

The Long road to Banjul and beyond:

Process of the African Youth Charter and the role of youth in its popularisation and ratification

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Fifth African Development Forum
United Nations Conference Centre, Addis Ababa
November 16-18, 2006

November 2006

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Introduction

In 2004, the African Union Commission developed its most ambitious strategy for its own institutional reforms as well as, to strengthen its relationship with other inter-governmental agencies, partners and member states. Six key objectives underlie the basis of the strategy: to make the African Union Commission stronger and more responsible; formulate a shared vision on Africa's future; and promote and defend Africa's positions in matters of interest to the continent and its people; contribute to Africa's cultural radiance; enhance international and regional cooperation; promote a new citizenship anchored on Africa's basic values and on performance initiatives; and promote strong and integrated economies in Africa. This strategy provided the framework for the integration of youth development issues into the AUC's development agenda and informed the development of the African Youth Charter which identifies, addresses and provides a framework for programmes and activities that will solve the problems of youth in Africa.

At the start of the process of developing the African Youth Charter, a research on the Status of the African Youth was commissioned by the African Union Commission (AUC) with the support of the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA). This research showed that: gross enrolment ratio into tertiary institutions in sub-Saharan Africa is 3.6 percent and compares poorly with other regions; public expenditure on higher education has declined steadily since the 1980s and remains chronically under-funded; 60.7 million young people in Africa are living on less than US \$1 a day ; the situation of youth unemployment in Africa varies across the continent, from 35 percent in Morocco to 70 percent of 18-35 year olds in South Africa; an estimated three quarters of the 12 million young people between ages 15-24 who are living with HIV/AIDS live in sub-Saharan Africa; half of the 300,000 child soldiers in the world are in Africa and most of these young people have been forcibly recruited; young girls are subjected to sexual violence; and African youth have limited space to participate in decision-making and governance. This research evidence formed the basis for the urgent development of a charter that will provide member states, including those without functional youth policies, with a framework for youth development programming at the national level.

Background

After the year of youth marked by the United Nations in 1985, various youth issues have been integrated into policy making and international development frameworks. Although it is argued that the level of youth involvement in these processes is often tokenistic, these have been great steps towards achieving the desired level of youth participation policy and decision-making in processes. In 1995, the United Nations again made a landmark achievement towards improving the status of youth by adopting the World Programme of Action for Youth to the year 2000 and beyond. Eight years after, additional 5 priority areas for youth development were integrated and adopted as the World Youth Agenda in 2003. However, not much about the WPAY was known by young people until 2005, 10 years after, when it was being reviewed. The key concern and focus of this paper therefore is how to ensure that all key stakeholders play an effective role in the popularisation, ratification and

implementation of the African Youth Charter, including key possible priority actions until 2010.

Previous charters like the Charter on Popular Participation, the Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the African Child and several international declarations have been made, but very little is known about them and very few of their components are included in development programming at country level. Interestingly, even the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) that were set as part of the United Nations Millennium Declaration in the wake of the new millennium, with all the media attention and high-level officials that were involved in its adoption only began getting recognition recently as a result of increased momentum and advocacy from both the United Nations and civil society groups at the national and international levels and the fact that the MDGs have become the basis for benefiting from the international community on issues like debt relief.

Many of these declarations only end up as reference documents for the development of project proposals and national budgets. Thus, there needs to be collective efforts from all stakeholders and an effective strategy to ensure that the issues around this present Charter do not end soon after 2006. Important actions need to be taken to ensure that the African Youth Charter is a living document and that its components are effectively integrated into Youth Development Programming and planning at the national level. Youth have the potential to make this happen and should make it happen. The level of leadership that was demonstrated during the development of the Charter can be carried on to its ratification, popularisation, implementation and reporting at the national level.

The African Youth Charter

The African Youth Charter is a political and legal document which serves the purpose of providing a strategic framework and direction for youth empowerment and development activities at continental, regional and national levels. The Charter is inline with the efforts of the African Union Commission to provide an avenue for effective youth participation in development processes and is part of the efforts to implement the AUC's Horizon Strategy (2004-2007).

