

Beyond rhetoric

Engaging Africa's youth in democratic governance

Lauren Tracey and Edward Kahuthia

Key points

- 1** The AU has made progress in involving youth and member states have followed suit, yet the ability of the youth to effectively engage in governance and development processes is still limited.
- 2** A key challenge facing youth is unemployment, which is a significant push factor for joining rebel movements.
- 3** Africa's large youth population can either spur innovation, creativity and enterprise – or fuel instability and violence. How policies, structures and processes are implemented will determine whether their effects are positive or negative.
- 4** Youth caution against young people not being engaged structurally and consistently to achieve tangible and sustainable results.

Summary

This brief presents an overview of the continental normative framework on youth engagement by the African Union (AU). It argues that there is a disconnect, both in theory and practice, between youth rights and freedoms on the African continent. The brief highlights the important roles of the AU, regional economic communities and member states in meaningfully engaging the youth in governance processes. It explores ways for the youth to assist the continent in achieving sustainable development, preventing human rights violations and harnessing Africa's demographic dividend.

'HARNESSING DEMOGRAPHIC DIVIDEND through Investments in Youth' has been declared the AU's theme for 2017. The focus on youth is an acknowledgement of the sizable youth demographic and youth's important role in achieving sustainable development in Africa. The theme reaffirms and seeks to respond to heightened demands by young people across Africa for their inclusion and having a voice and a space at the table in matters that affect them. 'Nothing about us without us' and 'Ignore us at your own peril' are now popular clarion calls by young people that regularly resonate across the continent from Tunisia to Burkina Faso, Ethiopia to Burundi and South Africa.

The AU's 2017 theme provides an opportunity to assess the efforts of the AU, regional economic communities (RECs) and member states in engaging the youth meaningfully in democratic governance processes. Through normative and institutional frameworks, such as the African Governance Architecture – Youth Engagement Strategy (AGA–YES), the AU aims to engage young people constructively in democratic governance processes.

AGA–YES places emphasis on young people’s fundamental human right to participate as game changers in the attainment of Africa’s development goals.

As part of the strategy, four Regional Youth Consultations on Project 2016 – Year of Human Rights, which focused on the rights of women, were convened. The consultations illustrated AGA–YES’s commitment to youth engagement in policy processes, and provided an opportunity to take stock of progress and reflect on major challenges and/or obstacles in the enjoyment and protection of human rights for young people. The reality, as echoed at the consultations, is that the binding and non-binding frameworks of the AU, RECs and member states still fall short of practically realising the promises they hold for young people.

Why engage youth?

Engaging youth in democratic governance processes in Africa could bring with it huge social, political and economic benefits. Africa has the youngest population globally, with people under the age of 35 years accounting for some 65% of the total population.¹ One view is that this young demographic presents an enormous opportunity, not only for enhancing economic growth, but also for addressing Africa’s many social, economic and political challenges. Another view, however, is that the youth bulge is a double-edged sword for the continent. While it can spur innovation, creativity and enterprise – all of which enhance development, if not well managed, it can fuel instability and violent conflict.² Consequently, the effectiveness with which a country or the continent deploys policies, structures and processes largely determines whether the growing number of young people will have a positive or a negative effect.³

Young people continue to demonstrate the transformational value they can bring to governance

In many African countries, cultural differences, a lack of political will to implement reforms and entrenched postcolonial and dictatorial attitudes result in young people not being able to participate in the development of their countries. It also means that youth are not involved in the creation of solutions to the socio-cultural and political challenges that often affect them directly. Yet, in other parts of Africa where they are afforded the opportunity, young people continue to demonstrate the transformational value they can bring to governance. In countries such as Mali, South Sudan and the Central African Republic, young people have become human rights observers and peace-building officers.⁴

In South Africa, protests around persistent inequalities and the need for free education, as seen in the form of the Fees Must Fall and Rhodes Must Fall movements, illustrate how the youth are taking action against

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the status quo, insisting on policy reforms and the implementation of past promises.⁵ In Nigeria, there has been a powerful campaign identified with the hashtag #NotTooYoungToRun, which focuses on a reduction in the age required to run for public office. The campaign is being reinforced by a draft bill.⁶ These movements, as also exemplified by the Tunisian revolution that later spread to Egypt and influenced governance reforms in Algeria, are helping to persuade governments to invest much needed effort in reforms that will protect youth rights.

