

The Melting Pot: Trends About Youth Leadership and Political Participation in Africa

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Abstract

This paper is an effort to highlight trends in Africa that are focusing on including youth in leadership and political participation. It banks on the premise that Africa has had its share of good leaders. In fact, leaders in the corporate and non-governmental sectors in Africa have been recognized across the region for exemplary performance and sound governance. Some numerous women and men continue to exercise outstanding leadership in various fields from board chairpersons to community-mobilizers, these Kenyans show and cherish shared values, a common vision, and principles for their country. The departure manifests when it comes to elected leaders and by extension some appointed and nominated leaders. This has further been displayed in the level at which the young leaders are engaged in influencing decisions in their countries. Over the decades Africa has maintained a leadership system that continues to strangle the very energy, initiative, and creativity among young people in the public sector. Accordingly, many young people have been locked on the grounds of their insufficient political networks, inexperience despite their massive skills and acquired knowledge. Regrettably, looking youthful has further been confused with being youth by age especially in the public sector with those between 35 and 45 years old still being considered youth. Whereas at the regional level young people have been offered platforms to influence certain policies and directions such as Agenda 2063 and Sustainable Development Goals including some countries having made some notable feat in youth inclusion, much is yet to be done in securing meaningful engagements in political, social, cultural and economic spheres of life. The paper discusses the good, the bad and sometimes ugly trends about youth inclusion in leadership and their political participation. This is discussed in the context of young women political participation, youth affirmative action normative frameworks and constitutional provisions protecting youth participation in Africa, youth representation in public offices and clarion calls from the youth regionally. The paper then proposes key recommendations by youth, governments and other stakeholders on critical actions that must be taken while appreciating the existence of other recommendations made by other contributors. The author argues that no level of youth development or engagement is effective without African commitment to investing in its youth and that generating disaggregated data necessary to inform decisions moving forward. It concludes that the eventual change expected in Africa by harnessing the potential of youth is, without doubt, the spark needed to brighten the prospects of Africa towards achieving her vision Agenda 2063 and the global Sustainable Development Goals.

Keywords: Youth, Gender, Women, Empowerment, Sustainable Development Goals, Africa, UN Women, Policy.

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1.0 Background and Context

A central component of a healthy democracy is the participation of its citizens in the electoral processes. African has a youth citizenry, and with the World Bank report indicates that while the African population is approximately above one billion people, out of which 65 percent are below the age of 35.¹ The minimal level of electoral participation by youth has been a phenomenon observed in Africa throughout the past two decades as the youth numerical strength has not necessarily translated to more youth participation in political processes.

As a conceptual term, political participation entails a civil right for the involvement of groups and individuals in governance, leadership and decision-making processes directly or indirectly through representation. The centrality of political participation perhaps rests on its cross-cutting nature with profound social, economic, cultural, and demographic ramifications and indicators. It rests on the backdrop of numerous variables that shape the course. Gender, ethnicity and race, disability, refugee status, social class, financial advantages and the embedded enablers such as education and employment are key analytical categories influencing political participation.²

Many obstacles discourage youth from vying for various political positions despite the political environment being and precluding factor their active participation in policy discussions. On the same note, many young people often lack adequate resources for effective campaigns towards their political successful elections. These challenges are frequently compounded by the persistent negative cultural perceptions of youth and which, keep many aspiring youthful leaders off party lists. Their participation in the governance process is not any different, very few young people are in appointive positions where an array of decisions is made about them and those that affect them. In this context, the minority who are represented in influential positions make decisions for the majority who lack the opportunity to be represented due to the continued marginalization among other factors. Consequently, decisions arrived at do not favor the interest of these majority and the result is a non-responsive administration.

