

Youth and economic development in the 21st century africa

[Life, Adolescence](#)



Youth and Economic Development in the 21st Century Africa By: Ikechukwu D. Ikerionwu Dept. of Peace & Conflict Studies, University of Massachusetts, Lowell, USA. Preamble In the context of youth and economic development, leadership is a multi-layered phenomenon characterized by two main features: 1. The economic challenges facing African youth warrant responsible leadership by governments and international partners; 2. As leaders, youth can themselves play an important role in the promotion of economic development.

This paper seeks to address these aspects of leadership by exploring seven main issues of economic development that are central to the well-being of youth in Africa: education and training; employment and migration; entrepreneurship; access to information and communication technology; health and HIV/AIDS; environmental and sustainable livelihoods; and participation in economic decision-making. The paper looks in particular at how governments have responded, how international partners have supported efforts, and how youth themselves are taking the lead in addressing these issues.

The main message is clear: while African governments are increasingly putting youth concerns at the heart of the development agenda, a lot more remains to be done. Both governments and international partners should commit to fully engage young Africans in all aspects of their programmes and initiatives that target youth and economic development. Youth have repeatedly demonstrated a willingness and an ability to contribute to the

development process from the identification of issues to implementation and monitoring.

However, to reap full benefits of their contributions, youth participation in programmes such as NEPAD, MDGs and PRSs needs to be strengthened. As motivated and inspired citizens, young people are agents of change with the potential for taking a leading role in tackling Africa's development challenges for themselves, their families and the society. The youth of today are the leaders of tomorrow. Education and Skills Training for African Youth

Young Africans need access to both decent formal education and opportunities to acquire a range of vocational and life skills to actively participate in all spheres of an increasingly knowledge-intensive society, today as young citizens and tomorrow as the continent's future leaders. Unfortunately, young people in Africa struggle to acquire an education that provides them with the right set of skills and knowledge. As a result, the transition from school-to-work is a major challenge such that many young Africans end up either unemployed or underemployed in the informal sector with little protection and prospects.

Governments and international partners have made concerted efforts in recent years to improve this situation. In particular, to achieve the goal of universal primary education, many African countries have directed much effort and resources to improving primary school enrolment. The abolishing of school fees at the primary level has been a major driving force to achieve this goal. In Malawi, for example, free primary school education has considerably increased the youth literacy level. Even while enrolments have

been increasing, the quality of education in many African countries appears to be on the decline.

Inadequate infrastructure and training facilities, poor and inappropriate curricula, and lack of well-trained and motivated teachers are among the main reasons explaining this decline. The Nigeria government is still having issues with the labour unions over the implementation of the N18, 000 (\$115. 38) minimum wage. Though access to primary education is a necessary first step and a fulfilment of a human right, it is also clear that it does not provide needed skills for a young African to compete in an increasingly competitive labour market.

Moreover, at the country level, a critical mass of secondary and higher education graduates are required in order to accelerate economic development. In most African countries, secondary schools are limited in capacity, which is largely due to inadequate budgetary resources for this sector. Consequently, the chances of young people proceeding to secondary school, not to mention tertiary institutions, are significantly hampered. To deal with this predicament, African governments and international partners must take a more holistic approach to education, broadening their focus from just primary education.

In this context, African girls and young women need special attention. Overall, in most of Africa, gender disparities continue to impede young girls' acquisition of a decent education and employable skills. This keeps young African girls away from their rightful place as agents of development and leaders of tomorrow. Fortunately, the gender situation has greatly improved

in recent years in some African countries. A number of them, such as Botswana, Lesotho, Mauritius, Namibia, Rwanda, Swaziland, Nigeria, Zimbabwe etc, are in fact on track to achieve the goal of eliminating gender disparities in primary education. 1] Other countries have turned to a range of measures to reduce the gender disparity in access to education - one illustration is the provision of free uniforms and books to girls in Kenya. There are also considerable regional disparities within countries in terms of education and educational attainments. In this regard, the uneven distribution of educational infrastructure in most African countries reflects the weak commitment of governments in addressing this issue. Most secondary schools and tertiary institutions in Africa are located in the cities, with rural pupils struggling for access.

This situation contributes to the persistent urban-bias that has so much distorted Africa's development. The difficulties of the school-to-work transition would be reduced if young people end up with skills that are demanded by employers. One approach is to design curricula to suit the changing needs of the labour market, or alternatively, to combine formal education with workbased training as has been adopted in Egypt. Different forms of training are also needed to address the limited skills of young Africans once they have left formal education.

