‘The (democratic) future is ours to create’: youth and democratisation in Africa

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“Each generation must, out of relative obscurity, discover its mission, fulfil it or betray it.” Frantz Fanon

Résumé

Au centre de cette réflexion se trouve la lutte de la jeunesse africaine pour donner un nouveau sens à la démocratie que ce soit à travers les manifestations de rues ou les réseaux sociaux. En identifiant les facteurs spécifiques qui ont récemment renforcé la conscience et la visibilité de la jeunesse africaine dans la lutte pour la démocratie, la question est de savoir si de tels efforts constituent une plateforme durable pour la promotion des valeurs démocratiques sur le continent. L’article affirme que le développement technologique inégal sur le continent requiert une stratégie vaste afin de promouvoir un véritable changement sociopolitique et économique en Afrique et recommande entre autres mesures un programme de prise de conscience renforcé sur les activités de la jeunesse, le lobbying auprès des institutions gouvernementales nationales et internationales pour obtenir l’inclusion de la jeunesse dans les politiques de planification, l’engagement du secteur privé et le renforcement de la coopération entre les institutions des jeunes.

Keywords: Activism; Africa; Democracy; Democratisation; Future; Youth
Introduction

Post-colonial political developments in Africa have stimulated a plethora of literature and the active involvement of regional and international actors. In this context, a number of attempts have been made to offer answers to the inability of post-colonial states to entrench democratic values, and in turn use this to foster substantial economic development.

From the failure of independence elites to lay the foundation for development in the 1960s, to ‘popularising’ multiparty democracy in the early 1990s, and the prevalent manipulation of elections to suit the interests of the ruling elites, the balance sheet of democratisation in Africa leaves much to be desired. This is not to say that gains have not been made; rather it points to the extent to which the deficit outweighs the gains.

As this writer has noted elsewhere,

> [t]he narrative of one step forward, two steps backward, best describes the state of democracy in Africa. In this respect, every progress made in countries such as South Africa, Mauritius and Ghana, is continuously overshadowed by dictatorship in states like Zimbabwe, Libya and Equatorial Guinea. The constant relapse into autocracy remains a primary obstacle to development on the continent (Fagbayibo 2010).

Armed with widespread access to social network websites, youth in Egypt and Tunisia recently provided a template for effectively tackling dictatorial regimes in Africa. While the events in Egypt and Tunisia are yet to be replicated successfully in sub-Saharan Africa, they opened the eyes of national governments, policy-makers and major international actors to the potential of youth activism and especially, the importance of addressing challenges confronting the youth (Gumede 2011: 18-22). Africa’s case is even more peculiar because it has the largest global youthful population (ILO 2010: 7). It is thus logical that the debilitating socio-economic conditions will have a major impact on this important segment of the population. High rate of unemployment, decaying infrastructure, poverty, nepotism and crumbling education sector are some of the factors that continue to limit the potential of African youth.

At the core of this article is an attempt to highlight the factors that are likely to enhance the effectiveness of youth activism in Africa. To address this, the paper starts with a discourse of African democracy. It discusses the inability of the continent to translate its large youthful population into a demographic dividend and looks at how African youth have advanced the need for socio-political and economic transformation. It concludes with an analysis of the specific factors that can enhance the effectiveness of youth activism in Africa.

The context of democracy in Africa

In order to provide a proper context for the discussion on the frustration of African youth with the political system, it is apt to begin with an analysis of the context of democracy in Africa. In other words, what is the condition of the democratic milieu
under which African youth are expected to realize their full potential?

At the core of the western/liberal conception of democracy is the idea of political pluralism, especially as it relates to the ability of the people to elect their representatives and hold them accountable. Dahl (1991: 72-75), a political theorist, identifies the following as essential elements of liberal democracy:

- Peaceful election and removal of elected officials,
- Free and fair elections devoid of coercion,
- Universal adult suffrage,
- Constitutionally guaranteed role of elected officials to exercise policy-making functions,
- Civil and political rights,
- The right of most adults to run for political office,
- Easy access to information, and
- Enforceable right to form and join political organisations.