Policy formulation to involve young leaders in useful decision-making processes has amplified tremendously³

influencing discussions and plans at the regional level. The Africa Union has adopted a surplus of normative frameworks to champion profound youth participation and representation at all political leadership hierarchies. Such normative frameworks include the Youth Charter; the 2002 Constitutive Act of the African Union; and the African Charter on Democracy, Elections, and Governance. These frameworks detail rights, freedoms, as well as duties that dawn on young people to effectively and meaningfully increase youth participation and representation at various levels of decision making. However, the political participation equilibrium is often disturbed at different times across the globe. Globally, although most countries across the world have adopted universal suffrage, inconsistencies in the application of the legal and rights instruments mar political participation especially running for political positions. In other circumstances, especially in the developing world, supportive legal/right/policy/institutional frameworks are utterly absent. Resultantly, certain key and marginalized groups including the youth, women, migrants, and persons with disabilities (PWD) are disproportionately affected and also marginalized in their political participation and representation. For instance, globally, while youth account for 20% of the world's population, it is unfortunate that the average age of members of parliament is 53.⁴ This implies that few youths enter the world political spheres despite the United Nations Youth (2013) reporting that in most countries, the minimum age of parliamentary candidacy is 25.

Further, the participation of the developing world in global governance institutions is not advanced. Indeed, Sustainable Development Goal 17 partly addresses the issue of expanding and strengthening the participation of developing countries in the institutions of global governance.

In Africa, political participation for different groups matches the inclusive developing world's situation. Unequal participation is felt among youth, women, and other marginalized populations such as PWD. Although adults are eligible to vote and therefore participate in the political process, the participation of women and youth is not significant in representation in political parties and offices. This is where the legal and rights frameworks have consistently failed to address or have suppressed the political participation of groups and individuals. Reports have shown that youth participation in voting and election process is declining despite their increasing number. Regionally, East Africa leads the continent with the highest youth proportion. West Africa comes second followed by Central and then Southern Africa. Afrobarometer data showed that, based on supportive structures, countries such as Burkina Faso, Malawi and Kenya have considerably higher political participation levels among youth than lowly ranked countries such as Zambia.⁵ Exclusion arises because of not well-established political institutions that hence do not support youth's political ambitions and legal structures that fail to accommodate meaningful political participation. Resultantly, the involvement of groups such as youth in the political process remains at the periphery and informal. Africa's youth have been neglected from the political sphere despite the numerical importance and relevance. They have also been sidelined in the economic and employment sphere and this has reduced their capacity to participate well in the political front, owing to the economic pressures/constraints.⁶ The question that begs is "Are African Countries unleashing the potential of youth by including them in leadership and political processes?"

2.0 Objectives

It is against this background that the paper seeks to highlight the good, the bad and sometimes ugly things about youth inclusion in leadership and political participation in decision making that require action. The specific objectives of this paper are to;

- To establish if there exist youth affirmative action frameworks to promote youth opportunities to participate in decision making.
- To analyze country performances that have embraced youth leadership.
- To draw lessons for the future arising from the role and performance of young people in political processes in Africa.

3.0 Methodology

To address the objective, a desk review method was used for data from secondary sources such as journal articles, briefs, periodicals, books, media, and government releases. Although this method suffers the disadvantage of a lack of primary data and physical interaction with respondents, it is an amalgam and synthesis of other primary and secondary sources. It is thus representative of a large sample and allows for comparison of data for different regions, phenomena, or countries. Further, the sources were judiciously selected systematically based on relevance, current data, methodology, and credibility. The first desktop review was conducted on a global level and second on a continental level with crosscutting recurring themes. A summary of youth political participation at the global and regional levels was developed. Major sources used included publications by civil society organizations, academic analyses and articles, and mainstream media.