In this context, African governments can provide public funded training or financial support for private provision of such facilities, which could focus on either general training or more specific vocational skills. Apprenticeships have been utilized in a number of African countries as a measure to address

skills and employability of out-of-school youth for example the National Open Apprenticeship Scheme in Nigeria. In 1987, the Government of River State in Nigeria launched an innovative programme dubbed the National Open Apprenticeship Scheme (NOAS) as an attempt to link education and training with the workplace.

The scheme provides vocational education and training to unemployed youth. It utilizes facilities such as workshops and technical instructors from private industries, government institutions, and by way of subcontracting arrangements, way-side craftsmen and tradesmen in the informal sector. Under this scheme, unemployed youth and school leavers are trained for a period of 6 to 36 months under reputable master craftsmen. They are also taught management, business and administrative skills.

The scheme has succeeded in training over 600, 000 unemployed youth in over 80 different trades out of which about two-thirds started their own micro-enterprise. A mobile training scheme dubbed School-On-Wheels programme introduced in 1990 has provided vocational training to over 21, 000 school leavers and other unskilled persons in rural areas. The programme is of a three-month duration, after which graduates are absorbed into the NOAS. Another related scheme is the Waste-to-Wealth Scheme under which youth are trained in the techniques of converting waste material into useful objects.

At least 8, 000 people have been trained under this scheme. [2] Besides the provision of training, the private and non-profit sectors also have a role in providing formal education at all levels. For example, religious bodies are

actively involved in the educational sector in Africa, even at the tertiary level. Since governments are constrained by limited financial resources, African leaders need to explore the use of public-private partnerships (PPPs) to overcome shortfalls in the education sector.

PPPs can also enhance the linkages (forward and backward) between the formal education sector and the private sector. This can in turn ensure that curricula are demand-driven, helping to improve the skills match between school leavers and requirements of employers. Trained and motivated young people can themselves play a substantial role through peer education initiatives. Peers can reach out either in an organized manner or informally to other youth, imparting information and knowledge on issues such as health and well-being.

Peer education can happen in small groups or through individual contact, and can take place in a variety of settings such as in schools and universities, clubs, churches, workplaces, on the street or in a shelter. In Africa, peer education has been used successfully for raising HIV/AIDS awareness and developing life-skills amongst vulnerable youth. Initiatives of development partners. Development partners have also played a major role in pushing the education and skills agenda forward in Africa and in promoting initiatives to increase education access and attainments throughout the continent.

One innovative project developed by the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) together with the Canadian Bureau for International Education aims at providing education and training to

participants in a number of African countries. Known as the CIDA Youth Education and Training Awards - Africa, the project focuses on young people already involved in non-governmental organizations and community groups. The education and training provided to winners of the awards include short courses and academic programmes.

Having these programmes in the country also helps stem brain drain. Youth Employment and the Challenges of Migration Having a job provides one not only with a source of income but also a basis for dignity and self-respect. To be leaders in the context of their families and in the broader community, young Africans need to secure a decent job. However, young people have a hard time in African job markets; with inadequate education and skills and few opportunities, most young Africans face a future of low-wage employment, unemployment and underemployment.

An increasing youth population adds to the pool of job seekers every year, worsening the situation. In Nigeria, over 300, 000 youth participate in the National Youth Service Corps scheme annually, but sadly, only about 5% secure decent jobs. The rest are either unemployed or underemployed. In Northern Nigeria and elsewhere in Africa, young women also face particular barriers in the labour market, much of which is attributable to cultural attitudes towards them.

The expansion of employment opportunities is far below the growth in the youth population because of a lack of appropriate technologies and investment. For example, Africa's continued dependence on rain-fed agriculture causes much underemployment among rural youth for most part

of the year. With little access to land, these youth lack educational, economic and cultural opportunities. As a result, young people consciously decide to move to the towns in the hope of greater chances for employment, as well as a more exciting life, causing massive urban drift.

Sadly, once in the big city, African youth lose hope of finding a decent job and are compelled to cross dangerous paths and waters to better pastures, with all too tragic consequences. It is no longer news that less than one-third of the thousands of young Africans who attempt to reach Europe through the Sahara desert and other illegal channels make it to their dream destinations. Another problem is the rising incidence of youthpoverty, crime, prostitution and drugs among youth, as well as the involvement in armed conflict - direct consequence of the lack of decent jobs.

In Nigeria one we have the Boko Haram sect, the Niger Delta militia etc. This is of particular concern, not only due to its profound impact on the lives of young people but for society as a whole. Tackling The Challenges Of Youth Employment For many decades, governments and international partners focused on macroeconomic stability and structural adjustment as a means to promote economic growth and thereby create jobs. The underlying faith in this approach was that these measures alone would lead to job creation and poverty reduction, for youth and adults alike.

