SUCCESSFUL YOUTH POLICY: LESSONS FROM THE AFRICAN PEER REVIEW MECHANISM

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Youth policy provides a strategic framework for countries to structure their youth development efforts. Drawing on the work of the African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM), the policy brief examines the state and prospects of youth policy in Africa. It argues that while youth policies are becoming more common, there is a need for better design and more innovative implementation strategies. In particular, stronger partnerships with bodies outside government are crucial.

INTRODUCTION

Accommodating Africa's rapidly expanding youth population is a crucial issue facing the continent. Recent events, notably the uprisings in North Africa in 2011, have demonstrated the considerable political weight that mobilised young people can exert. This dynamic, enhanced by the rapid spread of communications technology, has underlined the imperative of integrating young people's aspirations into societies' developmental agendas.

Commentary around Africa's youth has tended to present their role in dualistic terms. On the one hand, a growing cohort of young people means a lower dependency ratio (the relationship between the working-age and non-working-age population) and – possibly – an opportunity for economic acceleration. On the other, an ever-larger number of young people competing for limited resources in

RECOMMENDATIONS

1 Invest in systemic information collection and analysis to provide a solid evidentiary basis for youth policy.

2 Recognise youth policy as a long-term, inclusive strategy. Capture by political interests is detrimental to its success.

3 Set realistic objectives in policy, considering what is feasible in the context of often-weak state capacity – establishing priorities is critical.

4 Improve the capacity of states to implement policy. This is likely to be a long-term process, so bringing in non-state actors as partners in implementing policy is critical.

5 Emulate the successes achieved in bodies to represent the youth – such as youth councils – to ensure that they are given a voice and the opportunity to participate in governance and development.

already strained economies could threaten Africa with unmanageable societal stresses. The challenge will be to steer the youth towards seizing opportunities rather than posing threats.

This policy brief surveys the state and prospects of youth policy in Africa. It draws particularly on the Country Review Reports (CRRs) of Africa's home-grown governance review system, the APRM. Since the APRM is explicitly intended to encourage the adoption of developmentally appropriate policies, its work deserves particular consideration.

YOUTH POLICY IN PERSPECTIVE

Youth policies are increasingly recognised as important frameworks for governance and for managing issues confronting the youth. As UNESCO comments:[2]

> Every country thus needs effective strategies able to help young people to make the right choices, protect them from exploitation and neglect and ensure their participation in all spheres of society. To address some of these issues and, more importantly, to take a strong stand in support of their young people, each country is urged to develop a long-term, consensus-based, integrated and cross-sectoral youth policy.

According to youthpolicy.org[3] – an organisation promoting youth policies – of the 198 countries surveyed worldwide, 122 (62% of the total) had a fully developed or draft youth policy in 2014, the latest year for which a full report has been produced.

The uptake of youth policies in Africa currently trails the rest of the world by a considerable margin. In 2014, 23 of the 54 African countries covered (43%) had a full or draft youth policy, 14 were developing or revising one, and another 14 had none at all. The status was unknown in a further three states.

Whether such a policy is effective is a separate matter. Youth policy is a fraught area – partly because few clear examples of success exist; many are 'promising but unproven, and this is a serious impediment to wider replication'.[4] The Baku Commitment to Youth Policies – stemming from the First Global Forum on Youth Policies in 2014 – proposed several features to define good youth policy: rights-based; inclusive; participatory; gender-responsive; comprehensive in scope; evidence-based; properly resourced; and accountable.[5]

Drawing loosely on the Baku formulation, this policy brief examines youth policy in Africa in relation to four elements: high-quality information; good policy design; inclusivity, particularly regarding its target constituency; and good implementation.

INFORMATION

Policy must address issues as they exist; problems must be properly identified and intimately understood to make effective solutions possible. For example, there is wide consensus on the importance of two key interrelated issues confronting the continent's youth: education and unemployment. These have featured repeatedly in analyses by such bodies as the African Development Bank (AfDB) and the APRM, the CRRs having stressed the imperative of providing opportunities to Africa's young people.

But inadequate information is a major obstacle. The Nigeria CRR notes that this has undermined much of its poverty eradication efforts.[6] Similarly, officials from the AfDB note: 'Youth employment interventions in Africa generally lack knowledge on what works well and what does not, which is closely linked to the extreme paucity of employment data availability. High quality data is therefore crucial to guide effective youth policies, strategies and programs.'[7]

POLICY DESIGN

Policies must articulate objectives, identify stakeholders, target beneficiaries and outline the strategies and mechanisms for achieving their goals. Youth policies establish a broad orientation, to be fleshed out by legislation, sector-specific plans and the work of implementing agencies.

Across Africa, there are numerous ideas for addressing youth problems. The CRRs indicate, for example, that bodies to represent and champion the interests of the youth (ministries, commissions and funding programmes) are widespread. Key to their respective mandates is integrating young people into adult society. This is to be achieved both through addressing problems prevalent among young people – such as substance abuse – and 'empowering' them for adult responsibilities – such as creating economic opportunities.