4.0 Trends About Youth Leadership and Political Participation in Africa

4.1 Youth Affirmative Action Normative Frameworks and Constitutional Provisions Protecting Youth Participation in Africa

Agenda 2063 presents a promising commitment by African leaders to promote good governance, peaceful and united nations where development is people-driven and especially women and youth. Besides, The Africa Youth Charter (2006) and the African Charter on Democracy, Elections, and Governance (ACDEG), Maputo Protocol outlines rights, freedoms, as well as duties that young people should take up. The protocol also provides clear guidance on various avenues for effectively and meaningfully exploring their potentials at all levels. By 2017, of the 55 Member states of African Union, only 38 had ratified the Africa Youth Charter and a similar number of 38 had ratified the Maputo Protocol.⁷ The African Union Commission (AUC) later developed a roadmap spelling out areas for strategic interventions including a high-level consultation on Enhancing Youth Participation and Representation in Governance in the continent. Regrettably the outcomes of those discussions are not available for public information. However as noted in below, African leaders' commitment to youth engagement in the political process is apparent.

H.E Dr. Martial De-Paul Ikounga, Commissioner for Human Resources Science and Technology of the African Union Commission, during the Addis Ababa, Ethiopia 23rd January 2017 Africa Union the youth consultation meeting noted the importance of the role Youths play and their contribution to the development of policies affecting day-to-day African lives, *"Africa cannot develop without the tremendous contributions by its largest resource—the youth. As you already know young people below the age of 35 constitute 65% of the population on the continent and this means actions being taken around the continent mainly affect them, and nothing can prosper without their inclusion from decision making to implementation."*

Youth Engagement Strategy (AGA-YES), which is the African Governance Architecture, details a pathway for Africa's youth's strategic and effective participation in the democratic governance initiatives on the continent. Thirty-eight African Union Member States have so far exemplified such political commitment at national levels through their ratification of the Youth Charter. That is a promising trend towards effective youth engagement in African political spheres.

According to International IDEA, the constitution and electoral laws are important strategies for codifying, protecting and affirming the ways young people participate in electoral processes as candidates of voters. In North Africa, Egypt, Algeria, Morocco, Libya and Tunisia all have very explicit provisions for promoting youth participation except for Mauritania. In the same region, there are no provisions or quotas for increasing youth participation in their laws for some countries like Algeria, Mauritania and Libya.

The adoption of youth quotas increases youth representation with the most effective being the reserved seat and legislated quotas.⁸ In other African countries such as Burkina Faso, Kenya, and Liberia, they have national legal and right instruments that support the political participation of groups such as youth and women. In Kenya, there are policies and legal frameworks for political participation without discrimination. Kenya's Constitutional dispensation, for instance, scrapped the age limit⁹ in electoral law, paving way for a possibility of a youth president. This potentially enables youth and women to vie for political positions that they could not before. The legal framework also provides for mandatory representation of youth and women in political position allowing increased participation in the political processes. On the other hand, Liberia has an Affirmative Action framework; Equal Representation and Participation Act of 2016,¹⁰ which not only establishes seven special constituencies but also reserves five political seats for women, one for youth and the last one for persons with disability.

4.2 Undercurrents of Young Women Political Participation in Africa

Young women face a double disadvantage when it comes to participation in decision-making in institutional setup. First, because of discrimination based on gender. Secondly, because they are young and therefore discriminated based on age. The problem is compounded by the structure and emphasis of various programmes designed to empower and even out the ground for both women and young women. Despite policy support, the participation of young women in Kenya's electoral and political processes, for example, remains dismally low due to chains of challenges ranging from socio-cultural barriers to poverty issues.¹¹ While well-intentioned, the few programmes and interventions that are in place have failed to correct the discrimination against young women precisely because they have failed to acknowledge first, the unique circumstances that face young women and secondly that the best predictors and drivers of such interventions should be affected.