There is now a growing consensus among governments and development partners that specific policy measures are required to tackle the main barriers to employment generation for Africa's youth. One relatively effective measure is the public works programme, which has been implemented in a

number of African countries with some success in creating jobs for unskilled youth. Public Works Programmes in Senegal With the assistance of the World Bank and the African Development Bank, the Senegalese government set up in 1989 a US\$33 million public works programme that targeted the growing number of unemployed youth.

The main objectives of the programme, which was administered by the Agence pour l'Execution de Travaux d'Interet Public contre le Sous-emploi (AGETIP), were to provide short-term employment to these young people through labour-intensive public works projects such as construction, rehabilitation and maintenance of public services, and provision of essential services. The work was subcontracted out to small and medium-scale enterprises. During the first phase of the programme, around 80, 000 jobs were created for young people in 416 projects in small-scale enterprises.

Overall, AGETIP has implemented 3, 226 projects resulting in the creation of 350, 000 temporary jobs annually. More importantly, the projects also led to the establishment of 6, 000 permanent jobs, an outcome that is not usually associated with a public works programme. [3] The International Labour Organization (ILO) is involved in a number of projects that target job creation for young people as part of their Employment Intensive Investment Programme (EIPP). EIIPs are public works-type projects in the area of infrastructure, and have been implemented in over 20 African countries.

Under the umbrella of this initiative and with assistance from donors, a number of projects in labour-based road construction and maintenance have been supported on the continent. Facing a dire situation in the labour

market, many young people stop actively searching for a job. A South African survey in 2000 revealed, for example, that 39 per cent of unemployed youth had stopped searching for employment. [4] Job-search assistance can be provided or funded by the government to help encourage African youth to re-engage with the labour market through activities like writing job applications and curriculum vitae, and preparing for interviews.

A number of global initiatives have been set up to accelerate efforts in tackling youth unemployment and underemployment. For example, the United Nations, along with the ILO and World Bank, established the Youth Employment Network (YEN) in 2001 to provide support to the global commitment of “ developing and implementing strategies that give young people everywhere a real chance to find decent and productive work” as embedded in the United Nations Millennium Declaration of 2000.

National and regional programmes aside, young people continually demonstrate their own ability to cope with the situation they face in the labour market. Promoting The Benefits Of Migration While Mitigating The Costs While migrating to an urban area is a rational act for a young person in search of a job and a better life, too often, the end result is poverty and exploitation. To rectify this, governments must look at job creation in rural areas, though these initiatives need to be both intensified and expanded.

At the same time, very little effort has been made in Africa to reduce emigration or to promote the return of emigrants. It is unreasonable for so many Africans living outside Africa (who are making giant strides) to return home. In response to this situation, the African Union has established a “

Strategic Framework for a Policy on Migration” with the goal of addressing the causes of internal and international migration and its challenges.

The ILO together with the European Commission has also set up a project on “ Managing Labour Migration for Development and Integration in the Maghreb, West Africa and East Africa”. This project has increased awareness of stakeholders on different aspects of labour migration, promoted understanding of its causes and consequences, and collected data and information, which are critically needed to develop comprehensive policy frameworks and labour migration management measures.

Youth and Entrepreneurship Given the right combination of motivation, ideas and opportunities, youth are more than able to establish productive and creative businesses. Engaging in entrepreneurship shifts young people from being “ job seekers” to “ job creators,” and also from social dependence to self-sufficiency. Many self-employed youth also contribute to the upkeep of their family, sometimes in a leading role in the absence of parents.

Despite these potential benefits entrepreneurship, the majority of youth continue to look up to the state for employment rather than creating their own jobs and employing others. This failure of young people to engage in entrepreneurship has also been attributed to a range of factors: sociocultural attitudes towards youth entrepreneurship, lack of entrepreneurial training in the school curriculum, incomplete market information, absence of business support and physical infrastructure, regulatory framework conditions, and in particular, poor access to finance.

The youth strongly recognized their involvement in small business development as an important vehicle for national development but lack of financial resources has always been a major constraint for youth entrepreneurship and business development. Owing to the lack of collateral and business experience, young people are considered a very high risk by lenders. The limited number of micro-finance institutions that target young people in business continues to constraint the development of youth entrepreneurship. On the gender front, very few young women in Africa engage in establishing and running their own enterprises.