As illustrated above, young people are dynamic, resilient and full of potential. The sheer power of this demographic has the potential to play an instrumental role in both policy-making and implementation. The challenge lies with the limited implementation and an inadequate investment in laws, policies and initiatives by governments to harness this potential and to leverage the demographic strengths of young people for wider societal reform.⁷

Governments need to understand that by engaging the youth meaningfully, they can actively promote inclusive economic growth and development. But this will require a human rights-based approach that ensures that young people and other marginalised groups can contribute to governance and development processes effectively. While the significance of efforts made by the AU and individual member states to improve youth engagement cannot be ignored, there is still a lot of ground to cover in opening the political space for meaningful youth engagement. Care must be taken to ensure that the voices and insights of young people are not limited to event-based initiatives and tokenism.⁸ The development of effective and sustained strategies for promoting meaningful youth engagement is an area that is ripe for reform at national and continental levels.

In a bid to elevate the voices of youth on the continent and to gain a better understanding of the challenges they face concerning their human rights, the AU has engaged in several initiatives that bring together young people from across the continent. These initiatives place young men and women at the forefront of Africa's developmental agenda. An example of this is the AGA Youth Engagement Strategy under which the Regional Youth Consultations on Project 2016: Year of human

rights with a particular focus on the rights of women, were convened.

Overview of the continental normative framework on youth engagement

The AU has an expansive normative framework on the participation and engagement of youth in democracy and development processes. Article 4(g) of the AU Constitutive Act specifies that promotion of popular participation is one of the objectives of the Union. Furthermore, article 4(c) provides for the participation of African peoples in the activities of the Union. There is no doubt that the AU's founding treaty envisages participation of the people, including youth, at national, regional and continental levels.

By engaging the youth meaningfully, governments can actively promote inclusive economic growth

The African Youth Charter (AYC), adopted in Banjul in July 2006, provides the continental framework for the rights, freedoms and responsibilities of the youth, and the obligations of member states to ensure the realisation of the Charter's promise at all levels. Of particular relevance is the fact that in Article 11, which provides for the right of every young person to participate in all spheres of society, is assured. State Parties are obliged, amongst others, to facilitate the creation or strengthening of platforms for youth participation in decision-making processes at local, national, regional and continental levels.

The African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance (ACDEG) also calls on State Parties to 'promote [the] participation of social groups with special needs, including the youth ...' in article 31(1).⁹ While these norms illustrate the commitment of African leaders to youth participation, the sluggish ratification, implementation and reporting on the existing norms continue to limit their potential impact.

Beyond binding norms, the AU has adopted soft laws in the form of policies, frameworks and programmatic interventions to further pursue constructive and effective participation by youth, particularly at the continental level. Key among these are the African Youth Decade Plan of

Action 2009–2018 (DPoA), which provides a roadmap for implementing the African Youth Charter and the AU Agenda 2063, amongst others. The DPoA is described as the framework for the multi-sectoral and multi-dimensional engagement of all stakeholders to achieve the goals and objectives of the African Youth Charter.¹⁰ Aspiration six of the AU Agenda 2063 envisages ‘an Africa whose development is people-driven, especially relying on the potential offered by its women and youth, and well-cared for children’.¹¹ This aspiration specifies that ‘all forms of systemic inequalities, exploitation, marginalisation and discrimination of young people will be eliminated and youth issues [will be] mainstreamed in all development agendas.’¹²

At the programmatic level, initiatives such as the AU Youth Volunteer Corps (AU–YVC) stand out. As part of the DPoA, the AU–YVC is a 12-month volunteer programme that places young people at various AU organs and institutions. One of its key objectives is to provide young Africans with opportunities to serve and gain crucial professional experience, soft and social skills, international exposure and leadership skills.¹³ The programme has been instrumental in changing the face of various AU organs and institutions, particularly the AU Commission (AUC) and has seen over 150 young people benefit from the programme. About 50% of those who have participated in the programme have been retained in various departments to lead and support various programmes and activities of the African Union Commission. Those who could not be retained have acquired skills and experiences that will enable them to become productive and proactive citizens in their own countries.

