

# The Quest for Youth Inclusion in the African Politics: Trends, Challenges, and Prospects

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Rec date: Nov 20, 2016; Acc date: Dec 03, 2016; Pub date: Dec 08, 2016

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## Abstract

At the global level, there seems to be an understanding that youth are significant dividends of the global population, such that they need to be included in every decision-making process. They are also recognized as key agents of socio-economic and political movers of the society. Despite this fact, on the ground, youth are marginalized and excluded from the political and important decision making processes. This is truer in Africa than elsewhere in the world. Most politicians in Africa are failing to recognize this basic concern of the continent. Thus, the objective of this paper is to quest the youth inclusion in the African politics, which has been addressed by making a critical analysis on the trends, challenges, and prospects of youth participation in the political discourses of Africa. To address the objective of the study, secondary sources of data were utilized. After amassing all necessary data, qualitative methods of analysis in the forms of construction and interpretation were utilized to analyze and give a condensed picture of the study. Accordingly, the results of the study revealed that despite the fact that youth account the high proportion (seventy percent and more) of the African population, they are extremely excluded from socio-economic and political spheres. Though some legal protections and advocacies have been attempted by African countries, most of youth-related policies and programs are paper values. Hence, it is recommended that African countries should create enabling and youth-friendly environments that pave the way for an effective and meaningful youth political participations. Likewise, facilitating youth inclusion in the national and local electoral and consultation processes is another means for upgrading the level of political participation of youth. Finally, if the countries are not proactive towards their youth population, it may become a ticking political time bomb. Thus, young people should have a voice in their own future.

**Keywords:** Youth; Politics; Inclusion; Trend; Challenges; Prospects; Africa

## Introduction

Youth constitute a fifth of the World's population [1]. Meanwhile, their participation in the political discourses is very limited. Globally, the average age of parliamentarians is 53. The minimum age for competing to the parliamentary candidacy is 25 years [2]. This puts into question the inclusion of young peoples in the political spheres and processes. Youth have been recognized for their creative skills and innovative ideas. If we look at critically the major political changes and dynamism, youth are at the centre of the furculum. They mostly serve as catalysts for the changes of undemocratic governments and their political systems. The 2011/2012 Arab States popular uprisings were the cases in point. However, due to unfavorable legal architectures, low economic conditions and different discriminatory practices, their contributions and roles in the political arenas were extremely limited. As a result, their involvement in the political process is informal and not yet well recorded.

Given the fact that Africa is young in democracy and its political institutions are not well established, youth are excluded from important decision making processes. Most often than not, governments and policy makers in Africa are reluctant to include youth in the formal political systems. Nowadays, however; a marginal improvement has been shown in Africa, partly because of the rising consciousness of states and the external pressures including

globalization and democratizations, which give due emphasis for the youth participation in the political and economic spheres of influences.

In Africa, consistently youth are correlate with violence. Indeed, the young population in Africa is growing at an alarming rate. Nonetheless, this segment of the population is unemployed and lives in an extremely discrepant way of life. That is why most young peoples of the continent get into violence than harnessing positive and real changes in their communities [3]. Nowadays, it is common to find that most African youth are drawn into gangs and predatory activities. Scholars pointed out that this could be a response to their marginalization and social and economic exclusions.

Recent reports of the World Bank and UNDP indicated that the youth accounts for more than seventy percent of the Africa's population. Yet, regardless of their numerical importance and the historical relevance throughout the region, they have been neglected from political arenas [4]. As a result of lack of political participation of youth in the continent, most the younger population is disorganized, unemployed, and vulnerable to radical ideas such that leading demonstrations against governments. This has been seen in Sierra Leone, where the disillusioned and unemployed youth had played a great role in establishing the revolutionary united front (RUF) and in Rwanda where the youth were at the center in the genocidal. By taking these lacunas into consideration, this paper has thus an objective of questing the inclusion of youth in the African politics and the way they would be included in the political affairs of their respective countries.

## Conceptualization of the Study

Even though the term youth is widely reviewed in literatures, however, there is not yet a rigid and precise definition of it. Some agreed that it encompasses the age bracket that extends from 15 to 24 years (for example, United Nations), while others stretch it from 15 to 35 years. Therefore, the historical background, the socio-economic and political realities and situations on the ground are determinants to define youth of a nation or an institution [5].