The Charter defines youth as any individual aged 15-35 years. This puts to rest the age long argument of defining the youth within the African context and based on Africa's development realities. The age bracket set in the Charter has been and will continue to be a source of very strong discussions, however, it is a position that was agreed upon by African Youth, Experts and Ministers, and endorsed by Heads of States. This age bracket is a reflection of the challenges faced by African youth in effectively integrating into society, finishing school, getting married and gaining financial independence. This age definition also provides sufficient compromise for all African countries, most of whom have defined youth as individuals aged between 29 and 40 in their National Youth Policies.

Key issues affecting youth in the areas of employment, sustainable livelihood, education, health, youth participation, national youth policy, peace and security, law enforcement, youth in the Diaspora and youth with disabilities, among others, are adequately addressed within the Charter. It calls on state parties to ensure the freedom of movement, expression, private life and property.

- On **National Youth Policies**, the Charter calls on member states to develop cross sectoral policies which take into consideration the inter-relatedness of the needs of youth with a view to integrating and mainstreaming the perspectives of youth into decision making and development processes.
- On **Participation**, it calls on state parties to guarantee the participation of youth in parliament and other national decision making bodies as well as facilitate the establishment or strengthening of national, regional and continental platforms for youth participation.
- The charter recognises that every young person has the right to **education** of good quality and that the multiple forms of education including formal, informal, non-formal, distance learning and life long education shall be embraced in order to meet the diverse needs of young people. In this light, the charter calls on member states to provide free and compulsory basic education and take steps to minimise the indirect costs of education; revitalise vocational education and training relevant to current and prospective employment opportunities and expand access by developing centres in rural and remote areas.
- On **Sustainable livelihood and youth employment**, state parties shall ensure the availability of accurate data on youth employment, unemployment and underemployment so as to facilitate the prioritisation of the issue in national development programmes and Promote youth entrepreneurship by including entrepreneurship training in the school curricula, providing access to credit, business development skills training, mentorship opportunities and better information on market opportunities.
- On **Health**, state parties shall take measures to make available equitable and ready access to medical assistance and health care especially in rural and poor urban areas with an emphasis on the development of primary health care and institute comprehensive programmes to prevent the transmission of sexually transmitted infections and HIV/AIDS by providing education, information, communication and awareness creation as well as making protective measures and reproductive health services available.
- On **Youth in the Diaspora**, the Charter calls for the establishment of structures that encourage and assist the youth in the Diaspora to return to and fully re-integrate into the social and economic life in Africa and Promote and protect the rights of young people living in the Diaspora.
- On **Girls and young women**, the charter calls for the Introduction of legislative measures that eliminate all forms of discrimination against girls and young women and ensure their human rights and fundamental freedoms and ensure that girls and

young women are able to participate actively, equally and effectively with boys at all levels of social, educational, economic, political, cultural, civic life and leadership as well as scientific endeavours

The charter outlines a number of responsibilities for the African Union Commission and Youth. The AUC by the provisions of the charter will: collaborate with governmental and non-governmental institutions and developmental partners to identify best practices on youth policy formulation and implementation and encourage the adaptation of principles and experiences among States Parties, as well as invite States Parties to include youth representatives as part of their delegations to the ordinary sessions of the African Union and other relevant meetings of the policy organs to broaden the channels of communication and enhance the discussion of youth-related issues. Youth are being expected to contribute to the promotion of the economic development of their countries and the continent by placing their intellectual and physical abilities at its service. The African Youth Charter is a unique opportunity to unite the youth movement in Africa to speak same language and move along the same strategic programming lines to improve their status and those of their communities..

Development Processes of the African Youth Charter

The African Youth Charter is the result of several months of hard work by various stakeholders. The African Union Commission (AUC) showed sincere commitment and demonstrated enormous goodwill to the process of developing the charter in order to ensure its adoption and endorsement. to ensure that youth issues are effectively integrated into the development programmes of the African Union and that youth form a major part of its development agenda..

