Re-Thinking Democratic Governance: The Role of African Youth in Silencing the Guns

INTRODUCTION:

Good governance remains a prerequisite for sustainable peace. The lack of adherence to key governance tenets, principles and values in Africa have, therefore, often led to violent conflicts and protracted socio-political and economic crises in which the role of the continent's youth has been prime. As such, addressing the current state of limited youth empowerment and involvement in all spheres of governance have become critical for peace and security efforts especially in silencing the guns on the continent.

The continetnal initiative to silence the guns in Africa is a key priority of the AU's Agenda 2063. It affirms member state's commitment to rid the continent of armed conflict as a pre-requisite to sustainable development.[2] With at least 65% of Africa's population under the age of 35 years old,[3] however, the burden of achieving this aspiration stands on their shoulders. These young people are undoubtedly also central to fostering Africa's democratic governance agenda.

Democratic governance entails giving the citizens of AU member states, the majority of whom are youth, a say in decisions and policy making. Rolling out democratic governance in an effective and efficient manner is, thus, vital in ending armed conflict on the continent. According to article 31 of the AU's African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance (ACDEG), member states are obliged to 'promote participation of social groups with special needs, including the youth and people with disabilities in the governance process'.[4]

This policy brief is based on the deliberations at the 9th Hight Level Dialogue organised by the AGA Secretariat of the AU discusses current trends in the involvement of youth in democratic governance and their role in achieving the goals of the Silencing the Guns in Africa Initiative. The brief places emphasis on the role of youth vis-à-vis those of multilateral stakeholders towards attaining lasting peace and political stability. The brief argues that mainstreaming youth as a major stakeholder in efforts to silence the guns remains unnderachieved and that not enough effort is also being put into guaranteeing increased representation of youth in democratic processes. Re-thinking the inclusion and participation of youth in political processes remains a dire imperative towards silencing the guns.

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Overview of Africa's governance deficit as a key driver of conflict

In 2020, political violence and conflict-related fatalities decreased in every region of the world except Africa.[5] Intra-state conflicts, often fuelled by discontent with democratic governance,[6]

remain a major challenge on the continent. According to the 2019 Africa Governance Report of the Africa Peer Review Mechanism, governance-related conflicts in Africa are triggered by about seven major factors.[7] This policy brief explores the complex multiple linkages between three of those triggers with the continent's youth dynamics.
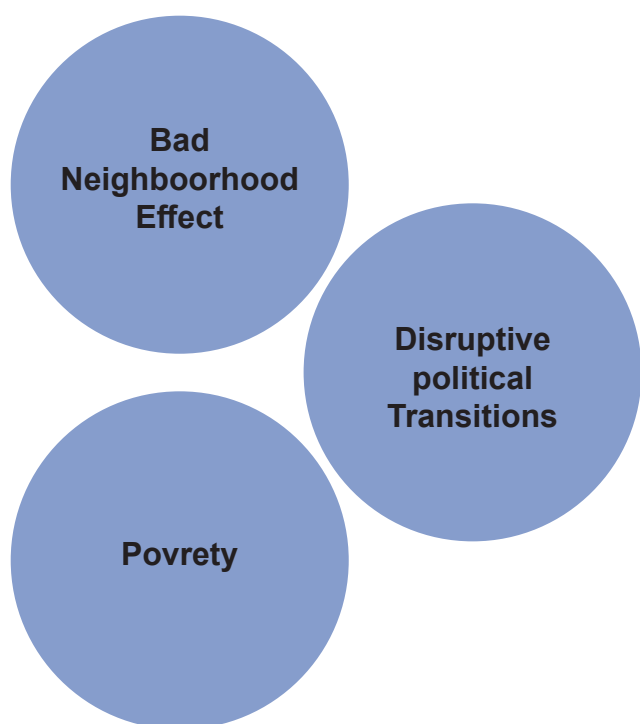
Governance-related Conflict Trigers for Youth

Figure 1: triggers of governance related conflicts

Poverty: Africa has an alarming high rate of poverty with Nigeria, Angola and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) having up to 175 million people living in extreme poverty.[9] Poverty amongst young people is linked to various political and economic shortfalls, especially chronic un/underemployment.