Thus, Benin has a National Employment Promotion Agency to assist the youth to enter the economy, as

employees or entrepreneurs.[8] Youth entrepreneurship is supported in countries such as Algeria, Lesotho, Mozambique and Zambia.[9] A more recent initiative in South Africa is its youth wage subsidy, which seeks to provide an opening to the labour market by refunding firms a portion of the costs of employing young workers.[10]

However, policy design runs into a number of problems. The definition of youth is one. The African Youth Charter defines the youth as those between the ages of 15 and 35 years. Attempting to fashion policy that engages with such a broad range of people risks attempting too much – are the interests of schoolchildren, university students and those approaching middle age sufficiently congruent to be covered by a single policy?

Poor or incomplete design compromises efforts at intervention. This is likely to be an especially serious risk where policy attempts to co-ordinate numerous state activities. The outcome may be contradictory and incoherent. The Mozambique CRR, for example, notes that the country's efforts at addressing youth unemployment have been undermined by an 'unclear national policy and strategic framework'.[11]

IMPLEMENTATION

Well-designed policies mean little if the systems to actualise them do not exist. The uneven capacities of Africa's states constitute a key obstacle. The CRRs capture these in some detail. Financial and skills shortages are widespread, while the extent of the problems involved would challenge even better-endowed systems. The Algeria CRR notes that 'the Ministry of Youth and Sports, which coordinates government actions targeted at young people, experiences serious human, technical and material constraints that prevent it from playing its role effectively'.[12] It then comments that in some areas – notably youth unemployment – significant expenditure has failed to dent the sheer scale of the problem.[13]

Zambia's youth-directed credit programmes have also failed to meet their objectives, owing to a 'poor selection of youth beneficiaries, lack of monitoring, lack of strong financial control systems and, oftentimes, political influence'.[14] Likewise, patronage networks and corruption have undermined policy efforts: the Kenya CRR reports that bursaries tend to be allocated on the basis of the right connections.[15]

The lesson is that policy must be mindful of capacity; a 'good' policy that cannot realistically be implemented is not a good policy. Overcoming this may imply enhancing capacity, forming partnerships, making painful decisions about priorities, or – most likely – a combination of these.

PARTICIPATION

Effective youth policy should be designed with input from the youth and produce enhanced opportunities for youth involvement in governance and development processes.

The APRM records successes in this regard. Several countries have established bodies to provide an avenue for the youth to enter governance conversations. The National Youth Forum in Burkina Faso, for example, is a mechanism that allows youth representatives to interact with the head of state.[16] Rwanda and Uganda reserve seats in their legislatures for the youth.[17] In Mozambique, the National Youth Council provides a forum for vulnerable or marginalised groups to contribute to development processes at the national, provincial and district level.[18]

Research argues that youth activists have used these bodies to noteworthy effect. They provide a means for the youth to influence governance – for example, the Mozambique National Youth Council produced a Youth Declaration, which became the basis for the country's youth policy.[19]

But fostering the inclusion of and participation by the youth faces the challenge of identifying youth representatives – who are the youth? Attempts can be made to encourage widespread involvement, such as through large youth summits. But even thus, for the majority of young people direct interaction on governance will be sporadic and fleeting, unless it is managed by committed intermediary organisations.

Moreover, it is not possible to accommodate all candidates for the limited number of positions (often remunerated) on the bodies charged with overseeing policy – these being where ongoing influence is wielded. Competition for these positions may be intense.

This is especially the case where youth policy exists against the backdrop of fierce political contestation. South Africa's National Youth Development Agency has been criticised for its apparent relationship with the ruling party's youth league. Commented one journalist:

'The youth league's leadership decides who sits on the board and in its executive, though normal recruitment processes are followed.'[20]

It is doubtful that an institution under party-political sway can represent the diverse interests of society's young people – or indeed whether it would be enthusiastic about assisting those perceived as opponents. This could prove fatal to its credibility and effectiveness.

CONCLUSION

Given the continent's demographic structure, youth policies make sense for Africa. African countries require strategies to secure the futures of their young people, and in so doing, the futures of their respective societies.

But youth policies are complex and challenging. The APRM has demonstrated that African countries have encountered obstacles that have undermined their efforts to assist their youth. To address this, the imperative of information gathering as an initial step cannot be overemphasised. Youth issues must be understood before they can be dealt with.

Effective policy design and implementation can flow from this – provided that policy is prudently crafted. It must set clear goals, reflect realistic assumptions about what is possible, and prioritise its activities for the optimal use of the continent's often very limited resources.

Moreover, policymakers should seek innovative and value-adding partnerships with the continent's civil society, business and academic communities, to tap into their social reach, intellectual capital and material resources. Indeed, the relative success that African countries have had in convening youth bodies suggests that considerable scope exists for such co-operation between the state and the non-state sector. Properly executed such broad-based partnerships hold the potential to be a critical factor in effective youth policy.

ENDNOTES

1   Terence Corrigan is currently a SAIIA Research Fellow in its Governance and APRM Programme.
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