

POLICY BRIEF 2021

Youth leadership for a renewed African Renaissance: A lever for building the Africa we want

BACKGROUND

The past decade has seen multiple revolutions that called for regime change in many instances championed by young people. Despite this, a concerning factor has been that the youth have remained at the periphery of the gains of these transitional processes. What this points to is a clear exploitation of youthful exuberance, where the value of youth is seen through being used to achieve a change agenda whose gains exclude them.

The median age in Africa for 2020 was calculated to be 19.8 years with 454.5 million individuals in the 15-34 age group; furthermore, between the median age and that of the executive leadership was a 45-year difference thus making Africa the youngest continent best positioned to have youth leadership for a renewed African

renaissance.¹ Shifting away from potential, 2020 saw a “noticeable deterioration of the civil society space” which was observed through the high incidence of protest action in contrast to previous years.² Such actions can be interpreted as the society having reached their highpoint with poor governance and as a result demonstrating against, and calling for a more visionary and responsive leadership.

Against this background and motivated by the need to uphold the legacies of the men and women that fought to see a united Africa, the African Governance Architecture is pushing the envelope and calling for a renewed African Renaissance that brings a new breed of visionary leadership ready and equipped for the challenges of the day.

**IN
2020**

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CONTINENTAL FRAMEWORKS FOR YOUTH BUILDING THE AFRICA WE WANT

The African Union, African Governance Architecture is “inspired by the Constitutive Act of the African Union (AU) that expresses the AU’s determination to ‘promote and protect human and people’s rights, consolidate democratic institutions and culture and ensure good governance and the rule of law’”³ This consolidation of culture becomes at one with the African Union theme for 2021 “Arts culture and heritage: levers for building the Africa we want.”⁴

To further buttress this, Agenda 2063 Aspiration 2, envisions “an integrated continent, politically united based on the ideals of Pan-Africanism and the vision of African renaissance.”⁵ Additionally, Aspiration 6 of Agenda 2063 seeks to have “an Africa whose development is people driven, relying on the potential of the African people, especially its women and the youth and the caring for children.”⁶ What this points to is a solution based agenda that seeks to redress a fractured democratic state through practical solutions that are rooted in African realities. Solutions that empower a new breed of young African leaders attuned to the needs of this demographic while harnessing intergenerational wisdom; thus, learning from the past, adapting to the present and transforming the future.

Article 3 (c) of the Constitutive Act of the African Union speaks to accelerating “the political and socio-economic integration of the continent.”⁷ Article 11, 2.(b) and (c) of the African Youth Charter

speaks of the need to “facilitate the creation or strengthening of platforms for youth participation in decision making at local, national, regional and continental levels of governance” and, ensuing “equal access to young men and young women to participate in decision making and in fulfilling civic duties.”⁸

Together, these normative frameworks make Africa well positioned to be a role model continent where youth leadership is a standard however experts at the youth consultation bemoaned the poor realization of these policies. Having an environment where the ideal conditions are known in theory creates an increased state of frustration considering that, to be able to make changes, one needs to be within the structures or have a seat at the table. In developing African solutions to this problem, African leaders should be deliberate and intentional in shifting their thinking from seeing the youth as incompetent and unserious and rather productively harness the energy of the youth to give them a space to use their creative ability to develop solutions that re-imagine the socio-political and business landscape within African States.



AFRICAN YOUTH COMPETING FOR SPACE

African youth are a distinct group that is not homogenous. Despite this, there does exist a degree of uniformity of locale and upbringing however, the challenges encountered in the process of youthfulness have made this demographic on occasions more divided than united despite being collectively in pursuit of a better future. The African youth have been termed a generation “stuck in waithood” based on the protracted suspension in a state of little to no access to services due to them; services that an educated individual belonging to a nation-state ought to be receiving as a right.⁹ In addition, this waithood

has extended to their political side-lining and stifling of their voices leading to youth participation being primarily seen in popular uprisings.¹⁰

Regardless of the position that argues that the sustainability of good governance needs the involvement of all components of the society, including young people, this aspiration is yet to be realized. It has been argued that there is a strong correlation between long serving leaders, that are attributed to have “delivered democracy,” and a high rate of democratic deficit in the continent.¹¹

As a generation that seeks to revive Pan-Africanism and the African renaissance it should be realised that having that common history, culture and origin is sufficient to drive the agenda towards the common purpose of renewal that brings transformation.¹² Historically, Pan Africanism was rooted in the desire for social, economic, cultural and political emancipation of the African people however experts at the consultation noted that at present, pan Africanism has become

“modified, radicalised and personalised,” to be a self-serving ethos.¹³ Delegates at the consultation emphasized the need to have genuine leadership that can open up structurally closed spaces. A leadership that creates spaces for youthful ideas to percolate thus creating an environment where individuals can think global and act local. It should be noted that having such an environment would be deliberately moving towards a renewed African renaissance.