The process began with a research focusing on the status of the African youth which highlighted myriad problems of African youth in various areas. This research served the impetus and inspirational factor for the urgent development of the African youth charter. This research was followed by the development of a draft charter, taking into consideration the issues and problems identified in the status report and provisions of various international and youth development frameworks like the: Platform of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development held in Cairo in 1994, the World Programme of Action for Youth to the year 2000 and beyond and the Youth Development Strategy of the New Partnership for Africa's Development, the Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child and the Millennium Development Goals.

The zero draft of the Charter was discussed at a youth and expert meeting held in Addis Ababa in January 2006 in order to criticise its content and ensure that they were inline with the needs and priorities of young people. This meeting in Addis Ababa was preceded by two important exercises: national consultations to discuss the content of the Charter and reflect on how it effectively addresses the needs of young people and ties into the provisions of the National Youth Policies and Development efforts in member states. The second exercise

was a recommendation that came out of the Addis Ababa meeting that the Pan African Youth Union be evaluated against a proposal to establish a new Pan African Youth Federation in order to address its challenges and position for optimum utility as the Pan African Youth organisation. This exercise was carried out by the African Union Commission.

In order to be proactive and to have an effective youth-led mechanism that will support the and advocate for the speedy ratification and popularisation of the African Youth Charter when it is adopted and endorsed, the AUC proposed a Pan African Youth Federation. The Federation was proposed as a continental youth body with structural arrangements that include a parliament, Executive, congress and secretariat. The African Union Commission proposed to provide for 50 percent of programme costs and all operational and staff costs for the new Federation to be based in Addis Ababa. However, this proposal was not accepted, and the youth called for the evaluation and revitalisation of the Pan African Youth Union.

In May 2006, the first ever Conference of Ministers in Charge of Youth in the African Union was organised in Addis Ababa to discuss the content of the African Youth Charter as well as the Strategy for its popularisation and to establish a Ministerial bureau of Youth Ministers in the African region. This meeting was preceded by the African Youth Forum and experts meeting where the charter was extensively discussed and adopted. The Ministers meeting is unique in that being the first of its kind in Africa, it came with a big bang by adopting the African Youth Charter. After the adoption of the Ministers, the Charter was endorsed by African Union Heads of States and government at their July 2006 Summit in Banjul.

Ratification and Popularisation of the Charter

Ratification continues to be a major challenge for many charters. While the political process can be very lengthy, countries sometimes do not ratify documents that they agree to at the international level. Ratification involves a whole lot of process within the legislature of a country in order to ensure that the content are localised and enacted into a legal framework that is binding to people at the national level. The ratification of the African Youth Charter is very important because it is the only way that it can become a legal document that is recognised by governments. As a result, all stakeholders need to work together to ensure the early ratification of the charter in member states.

The key issues for the ratification of the charter include: respect for rights, responsibilities and freedoms, as provided within the frameworks of national laws of member states of the African Union. These themes and others such as education, health, youth in the Diaspora, HIV/AIDS, employment and girls and young women are critical to the development of the AU member states and will most definitely secure the attention of various stakeholders when they are used as the basis for advocacy around the charter.

Two key mediums have been identified as methods for advocating for the ratification and popularising the charter, these are: traditional and modern means of communication and exchange.² These two media are all encompassing and involve all the relevant media for reaching out to both small and large audiences and will be great tools in the popularisation of the charter.

Traditional medium of communication and exchange include:

- a. Workshops and conferences
- b. Official meetings, public rallies and marches
- c. Community gatherings
- d. Official documents

a. *Workshops and conferences:* as with many international development frameworks, workshops and conferences are important spaces for the discussion on the charter and issues affecting youth as contained in the charter. This medium should continuously be explored and effectively utilised as space to discuss the African Youth Charter. As much as possible, African Youth development and empowerment meetings should always create space for the discussion of the issues in the charter and how to further progress in its ratification and implementation by member states. The advantage of big conferences is that they carry a lot of media attention, especially when high level officials are involved and the outcomes of these meetings are continuously shared and serve as reference point for development experts, governments and even students from local communities.

