

# YOUNG PEOPLE AND LEADERSHIP

## Introduction: Fulfilling the Forgotten Promise

Africa won its liberation through the efforts of the young. Across the African continent, the moment of independence represented many things. It was the winning of the political kingdom and the promise that the continent could unshackle itself from the chains of colonial rule and achieve the social and economic development for which its people had yearned. But national independence manifested something else too, something that is easily overlooked with the passage of almost half a century. The social and political movements that struggled against colonial and racist rule were overwhelmingly parties of the young.

Not only were the rank and file of independence movements filled by youth, but the leaders themselves were young. It is striking to look at the photographs of Africa's independence leaders as they assembled in Africa Hall for the creation of the Organisation of African Unity in 1963. They were strikingly youthful. It was not uncommon for prime ministers and foreign ministers to be in their thirties. And these were the veterans of many years of struggle, struggle that had often begun in high schools, and had frequently reached its zenith among students in universities. When the Italian colonists lowered the flag in Mogadishu, they handed over the government to the Somali Youth League.

The prominence of the young was clear in the civil struggles that yielded peaceable liberation in countries such as Ghana, Senegal and Tanganyika. Still more was it true of the armed liberation struggles that brought freedom to Angola, Mozambique, Guinea Bissau, Zimbabwe, and Namibia. If the leadership of South Africa's liberation struggle were entering what would normally be considered retirement age at the time of that country's liberation, that was only because overcoming Apartheid took so many long years. Recognizing the importance of his young followers, Nelson Mandela proposed that South Africa's first democratic constitution reduce the age of enfranchisement. The proposal was not adopted, but it was a genuine and bold effort to reciprocate the trust that the country's young revolutionaries had placed in the men and women who had led their struggle for more than a generation.

Liberation was the promise of a young Africa, the promise that there would be, always, "something new out of Africa." While drawing upon African traditions, independence was also a generational revolt, of the young against the old. It was a new dawn, not a return to the past. This promise of youth enfranchisement was in fact one of the most fundamental pledges of liberation, but over the years it has been the most neglected. Many of the hopes of independence have been disappointed: among them is the promise of empowering the young generation. African cultures are respectful of age, and the continent's leaders have exploited the symbols of fatherhood, wisdom and experience to the full, often presiding over sclerotic governments out of touch with the rapid pace of change. The tradition of obedience to one's elders is routinely cited. But this is only one side of the story. There is a tradition, equally vibrant, of generational renewal. This was not just a historical accident of the independence generation. Equally it was true of the first resistance to imperial conquest and the domestic

movements for renewal such as the Fulani Jihads, the Sudanese Mahdists and countless others.

The fifth Africa Development Forum is a historic recognition of the forgotten promise of liberation, that it would enfranchise the young, and is a moment to redeem the pledge.

## **Youth Rights**

Youth have rights as well as obligations, though they are too often forgotten in a social order built around gerontocrats and a welfare agenda focused on children.

Domestic and international law distinguishes between children (legal minors) and adults, commonly using a threshold of eighteen years. The category “youth” will always be secondary to the child-adult dichotomy. Some age-based definitions of youth include under-18s, others do not. Different issues arise depending on whether the “youth” in question are above or below 18: for those younger, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the corresponding African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child are applicable.

Article 12(1) of the UN CRC reads, “States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.” The Article goes into further detail on judicial and administrative procedures to be followed on matters directly affecting the rights and wellbeing of the child in question. But these provisions are both secondary to the basic legal reality that children under 18 are not fully legally enfranchised, and subjective insofar as they call for an assessment of the “maturity” of the child. Meanwhile, on reaching 18, the former child is a full adult with all the rights and responsibilities that status entails. All the provisions of an adult under the Universal Declaration on Human Rights and the Conventions on Civil and Political Rights and on Social, Economic and Cultural Rights apply. Such young adults are not simply “future potential”, receptacles for learning, but they are active and contemporary social, political and economic actors in themselves.