YOUTH IN POLITICS AND ECONOMICS

Adding on to the negative pan African reorientation, experts noted that the political space has become commercialized making one's financial capacity an advantage or an obstacle into entering the political arena. Having a godfather/mother who becomes a financier, and a connector has become a prerequisite and without one, political support, including that from ones (youth) demographic can easily be lost. It can be argued that given the tendency to commodify one's political support, if a candidate does not have the means to incentivise the electorate, they will not gain traction despite the merit of their ideas. Considering that this commodification of support is also seen as a means to gain an income in an environment of high unemployment, one may see a justification on the part of the seller however for a renewed African renaissance such practices were spoken against by the delegates present.

Notwithstanding, the African youth should be able to redress this norm through collective action that can dislodge this negative reformulation of pan Africanism. There is a need to have a shared responsibility towards doing away with the present challenges of youth inclusion that include the commercialization of the political space wherein, without a godfather/mother one's political participation is deemed futile. To eliminate the commercialization of the political space requires either an elimination of the demand or the supply.¹⁴ Doing away with the former is where the commitment of the youth toward a rebirth can be seen prominently as it takes a visionary leader to be firm and to reject undue incentives for their political support. Once demand is removed those with the means of supply will cease to have an audience thereby making sure that the political environment becomes one where ideas

become currency.

Onto the aspect of commerce, the International Labour Organization (ILO), notes that over 90% of educated and semi-educated youth in Sub Saharan Africa are involved in the informal economy.¹⁵ This high participation in the informal economy is driven more by necessity than choice as the labour market does not have space to absorb the 9 million graduates remaining after the job market absorbs its 3 million capacity from an annual cohort of 12 million graduates.¹⁶ In more recent history the informal sector has been romanticised by the continent's leadership and treated as the solution to the growing levels of unemployment however experts at the consultation stressed how the lack of professional networks that are gained through employment and the lack of actual work experience, creates a vulnerability and exploitation of the entrepreneur.

To avoid Africa being the youngest continent with the highest rate of unemployment, there is a need to have a transformed education sector that responds to the present needs of the continent. Beyond the curriculum, there should be direct targeted support for the entrepreneur such as tax holidays and easy access to credit to accord the young entrepreneurs an opportunity to competitively focus on their trade. To cement these structural interventions, the continents leadership should ensure that the Africa Continental Free Trade Agreement (AfCFTA) becomes fully ratified by all African states as this will equally accomplish Aspiration 2 of Agenda 2063 of having a politically united and integrated continent.

CREATIVE DEMOCRATIZATION

In using arts, culture and heritage as levers for building the Africa we want, there is a need to depoliticize the political landscape and do away with the exclusionary norms that have become the standard procedure within the continent against young people. When this is done, a renaissance rooted in the present shared realities and aspirations of the youth will take place therefore guaranteeing that future generations of this continent will start from a better Africa.

Culture, encompasses (African) thought, behaviour and ideas and it can be used to separate at an equal pace as it can connect.¹⁷ Heritage, is defined as tangible and intangible with “monuments or architecture, art and crafts, sites, manuscripts, books and other objects of artistic and historical interest” forming the tangible while “language, oral traditions, performing arts, music, festive events, rituals, social practices, traditional craftsmanship, knowledge and practices concerning nature and the environment” comprising the intangible.¹⁸

Article 22 (b) of the African Union Charter for African cultural renaissance encourages States to “provide financial, technical and other forms of assistance to stimulate artistic creation and expression, preferably by the establishment of national funds for the promotion of arts and culture”¹⁹ Article 13 (2) of the same, explicitly recognizes the youth as cultural stakeholders and that States should accord them their space to express themselves. These frameworks all contribute to depoliticizing the political landscape, allowing for the full and equal participation of all. From the above, the enabling environment for the youth to use arts, culture, and heritage as levers for building a better Africa exists, however delegates noted that the present generation of leaders have a preoccupation in morphing to global systems rather than championing and allowing the youth space to create a local super structure relevant and responsive to the needs of continent.