Contrary to arguments that poverty is unlikely to lead to conflict,[10] this policy brief further argues that Africa's chronic poverty does generate violent unrest. This is exemplified by the fact that in countries facing conflicts, such as

DRC, poverty, remains a major factor that predisposes young people to easy recruitment into armed rebel gangs such as the Mai-Mai, particularly as living by gun offers an attractive a source of livelihood.

Disruptive Political Transitions: Regime change in Africa is a common source of both short-term and long-term conflicts. Different forms of complex political transitions are inspired by controversial electoral processes, coup d'états and heavy-handed approach in the management of popular protests.

More than often, young people are involved in the violence associated with disruptive political transitions. Africa has recorded a number of disruptive political transitions since 2020. These include the 2020 coup d'état of Mali [11] and the 2021 unconstitutional take-over of government by the security forces of Chad.[12] Violence linked to political transitions was also recorded during post-electoral violence in countries like Guinea and the Ivory Coast.

Bad-Neighbourhood effect: This refers to the spread of instability and its associated dynamics in one country to others in the same geographical region. It is fuelled by the existence of porous borders, transitionally of ethnic identities and shared markets. For instance, it is impossible to avoid having the Boko Haram insurgency affect neighbouring countries in the Lake Chad Basin. The same can be said of the Al-Shabab's presence in the Horn of Africa.

Conflict displaces people and/or induces involuntary economic migration. The former is the reason states like Uganda and Sudan host large camps of refugees and displaced people from neighbouring states. A contemporary example of the latter phenomenon relates to the status of youth in the Sahel. Exposure to militia activity, poverty and un/underemployment fuels migration even to countries experiencing insecurity such as Libya.

Positioning youth in democratic governance

At the close of the 20th century, the continent was grappling with efforts to implement democratic governance. The governance discourse was commonly driven by those who were active during liberation struggles. As progress has been

made in the acceptance of democratic values, the need to have youth participate in various aspects of governance has become inevitable. Though youth inclusion and participation remain a challenge, the discourse around it is slowly but significantly finding in-roads into mainstream governance matters. Questions, however, remain as to how they can more effectively be represented in parliamentary processes and in political party leadership structures. In examining the status of their involvement in democratic governance process, thus far, it is necessary to interrogate the path by which efforts to enhance their participation and inclusion have taken. The following are five key aspects of the lessons learned in efforts to include youth in governance in Africa.

Socio-political norms dictate participation

When it comes to youth inclusion and engagement, context matters. For example, despite the numerical definitions of youth by multilateral entities, most African societies still engage their youth based on how they traditionally classify them.[13] In some contexts, an unmarried or unemployed man can be classified as youth despite their age. Furthermore, a young woman might not be considered youth after having a child or after marriage. The responsibilities attached to this classification also dictate how some young people are engaged by their local community leaders or decision makers. Such classifications often lead to discrimination for a lot of young people who are willing and able to participate in governance processes, especially at the national level.

Laws are yet to be enacted or streamlined to support/enhance youth participation

At least 39 AU member states have ratified and deposited the African Youth Charter (AYC) of 2006.[14] Key in the provisions of that Charter is the explicit requirement for state parties to "recognize the rights, freedoms and duties" enshrined in its provisions.[15] Notwithstanding the Charter, however, African governments are yet to not enacted laws to realise their goals to involve young people in governance processes despite the fact that Article 11 of the Charter requires them to guarantee and facilitate the participation of youth in decision making. Article 31 of the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance, adopted only a year after the AYC

also singles out youth as a priority for AU member states' efforts at democratic governance.

