

**ICPD@ 15 African Regional Review**  
“ICPD and the MDGs: Working as One”

Major Findings

**HOW ARE THE AFRICAN YOUTH DOING?**

- Introduction

As clearly evident across the continent, African youth represent a significant proportion of the population; those aged between 15 and 24 account alone for around 20 per cent. A large number of these young Africans face considerable hurdles to participating in economic, social and political spheres of life as a result of: inadequate access to education and training; poor health and vulnerability to HIV/AIDS; the lack of decent jobs; susceptibility to becoming involved in conflict and violence; and insufficient representation in decision-making processes, to name a few factors.

In response, African governments and regional and international partners have begun to recognise the centrality of youth issues in the development agenda. At the same time, there is also a growing awareness that African youth are not just a problem to be rectified and beneficiaries of government interventions, but are also part of the solution; not just for themselves but also for African countries as a whole.

This acknowledgement of the positive role of youth is best exemplified by two recent initiatives on the continent, namely the adoption of the African Union’s African Youth Charter and the Fifth African Development Forum (ADF-V), which was organized by the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) and AU together with other United Nations partner agencies, the African Development Bank (AfDB), and the Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie (OIF). The African Youth Charter was adopted at the AU Heads of State Summit held in Banjul in July 2006, and was subsequently launched at ADF-V. The Charter came into force on 8 August 2009, after ratification by 15 member States.

ADF-V, which focused on “Youth and Leadership in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century”, was a milestone event in terms of putting youth issues firmly at the centre of the mainstream development agenda in Africa. The ADF-V Consensus Statement highlighted key actions to be taken by governments and development partners in the areas of strengthening youth capacity and promoting youth participation and empowerment, along with the ratification and operationalization of the African Youth Charter.

In addition to these regional initiatives, the United Nations World Programme of Action for Youth (WPAY) provides a global framework for countries to develop youth policies and strategies. The recognition of youth issues at this level has also resulted in a number of important documents. The flagship publication of the United Nations Programme on Youth, the biennial World Youth Report, is an in-depth look at youth issues as framed by

the WPAY. In addition, the World Bank's World Development Report in 2007 also focused on youth issues. These reports provide a comprehensive global overview of key youth issues and policies to tackle the challenges experienced by youth around the world.

Based on the analyses regarding youth development issues, a number of messages emerge that are presented under three themes: Education and employment; Health and HIV/AIDS; and Participation by young people in political and decision-making processes.

#### - Education and employment

In order to find a decent job in a globalized world, young people need to develop a range of skills and knowledge that are typically gained through formal education and training. However, though enrolments in primary education have improved considerably, most young people in Africa face major barriers to achieving this goal, particularly in terms of accessing post-primary schooling. Even those young people lucky enough to stay on at school are not developing skills that are demanded by employers across the continent. As a result of this situation and the overall failure of most African economies to create jobs for a growing population, young people continue to be marginalized in African labour markets. Subsequently they have few opportunities to find decent formal employment that will lift them and their families out of poverty.

In response to the challenge of creating jobs for their increasing population, African governments are implementing various policies and schemes to promote employment opportunities for young people, including skills training and entrepreneurship funds. Even if properly designed, however, the implementation of these interventions is constrained by cost and the lack of capacity among governments to evaluate the impact of policies. To create more decent jobs for young people, African governments, in partnership with bilateral, regional and international organizations, should:

- Develop macroeconomic, sectoral and investment policies and an enabling business environment to promote sustained economic growth that results in creation of decent jobs, which subsequently benefits young people
- Broaden education policies and strategies to improve access to and the quality of post-primary education, particularly for young girls
- Support the development of internship and apprenticeship programmes, in consultation with the private sector
- Encourage the participation and representation of the private sector in universities, aiding these institutions in the development of curricula that match the requirements of employers
- Embed youth employment issues in all national policies, including poverty reduction strategies and national development plans, and develop associated action plans matched by resources to ensure these policies are implemented;
- Use labour market policies and programmes including training, public works programmes and entrepreneurship funds to target vulnerable youth such as those in post-conflict situations, young women and youth with disabilities

- Establish youth enterprise centres that provide training and assistance to young people, including helping them to develop bankable business plans. These centres should be located in both urban and rural areas, providing a safe place to young women and out-of-school youth
- Support the development of youth business associations, especially for young women, to provide forums to exchange information, undertake training and develop mentoring programmes
- Collect labour force statistics disaggregated by age and along other dimensions (gender, disability status, etc.) and undertake rigorous monitoring and evaluation of interventions.