In similar vein, major international documents have played a huge role in the universalisation of the western/liberal idea of democracy. For example, Article 21(3) of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) provides that:

\[
\text{the will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government; this will shall be expressed in periodic and genuine elections which shall be by universal and equal suffrage and shall be held by secret vote or by equivalent free voting procedures.}
\]

Article 25 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) further provides for the right of citizens to freely choose their representatives. Other regional documents, from Asia to Africa, have similarly expressed this position. For example, the Constitutive Act of the African Union (AU), in articles 3 and 4, clearly outlines the principles of democracy, good governance and the promotion and protection of fundamental human rights as some of the primary objectives of the organisation.

If the elements of democracy are seen as an universal condition of humanity, then why should there be a debate on the relative nature of democracy? Granted that certain peculiar factors will not allow an uniform practice of democracy across the globe, it is still essential to prioritise the minimum standards of democratic principles.

The dichotomised conception of democracy, especially in Africa, is best understood within the context of dynamics of the politics of the 1960s. Ironically, while the politics of decolonisation was woven around the basic ideas of democracy, post-independence elites embarked on the process of decimating or completely dismantling all the structures of democratic governance. Ake (1993: 240) refers to this as the ‘bitter disappointment of independence’.

In justification of the erosion of democratic values, many of the post-independence elites argued that pre-colonial Africa knew no form of party politics and that
community decisions were arrived at through consensus (Nyerere 1966: 103-106, 195-203; Shaw 1986: 377).

Another justification is the argument that Africans are more concerned about socio-economic issues than abstract political rights. Mariam (2011) aptly shows how political elites rationalise the peculiarity of African democracy:

*Before Africa can have political democracy, it must have economic democracy. Africans are more concerned about meeting their economic needs than having abstract political rights. Economic development necessarily requires sacrifices in political rights. African democracy is a different species of democracy, which has its roots in African culture and history. African societies are plagued by ethnic, tribal and religious conflicts which can be solved not only by western style liberal democracy, but within the framework of the traditional African institutions of consensus-building, elder mediation and conciliation. Western-style democracy is unworkable, alien and inappropriate for Africans because the necessary preconditions for such a system are not present.*

The relativisation of African democracy is not necessarily a bad thing. However, it becomes problematic when it is used as logic for manipulation and consolidation of power by dictatorial regimes. The mere fact that leaders who profess the supremacy of socio-economic issues over political rights have not been able to enhance the socio-economic conditions of their citizens exposes the fallacy of this argument. Moreover, survey research and behavioural pattern, especially through widespread participation in the electoral process, points to the active demand for democracy across the continent. Africans believe civil liberties are essential, central to their overall quality of life’. (Cilliers et al 2011: 64-65). Similarly, Ake (1993: 241) remarks:

*Ordinary Africans do not separate political democracy from economic democracy or for that matter from economic well-being. They see their political empowerment, through democratisation, as an essential part of the process of getting the economic agenda right at last and ensuring that the development project is managed better and its reward more evenly distributed.*

This does not, however, mean that Africans are oblivious of the contextual nature of democracy; rather it is an affirmation of the central ethos of the idea – the enhanced participation of the citizenry in the political process. Without diminishing the inherent values underpinning democratic values, African democracy should reflect and seek to address the realities on the ground. These include ethnicity issues, minority rights, ownership and the judicious distribution of benefits accruing from natural resources, poverty alleviation measures and institutional development (Ake 1993: 242-244; Ngugi 2011: 9; Adejumobi 2000: 71).

In other words, the imperative questions to ask in determining the substance of democracy in Africa should be:

- To what extent do democratic norms enhance economic development?
- Are national democratic institutions well equipped to ensure the adherence to constitutional values?
- How effective are the constitutional provisions aimed at ensuring
balanced ethnic representation in national affairs?

- Are there mechanisms for ensuring broad representation and input into the policy-making processes?
- Is the management of resource revenue transparent and accountable?
- How legitimate is the electoral process?