For instance, in Zambia only around 5 per cent of females aged 15-19 are running enterprises as proprietors compared to 15 per cent among their male counterparts. While 25 per cent of female youth aged 20-24 are engaged in running enterprises in Zambia, as much as 40 per cent of male youth are self-employed. The Effect of Combination of Training And Funds Providing capital alone to young potential entrepreneurs is only part of the solution. Studies have shown that what is more effective is the provision of capital together with training in managerial and entrepreneurial skills.

In South Africa, for example, the Umsobomvu Youth Fund (UYF), a government-created development finance agency for skills development and employment creation for youth, has developed a number of initiatives such as micro loans for young entrepreneurs, the creation of a venture-capital fund underwritten by a mainstream bank with the UYF providing guarantees, and the development of a voucher programme to access business development services. Private institutions, especially non-profit

organizations, also play an important role in training and funding young entrepreneurs.

One example of this is TechnoServe's business plan competition: ' Believe, Begin, Become', which is supported by theGoogleFoundation, and now active in Ghana and Swaziland. Since 2002, TechnoServe's competitions have helped launch or expand 165 small and medium-scale enterprises that have generated US\$8. 2 million in additional revenues and created more than 1, 000 new jobs. In the international policy context, the Youth Employment Network (YEN) and the Commonwealth Youth Credit Initiative (CYCI), for instance, help promote youth entrepreneurship in a number of African countries.

Partnerships between such international institutions and the private sector have seen the creation and development of young entrepreneurs Young Africans can also benefit from the experiences of established business leaders. Through mentoring schemes, internships and training opportunities, young people can gain an insight into setting up and running a business, and importantly, how to avoid the potential pitfalls in the real world of business.

Governments need to encourage the private sector to take on this role. As with other areas of economic development addressed so far, one key weakness in the formulation of youth entrepreneurship initiatives is the inadequate involvement of youth in their design and implementation, which will be discussed later. Youth and ICT - A Powerful Combination for Promoting Leadership The information and communication technology (ICT) revolution has radically changed the world we live in.

Young people in particular have demonstrated an aptitude in developing, adopting and disseminating such technologies, and their leadership role in this sphere is evident throughout both the industrialized and developing world. In fact, it is common practice for adults to learn ICT skills from youth. ICT Is Cross-Cutting ICT adoption can be used both as a tool to promote youth as leaders in the ICT sector and to foster broader youth leadership. With an impact that is cross-cutting, ICT can, therefore, contribute to youth participation in a wide range of economic, social and political activities.

For example, new technologies can be used for improving access to and quality of education for African youth. With the necessary infrastructure, technologies like online learning can bring a high standard of education to remote, rural communities. Moreover, in a global economy characterized by skill-intensity, young Africans increasingly require a range of ICT skills in order to get a decent job. Equipping youth with such skills can also have a catalytic effect on innovation and entrepreneurship, contributing to economic development.

ICT entrepreneurship is evident on the streets of all African cities in vending kiosks, where young people provide such services as mobile phone calls, sale of recharge cards and repairs. The number of tele-centres in countries like Senegal and the proliferation of Internet cafes across the continent have also been a source of employment opportunities for youth. In Nigeria, we have computer village in Lagos, GSM village in Abuja etc, engaging thousands of youths in different spheres of ICT, thereby providing job opportunities for them.

Besides these small, informal businesses, ICT-related youth enterprise opportunities include: producing/reselling hardware, software and telecommunications products; data entry services; ICT-based business services; software customisation; distance learning; computer training; consultancy; content provision; communication (e-mail/Internet/mobile); data processing (small business information systems) and ICT-based manufacturing systems. African Youth also employ ICT to develop social enterprises.

For instance, the Mobile for Good (M4G) programme in Kenya. M4G is a social franchise project designed to use mobile technology to improve the lives of people in Kenya, the majority being young people. It aims to send essential health, employment and community content via SMS on mobile phones in order to inform and empower disadvantaged individuals. The pilot project, which started in September 2003 in Kibera, an informal settlement situated on the outskirts of Nairobi, has successfully evolved into a self-sustainable Kenyan owned and managed venture.

The project seeks to empower marginalized individuals by offering a unique SMS-based information service to disadvantaged communities. The services that have been developed include: Kazi560, a job information service for the casual jobs sector, Health Tips, which provides daily tips to subscribers about Breast Cancer, HIV/AIDS, and Diabetes, and a Community News service, which provides free, locally sourced news to those living in informal settlements in Kenya via SMS.

