

12-2019

Youth in Africa: Between Marginalisation and Demographic Dividend

Steve Kayizzi-Mugerwa
Zziyika and Associates LLC; Cornell University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarship.law.cornell.edu/sajpd>



Part of the [African Studies Commons](#), [Civic and Community Engagement Commons](#), and the [Regional Sociology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Kayizzi-Mugerwa, Steve (2019) "Youth in Africa: Between Marginalisation and Demographic Dividend," *Southern African Journal of Policy and Development*. Vol. 4 : No. 2 , Article 6.
Available at: <https://scholarship.law.cornell.edu/sajpd/vol4/iss2/6>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at Scholarship@Cornell Law: A Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Southern African Journal of Policy and Development by an authorized editor of Scholarship@Cornell Law: A Digital Repository. For more information, please contact jmp8@cornell.edu.

Youth in Africa: Between Marginalisation and Demographic Dividend

Steve Kayizzi-Mugerwa

(Zziyika and Associates LLC & Cornell University)

Since the 1980s, most African countries have experienced demographic shifts that have resulted in young populations, creating the possibility of youth marginalisation, but also a potential demographic dividend. The lack of social and economic opportunities generates unease about youths' future and anger and loathing towards society and government, heightening the risk of uprisings as witnessed during the Arab Spring. Governments have become aware of the inefficacy of existing policies designed to advance the welfare of the ever-increasing youth population, and look to change this by formulating inclusive policies, often with support from the international community, to harness youth potential. The African Youth Charter defines youth as those aged between 15-35 years, encompassing groups with different social, economic and political needs. The heterogeneity of this group makes policy formulation complex, resulting in poorly designed and ill-suited policies that fail to address the diverse and multi-faceted causes of youth violence. While SSA governments express concern about escalating youth violence, their macroeconomic policies are not well targeted at youth needs and create further agitation among the youth demographic. Some youths see contesting for political office as a solution to these challenges. However, the social, political and economic diversity of young voters hampers such solutions, as youthful candidates do not appeal to all young voters. Looking ahead, to harness the demographic dividend will require reforms and investments, especially targeted at the youth, including in ICT, youth empowerment programmes, quality education and healthcare. The goal is to better equip the youths for present and future challenges.

1. Introduction¹

Africa's youth are today caught between political and economic exclusion and the hope of an effervescent, globalised and affluent future that everyone, including government leaders, says awaits them (Lopes, 2013). Unencumbered by the trappings of political power, the youth have not desisted from rattling the existing order – as indicated by the Arab Spring and similar, if lower scale, insurrections in the rest of Africa. Although youth disaffection with the status quo currently runs deep, the young people's relative marginalisation and lack of influence are today providing a greater degree of youthful solidarity and political activism

¹ This discussion note draws on the lecture I gave at Cornell University, Ithaca, on 21 March 2019 as part of the Spring 2019 seminar series of the Institute for African Development, where I am also a Visiting Fellow. I thank participants for their comments and the Institute's Director, Prof. Muna Ndulo, for his support.

than in the past. This has emerged in spite of the amorphous nature of the youth as a group and the broad differences in their age composition, status, upbringing (i.e. rural, urban, poor, rich) and gender.

While the youth are seen as the custodians of Africa's future (African Union, 2006), they are at the same time derided by governments for their 'disruptive' behaviour and 'threats' to political stability (The Independent, 2016) – restiveness, armed rebellion, and gender-based violence have indeed become part of the continent's youth narrative. The recent growth surge and modernisation drive have not translated into jobs for the youthful population and a return to agriculture, which many young people have long deserted, is sometimes seen, by governments and development agencies, as the solution to the unemployment problem, although the level of skepticism is rising (Economic Commission for Africa, 2009; Johnston, Ives & Lobo, 2011).

Africa's policy debate has been enlivened, even as youth disgruntlement has escalated in recent years, by the prospect of a substantial demographic dividend emanating from the strategic deployment of its young people (Economic Commission for Africa, 2013). It is feared, however, that a broad youth insurgency might disrupt social harmony and reverse the size of the dividend. This could be countered by thoughtful and inclusive public policies, ensuring a better future for Africa's young people.