The democratisation process on the continent is yet to be entrenched. While statistics show that the majority of the countries on the continent have adopted multi-party democracy, the real problem lies in the substance of such adoption. Beyond the ritual of periodic elections, there exist structural deficiencies in the way a number of African countries practise democracy. Onyango-Obobo (2012) for example notes that out of 17 presidential elections held in 2011, only 4 could be deemed as free and fair. The uneven democratisation process on the continent is further amplified by the repression of fundamental rights in countries such Gambia, Equatorial Guinea, Zimbabwe, Ethiopia and Rwanda (Freedom House 2011). These trends detract from gains recorded in places such as Ghana, Sao Tome, Cape Verde, South Africa and Mauritius, mainly because they impede the implementation of continental and sub-regional standards on democratic governance. In the context of the theme of this paper, democracy deficit frustrates the effective implementation of regional and national standards on the participation of youth in the governance process, and consequently limits their socio-economic opportunities.

**The dilemma of the ‘youngest’ continent**

There is no single definition of ‘youth’. The social, political and economic contexts of each society, to a large extent, determine the classification of ‘youth’. Specifically, these include factors such as transition from childhood to adulthood, entry into the labour market, marriage age, and the cultural age of majority (Economic Commission for Africa 2009: 11).

The United Nations (UN) for example defines young people as individuals between the ages of 15-24 (Ibid). The African Union (AU), basing its classification on the contexts described above, define ‘youth’ as people aged between 15 and 35 (African Youth Charter 2006). This paper agrees with the AU’s broader definition mainly because it takes into account the contextual realities of being young in Africa. The discussion below on effective youth activism is thus done within the context of the AU definition of youth.

Africa’s demography is quite unique. Described as the youngest region in the world, over 20% of its population is between the ages of 15-24, and about 70% is under the age of 30 (ILO 2012). In addition, over 40% of sub-Saharan Africa’s population is under the age of 15 (Ashford 2007). It is estimated that by the year 2030, youth between the ages of 15-34 will make up 35.6% of the total population of Africa (United Nations Population Division). A country by country analysis also reveals the demographic importance of youth. More than half (57.2%) of the Egyptian population is under 25 and 37.3% are under 15 (UNFPA Figures). In South Africa, the proportion of people between the ages of 15-34 is about 37% of the total population.
population (Department of Social Development, South Africa 2009). Around 75% of Kenya’s population is under 30, with people between the ages of 15-24 constituting about 22% of the total population (United Nations Population Division 2005). In Africa’s most populous nation, Nigeria, it is estimated that 70% of its 150 million people are under the age of 30 (BBC World Service 2011).

The statistics provided above point to the numerical significance of youth in Africa. The nexus between a productive youthful population and economic growth is not tenuous. According to Ashford (2007), the ability of East Asian nations to absorb a large generation of young adults into the workforce impacted positively on growth in Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita. As Zille and Bejamin (2011: 27) aptly note:

*The dividend from a youth bulge may be realised through increased productivity (the ratio of output to labour input) and the beneficial effects of a more prolonged labour force participation of a youthful population. In turn, this would lead to higher savings and investment rates, both prerequisites for sustained economic growth and development. Increased employment also offers a greater number of opportunities for on-the-job training and transfer of skills, which directly leads to a greater accumulation of human capital.*

The dilemma of the African continent is the continued inability to provide the right political and economic conditions for enhancing the productivity of its youthful population. As at 2007, youth unemployment rate in sub-Saharan Africa was 11.5% and around 23.8% in North Africa (Economic Commission for Africa 2009: 24). According to the World Bank (2008), African youth make up 37% of the working age population yet they are 60% of the totally unemployed. Since they constitute a substantial segment of the population, African youth are often the hardest hit by the worsening state of socio-economic standards in their respective countries. High rates of unemployment, acute underemployment, falling standards of education, poor public health systems and widespread poverty are some of the factors curtailing the development of youth in Africa (Economic Commission for Africa 2009).