#### - Health and HIV and AIDS

Young Africans continue to battle with a range of health burdens including nutritional deficiencies, disabilities, diseases such as malaria and bilharzia, violence and, HIV and AIDS. Figures on HIV prevalence reveal that young people, especially young women, are more vulnerable to acquiring the virus due to gender inequalities and age difference. Behind the vulnerability of young women in Africa are issues of nutritional deficiencies and the impact of other diseases; sexual abuse and exploitation; early marriage; and migration and urbanization.

A more holistic approach is needed in dealing with young people's health. Key recommendations relate to action in the following areas:

- Efforts to address the underlying causes of poor health among young Africans and tackle vulnerabilities, not just the behavioural explanations for the HIV and AIDS epidemic among young people, including protecting young women
- Development of broader, youth-friendly health services and more holistic health strategies for young Africans
- Improvement of education and the capacity of young people so they can make informed decisions
- Promotion of participation by young people and the establishment of youth centres and effective peer education programmes, which would improve access to information on health issues for young Africans
- Action to collect and report on disaggregated health data by gender and age.

#### - Participation by young people in political and decision-making processes

African governments are increasingly involving young people in political and decision-making processes, as reflected in the establishment of national youth councils, youth parliaments and youth representation in national parliaments, and consultation with young people during the preparation of poverty reduction strategies and policies. Despite these efforts, the participation of young Africans is often not effective. Their involvement is often confined to urban elite, marginalizing certain groups of young people such as younger adolescents, young women, poorer young people and those in rural and remote

areas. Overall, the main barriers to youth participation in African countries are the lack of opportunities for young people to gain an entry point in political and decision-making processes, and the lack of capacity on the side of both young people and governments to develop such a participatory approach.

In order to increase effective participation by young people, this report recommends that:

- African governments should provide opportunities for young people to participate at all levels including through youth quotas in parliaments, or the active encouragement of young people to stand for parliament, and the allocation of positions in village councils, local administrations and working committees at the regional level
- Governments should also ensure that young people receive information about policy options available to policymakers and involve youth in the implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies
- Policymakers should develop guidelines or protocols for conducting consultations with young people which are available to all stakeholders
- Youth organizations should establish a joint autonomous body to represent them at the national level, and ensure that it has broad representation based on age, gender and geography
- Young people should become involved in scrutinizing the government's budget process at the local and national level
- Regional and international organizations such as the African Union and the United Nations should increase the participation of young Africans in processes and meetings

- The way forward

Youth will continue to represent a significant proportion of the population in both SSA and North Africa. The main message for African policymakers and development partners is that a broader approach, encompassing all dimensions (social, economic and political), is needed to promote the overall well-being of youth and to provide them with the opportunities and capabilities for participating in society and contributing to the development of the country. To overcome the main constraints to effective youth policy-making, African countries, with support from development partners, should aim to:

- (a) Ratify the African Youth Charter;
- (b) Align national youth policies with the African Youth Charter and the World Programme of Action for Youth;
- (c) Develop action plans and allocate sufficient resources to ensure policies are operationalized;
- (d) Involve young people in a meaningful way in all stages of policy-making, and not just with respect to youth policies, but also in terms of developing poverty reduction strategies and national development plans;
- (e) Undertake further research on youth development issues and collect and analyse disaggregated data through the national statistical offices.

*Extract from ECA's African Youth Report 2009: Expanding opportunities for and with  
Young people in Africa*