This discussion note looks at how African countries have responded to youthful political and economic demands, in light of their political economy and capacity constraints.

2. Youthful Ambiguity

The term 'youth' is today associated with a range of socially-tinged attributes in Africa, i.e. 'social malcontents'; 'rebels in search of a cause'; and, in the opposite direction, 'young nationalists' and 'the continent's future' (Ukeje & Iwilade, 2012). Some domestic observers have gone as far as blaming the youth insurrection on foreign interference, and the ease with which 'unAfrican' ideas and values are disseminated in the 24/7 media world of today (Abanyam, 2013).

The dichotomy is also partly to blame on differences in official conceptions of the youth, with some African countries underlining the importance of keeping the notion of rites of passage in mind when designating cut-off points for the various age cohorts. The African Youth Charter, launched by the African Union in 2006, set the youth age bracket at 15-35 years, while the UN, for statistical purposes, defined the 'youth' as those aged 15-24 years. Nigeria's national youth policy from 2009 set the bracket at 18-35 years, while Benin set it at 12-35 years in 2001. On the other hand, Angola, in 2005, eschewed the age bracket altogether in proposing its youth policy, focusing instead on the group's composition, i.e. students, unemployed youth, sex workers, etc.² Typically, the youth bracket not only includes

² For an overview of national youth policies from around the globe, see: www.youthpolicy.org

minors but also household heads, seasoned professionals and/or budding politicians. Hence, while the 'youth' moniker suggests a well-defined and homogeneous group within the broader population, it has proven too fuzzy a concept for the mobilisation of young people or the design and targeting of public interventions. The wide age variance suggests, in spite of appearances, that the youth's claim to homogeneity is scantier than assumed. It is sensible, as suggested by Goldstone & Day (2012), to consider age-cohorts within the larger youth group as the relevant point of departure, as they would have more political and economic affinity, and hence be more amenable to the coming-of-age sentiment.

If the African Union definition above is used, the African youth population is about 35 percent of the total population of some 1.29 billion (but only about 20 percent if the narrower UN definition is used instead). In terms of region, given that the median ages of low-income Sub-Saharan African (SSA) countries lie between 15 and 18 years, an unprecedented youth boom is expected there in the next decade. The middle-income countries of north and southern Africa have median ages above 25 years and the youth expansion will not be as dramatic. The fact that the youth-cohort in the latter region is older, employed and/or transcending into family life, and hence more politically alert and impactful, could explain why the Arab Spring happened there and not in SSA, where poverty is more acute, but where there might not be enough 'youth', in the right age bracket, to sustain a rebellion.

3. Youth Violence

Youth violence, though closely associated with today's young people, is not new in Africa (Waller, 2006). Sharp increases in rural-urban migration in the 1960s, as colonial-era restrictions to urban residence were revoked, led to spikes in petty crimes and urban thuggery in the face of high unemployment, lack of housing and poor access to social services (de Lemos and Moore, 1965; Leys, 1965). Still, in retrospect, youth violence was more of a social irritant at the time than a threat to social and political stability as it is today.

Recent years have seen youth violence achieve a greater disruptive potency across the continent (Heilbrunn, 2006; Blattman, 2009). Besides the 'youth bulge' itself, the causes include: rapidly expanding and unplanned urbanisation, leading to the ghettoisation of most large cities; mass unemployment and economic informalisation; the rise of religious fundamentalism; the paucity and declining quality of social services; frictions arising from rising poverty and inequality, including gender gaps; a greater sense of insecurity and victimisation related to small-arms proliferation in SSA, and related illicit drug activities; and the de facto pauperisation of the state owing to feeble finances, etc. There is hence a multifaceted link between socioeconomic factors and youth violence in Africa, i.e. involving personal, situational, socioeconomic, political, psycho-cultural and historical factors that require an equally multidimensional approach from governments. The endogeneity of the above factors raises formidable analytical and policy hurdles in assessing the impact of

discretionary public policy on the well-being of the youth in Africa (Boudreaux, et al., 2015; Marsh, 2007).