b. *Official meetings, public rallies and marches:* official meetings between youth and high-level government officials and community leaders can be used as spaces to discuss the African Youth Charter and its components. Special meetings between youth and government officials will be great spaces to advocate for the ratification of the Youth Charter. It is important to take advantage of such meetings to move the youth development agenda forward. Official meetings by high-level officials often attract large rallies and demonstrations, especially in countries where democracy is practiced. These media can be very important means to ask questions about the implementation of the ratification of the Charter.

c. *Community gatherings:* this is traditional for most African countries, for communities to come together at certain period /time in the year, month or week to discuss issues affecting the community. The charter can be an important reference to argue for youth participation in decision making at that level and can serve as the guiding framework for youth development and empowerment. More so, community leaders can be great allies in advocating the signing, ratification and implementation of the African Youth Charter.

d. *Official documents* of governments and institutions are powerful tools through which to make an issue popular among policy makers. Policy makers are often in search of data to

² Strategy for the Popularization and implementation of the African Youth Charter, African Union May 2006

develop new proposals and new strategies. Youth and development partners can develop important policy arguments on why the African Youth Charter should be ratified and utilised as a tool for youth development programming.

Modern information and Communication technologies (ICT): This medium includes a whole lot of technologies from radio, TV, telephones and the internet. While traditional media including the print media may not be very new, they are being included as modern ICT, as many media institutions presently use information and communication technology to disseminate information to a wide variety of audiences. ICTs are great tools for the popularisation of the African Youth Charter.

Young people are the most users of technology, the early adaptors of technology and if ever there was an area where young people are the leaders, not only of tomorrow but also today, it is in the field of information and communication technology.³ Blogs, listservs and youth specific discussion boards and websites are hobbies for young people and they create content that attract a variety of audiences from colleagues to policy makers and development experts. This medium is a strong tool for the popularisation and advocacy for the ratification of the Charter. The internet is the one tool that knows no personality and individuals of all backgrounds access information that is made publicly available.

Media spaces in big events can also be used to promote and popularise the charter. Targeted advocacy visits can be paid to media organisations to ask for space to speak on the charter both at the local, national and international levels.

Defining stakeholder roles

Key stakeholders in the process towards the early ratification and popularisation of the charter include: youth, regional economic communities, member states of the African Union and international organisations.

Youth: this group makes up more than half of the population of the African continent and are the most affected by the various challenges faced by the continent, yet this group continues to be on the margins of society's development processes. The popularisation of the African Youth Charter can be a very important entry point to their active involvement participation in development processes. The charter contains key points for advocacy and youth action for sustainable development. National, Regional and Continental youth organisations are major stakeholders in making this effort possible. As recommended at the May 2006 AU Youth Ministers Conference⁴, the Pan African Youth Union should be strengthened and given the required technical and financial support to become an effective umbrella group for youth activities in Africa. This means that the recommendations made for the establishment of sub-continental structures⁵ to serve as follow-up youth bodies for

³ World Summit on the Information Society National Youth Campaign Strategy, 2002; TIG, ISSD and GKP

⁴ Addis Ababa Declaration of Youth, African Union Conference of Ministers in charge of Youth, May 2006

⁵ Draft Concept paper for the Pan African Youth Federation, January 2006

the popularisation of the Charter should be implemented as soon as possible, already such structures exist in Southern Africa, East and Central Africa. There is a need to harmonise all the regional youth bodies in West Africa and to make efforts to bring North Africa more clearly on board the youth movement in the continent. If this charter works, this group is one group that would make it happen!

Regional Economic Communities: have very strategic roles to play as they are nearer member states and have better contact with youth organisations operating in their region. Like has been done by ECOWAS, the Civil Society component of Regional Economic Communities can create special youth desks to create spaces for youth development and empowerment issues within their structures. However, they also need to be able to include discussions on the African Youth Charter in their meetings with heads of states and ministers in charge of aspects related to the charter, e.g. ministers of education, health, environment and foreign affairs. The RECs should organise regional dissemination workshops to provide space for the discussion of the Charter at the grassroots level.

