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Africa's apathy gap

Africa is a youthful continent, but its old people call the shots

When the United Nations' member states adopted the Sustainable Development Goals two years ago, they committed themselves to reduce substantially 'the proportion of youth not in employment, education, or training'. That commitment will be virtually impossible to fulfil, unless political participation by young people increases considerably.

Young people are critical to progress. As US president Barack Obama put it in a 2015 speech in Nairobi, 'no country can achieve its full potential unless it draws on the talents of all its people'. And youth now comprise a large share of those people – 18 percent of the world's population, to be precise. The share is even larger in much of the developing world. The median age of Africa's population is just 19.5 years.

Given their numbers, not to mention rising education and literacy rates, young people can make a world of difference, shaping political discourse and electoral outcomes. But that requires them to be engaged and active.

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In the United Kingdom, most young people wish to remain in the European Union. As a Lord Ashcroft poll showed, 73 per cent of those aged 18-24, and 62 per cent of those aged 25-34, voted accordingly in last year's referendum. But most young British did not actually show up to cast their votes, allowing the UK's older, predominantly pro-Brexit cohorts to win the day.

Presumably having learned their lesson from the Brexit referendum, young Britons contributed to an unexpected victory for Labour in June's snap general election. In Kenya's presidential election, held last month, 51 per cent of registered voters were below the age of 35 years. Although the Supreme Court annulled the results and ordered a fresh vote, owing to electoral irregularities and illegalities, large numbers of young people are likely to turn out again.

Unfortunately, Kenya is the exception that proves the rule. Political apathy among young people, like that seen in the Brexit referendum, remains pervasive worldwide. In many regions of Africa, for example, young people are disillusioned with politics, convinced that wealthy older people will always prevail and advance their own interests, often at the expense of younger generations.

This sense of disempowerment is threatening to turn the developing world's youth bulge into a youth curse – with serious potential consequences. The Arab Spring uprisings, which led to violence and instability in most affected countries, were fuelled largely by desperate young people demanding rights and opportunities.

To avoid such outcomes, young people need to be part of their countries' political life, able to advance their own vision of the future. As young Kenyans repeated during the recent election campaign, 'If you are not at the table, you are on the menu'.

So what can be done to increase political awareness and participation among young people? In Kenya, government efforts have focused on the creation of three institutions: the Ministry of Public Service, Youth, and Gender Affairs; the Youth Enterprise Development Fund; and the National Youth Council. Though somewhat dysfunctional, these institutions have helped to empower Kenyan youth, driving the high election turnout last month.

But perhaps the most effective approach to closing the apathy gap focuses on initiatives led by young people themselves. In Nigeria, young people spearheaded the *Not Too Young to Run* campaign, which led to a constitutional amendment lowering the minimum age for candidates. Their success inspired a global campaign to support young people's right to run for office.

In Kenya, the youth-led Jiactivate– the name, which combines Swahili and English, means 'Activate Yourself' – has sought to boost youth participation in politics by highlighting the main issues affecting young people. Jiactivate, in which I am engaged as National Chairperson, aims to serve as a platform that amplifies young Kenyans' voices, offering them easier ways to take action.

To inspire more such initiatives, there must be a deliberate effort to engage with youth in a way that supports real political engagement, not tokenism and empty rhetoric. To that end, the Organisation of Africa Youth, of which I am coordinator, has not only worked with local youth groups and community networks; it has also taken lessons from

a GeoPoll survey of 2,000 urban and rural Kenyan youth.

That survey showed that, while 27 per cent of respondents had never engaged politically, 26 per cent had attended an event and 34 per cent had posted on social media. Moreover, 68 per cent of respondents said that they would participate in political action only if they had access to a safe and trusted platform that would protect them from victimization, intimidation, or reprimand.

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One lesson than can be drawn from these data is the potential value of social media, which, despite being constrained in many countries during elections, remains a potent tool to facilitate youth political engagement. For example, by creatively using social media to collect, collate, and amplify young people's priorities in the Kenyan elections, Jiactivate helped spur their interest in politics.

Nonetheless, many Kenyans who were popular on social media did not make much of an impact on the election's outcome. Translating social media energy into effective action in the real world remains a daunting challenge.

Increasing youth involvement in politics will require sustained commitment and hard work. But, far from a deterrent, this should serve as a powerful incentive to get started. No one is more affected by past, present, and future policies than young people. They must take their seat at the table, not wait until one is offered.

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