AU Agenda 2063 envisages people-centred development relying on the potential offered by women and youth, and well-cared for children

Another example of the AU’s commitment to mainstreaming youth participation is the Legal Associates Programme (LAP) within the Office of Legal Counsel at the AUC. It is designed to provide and inculcate professional legal expertise in young African lawyers in the area of African integration law as represented by the ideals, programmes and activities of the AUC and other AU organs.

At the national level there have been advancements with regard to the implementation of laws that aim to protect young people and effectively engage them in democratic governance processes. Several AU member states have outlawed female genital mutilation and child ‘marriages’. Others have enacted laws that guarantee the right to basic education, and have established youth ministries and commissions to coordinate the mainstreaming of youth in development agendas. In some countries, youth funds have been established to finance programmes and affirmative action to help youth to access business opportunities with government. In Kenya, for



SEVERAL AU MEMBER STATES HAVE OUTLAWED CHILD ‘MARRIAGES’

instance, government has a policy of allocating 30% of all tenders for supplies to young people, women and persons with disabilities. This is in addition to the introduction of a youth fund that grants loans at minimal interest rates.

The greater part of Africa's youth still endures enormous challenges that limit their ability to engage in democratic governance

While the efforts by the AU and various member states are commendable, it should be noted that the greater part of Africa's youth still endures enormous challenges that limit their ability to engage in democratic governance and development processes. These include marginal involvement in civic and political spaces, and unemployment.¹⁴ The latter has been flagged as a pressing challenge on a continent where youth account for three of every five unemployed persons in Africa.¹⁵ The plight of unemployment is believed to have fuelled armed conflict in Africa: research shows that one out of two young people joining a rebel movement cite unemployment as the main reason for doing so.¹⁶ To address these and other challenges, such as the scourge of radicalisation and violent extremism, member states must adopt legislation that enhances youth engagement. Besides the binding norms and soft law interventions discussed above, the African Governance Architecture-Youth Engagement Strategy holds great promise in the quest for meaningful youth engagement. It is briefly examined below.

African Governance Architecture–Youth Engagement Strategy

AGA is the platform for dialogue between the various stakeholders and has a mandate to promote democratic and participatory governance in Africa.¹⁷ The institutional framework of AGA is the African Governance Platform that comprises RECs and all AU organs and institutions that have a formal mandate for the promotion and sustenance of democracy, governance and human rights in Africa.¹⁸ The principle objective of AGA is to harmonise AU shared-value instruments and coordinate initiatives that promote and consolidate democratic governance.

AGA–YES provides a framework for the strategic and effective participation by Africa's youth in the democratic governance initiatives of AU organs and institutions that have a mandate for democracy, elections, human rights and governance in Africa.¹⁹ The strategy is designed to reinforce the various AU commitments and pronouncements in areas of youth leadership and participation based on the acknowledgement of young people as beneficiaries, partners and leaders in democratic governance and sustainable development in Africa.²⁰

AGA-YES envisages that by implementing four targeted outcomes focused on creating increased youth awareness of AU-Shared Values on democratic



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governance, and by enhancing the capacity of youth to engage with AU organs, institutions and RECs, it will grow its engagement in democratic governance processes. The strategy further aims to develop youth-specific knowledge on democratic governance trends, and create platforms for dialogue and the sharing of comparable lessons on youth-specific trends, challenges and prospects for improved governance and democracy.

Since the implementation of the AGA-YES, activities have been focused on enhancing the capacity of youth organisations and networks to foster compliance and implementation of norms at national and sub-national levels in member states. In addition, some programmes have been geared towards facilitating an engagement space for young people in governance and peace and security. These initiatives have been premised on the need to harness youth perspectives and ideas in finding homegrown solutions to African problems. One such activity was the Regional Youth Consultations in 2016.