The Community News service reaches over 5, 000 people in Kibera. The information is collected by a group of 11 Youth Mobilizers who are all residents in the community. Information can vary from events, to health clinics, to jobs on offer. All the information is designed to promote economic and social development in communities and to provide a means of accessing information otherwise costly or unavailable. The success of M4G has been staggering.

The project has fulfilled its subscriber targets considerably ahead of schedule, with the number of subscribers now exceeding 30, 000. Hundreds of people have found employment through the jobs service, Kazi560. [5] ICT also facilitates youth participation in civic discussions, providing young people with a voice on a range of topics. Electronic fora involving African youth have been successfully undertaken by international agencies like the United Nations.

Such initiatives not only assist young people to exchange and develop ideas, but also help inform policy makers and practitioners. The success of the struggle for leadership change in Egypt and other places by the youth can be attributed to one of the effects of ICT. ICT Adoption In Africa Remains Insufficient Despite its advantages, ICT adoption in much of Africa remains low. For instance, there are only 0. 75 computer users per 100 inhabitants - this is to say that only a small proportion of young Africans have access to the Internet.

Moreover, due to differences in income and access to infrastructure, the digital-divide on the continent is demarcated not only by national boundaries

but also within countries. Fortunately, decreasing prices and recent advances, particularly in mobile telephony, have helped expand access to ICT on the continent, especially amongst the youth. Nonetheless, governments and partners have a lot more to do to eliminate disparities in ICT adoption. Governments should focus on: a pro-poor ICT policy; promotion of ICT investments in rural areas and public-private partnerships; financial and strategic support of ICT youth-led enterprises; career counseling for young people on ICT opportunities and different areas of specialization; promotion of affordable ICT rural infrastructure and local content; development of multipurpose community tele-centres in rural areas; and dissemination of best practices. One way of building capabilities and networks between public institutions (governments and universities) and the private sector is the support of technology parks and business incubators for the ICT sector, in particular to nurture youth-led ICT enterprises.

Egypt, Ghana, Morocco, Nigeria, Senegal, South Africa and Tunisia are pioneers in promoting ICT-youth led enterprises through such initiatives. International partners are also playing an important part in the promotion of information and communication technologies for development, known as ICT4D. For instance, the African Youth and Communication Technologies for Development (ICT4D) Network - AYIN- (www.ayinetwork.org) was established in 2005 as a pan-African platform for youth input into the African information society agenda.

It is a vision of a “ networked generation of young Africans empowering themselves and contributing to the continent’s active participation in the

Information Society". The network has commenced the implementation of its Action Plan with the development of strategies to promote youth involvement in policy development on the continent. Improving Health and Fighting HIV/AIDS Through Youth Leadership The ability of African youth to contribute to economic development and become leaders in all walks of life critically depends on their health status.

In Africa today, young people are, however, vulnerable to debilitating illnesses and health problems such as malaria, tuberculosis, water-borne diseases, maternal complications, and above all, HIV/AIDS. Consequences of HIV/AIDS for Development The HIV/AIDS pandemic, especially in Southern Africa, poses one of the greatest economic, social and political challenges of our time. AIDS reduces the earning capacity of affected individuals and increases their medical expenses, pushing families and households further into poverty, creating a vicious cycle of material deprivation and health problems. The disease leaves behind a generation of orphans, many of whom are left to be brought up by other relatives or are forced to fend for themselves. Besides the tragic consequences of the pandemic for individuals and their families, HIV/AIDS remains a major burden for affected countries; it severely hampers efforts of governments to improve the health status of the countries and achieve sustainable economic development, in particular by diverting scarce resources from other development priorities.

HIV/AIDS also reduces labour supply and productivity levels, which in turn have a negative impact on economic growth. This is nowhere more evident than in the education sector, where the disease is cutting back the numbers

of trained teachers and diminishing aspirations for achieving the Millennium Development Goal II of universal primary education by 2015. Young African Women Are The Most Vulnerable To HIV/AIDS Young Africans are more vulnerable to HIV infection than adults with young women being at the highest risk of getting the virus.

In terms of the vulnerability of young women, the figures are quite alarming - young women (aged 15-24) in sub-Saharan Africa are two and half times more likely to be infected than males in the same age group. In some areas, up to six times more women than men are affected in the 15-24 age group. [6] The vulnerability of young Africans to HIV infection stems from both physical and social aspects of their lives. Physical vulnerability results from the damaging effects of malnutrition and ailments such as bilharzia.

A weakened immune system, particularly for adolescence during growth spurts, significantly increases their susceptibility to becoming infected. HIV prevalence can also be attributed to a range of socio-economic factors such as: poverty, inequality, and social exclusion; low levels of education and lack of information; poor access to health services; and societal attitudes. Young women are especially vulnerable because of migration, poor living conditions in informal settlements, isolation and proneness to sexual exploitation and abuse.