The future of Africa’s economic growth depends on the ability to effectively translate its large youthful population into a demographic dividend. Without finding innovative ways of addressing social challenges facing its youth, African countries will lose the opportunity to sustain, and further improve, the impressive economic growth rates that have been recorded in the past decade. The gap between growth and noticeable improvement in the conditions of youth (especially in terms of employment and quality education) continue to undercut the substance and seriousness of positive GDP growth rates. In order to counteract this, it is crucial that African leaders put in place mechanisms that foster the development of youth. This will require the political will to create an environment in which the strong commitment to the rule of law underlies the investment in infrastructure, incentives for investors and the private sector (specifically targeting youth employment and empowerment), investment in quality education, and the strengthening of critical regulatory institutions (Ashford 2007; Zille and Benjamin 2011; Lin 2012).
African youth and the quest for democratisation

The involvement of youth in advancing socio-political and economic transformation in Africa is not novel. African youth were prominent actors in the process of decolonisation. Independence heroes such as Kwame Nkrumah, Nnamdi Azikwe, Patrice Lumumba and Sekou Toure were in their youth when they started the struggle against colonialism.

Even after independence, young people were at the forefront of the resistance against autocrats who have decided to stay indefinitely in power. The recent moves by African youth to foster political change should thus be seen in the linear context of the decades of struggle to change the status quo. The content of demands remains the same, that is, the need for advancing concrete and viable democratisation. This is because the so-called wave of democratisation in the 1990s has largely resulted in the triumph of form over substance (Adejumobi 2000: 66). In this respect, there is a facade of ‘multi-partyism’ but tactics such as electoral chicanery, intimidation of opposition members and clampdown on the media ensures that the playing field is skewed in favour of ruling elites.

The strategy for advancing socio-political change has, however, taken a new turn. Africa is currently the fastest growing mobile market in the world, with mobile phone penetration reaching some 649 million subscribers in the fourth quarter of 2011 according to BBC’s reports (BBC 2014). Social media websites, such as Facebook, Twitter, and mobile phone technology are being employed as a tool for expressing discontent with social, political and economic issues. In what is akin to an ‘alternative society’, the internet provides a veritable forum for advocacy and mobilisation amongst African youth. It complements old-fashioned means of protests and also circumvents the mainstream media, which are in most cases circumscribed or biased towards the ruling regime.

The success of the Egyptian and Tunisian revolutions, and the consequent apprehensions of other African dictators, shows the potential of technology as an effective tool for advancing democratisation. Although youth in sub-Saharan Africa are yet to stage the kind of revolution witnessed in North Africa, there have been increased consciousness of the potency of communication tools. The import of this is not lost on African autocrats. It shows that despots can no longer manipulate the general public through the monopolisation of the means of communication. Some analysts have argued that because much of sub-Saharan Africa lacks adequate internet infrastructure, the potential of a social media revolution is highly curtailed (Gumede 2011: 19). Lwakabwanga (2011), however, argues that mobile phones, where internet facilities are lacking or deficient, can play a more efficient role in spreading information.

Sarrazin (2011: 8) observes that many Cameroonians relied on mobile phones rather than scarce internet connections, to communicate with the outside world and mobilise for the anti-government protests in February 2011. The Cameroonian government strongly reacted to this development by forcing mobile operator, MTN, to deactivate Twitter, shortly before the 2011 election (Sarrazin 2011: 7). Recently, the Ethiopian government also passed a law banning Skype and other Voice-over-
Internet Protocol (VOIP) services. The violation of this law is punishable by fifteen years in prison (BBC News 2012). The foregoing highlights two key points. One, the revolution in North Africa has provided some sort of template for African youth seeking socio-political transformation. Subsequent protests in countries like Cameroon, Nigeria, Senegal, Uganda and Burkina Faso underscore this point. Even in places where there is inadequate internet infrastructure, images on television and news on the radio have proved sufficient to provide instructive lessons. Two, one cannot presume that a sustainable strategy on how African youth can tackle dictatorship has been established. The fact that technology penetration is still very low in parts of Africa buttresses the point that technology cannot at this stage be the sole strategy for advancing democratisation in Africa. Rather, it should form part of a broader strategy. This is discussed below.