Regional youth consultations on Project 2016

In fulfilment of AGA-YES objectives to engender the effective engagement of young people in policy processes, the AU hosted the Regional Youth Consultations on Project 2016: Year of Human Rights, with a Particular Focus on the Rights of Young Women. These consultations, which took place in Tunis (Tunisia), Kampala (Uganda), Windhoek (Namibia) and Accra (Ghana), provided over 200 young people drawn from government, civil society, think tanks and institutions of higher learning with an opportunity to make inputs into the Ten-Year Action Plan and Implementation Plan for the Promotion and Protection of Human and Peoples' Rights in Africa. This Action Plan will be the guiding framework for collective action by the AU, RECs and member states aimed at strengthening the African human rights system and addressing current challenges. The consultations also provided platforms for knowledge sharing on human rights and contributed to the generation of actionable ideas to improve individual programming by AU organs, RECs, national mechanisms and youth-led civil society organisations (CSOs) for the promotion and protection of young people's rights.

The regional consultations gave young people the chance to review the progress made and the challenges being faced

The regional consultations gave young people the chance to review the progress made and the challenges being faced in the protection and promotion of their human rights at all levels. Young people discussed the hurdles they faced in their respective countries concerning governance; peace and security; young women's rights; inclusion, diversity management and popular participation; and employment, mobility and migration. The consultations also provided a platform for young people to network and opened up possibilities for partnerships and coalitions to advance the youth agenda on democratic governance.



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While the consultations gave participants an understanding of the AU human rights system and provided them with examples of advocacy skills, it was evident that many of the young people had little knowledge or understanding of how the African human rights system works. It was also observed that there is limited interpretative understanding of the fact that human rights go hand in hand with duties, and that young people needed to do more to hold their governments accountable for the non-implementation of commitments. Young people emphasised that while they were open to gaining knowledge and awareness of issues of governance and human rights, there were, in their opinion, insufficient institutional mechanisms to guarantee their effective participation.

The consultations brought to light various issues on the continent. Young people decried the existence of legislation in some states that placed unjustifiable hurdles in the way of participation by young people in election processes through, for example, prohibitive age requirements. An example given was Cameroon, where the voting age is 20 years but the age for military intake is 18 years. Another issue referred to was the need for governments in all regions to include young people in decision-making processes and give them platforms to participate meaningfully. They acknowledged, however, that while it was a function of government to protect their human rights, it was up to them to be proactive in addressing the human rights challenges they faced. But, for this to happen, the youth had to be organised and knowledgeable about the various avenues and opportunities available to them at national, regional and continental levels.

Region-specific themes that are equally relevant to most member states also emerged from the consultations. During the East Africa consultation, youth highlighted the role of ethnic-based politics in weakening the potential power of young people to hold the political elite accountable for violating its rights. Youth from Central Africa raised the continued denial of young people's and the wider society's fundamental rights and freedoms. North African youth expressed concern about the fact that the underlying factors that had led to the uprisings in their region had not been addressed fully, pointing in particular to unemployment and the denial of a range of civil liberties. Women bore the brunt in the latter case.

Conversations in West Africa were dominated by calls for the reform of education, in particular the revision of school curricula and the need to place greater emphasis on creativity, entrepreneurship, innovation and science and technology as a long-term strategy to address the challenge of unemployment. Migration also featured prominently, with participants calling on AU member states to address both push and pull factors that drive migration. A pressing concern of young people in Southern Africa was the decline in civic and political engagement by the youth. Studies on this phenomenon, reported by a representative of the polling agency Afrobarometer, brought to light that young women are less engaged in politics than their male counterparts.²¹ It was proposed that steps be taken to create a space for young women that is conducive to their equal participation in political processes.

The consultations made it evident that many young people had little knowledge of how the African human rights system works

In a bid to demonstrate the leadership role played by young people to entrench a culture of human rights on the continent, the regional consultation hosted four editions of *Africa Talks DG Trends* to showcase game-changing initiatives led by young people in various countries. This initiative aims to inspire youth-led and human rights-orientated organisations by discussing programmes or initiatives that have improved human rights conditions in specific communities, countries or regions. The *Africa Talks DG Trends* platform creates a space for young Africans to illustrate how they continue to contribute to the attainment of Agenda 2063 and SDG 2030 even in challenging environments.