The Need For Targeted Interventions The conventional approach to tackling HIV/AIDS focuses on changing people's behaviour in order to reduce HIV infection rates. Young people have been targeted by such campaigns via the media, youth centres and peer education. The most well known initiative

using this paradigm is the ABC campaign (Abstain, Be faithful and use a Condom). However, ABC initiatives fail to address the physical and social environment that creates the conditions for high infection rates.

The United Nations Secretary-General's report on young women in Southern Africa recognized this limitation and called for broader measures that also aim at creating safe places for young women, amongst other actions. [7] Youth As Key Partners African youth and their organizations have been already at the forefront of tackling HIV/AIDS in terms of raising awareness and developing life skills, and also supporting others such as orphans. In this respect, youth centres and peer education have proven to be one of the most effective initiatives undertaken by African youth.

For example, the Anti-Aids Youth Clubs in Ethiopia, with UNICEF support, youth clubs have sprung up in the country to fight stigma, discrimination and ignorance about HIV/AIDS. There are now more than 230 such clubs alone in Ethiopia's Somali region, where the stigma of the disease and societal attitudes make it particularly challenging to get the message out. In this region, the use of condoms is estimated to be as low as 0.5 per cent, and female genital mutilation, a major factor behind HIV transmission, is almost universal amongst women.

Youth clubs are more successful than government interventions because young people can more effectively influence their peers by using appropriate media to target them. A comment by one member of a club about music written for this purpose captures this point: "Young people don't stop in the street to read a banner they don't understand. But they listen to

the music and the lyrics". The songs written address such themes as prevention, stigma and friendship.

Other clubs use poetry and drama to get the messages across to other youth. Besides promoting HIV/AIDS awareness, these clubs also give young people a sense of responsibility and pride in regions where jobs are few and far between. [8] One limitation of peer education in the area of HIV prevention is that it often fails to reach young women, who are the most vulnerable. To rectify this situation, governments, partners and youth organizations need to consider targeted measures that focus on young vulnerable women.

Moreover, attention must also be given to addressing the causes of their vulnerability so that some of the contributing factors are tackled, including the danger of sexual exploitation and abuse. While there is a compelling need to focus on HIV/AIDS in many African countries, there must also be a concerted effort to improve the overall health situation of young Africans including improving access to sanitation and drinking water, increasing nutritional levels, and expanding preventive health programmes.

Broadening the focus of health services can help reduce stigmatisation and the subsequent reluctance of youth to use these services. In all initiatives, full participation of young people in the development and promotion of health-related policies and programmes must be encouraged to enable them to become agents of change in their communities. Above all, continued international cooperation and a collective global effort are necessary for the containment of the HIV/AIDS pandemic and other health challenges affecting young people in Africa.

The Role of Youth in Protecting the Environment and Promoting Sustainable Livelihoods As heirs to the environmental risks and hazards the world is producing today, ' it is imperative that the youth take on a leading role in protecting the environment and promoting sustainable livelihoods. [9] Africa faces a number of environmental risks and hazards that disproportionately affect young people, not only because they result in deteriorating physical conditions for both rural and urban dwellers. Erosion, pollution in all its forms, reduced biodiversity, over-exploitation of natural resources such as water and forests, and desertification, among many others, also severely compromise economic development and prosperity. Already, forest size in Africa has been drastically reduced over the last century, due to human activity, contributing to desertification and water scarcity. In many countries on the continent, access to clean drinking water may soon become a reason for conflict. In addition, the rate of urbanization in Africa poses an environmental challenge in waste management, access to water and sanitation facilities.

With only an estimated one-third of the total municipal waste on the continent formally disposed of, the amount of waste generated in African cities far exceeds the capacity of most municipalities. Already exposed to economic hardship, the youth need to take responsibility for the state of the environment by becoming full participants in society. But the question remains: Are young people sufficiently engaged? The voice of youth is an invaluable asset to environmental conservation and management.

Some governments and non-governmental organizations in Africa are committed to advancing the role and active involvement of youth in the

protection of the environment and the promotion of sustainable development. Initiatives include youth participation in advisory bodies such as youth councils within the context of Chapter 25 of Agenda 21, adopted at the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) and the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) held in Johannesburg in 2002.