**Shaping the present, consolidating the future: Strategies for effective youth activism in Africa**

The worsening socio-economic conditions, which are further exacerbated by the political situation, are mainly responsible for the disillusioned state of youth across the continent. The importance of expanding opportunities for young people in Africa has engendered numerous studies and programmes. These studies (Ashford 2007; Economic Commission for Africa 2009; World Bank 2008) commonly identify the key policy imperatives of improving the situation of African youth as:

- Improved quality of education
- Enhanced participation of youth in the governance process
- Improved labour market conditions
- Programmes aimed at enhancing youth skills
- Improved health system, especially HIV prevention efforts, reduction of unintended pregnancies, and improved maternal and child health
- Support structure for entrepreneurship and the development of the informal sector.

These policy recommendations are central to the big issues affecting the development of African youth and thus encapsulate their general demands. The big question to ask is not so much the identification of these key issues but how African youth can effectively pursue the realisation of these demands. The fact that only a few African countries have made serious efforts of either pursing youth-friendly programmes or including the youth in the policy-making process shows that more work still needs to be done in terms of advocacy (Economic Commission for Africa 2009). This then begs the question: What are the effective strategies for ensuring the sustained and effective involvement of African youth in the quest for socio-political and economic transformation of the continent? This is considered within the national, sub-regional and continental contexts.
Continental context

At the continental level, the African Youth Charter (AYC) (2006) remains the primary normative framework for youth development and empowerment. The Charter came into force on the 8th of August 2009. It has so far been ratified by 30 countries (AU website).

Article 11(2) of the Charter places a number of obligations on member states. It enjoins African governments to ‘guarantee the participation of youth in parliament and other decision-making bodies in accordance with the prescribed laws.’ It further directs Member States to ‘facilitate the creation or strengthening of platforms for youth participation in decision-making at local, national, regional, and continental levels of governance.’ In addition, governments are required ‘to give priority to policies and programmes including youth advocacy and peer-to-peer programmes for marginalised youth, such as out-of-school and out-of-work youth, to offer them the opportunity and motivation to re-integrate into mainstream society’. Other continental structures or instruments that promote youth participation include the African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM), the Pan-African Parliament (PAP), and the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance (ACDEG).

The chasm between norms and implementation/policy practice can be attributed to the lack of political will on the part of African governments to ensure the realisation of these objectives. The fact that the AU Commission and the AU in general, lacks supranational powers to monitor and evaluate the implementation of these provisions has ensured that not much has been achieved beyond the establishment of national youth agencies. From a continental perspective, the following points are crucial for ensuring effective youth activism:

• Youth activists should intensify efforts at ensuring that monitoring and evaluation capacities of continental organisations are strengthened. Youth organisations should be actively engaged in lobbying activities related to enhancing the powers of AU institutions such as PAP, AU Commission, and the APRM. This should also include the demand for the increase in the representation of youth in policy planning/formulation processes at the continental level.

• It is imperative to ensure the legitimacy of organisations tasked with promoting youth agenda at the continental level. Bodies such as the African Youth Forum (AYF) and the Panafriacn Youth Union (PYU) should focus on a broad-based mobilisation and awareness campaign that informs youth across the continent about their activities, and also encourage their input. Platforms such as the famous music channel, MTV, have been used in recent times to bring together youth across Africa and highlight the issues confronting them. Entertainment can be a useful medium for articulating youth issues and reaching a wider audience.

• Youth organisations should demand for a central, coordinating unit within the AU, which is solely dedicated to the monitoring of the progress and implementation of youth policies.
• Youth organisations should work towards establishing a continental programme on involving the private sector in developing the youth agenda. Particular focus should be on skills training, capacity building measures, and the funding of sensitisation campaigns.

• Youth organisations should further engage the AU on the need to create a framework that sets minimum requirements for member states on the involvement of youth in the governance process. This should include youth representation in national parliaments, government institutions, and local councils.