In a meeting of young women in politics organized by Africa Union Commission in 2014, participants emphasized that despite several parties having institutionalized structures and an enabling environment for their young leaders to organize and impact party policies, most young members, especially young women, of political parties in Africa are still struggling with marginalization, favoritism, and nepotism and that are anchored on deep-rooted patriarchal systems. This predicament deprives young people of the opportunity to participate in the continent's political spheres. Accordingly, the young participants recommended that African states undertake political reforms that make running for political offices more affordable to them and also to ensure that such

reforms are strictly enforced through capping of campaign expenditures which continues to place high threats to not only young people but also among women.¹² In addition, according to related studies, young women should significantly influence discussions, programmes and policies that emanate to fulfill youth development and women's right. They add that this should not continue to exist as empty promises.¹³ That said, it is worth noting that there are two young females in influential leadership positions in Botswana and Mali who are in important portfolios-Ministry of Trade and Investment and Ministry of Foreign Affairs respectively.¹⁴

4.3 Youth Voice and Clarion Calls in Africa-For Who and For What

According to Mengistu, Africa is known for its track record of repeated and unrealized promises to the youth which features every electioneering period or when in a gathering of youth. This is evidently so from the tracked campaigns and clarions calls by youth in Ethiopia, Kenya, Burundi, Gambia, Nigeria and South Africa such as advocacy through themes such as “we need a space at the table not a menu for discussion; nothing for us without us; not too young to run” and “ignore us at your own peril” all of which demonstrate an increased youth demand for inclusion in leadership and political processes. While this seems to be acknowledged by the African leaders, the practice seems to be in question leading some of the campaigns and clarion calls from the youth.

A study conducted by Youth Agenda in Kenya in 2014 revealed that men continue to dominate the figures in crime participation as compared to their female counterparts. However, with regards to increment, female offenders increased by 108% as compared to 0.04% as exhibited by male offenders between 2012 and 2013. A big percentage of all individuals participating in reported crime are aged between 18 and 25 concerning the youth, young men that participated in reported crime rose significantly between 2012 and 2013. While this may be known and regarded as the status quo, a worrying trend has presented itself with regards to the rate at which young women are participating in reported crime. In the above stated period, the figures representing young women in crime between 2012 and 2013 rose by an alarming 24%.

The Arab Springs was an eye-opener to many. Lessons from Morocco present a signal to mitigate the increasing corruption in many Africa countries. The 20th February Movement prompted a “fresh” Morocco interest among youth in electoral participation. Limited youth inclusion in leadership and decision making has equally had negative effects as detailed in the case study in Box 2. Previous studies have pointed to young people's experiences of marginalization and exclusion that have contributed to hopelessness and powerlessness leading them to illegal activities as a strategy for getting an ear from their government.

4.4 Youth Representation in Public Offices

Inter-Parliamentary Union report of 2016 indicates that of all world MPs in a sample of 126, only 1.9% are under the age of 30 and 14.2% under 40 years. It is interesting to note that African countries with progressive legal frameworks and those that have addressed structural and cultural barriers have more youth representation in Parliament. In the lower house, Tunisia is ranked number 7, Ethiopia 9, Somalia 16, Gambia 24, South Africa 35, Sudan 49, Niger 55, Rwanda 62, Uganda and Algeria 68, Equatorial Guinea 71, Burundi 73, Tanzania and Zambia 81, Cameroon, Chad, Côte d'Ivoire, DRC, Mozambique, Namibia, Nigeria, Gabon and Ghana 88 at 0.0%. In the upper house, Kenya is ranked number 2. Additionally, to better deliver on the agenda of youth, young parliamentarians' groups exist formally or informally in countries including Cameroon, Kenya, Mozambique, Nigeria, and South Africa. While there is evidence of countries' effort to elect youth below 30 years as discussed above, disaggregated data and statistics on youth representation remains scanty to demonstrate the extent to which countries embrace youth representation and participation whether through appointment or election.