Contrary to the provisions of these normative frameworks, eligibility for participation in governance processes is limited and comes with age restrictions that discriminate against the youth. Youth representation in parliamentary processes on the continent, for instance, is extremely low.[16] Some AU member states, such as Zimbabwe, have at some point made constitutional amendments to include a youth quota (as well as those for women and the disabled) in parliament.[17] These are, however, rare cases that which often do not change the overall involvement of young people in governance.
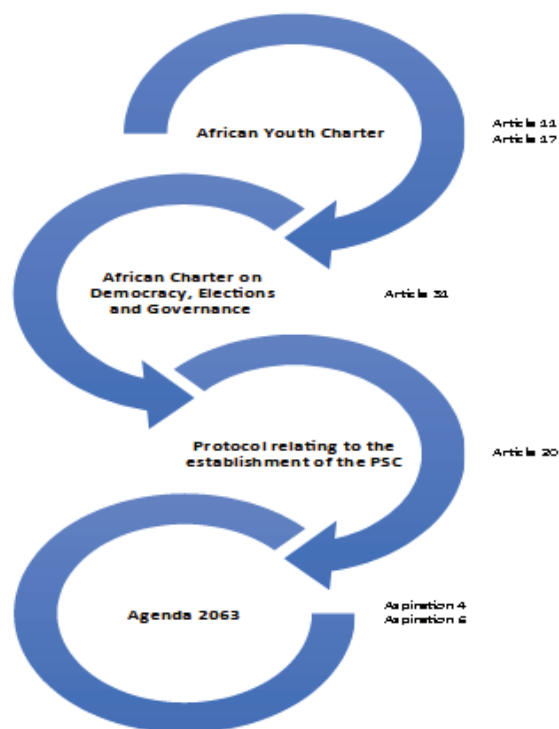

Figure 2: Normative Framework of of the AU in relation to youth in governance peace and security

There is a steep rise in informal engagements towards increased youth inclusion in political processes

Over the past decade, a plethora of youth networks and platforms have sprung up in the political governance arena. The majority of these networks e.g., the SADC Youth Network and the Youth Network for the Lake Chad Region are not related to government entities nor are they funded by the state. However, their aim is to influence peace and democratic governance processes and improved the involvement of young people. These networks are made up of youth-led groups that work at various levels including in the often-neglected grassroots level.

Linking youth in governance issues with that of peace and security is an emerging priority for multilateral institutions

Policy makers at the national, continental and global levels are beginning to appreciate the indispensable role of the youth, just as they have done with other issues such as gender. Multilateralism is making space for a youth, peace and security agenda. Such an agenda speaks to youth participation in democratic governance as a means of achieving sustainable peace and development. Institutions like the AU and the United Nations have, through their peace and security entities, established frameworks and resolutions in this regard. Youth envoys for both organizations have also been mandated to further the agenda in member states.

Young people are increasingly engaging with governance issues via political movements than political parties

The 2011 Arab Spring reminded the continent of the power of political movements in achieving change. Political movements are gaining popularity amongst Africa's youth population since they offer the opportunity to amplify youth political activism and serve as an alternative to political parties as a means to secure political participation.

Political movements have recorded some cases of successes, particularly in their push to enhance youth participation in governance. Nigeria's "#NotTooYoungToRun" Twitter Campaign,

for instance, ignited a movement in the West African state whose goal was to reduce the age limit for contesting elective office. It eventually resulted in a constitutional amendment reducing the age requirement for running for elective positions for the country's House of Assembly and House of Representatives from 30-years to 25; Senate and Governorship from 35-years to 30-year-old and presidency from 40 to 30.[18]

Contrary to widespread perception that political movements are meant to engage in political activism without seeking office in government, they have become a springboard for contesting electoral positions. Such is the case for Uganda's Robert Kyagulanyi Ssentamu, popularly known as Bobi Wine. The artist-cum-politician established a political movement dubbed the 'People Power Movement' and eventually joined and led a political party, the National Unity Platform in 2020. His movement launched his political career and mobilised millions of Uganda's youths in search of political change through the ballot.

Leveraging youth capacities towards silencing the guns

The continent needs to leverage the innovation of young people towards conflict resolution and sustainable peace. This is, however, possible if policy actors can re-think the involvement of the continent's youth in governance processes. In achieving that, the following four approaches are imperative:
- Revamping youth inclusion in state legislature;
- Involving young people in political party engagements;
- Institutionalizing youth leadership; and
- Enhancing the governance and political knowledge levels and expertise of young people to boost their effective participation in such processes.