A legalistic approach to rights is essential for their robust enforcement. But an exclusive focus on what is justiciable overlooks the fact that rights are “work in progress.” The norms that underpin human rights provisions are in a constant state of contest and evolution. For example, there is still no complete consensus on age 18 as the upper limit of childhood. Many states still recruit 17 year olds to their armed forces. Age categories and the rights and responsibilities that accompany them are moulded by circumstances. In times of national emergency, youth are catapulted to the front rank of participation. It is young people who are recruited to the army, who are mobilized for national campaigns. Similarly, today it is youth who must refashion the social and sexual mores of societies afflicted by HIV/AIDS epidemics. As more is asked of young people, correspondingly they demand, and are entitled to, a broader remit of rights.

Many of the rights enshrined in the CRC, the CCPR and the CSECR are aspirational in nature, committing states to work towards agreed goals in a manner commensurate with their resources and capacities. Some of them are “stretch” goals that exceed the immediate capacity of many states to realise them. This is no reason to downgrade these rights, but it is a reason to distinguish between them and the associated goals and strategies. A state’s legal

obligation under a human rights instrument is a fundamental commitment, while adopting a goal or a target is an instrument for realising those rights.

Rights specifically for youth lie in that murky area well outside the set of rights that are immediately justiciable, and beyond even those aspirational rights formalized in existing international conventions such as the CRC and CSECR. It is arguable that youth, whether aged under or over 18, are already subject to a sufficient number of rights instruments that they do not need any additional legal protection. Rather than formulating new instruments, it is better to focus on fulfilling the relevant rights that are already formally adopted. Most of the rights agenda for young people would be achieved if they were able to associate freely, elect representatives and stand for electoral office, enjoy freedom of expression, and be free from fear and exploitation.

While the CPPR and CESR are covenants between state and individual, the CRC departs from traditional human rights thinking not only in the breadth of rights it awards, but in the range of actors it calls upon to participate in realising these rights. This recognizes a social and political reality: rights are realised through a combination of government action, social functioning and citizens' mobilization. Governmental commitments are important, but political change that emancipates people is the essential component of successful social progress. For young people to realise their rights, they need to enjoy their civil and political liberties, organize themselves, and in turn this means that they need to take on leadership roles. Leadership roles exist at all levels of society from family, community and school to the national political stage. Young people should have roles at all of these levels, but of necessity the greatest focus must be on their leadership of social and political movements.

## **Youth Organization and Social Change**

The starting point for efforts to generate social change, especially with regard to youth, must be what young people are already doing for themselves. Many young people in Africa are bewildered, demoralized and exploited. Many see no future for them in the African continent and instead aspire to leave to seek a new life in Europe or America. Yet at the same time, young people are the principal actors in Africa's social and political creativity today. Under the onslaught of a range of adversities—HIV/AIDS, unemployment, political repression, conflict, and the collapse of education systems—young people are actively fashioning new social orders. Most of these emergent social networks, organizations and belief systems are poorly understood. Many are feared by those in positions of authority, because any change can represent a threat to the established order.

Youth form the largest component of Africa's social movements. These range from religious organisations (including evangelical and Pentecostal churches and militant Islamic movements), sports clubs and student unions, and initiatives to overcome HIV/AIDS and provide treatment to people living with HIV and AIDS. In each of these cases, youth are more than mere followers, they are taking positions of authority and often leading substantial groups. This has arisen without directives or plans, instead arising from opportunity and talent. Where the avenues for advancement are open, young people will take the chances they are given with alacrity and vigour. Where the doors are closed—as in most formal state-centred institutions—they will look elsewhere.

Of today's movements, the most dynamic and effective are the religious revival movements, both Christian and Muslim. The most energetic religious organisations are characterised by a

powerful youth orientation, and by the message that personal moral salvation can redeem or transform a corrupt public moral order. They provide much more than a personal faith and a moral code. In the context of failing public services, and social disorder and political cynicism, religious organisations provide a place for socialisation, mechanisms for social support including introductions to eligible members of the opposite sex, financial support for impoverished young people to make a start in life independent of their parents, and institutional structures in which rapid advancement is possible. Many religious organisations also have international linkages that allow their members to become linked to their brethren elsewhere in the world, a source of both practical and spiritual support.

