



**Statement of the AU Chairperson's Special Envoy
on Youth, Ms. Aya Chebbi to African Youth
Ministers**

ADDIS ABABA, 17 June 2020

Excellencies, it is my honor to address you today and brief on the challenges faced by young people in Africa since the outbreak of COVID-19 as well as present the recommendations they came out as a result of two months consultations series that my office (AU Office of the Youth Envoy) convened besides a recent continental wide consultation held last week with partners.

I. Virtual AU Youth Consultations Series on COVID-19

Since March 23rd, my office (AU Office of the Youth Envoy) convened 13 consultations of [focus groups discussions](#) with over 400 youth leaders from 42 African countries with an average of 25 participants per consultation.

Based on the outcomes of the focus group consultations, there were two main expectations from youth;

- First; the creation of a youth space within the African Union to engage youth in decision-making with continental efforts. Therefore, on May 6th, 2020, the African Union launched the [African Youth Front on Coronavirus](#) as a multi-stakeholders youth advocacy group to support the implementation of the African Continental Strategy for COVID-19 Pandemic. 20 networks have been identified as a result of the Virtual AU Youth Consultations including National Youth Councils, students, refugees, young women, entrepreneurs, movements, activists and other civil society actors. This makes the African Union (AU) the first intergovernmental organization to create a high level policy and advocacy framework for young people to co-lead Africa's response to the pandemic. The Youth Front held 5 meetings so far, with the participation and support of Commissioner of HRST, Commissioner of Social Affairs and Deputy Director of Africa CDC. The Youth Front submits regular policy briefs to the Africa Taskforce on Coronavirus through Africa CDC.
- The second outcome was the need for direct engagement, communication and dialogue with decision-makers. Therefore, we pioneered a series of [8 public intergenerational Webinars](#) with African leaders where, African Union commissioners, Special Envoys, AU organs and Regional Economic communities (RECs) engaged directly with youth concerns. Over **22,800** participated and enabled over **72,000** with timely needed information. The consultations methodology was based on co-designing the themes and outcomes in collaboration with youth from across the continent. We held [Pre-webinar](#)

[forums](#) to map youth initiatives and consult with youth to showcase their work relevant to each debated theme.

II. Virtual Africa Youth Policy Consultation

On 9 June 2020, the African Union Commission (including AU Office of the Youth Envoy and Youth Division), the UN Economic Commission for Africa and Generation Unlimited co-organized a Virtual Africa Youth Policy Consultation in response to COVID-19 under the theme: “Building Back Better with Young Africans”. This consultation focused on developing recommendations for this convening of the AU Specialized Technical Committee of Ministers of Youth, Culture and Sport.

We had 3849 participants; with 949 participants on Zoom out of 1731 registered and 2.900 participants on Facebook Live with more than 80% of participants under the age of 35 years old.

We received 69 questions and our survey attracted over 1500 respondents. We used breakout sessions as a method for focus group discussions and a plenary panel as a method to share regional examples and experiences.

I chaired these consultations and now I have the responsibility to present to you today the outcomes;

III. Challenges

During these consultations’ youth expressed concerns for their future in light of the pandemic. Data from the survey we run have indicated that the two main concerns of youth are job security and food security. Youth in informal settlements and refugee camps additionally emphasized the increase in human rights violations in terms of access to basic needs as well as police violence.

The pandemic is also having an unprecedented impact on educational systems since school closures came into effect from mid-February 2020. Moreover, the length of the closures is considered uncertain and are having a disproportionate impact on the disadvantaged youth, who have fewer to no educational options outside the school and generally lack access to e-learning tools and the Internet, which should be a right not a privilege but unfortunately 70% of Africa is

offline. African countries are facing enormous challenges in addressing the losses in, and impacts on, education due to poverty and inadequate technology and infrastructure. Vulnerable populations are left behind, especially rural youth who feel they are denied access to reliable information about the virus because of digital divide. More so, 51% of Africans don't have access to electricity. More than 2/3 of Africa does not have electricity or reliable sources of energy. With no energy, there's no digitalization across all sectors.

The survey results showed that COVID-19 has affected young people mostly through unemployment. Before the pandemic, it is estimated that African economies generate only 3 million formal jobs annually for an estimated 12 million youth entering the workforce in Africa every year. Approximately 60% of jobs in Africa are considered vulnerable, with only 19% of the population is covered by social insurance. The situation is likely to escalate as more youth transition into the labour force if current employment shortfalls continue, exacerbated by the health crisis.

Labour markets are still not robust enough, leaving many youth to migrate and seek jobs elsewhere, thus a loss to our countries' economies and a drain on demographic dividend returns. Growing numbers of educated youth are not gainfully employed, and yet have the skillsets and training. Female labour force participation still lags that of their male counterparts. During the current health crisis, young women are spending disproportionate time on domestic activities and caregiving, undermining their opportunities to generate an income. While young women's entrepreneurship, an untapped area for many countries, has tremendous potential.

These consultations have put a spotlight on the innovation of youth led initiatives in driving efforts to mitigate the spread of the virus. In this regard, youth consistently called for support from governments in these initiatives and hope for a future where they are empowered to drive progress and development on the continent. They have asked for support in the form of resourcing as well as training. Youth have also noted the gap between urban youth and rural youth and call for increased efforts to ensure better infrastructure for youth in rural settings.