To contextualize the term, it is pertinent to see some of the definitions given by different authors and institutions. For example, free dictionary (2011) defines youth as “the time of life between childhood and maturity”. Without identifying the age range where the youth is found, the Oxford dictionary also defines Youth as “the period between childhood and adult age”. Others, such as Macmillan dictionary 2013 and Merriam-Webster 2012 also define youth as “the time of life when one is young, but often means the time between childhood and adulthood (maturity)” [6,7]. From here, we can understand that the definitions of youth to a specific age range varies, as youth is not defined chronologically as a stage that can be tied to specific age ranges; nor can its end point be linked to specific activities, such as taking unpaid work or having sexual relations [8]. This is in line with the sociologists’ perspective of youth. They argued that youth is just a word which has come into existence as a social construction. Hence, it is not possible to have a single and commonly agreed definition of it. Above all, though the UN defines youth as the age cohort of 15-24, the Secretary-General of UN once said that the definition of youth varies in different societies around the world. So, this entails that meaning of youth by age vary drastically across different societies and institutions [9].

The same is true in Africa. The national youth policies of different countries in Africa define the youth in different ways. For example, the South African youth policy (NYP) defines youth as those between 14 and 35 years of age, the Kenyan NYP uses 15-30 as a marker and the Nigerian NYP defines as those between 18 and 35 [10].

According to the African youth charter youth or young people shall refer to every person between the ages of 15 and 35 years. This definition takes into consideration the development realities of Africa and defines youth in the context of Africa. Though setting the age range was vigorously argumentative among African youth, politicians, and experts; finally, since they got this age bracket as the actual reflection of Africa, heads of states ratified it.

Therefore, in this paper; youth has been defined as a person who is found in the age cohort of 15 to 35, considering the fact that the study is focusing on all over Africa and different countries define the youth in different ways and age brackets. As a result, taking this age cohort seems to be representative and sound.

## Trends of Political Participation of African Youth

*“I think it is true to say that people don’t engage with the word politics but it’s often the way it’s presented (that is the problem). Quite a lot of young people are interested in big issues-climate change, global poverty, war - they are interested in politics in this way because it’s not presented as this highbrow, closed group.”*

*Onyeka Igwe, a producer at Catch 21, March 2010*

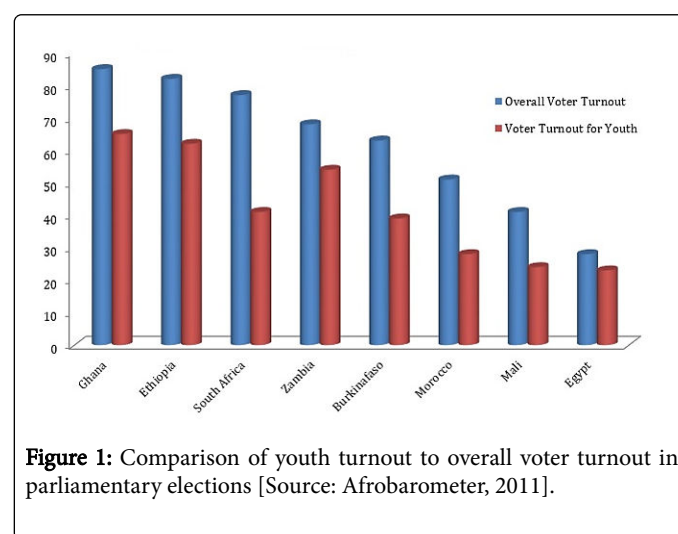
The above quoted speech definitely reflects what is happening in Africa today. Youth are politically active populations of Africa.

Nonetheless, the way the government and political parties approach them is non-inviting. The long-established structures of power in Africa persistently exclude the youth from political systems [11].

Over the past few decades, the policy formulation to involve youth in the decision-making process has increased tremendously [12]. Meanwhile, the actual youth participation in different for as of African such as youth organizations, parliament and council is extremely limited. But some attempts have been seen among the West African regional blocs in which the Mano River Union Youth Parliament can be typically mentioned. At the continental level, the African Youth Parliament is also another instance for the structural move of Africa as far as youth inclusion in the political spheres of the continent is concerned [13]. In the same vein, youth’ involvement in various youth-based advocacy groups like poverty reduction strategy papers (PRSPs) should not be undermined.