However, youth policies are often poorly designed and ill-suited for addressing the many-sided challenges of development (Muthee, 2010). In many cases, youth violence is seen as an isolated challenge, with specific socioeconomic demands, rather than as part of the broader challenge of social inclusion. Gender-based violence, while in many cases involving the youth – as both perpetrators and victims – is often seen as another policy challenge altogether and not as part of the discourse on youth violence (Douglas, 2000). A more nuanced discussion of youth violence requires a good understanding of the 'micro-macro' linkages and the nature of power structures – that, for example, enable the use of gender-based violence as a weapon of war (Sommers, 2015).

On the other hand, governments do not wish youth violence to escalate – as it affects tax income streams and the development agenda more broadly. In the SSA context, few governments could survive the persistent onslaught of well-mobilised youth groups. Governments have expended substantial effort in trying to prevent the escalation of youth violence – even eliciting the support of the international community. However, examples from Uganda (Swahn, et al., 2015), Cote d'Ivoire (Kayizzi-Mugerwa, 2018; Daddieh, 2016) and South Africa (Schuld, 2013) indicate that policies to address youth violence cannot be of the cookie-cutter variety. They must employ local knowledge and innovation and be inclusive to succeed. In Northern Uganda, for example, elaborate ritual cleansing ceremonies enabled the youth, even those that committed egregious acts of violence in the past, to return to their families and communities and lead normal lives.

The complexity of the causes of youth violence in Sub-Saharan Africa in turn complicates the design of public policy responses more generally – notably the decisions on where policymakers, given resource constraints, should make their entry points and focus resources. For example, the choice of whether to intervene at the level of infant and maternal health (improving mother's health and nutrition) or that of skills development at post-primary school levels; focusing on addressing youth mental health issues on an extensive scale; strengthening the implementation of the penal code and increasing the size of the police force; or creating job opportunities, including public works programmes for the restive youth.

Lastly, youth violence is prevalent in poor macroeconomic policy environments, as young people see a rapid diminution of their earnings, rising insecurity and a dimmer view of the future. Good economic policies that promote growth and provide employment opportunities are important preconditions for the success of anti-youth violence policies.

4. Youth and Politics: Not Too Young to Run

It has been argued that political parties based on the youth concept are implausible because 'youth' is not a social class *à la* the peasantry, but a microcosm of the total population –

among them are farmers, students, teachers, soldiers, prisoners, slum dwellers, politicians, etc. However, commensurate with their superior numbers, the youth have been demanding more influence on social, economic and political issues in their countries than ever before. Predictably, governments and civil society have sought to contain youth disaffection by appealing to young people's nationalism and love of country, urging them to desist from acts of destabilisation and violence as they await their 'turn', i.e. recent youth disgruntlement has largely been interpreted in political terms. Music has been a particularly effective medium for expressing political discontent and mobilising the youth (Perullo, 2011).

In many African countries, electoral cycles have tended to fan youth violence as a matter of course, with politicians using young people as their foot soldiers during elections, but abandoning them when the job is done. This breeds a level of cynicism among the youth that could have (and indeed has had) debilitating consequences (Musya, et al., 2017; Collier & Vicente, 2012).

To address youth restiveness, policymakers have responded with a wide variety of policies, emphasising social inclusion and economic empowerment. However, the political economy has been stark, with youth rights provisions and inclusive policies in social service provision hampered by the paucity of jobs and adverse legislation targeted at the freedom of the press and social media. The questions what role the youth should play in their countries and how the generational communication deficit should be addressed remain largely unanswered.

Governments have sought to contain youth disaffection by appealing to young people's nationalism and love of country and by formulating new national youth policies or refurbishing older ones. The latter have borrowed from the African Youth Charter mentioned above, including its emphasis on youth rights and freedoms. It urges state parties to ensure that "every young person should have the right to social, economic, and political and cultural development" and that all planning and decision-making should integrate and mainstream a youth perspective.