IV. Youth Recommendations to African Ministers responsible for Youth

A. Education

1. Scale-up the use of e-learning with innovation in delivering quality education for all. The youth are proposing that you create an integrated digitized African library for all African students
2. Increase national budgeting for education to ensure accessibility whether its access to educational facilities, resources and materials, access for youth with disability as well as access to the internet
3. Align curriculum of education with Agenda 2063 to ensure that everybody has a sense of belonging

B. Innovation, Entrepreneurship and Digital Transformation

1. Close the digital divide to fulfill the commitment of African strategy for digital transformation particularly for rural youth, and, fund and invest in digitalization, this is not just “the new normal” during COVID-19 this is “the normal” and will continue as such. Therefore, African youth are asking you to form innovator and entrepreneurial ecosystems
2. Recognize, certify and create legal status for youth innovation during the response to COVID-19, with flexible taxation regime to young entrepreneurs.
3. Establish centres of Innovation & Excellence for youth with entrepreneurial curriculums that can match education with the market needs and support jobs for young entrepreneurs who can solve more continental challenges and create more jobs in Africa.

C. EMPLOYMENT

1. Adopt flexible regulations for youth in establishing their businesses, obtaining financial credit and resources to create the necessary conducive environment
2. Implement policies designed to bring more young women into the workforce
3. Diversify the economies to meet the growing skillsets of African youth and scale up collaboration with private sectors and investors, and support small and medium scale enterprises to grow and expand because this could be an avenue to creating more essential jobs.

D. HEALTH

1. Engage young professionals and scientists in the scientific conversation about the vaccine
2. Reduce cost of COVID_19 related supplies by having tax exemption on local manufacturers to encourage more local production as many youth organizations are now producing protective hygiene, protective gear and masks
3. Incentivise healthcare workers in African countries to reduce the number of youth migrating out of the continent

E. CIVIC & COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

When we put sign up choices for youth to pick from the breakout sessions themes, the Civic & Community engagement had the majority of registration which shows that young people are committed to giving back to their communities. What they need is your support.

1. Allocate resources for community based initiatives by investing in youth-led civil society organizations
2. Adopt stricter measures and laws to curb police violence in the communities towards youth, and create a safe reporting mechanism for injustices so when certain rights are restricted by drastic enforcement measures, the principles of non-discrimination, proportionality, necessity, and legality should be observed. Any allegations of human rights violations should be promptly investigated, and justice upheld while keeping the “whistleblowers” protected
3. Create permanent and revered seats and quotas for young people in the policy-decision making entities and platforms which is included in the Africa Youth Charter ratified by 39 member states.

I take this opportunity to urge the 16-member states who have not yet signed or ratified the Charter to do so because the youth Charter will eventually help institutionalize youth participation and provide employment. We have initiated this year a programme called, the African Youth Charter Hustlers to advocate for the implementation and effective reporting on the youth Charter.

Conclusion

To conclude I think, your excellencies, that building trust between young people and the government is key. We cannot beat a pandemic as governments without youth engagement who constitute the majority of our continent and countries.

We should not forget that before the lockdown youth were in the streets protesting and they have been asking since 2010, for “Jobs, Freedom & Dignity”.

Therefore, the exclusion of youth has not led our continent to the progress we aspire to. We have to understand that our generation is pained, hustling, surviving and young people in the streets are saying, “we may die of hunger and malnutrition but not from COVID-19”, that “it might be the same for me to drown in the Mediterranean or join a violent extremist group or die with coronavirus because I do not enjoy basic rights anyway as a young person”. The millennials are carrying a lot of pain, your excellencies and need a lot of healing that's why we continue to advocate for support of their mental health and wellbeing. That healing can come from getting out of this crisis, transitioning to more inclusive governance with youth.

Young people have been in their communities at the frontline of the response to COVID-19 but their stories, models and innovations of resilience are un-documented, un-projected and un-utilized by our ministries and this is the gap. The challenge for you now is to listen to young people, to translate your commitments into concrete actions and integrate the youth innovation in your national response plan, recognize these innovations, certify their prototypes to ensure they can scale up and go to the markets, set up youth recoveries funds and be accountable to youth on COVID-19 national funds, appoint youth advisors and hire youth tech gurus and youth campaigners who know how to get the needed information across, and can help our traditional bureaucratic institutions to digitize, youth can build the capacity of our governments.

Your excellencies, the average age of African leaders is 64, and the average age of Africa's population is 20. This gap is the largest in the world. The inclusion of youth is a matter not only of justice and rights but also of necessity, one on which the peace and stability of the continent depends on. We must focus on closing this gap to ensure institutional memory, democratic transition and digital transformation.

We need to move your excellencies into [intergenerational Co-Leadership](#), between decision makers and the youth who are out of the system so we can co-design the tables, co-create the policies and co-produce the solutions that work for our generation.

We've already created that platform of Co-leadership at the African union level through the African Youth Front on Coronavirus which works with Africa CDC to co-lead the response on continental

level and engage with commissioners and we encourage our member states to adopt co-leadership models at national levels.

I thank you