In Africa, youth participation in voting and election processes has shown a decreasing trend since few years ago. Whether in political parties or social institutions, youth are less participating. The non-inclusivity of the political parties’ program is one of the fundamental reasons for the low participation of the young peoples in such relevant areas. For example, according to the UNDP (2012), the youth voter turnout of African countries revealed that youth voters are less participated than older citizens [14].

Even though youth’ participation is not much pronounced in Africa, but their will and desire in the day to day social, economic, and political activities of their countries remains high. So, if there is a favorable legal ground for youth, they can invest their efforts, knowledge, and skill in those aspects. However, what has existed in Africa is mostly unfriendly and uninviting. Politicians are not usually interested in young people and they see youth as their power-grabbers. In the political history of Africa, it is rare to find a president or prime minister who is below 60 years old. This is a problem by itself. Youth may start to lose hope and consider that they have no any part in the political aspects. According to Afrobarometer [15] African youth are less participating in electoral democracies and less violent they are [15] (Figure 1).



**Figure 1:** Comparison of youth turnout to overall voter turnout in parliamentary elections [Source: Afrobarometer, 2011].

From the above chart, one can understand that in the electoral processes of Africa, youth are not much participated and represented. This is truer in countries that follow the parliamentary system of

government. Hence, African countries should do more to involve youth in their elections in particular and political systems in general.

### The regional and national efforts to involve youth in the political system

**At the regional level:** In these days, at the national and regional level, there are some initiatives to inculcate the youth' issues into developmental agendas. For example, the African Union has stepped forward in addressing the youth issues. Its progress has been manifested in the NEPAD's program of action that underpins the youth to have been given with youth desk such that young people will participate during policy adoptions and articulations. The adoption of the African Youth charter, which is currently ratified by 23 African countries and signed by 37 nations, is also another legal step taken up by the AU. Furthermore, the AU is praised for its second education plan of action (2006-2015), which underpins the promotion of education throughout Africa.

Finally, the espousal of 2009-2018 ten-year AU plan of action for youth empowerment and development, the celebration of the African youth day and the implementation of the AU youth volunteer corps program are the notable achievements of AU to enhance the level of youth in Africa [16].

**At the national level:** At the national level, most countries of Africa have started to recognize the role and importance of youth that they have a big plus towards the sustainable development of these countries. The world program of action for youth had impacted Africa positively. If we see most African nations, they have adopted the national youth policies and institute a national youth representative body. Moreover, there seem resemblances of the African governments to involve young people as partners in various developmental aspects. Practically, however, youth are passive and reactive to decisions affecting them due to the lack of implementation of the policies and programs developed by respective governments. Similarly, many of the youth policies of these countries have numbers of pitfalls and challenges. One among others is while these policies were framed, youth were not consulted adequately. Therefore, national youth policies should be re-developed by approaching the youth. Complementarities between these policies and the legislations of every country are very essential to involve young peoples to the decision-making processes.

In general, the context of youth inclusion in various domains in Africa widely varies. Some had good experiences, but others not. For instance, countries such as Kenya and Tunisia have understood that unemployment is one of the biggest hurdles for the active involvements of youth in the political foras. As a result, they developed young peoples' entrepreneurship programs and employing youth to reduce the rampant unemployment rate in their respective countries. The West African countries are also trying to engage their youth into productive roles through extending Public works programs for them.

### Prospects of youth inclusion in the African politics

**International recognition of the importance of youth participation in politics:** The UN and its agencies, World Bank, International Monetary Fund, and other multinational corporations are pressurizing member nations to take into account the youth in their policies, programs, and strategies. Despite such endeavors, the pace of individual countries in integrating the youth into their national policies is largely retarded.