5.0 Conclusion: Charge to Action

The eventual change expected in Africa by harnessing the potential of youth is, without doubt, the spark needed to brighten the prospects of Africa achieving her vision—Agenda 2063 and the Sustainable Development Goals. This paper shows that Youth have a powerful force to political and decision-making changes in Africa and across the globe based on numbers and active engagement. However, they are not adequately represented in the political front and decision-making. In most jurisdictions, gerontocracy has pervaded through and youths have been pushed to both economic (through unemployment) and political (lack of inclusivity) periphery. The legal and policy frameworks are not strong enough or enforced sufficiently to encourage youth political participation. Current trends and key issues in political participation for the youth indicate a game-changer and growing recognition of youth and their importance on national, regional and global politics. Apparently, youth have active civic and electoral engagement than before and the international community pressuring governments to inculcate youth agenda in governance, resource allocation, and decision-making. Illustrated in their involvement in various revolutions especially in the Arab region, youth can participate meaningfully in political process and decision-making. They, however, have to contend with barriers including lack of adequate financial resources and being co-opted by political parties. Massive investment has to be made to enhance young women's participation due to their double marginalization as evidenced by the wide gender inequalities experienced by women in Africa.

6.0 Recommendations

- **Research, Knowledge, Data Management and Information Sharing**-It is clear from the foregoing analyses that disaggregated statistics/data, research and studies and information about youth inclusion in leaders and participation in the political process is evidently sub-optimal, scanty, sporadic and inconsistent, its importance and relevance notwithstanding. This shows that investment in related interventions including generation and management of data on youth has been minimal and especially quantitative data. The trend is even more alarming in young women's participation. There is need to monitor and track youth participation in leadership and governance to inform decisions at all levels through targeted investment in the generation of full disaggregated data, research and studies on participation of young women in leadership and decision making. Closely related is a call on the importance of sharing information publicly.
- **Establishment and Enforcement of Youth Affirmative Action Frameworks**-There is need for the establishment and continued strengthening of policy and legal frameworks to allow political participation among the youth. The frameworks serve as the foundation and gate pass for youth involvement in politics and civic engagement. The frameworks should target such areas as enabling age limit in electoral law, youth quotas and youth empowerment strategies. Representative institutions and government agencies should reserve participation quotas for the youth as a temporary measure to bridge the inequalities experienced by the youth in leadership and decision making.
- **Invest in Youth Social Economic Empowerment**-Recognized as social, economic and political movers of society,¹⁵ governments and stakeholders should invest in economic and social empowerment. Agenda driven engagement of the young people will put them at the forefront of the happenings of their respective countries thus increasing their engagement in both the political arena as well as other aspects of their nations including the economy. The vulnerability of the youth to negative influences from politicians will further be lowered through formal or informal employment.
- **Involvement of youth in related interventions**-Generally, African countries need to build an enabling and youth-friendly atmosphere that opens and peaceful spaces for their effective and impactful political participation. It is important to actively include youth in both national and local consultations including polling processes as a way of promoting their level of political participation rather than treating them as mere recipients of services.

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The paper has been led by UN Women East and Southern Africa Regional Office. UN Women is the UN Agency dedicated to gender equality and the empowerment of women. As a global champion for women and girls, UN Women was established to accelerate progress on meeting their needs worldwide. With a vision of equality enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations, UN Women works for the elimination of discrimination against women and girls; the empowerment of women; and the achievement of equality between women and men as partners and beneficiaries of development, human rights, humanitarian action and peace and security. UN Women also coordinates and promotes the UN system's work in advancing gender equality, and in all deliberations and agreements linked to the 2030 Agenda. The entity works to position gender equality as fundamental to the Sustainable Development Goals, and a more inclusive world. It supports UN Member States as they set global standards for achieving gender equality and works with governments and civil society to design laws, policies, programmes and services needed to ensure that the standards are effectively implemented and truly benefit women and girls worldwide. It works globally to make the vision of the Sustainable Development Goals a reality for women and girls and stands behind women's equal participation in all aspects of life. It has invested in its commitment to end all forms of violence, including child marriage, Female Genital Mutilation and other harmful practices against women and girls across the globe. UN Women envisions a world where societies are free of gender-based discrimination, where women and men have equal opportunities, where the comprehensive economic and social development of women and girls is ensured so that they can lead the change that they want to see, where gender equality and women's empowerment are achieved, and where women's rights are upheld in all efforts to further development, human rights, peace and security.