It should be noted that a direct reflection of this lack of championing an African superstructure is seen in the sustained high dependency on beyond Africa solutions regardless of the capacity and energy to develop organic solutions being available and unutilized.

Using creative arts as a lever for building an African renaissance was considered as an effective approach seeing as it is a medium that is non-threatening thereby soliciting a more positive reception as compared to embarking on a march or protest action. In this, the African youth were seen to be creating their own space for participation using new media platforms like YouTube, twitter, Facebook, podcast, and webcasts.

Unlike in the past where musicians like Fela Kuti would directly challenge the authorities in their lyrical content the present-day youth have found a more subtle manner of addressing their issues as was observed through the #EndSars protest when Nigerian youth used Davido’s song “Fem” as an anthem.²⁰ This song title in contrast to “coffin for head of state” by Fela Kuti shows the evolution and reimagination of the creative space which the young people should continue to exploit. Young people have also earned the art of organizing but not agonizing. They have effectively used the online space to coordinate and brought what is online to reality on the ground.

Despite the inoffensive nature of these platforms, it is fast becoming commonplace in Africa for the State to shut down the internet as a means of controlling discourse, and to repress any assumed action largely from the youth. It can be argued that if the administrative authorities go the length of obstructing the airwaves as though it were a state of war, these platforms are highly effective in challenging the status quo.

THE SUCCESSOR GENERATION.

The successor generation in Africa, is one that should be highly engrossed on all facets of governance despite the resistance of the day. Experts at the consultation rehashed that young people should get involved and take up spaces.

A key access point suggested is through volunteering in political parties, civil society groups or community forums. As a volunteer, one will gain invaluable lessons beyond what the classroom can offer and from this, they will be able to build better when they are setting out. They should be a greater degree of tolerance from this gen-

eration as this is the basis of eroding the static boundaries that separate Africa. This tolerance is one that should be practiced in the political landscape where there may be difference in ideological positions and in the society where the diversity of Africa is observed.

The successor generation is one that should think global and act local and as part of thinking global, there is need to be enrolled in education

and capacity building programmes that are different from the norm. Such programmes should be future thinking enabling the youth to take the lead at innovative cross cutting ideas that can shape different sectors from climate, economics, politics to arts and culture. Most importantly, the successor generation should be driven by Afrocentric thinking that ensures that the gains of liberation are preserved and not bartered for quick cosmetic wins.

CONCLUSION

This policy brief has shown that Africa has sufficient frameworks for the full inclusion of youth in leadership. What remains is the harnessing of their energy in progressive sectors where the leadership lacuna can be filled to reimagine and redesign Africa. The high number of youths who remain at the periphery of the table are a cause of concern and the government of the day should prioritise their incorporation into spaces where their creative ability can be harnessed in building the Africa we want.

Delegates at the continental consultation remained firm that the youth should occupy spaces however they emphasised the need to be technically competent to avoid a resurgence of

the negative self-serving patronage veiled as pan Africanism that has plagued the continent. Beyond this, it has been highlighted that even among the youth there is an uneven playing field based on gender stereotypes that need to be redressed.

Overall, young people at the consultation did not hint towards retreating despite the odds being structurally stacked against them which highlights that there is indeed a new generation of African leadership, and they are ready to build a new Africa.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE YOUTH VIRTUAL CONSULTATION:

1. The youth must harness their numerical advantage in taking up volunteering positions where practical insights will be attained. Beyond volunteering, the youth should be engaged in intergenerational learning to ensure that valuable time is not lost in avoidable experimentation.

2. To encourage a sustainable, economically viable informal sector that can absorb the high number of qualified unemployed graduates. The African Union also needs to encourage its member states to ratify the AfCFTA to facilitate an easier more beneficial exchange of goods and services within Africa to encourage economic transformation through the informal sector

3. The African Union should establish a reward mechanism for member states that have fully adopted and implemented mechanisms

that ensure full representation of the youth across different sectors in society. By so doing, the practice of having good policies that are not initiated will come to an end while new ideas that thrust Africa forward will be realised.

4. Member States should be deliberate about using digital platforms for young people to engage within and across nation states in Africa. Part of these deliberate steps are ensuring that the infrastructure for data transmission is present and that there is no selective tempering of connectivity.

5. Member states need to refrain from constraining the civil space to allow more open societies where a difference in opinion and ideology does not translate to a prison sentence.

6. Member states should have mechanisms in place that ensure the full impartial participation of young women and persons living with disabilities into the political arena.

NOTES

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