Just like the European Union, the African Union should also strive for the implementation of the youth related protocols and agreements. In 2013, the secretary general of the European youth forum strongly reminds Europe to consider the youth in every aspect of the continent. Though he had spoken about Europe, but it has also a message for our African governments. He said that *"Young people must be at the heart of the 2014 European elections as young people's involvement in politics will increase the quality of European democracy. National political parties need to significantly change their approach in order to engage youth in the campaign."*

**Adoption and ratification of youth policies at the regional and national levels:** By recognizing the importance of effective youth political participation, most African countries adopt and ratify the African Youth Policy. This is a good progress for the betterment of the youth. In their policy making process and structures, the nations also take some initiatives to involve youth through establishing some youth organizations and governance structures. At the regional level, the AU has commenced specific initiatives to create a framework for improving the active involvement of youth in its programs. Given the fact that the empowerment, development, and leadership issues of the youth are dynamic in their very nature, AU is re-thinking the means to improve the current youth mechanisms. It includes, but not only confined, the institutionalization of a Pan-African youth federation.

**The challenges of youth inclusion in the African politics:** Opportunities could not excel due to challenges and constraints that impinge the practical implementation of African governments' and civil societies' youth-oriented action plans. Lack of understanding of the benefits of the youth engagement in the policy and program of action by African governments is the first of problems that challenge youth participation in African politics. Limited capacity, skill, resource, and tools are also other hindrances for the youth [17].

**Little space for youth in the political environment:** In Africa, there are no wider political spaces for youth to have a chance to make their voices heard and to shape their future destinies. When youth are continually excluded from decision making processes, on their own and societal affairs by and large, they will face the psychological trauma of hopelessness and misery in their life. Africa is known by its repeated promises for its youth. Better education, good jobs, political room for youth is the common slogans of politicians. Sadly enough, none of them had made them true in actual contexts.

From its demographic importance, it is unquestionable that youth deserve a huge share of developmental investments. So, addressing issues concerning the youth should remain salient in Africa in particular and the global community in general. Therefore, as Kofi Anan, the then UN secretary general said: *"Young people should be in the forefront of global change and innovation. Empowered, they can be agents of development and peace. If, however, they are left on society's margins, all of us will be impoverished. Let us ensure that all young people have every opportunity to participate fully in the lives of the societies"*.

**Youth unemployment:** The youth unemployment is very rampant throughout Africa. Unless it has been managed early, it would be a ticking political time bomb. Most social implisions in the Northern part of Africa were chiefly the results of youth joblessness.

Despite the AU youth Charter, which specifies that *"every young person shall have the right to social, economic, political, and cultural development with due regard to their freedom and identity and in the equal enjoyment of the common heritage of mankind"*, the majority of

the Africa youth are leading a worst life due to a widespread unemployment and detachment from income generating schemes.

This has been reflected by Greg Nicolson, who said once upon a time: *“Youth issues have become political issues. Each year on Youth Day, we hear of the crisis of education and unemployment. But as politicians use the “youth” to further their campaigns to elect, they fail to acknowledge many of the struggles young South Africans face.”* Jacob Zuma also supported this idea while he had a speech in 1976 in Newcastle about the students uprising in South Africa. He underlined that out of the total unemployment rate in South Africa, 72% occupied by those who were under the age of 34. He additionally stated that youth unemployment in South Africa triggers the potential of youth to get into drug and alcohol abuse, social instability, and xenophobia.

Furthermore, the jobless young people are vulnerable to problems of education and health. Meanwhile, most Politicians fail to recognize this great concern of the continent. Because of their economic crisis, youth are deterred from their political participation. This is argued by some scholars that it could be a strategic formula (but a failed formula in actual senses) of politicians to weaken the competitiveness and the revolution of youth towards government.

## What Should be Done?

### Establishing legal frameworks for the political participation of youth

Adopting a youth-inclusive legal framework is an essential and primary step in mainstreaming the youth in the political aspects of a country. It would allow youth to participate formally and improve their political roles in their societies. The election is one of such means that political rights are exercised. In this particular case, the formalities and procedures of election should be friendly and take the conditions of youth into consideration. It could be like making the age limit for voting to be youth-inclusive and establishing favourable legal conditions to enable youth to actively involved in elections.