Political admonitions aside, national youth policies have thus far had limited impact on youth welfare or their attitude toward governments. Given resource constraints, governments, development partners and NGOs have tended to focus on more tractable subgroups, i.e. rural youth, ex-combatants, unskilled workers, sex workers, slum dwellers, school dropouts, etc. while leaving others, considered better-endowed, such as university students, to fend for themselves. On their own, such piecemeal interventions have limited traction at the macro-level, underlining the danger of seeing the youth challenge as not part of broader social and political inclusion.

With respect to youth in politics, a potent question is the extent to which effective youth coalitions could coalesce around common grievances and influence government policies (Goldstone & Day, 2012). In Nigeria's recently concluded federal elections, the youth expressed their consternation at being virtually excluded from vying for top office (top

candidates were all above 70) by using the hashtag #Not Too Young to Run.³ As there have been similar outcomes in many other countries in recent years, the youth think that establishing their own political vehicles might be the way out of their present quandary.

The example of South Africa's Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) shows, however, that it is easier to establish a political foothold in a vibrant democracy than in a country where youthful ambition could be misconstrued for an attempt to overthrow the established order (Daniel, 2018). A political challenge for the youth in many African countries will therefore be how to transform their movements from pushing the causes of the moment, such as anti-corruption and anti-poverty, into effective political party structures, with manifestos that transcend the grievances that helped launch the movement in the first place.

5. Harnessing the Demographic Dividend

Africa's demographic dividend will be determined by how well countries are able to harness the social and technical capabilities of their young populations (Swaniker, 2017; Republic of South Africa, 2011; Williams, 2012). It will require reforms that generate sustainable growth, adoption of new technologies, and the provision of quality education and health services to boost productivity. The demographic dividend cannot be harvested in a vacuum and strategies are needed to create a conducive environment for youth participation.

However, youth expansion is happening in an environment of institutional weakness and fiscal fragility in many countries, with high rates of unemployment and a paucity of social services. While these constraints also affect other groups in the economy, the youth, lacking assets and steady sources of income, and often with limited access to credit and financial networks, feel quite marginalised and exceptionally vulnerable. Although recent youth cohorts are much better educated than their elders, their ability to contribute to growth is often severely constrained. Because youth concerns are sometimes seen as targeting a narrower section of the population, youth policies are often drafted in proforma fashion – partly intended to impress the international community that finances a portion of the youth portfolio – but with little budgetary traction. Success requires more domestic stakeholder involvement and heightened participation by civil society, including the youth themselves, and better integration with the much broader national development plans.

While Africa's youth, like their counterparts elsewhere, have been fervent at adopting social media and other ICT-related technologies, African governments have been much more restrained in their response, in some cases imposing taxes on social media.⁴ In contrast, the East Asian economies used the youth's enthusiasm for ICT to create information and knowledge generating platforms that helped them leapfrog to the frontier in research, health

³ In 2018, President Buhari of Nigeria signed the legal provision for reducing the lower age limit for presidential contenders to 40 years in 2018. It did not affect the final line-up of candidates for the 2019 election much.

⁴ For example, President Museveni (2018) of Uganda introduced a tax on social media, partly because he is of the view that it is too gossipy and partly because it was a convenient way to raise revenue.

and education service provision, logistics, and environmental protection, and to create modern jobs for their people.⁵ While this approach is being promoted in some of the recent national development plans on the continent (Republic of Uganda, 2016), the East Asian enthusiasm and focus on technology is still lacking. However, Africa's youth are much better educated and more tech-savvy today than ever before and the diaspora is beginning to do for the continent, in terms of remittances and transfer of technology, what the Asian one has done for its region for decades. There is thus room for optimism.

6. Conclusions

While there is not a country in Africa today that has not tried to respond to youth demands in one form or the other, in reality few African governments envision the youth challenge as a labour of love, rather as an exogenous threat to the body politic that must be eliminated. Experience suggests that there is a tendency for youth-targeted policies to be generic, poorly funded and lacking in operational concreteness and finesse. Few countries attempt to assess whether the policy targets they set in their youth policy frameworks are achieved. The political inclusion that the youth are demanding is often not forthcoming.