The New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) also recognizes the importance of a healthy and productive environment and the role that the young people of Africa can play within this agenda. But commitment does not always mean action. For example, even though many African countries are signatories to various UN conventions, many have yet to be implemented. And, even in cases where conventions have been adopted and implemented, youth involvement has been at a minimum. Youth Taking Leadership The best prospect for the environment in Africa is an empowered youth.

The involvement of youth in environment and development decision-making at the local, national and regional levels is critical to the implementation of sustainable development policies. Many youth organizations are already taking a leading role in the area of environmental protection. For example, in January 1993, Environment JEUnesse (ENJEU, or Environment- Youth), Quebec's youth environmentalist network, took the initiative to create a Francophone network of youth organizations for environment and development.

The essential aspect of ENJEU's action plan is to mobilize and encourage youth to come together regionally in each major pocket of the Francophone world, including Africa. Some youth organizations in Africa such as Tensing, Internationally Committed Youth (ICY), YMCA/YWCA for Africa, Organization for International Resource Management, and Friends of the Earth clubs, have carried out education campaigns, tree planting and waste management exercises in their respective communities, especially during the commemoration of the World Environment Day.

Other best practices of youth involvement include “ For the Love of Water” in Botswana, “ Uniting Youth across Northern Africa”, “ Students on the Move” in Uganda, ‘ Painting Ghana Green” and “ Ecological Youth of Angola” among others. To improve awareness across the board, governments must integrate environmental issues into school curricula and training programmes for teachers. Youth in schools, communities and organizations must be educated on sustainable ways of living such as recycling and the sustainable use of environmental-friendly technologies.

An example is the efforts of the Environmental Education Association of Southern Africa and Friends of the Earth clubs in the region. In Angola, Juventude Ecologica Angolana (JEA) (The Ecological Youth of Angola) is a non-profit environmental NGO, which was established in 1991 with the primary purpose of promoting environmental conservation and sustainable development through the involvement and participation of young people in environmental education and active learning processes and activities. JEA

now has over 5, 000 conservation volunteers and environmental educators based in eight of Angola's provinces.

These young volunteers address different environmental issues facing the country: sanitation, biodiversity loss, soil erosion, desertification, and urban solid waste. The organization has developed programmes and projects such as the Communication, Education and Public Awareness (CEPA) initiative, capacity building, database management, clean-up and waste recycling campaigns, research and environmental assessment, and tree planting. In June 2002, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) recognized the contribution of this organization by awarding it the UNEP Global 500 Youth Environmental Award. 10] Environmental And Sustainable Livelihoods Is Cross-Cutting Promoting environmental and sustainable livelihoods has a number of indirect, but nonetheless important benefits for countries in Africa. For example, there is a double dividend from developing sustainable technologies in the area of renewable energies. On the one hand, these technologies reduce the emission of greenhouse gases, while at the same time they can be generators of employment for vulnerable youth. Creating Jobs Under the Sun

The Kibera Community Youth Project (KCYP) produces solar panels in a small workshop in the middle of Kibera, Kenya's largest informal settlement. Using skills and equipment passed on to them by a British volunteer, young people in this project are involved in all aspects of production. The solar panels are sold to power radios and charge mobile phones and rechargeable batteries, services that are in high demand in an area where electricity supply is erratic

at best. [11] Many of the young people involved in KCYP have never had a job before and often live in jobless households.

This project provides them with an opportunity to earn an income, while the simple technology helps improve people's lives in a sustainable way. To further enhance such synergies, governments in collaboration with youth organizations should initiate programmes that promote the participation of African youth in reforestation, combating desertification, waste management, recycling and other environmental practices. Youth participation in such programmes would provide training and encourage awareness and action, while also generating potential income-generating activities and employment opportunities.

Youth Participation in Economic Decision-Making Youth in Africa face specific challenges in the areas of education, employment, migration, entrepreneurship, ICT, health and environmental and sustainable livelihoods. To address these issues, African governments must prioritize youth in policy-making, or forego the chance of meeting their development goals. Until recently, policymakers rarely included youth in the decision-making process or even consulted with them on their concerns. Cultural attitudes have been a major stumbling block to establishing inter-generational dialogue, not just in Africa but also globally.

Traditionally, wisdom was seen as an increasing function of age, and subsequently, adult leaders and policymakers took it upon themselves to make decisions on behalf of youth. But such policymaking largely resulted in inappropriate policies that failed to address the requisite needs and

aspirations of youth. Having incidentally proven their ability to take leadership in the area of economic development, acting as agents of change, this traditional attitude requires urgent modification. Justifying youth participation It would appear to the onlooker that the case for including youth in policymaking is compelling.