### Empowering youth

Both politically and economically, African youth are not at in the orbit. They are rather observers of their older generations. So, it indicates that youth should be empowered to actively participate in the economic and political areas. The first step in empowering youth should start from the employment creation and integrating them into entrepreneurial activities whereby they would think then about how they will impact the inclusive political momentum of their country. Therefore, exposing youth into the working environments and supporting their entrepreneurship and strengthen the youth cooperatives and micro and small business enterprises has a big plus to laid a foundation for the political involvement of young peoples.

Researchers such as Milton Mutto [18]. shows that young peoples in Africa have an experience of being marginalized from the political and other important decision-making processes [18]. This in turn contributes to youth to feel hopelessness and powerlessness. This is also mentioned as one of the pushing factors for the young people to tend into illegal activities with a hope to be heard by the government and the public as well. For this reason, various forms of projects and programs should be developed to allow youth to participate in political and development agendas. Such programs may include, inter alia; the youth networks, youth-centered capacity building programs,

advocacies, organizing and strengthening the youth clubs and associations and mainstreaming youth and their issues in the countries policies and programs. Countries should also frame a quota or any kind of means to enable youth to have a representative from the local assemblies to the national parliament.

### Youth political sensitization and civic engagement

Media is one of the major instruments to raise the awareness level of youth thereby they can exercise their political rights and influence the decision of governments. So, sensitizing the youth and the general community is a means to greater involvement in wider-angle of socio-economic and political aspects [19,20]. On the other hand, youth participation in civic associations like community and religious groups will assist them to share information, foster leadership skills and to engage in political communities for example, Howe [20] indicated that those who are considerably engaged in religious associations are more likely to participate in their country's voting contest than who are not [20]. Similarly, the research done by McFarland and Thomas also revealed that in the United States of America, youth who are participated in social (voluntary) associations are more likely to involve in the political aspects of US. From here, one can understand that youth should be exposed to Medias and civic associations to increase their future political participations.

In a nutshell, as clearly stipulated in the African Youth Charter, African countries should establish, promote, and encourage Media to transmit information that benefits the youth. Furthermore, education and training should also provide for young people to know and actively participate in the democratization, governance, and political fields of their countries.

## Conclusion and Recommendation

### Conclusion

The youth dividend in Africa is significant. Meanwhile, the attention given to it is considerably limited. If the young population in Africa is utilized properly, it would be a potential resource to uplift the continent and to see the Africa everybody wants. Unless and otherwise, as we have seen during the 2011/12 Arab uprising and popular demonstration, the youth of Africa would become a threat for the governments that exclude the issues of this segment of the population. So, youth inclusion in the political aspects of Africa is very critical in a sense that it is a great machinery to reinvent the governance structure of Africa. Therefore, creating an enabling and equitable environment for youth in Africa is unquestionable.

### Recommendation

As the findings of the study revealed that the youth in Africa are largely excluded from the political discourses of the continent. Thus, to bring youth into the political foras of Africa and to utilize their immense potential, the following recommendations are provided.

From the global to the national and local levels, the youth-related issues should be the priority areas. Though policy adoptions are important steps towards youth inclusions, their implementations are of paramount importance. Therefore, in every developmental agenda, youth should place in the forefront. In effect, it could be possible to utilize the full capacity of these politically and economically active segments of the population.

Africa and individual states have to involve youth in all levels and areas of policy making and developmental plans. For doing so, a national disaggregated data about the youth and their participation is highly required. If Africans can do that, it will be able to make informed and evidence-based decisions.

One of the findings of the study shows that young Africans are largely marginalized from political processes and most of them feel hopelessness about their futures and their inclusion in various decision making processes. They thought that violence could be a viable solution to get what they lost because of irresponsible governments. Therefore, it is an important message for African governments to be aware of that if they continue as usual, they will confront with the young people who is revolting and restless. The Arab revolt was a good example for this. Therefore, youth participation and representation from local to national and international level is a timely and long-lasting solution.

At the continental level, a clear and implementable plan of action that sketches the youth-related programs in different time frameworks is very essential. A very potential area but highly unutilized in the implementations of youth programs in Africa is around the regional economic communities (RECs). In the present days, RECs are excelling in meeting various developmental agendas of the continent. However, in the case of integration of Youth programs towards such RECs is very minimal. Hence, like security and economic developments, youth agenda should also be the targets of RECs.

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