Thus, in spite of the creation of youth forums, ministries of youth and special-purpose vehicles focused on youth matters, the level of youth disgruntlement in many African countries is on the increase with ripple effects on the rest of the population. This is mostly because 'youth matters' such as unemployment, poverty and hunger are also affecting the rest of the population. You cannot realistically deal with youth concerns, without addressing them in the broader population. In this regard youth pressure is good for public policy, but destabilising for domestic politics.

The youth are adamant that real change can only happen when they access real power. However, while the youth have proven effective in pushing national causes, including anti-corruption, traditional party politics require the creation of formal structures – and hence a transition from largely voluntary activities to political contestation (and horse trading). The traditional parties consider the youth perceptibly 'too young to run' and will not help. Establishing their own political vehicles will not be easy, however.

With regard to the demographic dividend, it is ironical that Africa's youth 'bulge', considered a policy headache today, is actually the result of the continent's success in reversing the triple curse of 'poverty, ignorance and disease' inherited at independence. Notably, child and maternal mortality were radically decreased in subsequent decades, thanks to better education, health services and nutrition. Nothing suggests that such positive impacts will not recur in the future, enabling Africa to harvest the demographic dividend on a sustainable basis.

⁵ South Korea has been a leader in this regard. The Korean Education Research and Information Service (KERIS) has spearheaded the country's transformation into an information-based society.

References

African Union. 2014. *Africa 2063*. African Union Commission, Addis Ababa.

African Union. 2006. *African Youth Charter*. African Union Commission, Addis Ababa.

Blattman, C. 2009. "From Violence to Voting: War and Political Participation in Uganda." *American Political Science Review*, 103(2), pp. 231-247.

Boudreaux, K. 2017. "The Real Reason Young People Can't Get Jobs in Africa." Policy Note, Foundation for Economic Education, Atlanta.

Collier, P. and Vicente, P. 2012. "Violence, Bribery and Fraud: The Political Economy of Elections in Sub-Saharan Africa." *Public Choice*, 153(1-2), pp. 117-147.

Daddieh, C. 2016. "Elections and Ethnic Violence in Cote d'Ivoire: The Unfinished Business of Succession and Democratic Transition." *African Issues*, 29(1/2), pp. 14-19.

Daniel, L. 2018. "A Review of South Africa's Turbulent Political Landscape in 2018." The South African. <https://www.theSouthAfrican.com/south-africa-politics-2018-review>

Douglas, C. 2000. "Gender Violence in Africa: African Women's Response." *Off Our Backs*, 30, March.

Economic Commission for Africa. 2013. *Creating and Capitalizing on the Demographic Dividend for Africa*, Addis Ababa.

Economic Commission for Africa. 2009. *African Youth Report*, Addis Ababa.

Goldstone, J.A. 2012. "Youth Bulge and the Social Conditions of Rebellion." *World Politics Review*, November.

Gomez, J.L.R. 2005. "A Political Economy of Youth Violence in Nicaragua." Working Paper no. 65, Crisis States Programme, London School of Economics.

Heilbrunn, J. 2006. "Paying the Price of Failure: Reconstructing Failed and Collapsed States in Africa and Central Asia." *Perspectives on Politics*, 4(1), pp. 135-150.

International Labor Organization. 2012. *Youth Interventions in Africa*, Geneva.

Johnston, K., Ives, K. and Lobo, J.I. 2014. "Making Sense of Youth Political Violence in Sub-Saharan Africa." *Georgetown Public Policy Review*, June, 26. <http://gppreview.com/2014/06/26/making-sense-of-youth-political-violence-in-sub-saharan-africa/>

Kasirye, I. 2015. "Dynamics of War to Peace Transition in Northern Uganda." Research Paper, Economic Policy Research Center, Kampala.

Kayizzi-Mugerwa, S. 2018. "Evaluation of the Role of the IMF in Fragile States: Case Study of Cote d'Ivoire." Evaluation Report, Independent Evaluation Office, IMF, Washington D.C.