Conclusion

While the AU and certain member states have done commendable work, this policy brief indicates that more work needs to be done to ensure that young people are engaged meaningfully by their governments in democratic governance and development processes. The views of young men and women in all five African regions during the 2016 youth consultations have left little doubt that the

vast majority of young people still feel alienated and marginalised. They are either left out of decision-making processes completely or are involved in a tokenistic manner only. Unemployment has hit young people hardest and even where work is available, it is seldom sufficient to provide a dignified livelihood.

The AU, RECs and member states are continually being challenged to speak the language of the youth. In the age of information technology, young people are revolutionising civic engagement and participation through innovative tools and platforms. AU and REC instruments, structures and mechanisms need to accommodate the youth by employing language and mediums used and understood by them.

The vast majority of young people still feel alienated and marginalised

Africa's large youth population may turn out to be a blessing or a curse to Africa's governance and development. They are increasingly demanding to be at the centre of decision-making on issues that will affect their livelihoods and futures. In the light of this, stakeholders should make a genuine effort to remove the hurdles faced by young people so that they can participate in the governance and development of their countries, regions and continent. The AU, RECs and member states are well advised to heed the call from the youth: nothing for them without them!

Recommendations

Discussions and interactions at the four regional youth consultations resulted in the drafting of a set of recommendations. These focused on what the AU, RECs, member states and civil society organisations, including youth organisations, could do to enhance the prospects of young people being engaged constructively at national and continental levels. The recommendations are as follows:

1. AU member states should match their ratification efforts with equal zeal and commitment to the domestication and implementation of the AU Shared Values they have signed up to. In this regard, States Parties to the ACDEG are particularly urged to submit reports to the AUC on legislative and other relevant measures taken to give effect to the principles and commitments of the Charter as required under article 49 of ACDEG.
2. Youth and youth-led organisations should proactively leverage the AGA-YES to engage various AU organs and institutions with democratic governance mandates such as the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights, the Pan African Parliament and the African Peer Review Mechanism. In particular, young leaders should seize the opportunity provided by the 'Resolution on the Human Rights Issues Affecting the African Youth',²² adopted by the African Commission on Human and



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Peoples' Rights at its 58th Ordinary Session held in Banjul, to advocate for policy and institutional measures to foster effective youth engagement.

3. While the efforts of several member states have been commendable in addressing structural and cultural obstacles faced by young women, the AU and member states are called upon to adopt and implement plans, policies and programmes to improve the situation of child, early and forced marriage, female genital mutilation, other harmful cultural practices and political discrimination. Initiatives such as the proposed Women in Governance Initiative under the AGA should be supported fully.
4. Efforts towards universal understanding and appreciation of the AU Shared Values Agenda should be strengthened. CSOs are urged to increase initiatives aimed at educating African citizens on regional norms, standards, mechanisms and institutions to deepen democratisation and foster the popular participation of citizens, especially women and young people, in democratic governance processes.
5. The ACDEG specifies the role to be played by young people in fostering a culture of peace and democracy in Africa. In this vein, efforts aimed at engaging young people in conflict prevention, management and transformation measures should be encouraged. The AU, its partners and CSOs should support the strengthening of initiatives such as the African Union Youth-In-Peacebuilding Initiative (AU-YIP) as a framework for effective engagement of youth in AU conflict prevention and post-conflict reconstruction efforts, taking cognisance of the specific requirements of young women.

Youth networks and organisations are called upon to enhance their own internal structures, mobilisation frameworks and initiatives

6. Member states and democratic institutions such as political parties are urged to review or repeal laws and policies that hinder the effective participation of youth in political processes. In particular, discriminatory age limits and prohibitive fees that make it difficult for young people to qualify as candidates for elective positions should be abolished.
7. Finally, to maximise the potential and transformative capacity of the youthful demographic on the continent, youth networks and organisations are called upon to enhance their own internal structures, mobilisation frameworks and initiatives to enable popular participation, value-based leadership and internal democracy aimed at collectively addressing their challenges in a coherent and articulate manner.



PROHIBITIVE FEES MAKE IT DIFFICULT FOR YOUNG PEOPLE TO QUALIFY AS CANDIDATES FOR ELECTIVE POSITIONS

Notes

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