The African Union Commission: has played a major role in ensuring the development of the charter. It can continue to play this role by ensuring that continuous reference is made to the charter and progress reports are sent to member states on how many countries have signed or ratified the charter. These progress notes are imperative as not many departments of youth in member states may be aware of the charter, even at present. The AUC should continue to encourage member states to include youth in their delegations to ordinary sessions and other meetings where issues affecting youth will be discussed. Special Youth forums can be held to precede the heads of state meetings in order to encourage member states to bring youth representatives along with them. This will expand the channels of communication between youth and policy makers at the national and continental levels.⁶

International organisations: the United Nations system in its entirety has played a major role in promoting and bringing to the fore of policy making, key international agreements and frameworks that have been signed by governments. Some of these efforts have yielded very outstanding results. Some of the declarations that have made such progress include: the Beijing Declaration and platform for action, the International Conference on Population and Development Plan of Action and the Millennium Development Goals. International organisations and civil society organisations have the potential to pressure governments and build political will around the ratification and implementation of the charter.

Member States of the African Union: have the biggest responsibility to make the charter happen. The member states have the responsibility to accept the charter as a document that has been developed and adopted by their own youth, experts and Ministers, and endorsed by their heads of states. They have to accept the charter as an opportunity to make progress in youth development programming at the national and sub-national levels and put in place the necessary mechanisms for its ratification and implementation.

⁶ African Youth Charter

Priority Actions 2007-2010

Considering the importance of the African Youth Charter and the diversity of the stakeholders that will be involved in its ratification and implementation, the following key proposals are being made to distinguish the possible roles of each stakeholder in the ratification and implementation of the charter at national, regional and continental levels.

Regional Economic Communities

- i. Organise regional dissemination workshops to popularise the charter among member states and encourage its early ratification and implementation;
- ii. Establish where non existent and/or strengthen the capacity of regional youth organisations to engage in effectively advocacy for the ratification of the charter;
- iii. Inclusion of the charter in regional meeting agendas and youth development planning processes;
- iv. Develop regional youth development strategies that seek to implement components of the charter.

African Union Commission

1. Encourage the Commemoration of the African Youth Day from November 2007;
2. Strengthen the Pan African Youth Union in order to position it as the continental youth body to facilitate effective advocacy for the ratification and implementation of the African Youth Charter.;
3. Build capacity of member states to ratify charter and implement the charter;
4. Establish a taskforce to monitor ratification and implementation of charter by member states;
5. Review annually progress made with the implementation of the Charter;
6. Develop a monitoring and evaluation framework to ensure uniformity in key actions by member states and a consistent reporting format.
7. Continue to call on member states to include youth in delegations to ordinary sessions and other meetings where youth development issues are being discussed.
8. Organise a three year and five year review of progress made with the implementation of the charter in 2009 and 2011 respectively;
9. Encourage member states to submit annual state of the youth report which should inform a continental report on the state of the African youth;
10. Document and publicise best practices from youth development and empowerment by member states of the African Union and within the context of the charter;
11. Continue discussions on the establishment of the African Union Youth Commission at the ministerial level.

Member States of the African Union

- i. Ratify and domesticate the charter to meet national youth development priorities.
- ii. Strengthen/establish and build the capacity of the national youth councils to participate effectively in the popularisation and implementation of the charter.
- iii. Develop/ review national youth policy to incorporate contemporary issues related to youth development and empowerment and national development priorities;
- iv. Expand the channels of communication between youth and policy makers and by extension policy making processes;
- v. Recognise and commemorate the African Youth Day from November 2007.

Youth organisations

- i. Participate in targeted advocacy to ensure the popularisation and ratification of the charter at the national, regional, continental and international levels;
- ii. Strengthen networks and coalitions to effectively mobilise youth across board to participate in the development of national youth development agenda within the framework of the charter;

International organisations

- I. Build the capacity of governments and other stakeholders to ensure early ratification of the charter by governments;
- ii. Develop indicators to support effective monitoring and evaluation of the charter;
- iii. Establish an inter-agency working group at the ECA level to ensure that the components of the charter are translated into actions that meet the needs of youth;
- iv. Recognise the age provision for youth in the charter as bench-mark for African youth participation in international processes.
- v. Support the process of ongoing research efforts on the status of youth and the development of Africa specific Youth Development Index to measure and ensure effective youth development programming in the region.