• Youth groups should work closely with the PAP committee on youth on developing a framework for ensuring that youth issues occupy a significant part of deliberations in the continental parliament. The feasibility of reserving seats for youth representatives in PAP should equally be considered.

• The Pan African University (PAU) is an initiative that requires the involvement of youth organisations. Youth structures should be actively involved in curriculum development issues by advocating for emphasis on programmes that enhances the capacity of youth.

Sub-regional context

Some of the sub-regional organisations have developed frameworks and/or programmes on addressing youth issues. The East African Community (EAC) has drafted an EAC Youth Policy, which is still under consideration by member states (EAC Website).

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has set up a specialised agency, ECOWAS Youth and Sports Development Centre (EYSDC) to promote the youth agenda (ECOWAS Website). The Inter-governmental Authority on Development (IGAD), through its Conflict Early Warning and Response Mechanism (CEWARN), engages young people in various peace and security initiatives (IGAD Website).

In order for these initiatives to have the desired impact, youth activists need to be engaged in the following activities:

• It is essential to strengthen collaboration between and amongst youth organisations in the region. This should also include the encouragement of cross-border collaborations between youth organisations in neighbouring countries.

• Sub-regional youth organisations should engage both national governments and the private sector on developing exchange and collaborative programmes between learning institutions.

• Youth organisations should stress the need for the design or effectively implementation of programmes that enhances the free movement of young people within the region.

• The involvement of youth in electoral observer missions and peace and
security initiatives within the region is also essential. Youth organisations should engage national governments and regional bodies on creating a framework for developing the capacity of youth to carry out this task.

- Enhancing the participation of youth in the formulation of sub-regional policies on democracy and governance should also be a priority.

**National context**

- Youth activists should press for constitutional and/or legislative frameworks that provide specific guidelines on the involvement of youth in the governance process.

- Youth organisations should also advocate for legislative frameworks that defines the private sectors’ involvement in programmes on youth development. These include issues like scholarship, apprenticeship, quota employment and community development programmes.

- In addition to the inclusion of youth in the monitoring of elections, it is equally essential that political parties are mandated to engage in non-partisan political education programmes for youth. This should be monitored by the national electoral management bodies.

- It is essential to broaden the representation of youth activism. One of the problems identified with national youth organisations across Africa is their urban and elitist composition, which sometimes exclude females and young people from the rural areas (Economic Commission for Africa 2009: 83). The consequence of this is the crafting of policies which does not completely reflect the realities on the ground and is thus ineffectual. More grassroots youth organisations should be encouraged and allowed to contribute towards the formulation of the youth agenda.

- Youth organisations with capacity and means for effective activism should devote more energy to helping develop the capacity of other youth groups.

**Conclusion**

The disenchantment of young people with the political and economic conditions on the continent is justified. The oft-mouthed cliché that the young people are the leaders of tomorrow has not been matched by genuine commitments to prepare them for realities of the future. Falling standards of education, crippling health systems, dilapidated infrastructure and alienation from the political and policy processes continue to define the existence of youth across the continent. It goes without saying that the key to sustaining the current positive GDP growth rates lies in the ability of African governments to turn Africa’s large youthful population into a demographic dividend.

It is in this context that this paper looks at ways of enhancing the effectiveness of youth activism in Africa. The use of technology in recent times to advance socio-
political change is indeed a positive development. Technology is, however, a part of the whole strategy of achieving change. The uneven penetration of technology on the continent portends that struggle for advancing effective socio-political and economic change will require a broader strategy. This paper considers the continental, sub-regional and national perspectives of achieving this objective. The common thread that runs through this segmentation is that the primary responsibility of articulating and defining the youth agenda lies with young people. Increased awareness programme on youth activities, lobbying transnational and national governmental agencies on including youth in policy planning, engaging the private sector, and enhanced collaboration between and amongst youth organisations are some of the measures that have been highlighted in this paper. Pursuing these goals in a strategic and result-oriented manner is imperative because it will eventually determine the degree and substance of the desired change.

References


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