers have little evidence to go on and many programs show few results. Governments and development partners should focus on filling information gap labor markets. Once information gaps are identified and filled, all stakeholders—the government, development partners, civil society, and the private sector—should come together at national and regional levels for consultations that critically address the issue of youth unemployment through formulation of youth employment strategies.

Economic growth in Africa is quite commendable, but needs to be made inclusive and empowering for young people through better planning, coordination, and progressive economic policies. African youth on their part, need not agonize but continuously organize for political change on the continent through the power of ideas and activism. African youth have to develop strong ingenuity especially in the sphere of economic entrepreneurship aiming at creating not only independent economic bases, but creating wealth for African countries. Modern technology social networking facilities are good for social and political mobilization but they cannot replace active and practical engagement in political processes in Africa. These tools must be adapted for concrete political engagement.

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