As outlined earlier, youth inclusion in most African parliaments is poor. This is despite the fact that their active participation in parliament have the potential to enrich the quality of policy making. There is a longstanding belief in Africa that young people are not experienced enough to be part of decision-making processes. It is a grave challenge to debunk this belief hence it is the responsibility of lawmakers to ensure that legis-

lative quota is enacted. Implementing this might put into question, issues of merit versus tokenism. However, the benefits far outweigh the losses. Merit-based quota systems normalize having young people represented in parliaments and exhibiting their decision-making skills.

Quota enactment should begin at a political party level. However, before that can happen, youth empowerment should be the bedrock of political party functioning. Young people ought to have defined roles in political parties. These should be more leadership and coordination roles than administrative. Political parties in Africa fall into the habit of restricting the involvement of young people to youth wing activities. There is limited evidence to suggest whether youth wing members have gone on to represent their parties in public office whilst still in the youth age bracket.

AGA Continental Youth Consultation - 2020

Furthermore, as done in Nigeria, age limitations to running for political offices should be lowered. Such a move would exhibit trust in young people to lead.

In October 2020, the AU's African Governance Architecture (AGA) Secretariat on behalf of the AGA platform carried out the annual Continental Youth Consultation.[19] The aim of this virtual gathering was to discuss ways in which the inclusion of Africa's youth could be made central to the AU's silencing the guns aspiration. The meeting brought together representatives youth network/groups focused on governance, security and conflict prevention from the various regions of Africa. The following recommendations were made by the participants to towards addressing harnessing the involving of young people in furthering the silencing the guns initiative.

What do the youth have to say?

To Member States

• Member states must invest more in conflict prevention because it is cheaper and better. The youth have key roles to play here especially in structural prevention and early warning and must be given the opportunity to be part of such processes.

• Must have functional systems that encourage and promote youth participation at all levels of programming for governance peace and security. This includes the appointment or election of youth into key statutory positions of governance, peace and security Structures or as advisory boards.

• Member States should facilitate the nomination or appointment of national focal points and the development of National Action plans as required by the continental framework on youth, peace and security. This should include supporting youth-centered projects including vocational skills empowerment opportunities among young people as a means to reduce youth vulnerabilities to exploitation and manipulation.

• Member states must also strengthen and democratize National Youth Councils and youth parliaments so as to ensure that the right persons are appointed to lead the affairs of the youth. Achieving this ensure youth contributions across all sectors of government and policy formulation.

To the African Union Commission and RECs

• Must work to ensure greater inclusion of Africa's youth in public service and governance. The AU should encourage member states to remove economic barriers to youth inclusion, and adopt an intergenerational co-leadership approach across governance structures.
• Support member states to enable governments create an environment that prepares youth to enter the public service, build platforms for youth political voices and contributions, and establish accountability mechanisms that ensures reforms in youth development.

To Youth Networks and Civil Society Organizations

• Youth agencies should ensure at the continental level that when it comes to peace, young people must be involved in processes aimed at healing communities, societies, nations and the region. This should be done regardless of tribe and political affiliation, and factors that creates division in the society.

• There is need for civil society organizations and youth agencies to galvanize support and find ways to maximize the opportunities in the existing legal and policy frameworks for youth participation and involvement in governance peace and security processes.

• There is the need to ensure accountability in the full implementation of the AU youth charter and achieving its values by the youth themselves.

• Youth across Africa must unite around one identity, that is, the Pan-African identity and vision to enable them achieve the needed reforms around issues of governance, maintenance of peace and addressing corruption, among others.

• Youth focused agencies and civil society organizations should develop structured youth internship and mentoring programs that would attract and train youth in public service and governance institutions.

• Governance is and it also needs to deliver key useful. As much as advocacy is critical for change, young people ought to understand how government works and to enable them engage appropriately.

• Youth-led agencies and individuals must use available data to tell stories that are important to young people. They should also innovate and develop tools facilitate how young people navigate the challenges that they face.