Nonetheless, it has been necessary to argue why economic decision-making should be both inclusive and youth-focused. For example, the UNFPA's report "The Case for Investing in Young People as Part of a National Poverty Reduction Strategy" offers a number of arguments: 1. Equitable distribution of resources - Young people make up a large proportion of the population and the poor; 2. Achieving the MDGs - Five goals explicitly refer to young people in terms of educational attainment, gender balance in education, improved maternal health, combating HIV/AIDS and other diseases, and developing decent employment opportunities for young people; 3.

Economic benefits - By investing in education and health, governments can increase productivity and economic growth; 4. Youth poverty requires special attention - Young people experience particular vulnerabilities that make them prone to suffering from poverty, unemployment, etc; 5. Long-term benefits - Through investing in young people, it is possible to embark on the demographic transition by lowering population growth; and by improving the situation of youth, countries can decrease the chance that they will later become involved in criminal activity and civil conflict.

Youth participation in major development strategies - PRSPs, MDGs and NEPAD New initiatives now dominate the development agenda on the

continent, including Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs), the quest to achieve the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), and the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD). These approaches are a departure from the past with a shift to a focus on pro-poor policies, participatory and consultative processes, and ownership by countries. Though youth often figure prominently on paper, their involvement in any of these initiatives has usually been limited.

For instance, in a review of 31 completed PRSPs, over half mention that youth were consulted as a group as part of the PRSP process. However, the initiatives targeting youth have been piecemeal and inadequate in their scale and impact. [12] It is encouraging that the more recent PRSPs are more likely to have a major youth focus. In terms of youth employment, another analysis of PRSPs found that out of 21 African PRSPs, only 11 had at least one core section analyzing the issue. [13]

Clearly, there is a lot more governments could do to improve youth participation in the PRS process, particularly as part of the next generation of strategies. African governments should complement efforts of both the UN and youth organizations to achieve these goals. A good example of this is the TPT scheme below. Tackling Poverty Together (TPT) aims to enhance the role of African youth in poverty reduction strategies. The project was established by the United Nations Department of Social and Economic Affairs' Programme on Youth together with the National Council of Swedish Youth Organizations (LSU).

Other UN agencies and the Economic Commission for Africa provided technical support to the project. The TPT project brought together teams of youth from six African countries, Ghana, Kenya, Malawi, Tanzania, Uganda, and Zambia, along with a youth team from Sweden. Through workshops and ongoing support, these teams developed strategies and action plans consisting of concrete steps to improve the inclusion of youth in poverty reduction efforts in their respective countries. [14]

Youth have also been actively involved in the MDG agenda as reflected by their participation and articulation of ideas at various international fora including the World Youth Summits. For instance, in 2005 a group of international youth leaders representing a range of non-governmental organizations, including representatives from Africa, prepared a report, “Youth and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs): Challenges and Opportunities for Implementation”. [15] This report outlines how young people can be included and empowered as part of strategies for achieving the MDGs.

The aim is that the report can be used as a lobby tool and guide for programmatic action, but ultimately, it is also a call to all member States, UN specialized agencies, and civil society to create mechanisms for youth to participate in the implementation of the MDGs and take advantage of the work and activities youth are already leading. In 2005, the NEPAD Youth Summit was organized to launch a broad social movement to promote youth participation in the implementation and monitoring of NEPAD at the country level.

The establishment of NEPAD e-Africa Youth Programme is another platform that aims to promote youth involvement in the implementation of NEPAD. This initiative seeks to build a cadre of young people who will raise awareness on the issues of the information society and serve as active participants in building an inclusive information society in their countries.

Conclusion Young people in Africa have enormous potential that could be harnessed for promoting economic development on the continent.

African governments and international partners, therefore, need to focus policy initiatives and resources on improving the leadership role of African youth. The success of such interventions depends on the participation of young people in all aspects of the public policy process from the crafting of economic policies to their implementation, and subsequently, monitoring and evaluation. In particular, youth need to be part of the current development agenda in terms of poverty-reduction strategies, meeting the MDGs, and implementing the objectives of NEPAD.

Young people need to have opportunities to carry out their activities. At the same time, governments and international partners can provide technical and financial support to youth in order for them to fulfil their potential as agents of change. To achieve this goal, practical and achievable measures need to be put in place by both governments and international partners, including:

- Strengthening the capacity of youth clubs, associations and organizations at community and national levels;
- Promoting interaction between economic policy makers, international partners and youth to learn about their problems and experiences;
- Instituting regular consultations with

youth organizations to get their inputs into the development process; and - Promoting youth leadership at local, national, subregional and global levels through regular interface with community and national authorities.

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