Lemos, V. de, and Moore, D. 1965. "Violence in Portuguese Africa." *Transition*, 22, pp. 41-43.

Leys, C. 1965. "Violence in Africa." *Transition*, 21, pp. 17-20.

Lopes, C. 2013. "African Youth: The Custodians of a New Social Contract." <https://www.uneca.org/es-blog>

Lumun, A. 2013. "The Effects of Western Technology on African Cultural Values." *Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, 8(4), pp. 26-28.

Marsh, N. 2007. "Taming the Tools of Violence." *Journal of Public Health Policy*, 28(4), pp. 401-409.

Museveni, Y.K. 2018. "Why the Government is Taxing Social Media." www.yowerikmuseveni.com

Musya, J., Matanga, F. and Amutabi, M. 2017. "Effect of Political Mobilization on Political Violence in Nairobi County, Kenya: Focus on Mathare and Kibera Informal Settlements." *International Journal of Management Sciences*, 1(1), pp. 1-7.

Muthee, M.W. 2010. "Hitting the Target, Missing the Point: Youth Policies and Programmes in Kenya." *African Public Policy Scholar Program* (July-December, 2010), Woodrow Wilson, International Center for Scholars, Washington, D.C.

OECD. 2017. "Examen du bien-être et de politique de la jeunesse en Côte d'Ivoire," Paris.

Perullo, A. 2011. "Politics and Popular Song: Youth, Authority, and Popular Music in East Africa." *Journal of International Library of African Music*, November, pp. 87-115.

Republic of Ghana. 2010. *National Youth Policy*, Accra.

Republic of Nigeria. 2009. *National Youth Policy*, Abuja.

Republic of South Africa. 2011. "Confronting Youth Unemployment: Policy Options for South Africa." *Discussion Paper*, National Treasury, Pretoria.

República de Angola. 2005. *Resolução No. 29/05 de 27 De Julho*, Ministerio da Juventude e de Sportos, Luanda.

Republique de Bénin. 2001. *Politique Nationale de la Jeunesse*, Ministre de la Jeunesse, des Sports et de Loisirs, Cotonou.

Selvam, S. 2008. "Capabilities Approach to Youth Rights in East Africa." *The International Journal of Human Rights*, 12(2), pp. 205-214.

Schuld, M. 2013. "The Prevalence of Violence in Post-Conflict Societies: A Case Study of Kwazulu-Natal, South Africa." *Journal of Peacebuilding and Development*, 8(1), pp. 60-73.

Skaperdas, S. 1992. "Cooperation, Conflict and Power in the Absence of Property Rights." *American Economic Review*, 82(4), pp. 720-739.

Sommers, M. 2015. *The Outcast Majority: War, Development and Youth in Africa*. University of Georgia Press, Atlanta.

Spitzer, H. and Twikirize, J. 2012. "War-Affected Children in Northern Uganda: No Easy Path to Normality." *International Social Work*, 56(1), pp. 67-79.

Sulemane, J.A. and Kayizzi-Mugerwa, S. 2001. "The Mozambican Civil Service: Incentives, Reforms and Performance." Discussion Paper no. 25, Gabinete dos Estudos, Ministério do Plano e Finanças, República de Moçambique.

Swaniker, F. 2017. "Africa's Youth: Global Time Bomb or Incredible Opportunity?" African Youth Corner, August 27 <https://africanyouthcorner.wordpress.com>

The Independent Newspaper. 2016. "Angolan Young People Jailed for "Rebellion" Against President dos Santos After Discussing Democracy in Book Club." Tuesday 29 March.

Terenzio, F. 2007. "The African Movement of Working Children and Youth." *Development* 50(1), pp. 68-71.

Ukeje, C. U. and Iwilade, A. 2012. "A Farewell to Innocence? African Youth and Violence in the Twenty-First Century." *International Journal of Conflict and Violence* 6(2), pp. 339-351.

Waller, R. 2006. "Rebellious Youth in Colonial Africa." *Journal of African History*, 47(1), pp. 77-92.

Williams, S. 2012. "Africa's Youth. The African Development Bank and the Demographic Dividend." *New African*, March.