Table 1: Recommendations from 2020 AGA Continental Youth Consultations[20]

Conclusion

2020 was an appropriate year to mainstream youth in discussions related to how Africa can silence the guns and promote sustainable development. The AU theme of the year for 2020 was 'Silencing the guns: creating conducive conditions for Africa's development'. This presented an opportunity for the AU and its RECs, AU member states and development partners to heed the call by young people for increased inclusion and participation in governance and peace processes.

Re-thinking democracy in the search for peace and security requires partnerships with the youth population. As the continent heads towards framework fatigue, implementation is becoming more urgent. Youth engagement in governance and even CSOs work establishes entry points for inputs towards good governance. It minimizes chances of engagement in risky behaviour and moulds the youth into pro-active citizens who safeguard democratic values.

NOTES:

1. This policy brief is based on the Reflections At The 9TH High-Level Dialogue on Democracy, Human Rights and Governance: Trends, Challenges and Prospects.

2. African Union, 2013, 50th Anniversary Solemn Declaration, Available at https://bit.ly/31fT1JD

3. African Union Commission. AU Echo Magazine Issue 01.2017. Available at https://au.int/sites/default/files/documents/32665-doc-au-echo-magazine-2017-23june17-1.pdf

4. African Union. African Charter on Democracy and Governance.2007. Available at https://au.int/en/treaties/african-charter-democracy-elections-and-governance

5. Armed Conflict Project and Event Data Project. ACLED 2020: The Year in Review. Available at https://acleddata.com/acleddatanew/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/ACLED_AnnualReport2020_WebMar2021_PubUpd.pdf

6. African Union. Communique of the 766th meeting of the Peace and Security Council. 2018. Available at https://www.peaceau.org/en/article/the-766th-meeting-of-the-au-peace-and-security-council-an-open-session-on-the-theme-africa-s-peace-and-security-landscape-by-the-year-2023-end-of-first-ten-year-implementation-plan-of-agenda-2063-a-prospective-analysis-of-peace-and-security-challenges

7. The APRM Africa Governance Report of 2019 identified 7 governance-related triggers of conflict: poverty, disruptive political transitions, continuous violence, the bad neighbourhood effect, lack of democracy or democratic accountability, self-serving leadership and population imbalance and socio-economic exclusion. Report available at https://www.aprm-au.org/publications/africa-governance-report/

8. Ibid

9. World Data Lab. World Poverty Clock.2021. Available at https://worldpoverty.io/map

10. Goodhand, J.2001. Violent Conflict, Poverty and Chronic Poverty. Available at http://www.chronicpoverty.org/uploads/publication_files/WP06_Goodhand.pdf

11. African Union. Statement of the Chairperson on the situation in Mali.2020. Available at https://au.int/en/pressreleases/20200818/statement-chairperson-situation-republic-mali

12. African Union. Communique of the 993rd meeting of the Peace and Security Council .2021. Available at https://www.peaceau.org/en/article/communique-of-the-993rd-meeting-of-the-psc-held-on-22-april-2021-on-the-situation-in-the-republic-of-chad

13. The UN classifies youth as those aged between 15 and 24 years of age, whilst the AU places them between the 15 and 35 age brackets.

14. African Union. African Youth Charter Signature and Ratification List. 2019. Available at https://au.int/sites/default/files/treaties/7789-sl-AFRICAN%20YOUTH%20CHARTER.pdf

15. Ibid

16. Inter-Parliamentary Union. 2021. Youth Participation in National Parliaments. Available at https://www.ipu.org/youth2021

17. Constitution of the Republic of Zimbabwe.2013. Available at https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Zimbabwe_2013.pdf

18. Nigeria Constitution (Alteration) Bill, 2016. Available at https://web.archive.org/web/20180619041908/http://yiaga.org/nottooyoungtorun/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/NotTooYoungToRun-Bill-HB.544-1.pdf

19. The AGA Platform is consisting of 6 members i.e., the AU Commission, the African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights, the African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights, the African Peer Review Mechanism and the African Union Advisory Board on Corruption.

20. African Union. Outcomes Statement: AGA Youth Consultations. 2021. Available at https://au.int/sites/default/files/newsevents/workingdocuments/39566-wd-continental_youth_consultation_-_outcome_statement.pdf