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We need more than empty rhetoric on Africa's youth

Africa is a young continent ruled by the old. But the creativity, talent, ideas, and hopes of African youth can no longer be a sideshow

'Youth are the future, the leaders of tomorrow', 'young people must step up', 'youth empowerment'. These are common refrains peppering political rhetoric, policies and strategies for Africa's youth, penned by their respective governments, the African Union, and international development practitioners alike. They have had a runway for a number of years, but absent actual progress towards realising them, they increasingly come across as empty rhetoric, obfuscating the concrete paths to prosperity for a demographic that constitutes the majority population across the continent.

For one, youth are not a homogenous demographic. Within the 15-35 year old age groups exist the so-dubbed millennials (mainly in their 30s), Gen Z (teenagers and those in their 20s), soon to be joined by 'Gen Alpha' – the children of the millennials. Each of these sub-age groups warrants specific policies and strategies to not only improve their wellbeing, but also support the varied ways in which they are coming of age and adapting to a tumultuous world laden with multiple crises.

The world in which Africa's youth are coming of age is one of confronting all the cans kicked down the road. Climate change, severe socio-economic inequalities, and attendant conflicts are no longer far-off challenges, but existential crises. These have only been exacerbated further by the Covid-19 pandemic.

A young continent led by the old

When looking at socioeconomic policies such as the African Union's Agenda 2063 and respective countries' plans, it is ever curious that these are set to achieve lofty missions and visions of a world where young people thrive, but in a future for which they will no longer be young, nor one which they are in charge of shaping. We have previously had the

African Youth Decade Plan of Action (2009-2018), replete with action plans. We now have the African Decade for Technical, Professional, Entrepreneurial Training and Youth Employment (2019-2028). One can only imagine that there will be another 'youth plan of action' for the subsequent ten year periods, up until 2063.

If included, young people are subjected to continuous consultation, training, and empowerment programmes, but not the ceding of reins to run the show.

Yet how these plans are translating to the purported opportunities is scarcely paraded with the same gusto as the announcement of these plans and the huge sums of money fundraised to implement them. For example, have African governments invested 1 per cent of their respective GDP towards financing Science, Technology and Innovation (ST&I) development, per the African Union Science, Technology and Innovation Strategy for Africa 2024?

Progress reports indicate that by 2019, no African country had achieved this goal, and only 23 countries had submitted data against which their Gross Domestic Expenditure on Research and Development could be measured. Besides, how these investments are translating to actual opportunities for young people to sustainably contribute to ST&I fields warrants further scrutiny, considering that this strategy has been in place for the better part of the past decade. As one commentator has rightfully noted, 'we can't keep transitioning from one agenda to another [...] without any form of accountability'.

Furthermore, the world's youngest continent is led by the old. These aforementioned plans and strategies are executed through institutions that hardly have representation of this vast demographic among the leadership ranks. If included, young people are subjected to continuous consultation, training, and empowerment programmes, but not the ceding of reins to run the show. When called upon to take up political leadership for instance, it is often posited as a simple matter of expressing interest, stepping up and vying for elective seats. Yet in Kenya, for instance, it can cost upwards of €100,000 to secure a slot in party primaries, a steep cost generated by political and social behaviours over time. This excludes a huge proportion of young political aspirants, by amorphous design.

Prosperity, now

The age-old premise of education as a path to prosperity is also fraught; 'formal sectors' are unable to absorb the stream of talent emerging from

universities and colleges. When exhortations about young people going into entrepreneurship as a key to unlocking economic gains are heeded, we find ourselves in a wilderness, battling hurdles such as inaccessibility of capital, or unsupportive operational and regulatory policies that undermine the feasibility and sustainability of this approach. 'Change on the surface, continuity within' is a more accurate depiction of how all these ambitious agendas and plans translate in reality.

The creativity, talent, ideas, and hopes of African youth can no longer be a sideshow or afterthought.

We need more than rhetoric pertaining to Africa's youth. Our prosperity can no longer be framed as something to hold out for in a distant future. We have dialogued, strategised, and campaigned on the importance of involving young people in governance and shaping the continent's future, but the avenues for meaningfully realising this goal remain blocked.

Tomorrow never comes, and African youth are increasingly cornered into desperation. It can only be described as precarious to have a majority demographic so sorely underrepresented in the core of policymaking and governance, at local, regional, and even international spheres — at a time of complexities of a planetary scale. The resilience called upon to keep speaking up and fighting for chances is running thin.

Unleash African youth's potential

There are also those who no longer fit within the youth age brackets who are still waiting for their turn. This risks an intergenerational conflict rather than progress, if not acknowledged for the additional challenge that it is. Teenagers today are watching their older siblings and even their parents still waiting for their chance, while the power and resources accumulate among their grandparents and great-grandparents. Neither is it about tokenistic inclusion in institutional appendages prefixed or suffixed with the term youth, for which power, policy-making, and resources are controlled by the status quo.

Many of the action plans and policies still bear merit, if there are acted upon and continual accountability is integrated into how they are executed. Good-on-paper approaches no longer suffice. It is time, for example, to explore mechanisms for intergenerational governance approaches, that bring in young people into the institutional fold, to meaningfully co-create sustainable institutions and policies to mitigate the many urgent, inter-related challenges faced by past, present and future generations of African youth.

The creativity, talent, ideas, and hopes of African youth can no longer be a sideshow or afterthought. Before drawing up another action plan or policy declaration, it is a critical moral imperative for the institutions charged with executing them — specifically African governments and the African Union — to take stock of and transparently account for what has hindered meaningful progress, if we are to truly unleash the potential of Africa's youthful population.



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