Key to the dynamism of religious organisations is that they enable young people to do things for themselves. This is more than simply providing a space where youth can be harmlessly occupied and obtain an education. Rather, the entire agenda of these organisations can be shaped by their younger members, who are able to rise to leadership positions at an early age. They provide a future for youth, not only in an abstract sense of articulating a vision, but also in a concrete manner by giving practical chances for young people to exercise authority. Precisely because of the capacity of these organisations for mobilising young people, governments have been keen to dominate or co-opt them, seeking to neutralise any threat they may pose. The decline of international leftwing organisations has meant that many African student organisations are now bereft of foreign networks.

Organized students have long been one of the main motors for social and political change in Africa. Student unions and similar associations have been at the forefront of radical political change in a number of African countries, including liberation from colonial or racist rule, and democratisation. While university student unions have been the most politically prominent, student unions are also active in schools, and political activism sparked by university students commonly spreads to secondary schools as well. It is also noticeable how the friendships formed at secondary school can be extremely influential in later-life political networks, and the values and patterns established at this age can strongly influence the political trajectory of a cohort of politicians. Knowing the capability of student organisations, governments are usually keen to control them, to the extent of being ready to damage the quality of secondary schools and universities in pursuit of the political agenda of keeping them quiescent. A genuine educational effort for Africa must involve protecting the freedoms of association enjoyed by students. Participation in associations of all kinds is a basic human right, an integral part of the educational experience, and a fount of creativity for social change.

AIDS activism has emerged as another important channel for young people's participation in public life. This encompasses a range of activities, from treatment activism to education about the risks of HIV transmission to care for children orphaned by AIDS. This is a challenging field in which activists face the inequities of gender relations and the rigidities of custom and patriarchy, all of which contribute to stigma and denial. This arena is also internationally-networked, enabling the most energetic activists to link up with colleagues across the continent and internationally. Although commitments to human rights and participation are often honoured in the breach, they are equally often an opportunity for youth participation to go beyond tokenism, allowing for young people to exercise real leadership.

There is also a multiplicity of less visible youth organizations and movements. Especially outside relatively privileged urban centres, young people are finding creative means of articulating their aspirations—and their alternatives to established social and political orders—using cultural idioms and establishing modes of association that may be invisible,

transitory or obscure to national policy-makers. These are crying out for recognition and encouragement.

The prevalence of youth-initiated and renewal-oriented movements is both a sign of a socio-political vigour, and a danger signal for a possible breakdown in cultural transmission. On the one hand, this vibrancy illustrates the refusal of Africa's young people to accept the deplorable social and political circumstances in which they find themselves, and a determination to find new ways to give meaning to their lives in an environment in which almost all avenues for self-advancement are closed. The assumption that young people are automatically "rebellious" and that such rebelliousness is nothing but a phase or cycle without further implications, is not applicable to contemporary Africa. The issues raised by young Africans' formal and informal organisations are real ones, with real social and political implications. Not only are the issues real, but the energy for tackling them is real also, often in contrast to the moribund official systems of states. Young people's freedoms of expression, association and assembly are not only fundamental rights, but are the essential source of energy in society. To dismiss the expression of discontent as immature rage, or still worse to suppress it, is not only a violation of rights but the stifling of a society's creative potential. Without such creativity, societies will fossilize and become brittle and vulnerable to conflict or collapse.

On the other hand, there are instances in which there is a real breakdown in the transmission of social values and traditions, which may leave some groups of young people susceptible to forms of extremist mobilization. The tendency of militant fundamentalist groups to find fertile ground in refugee camps (e.g. the Taliban in Pakistan, Burundi Hutu extremism in camps in Tanzania) reflects this. Internally displaced and deracinated populations are in a similar position, especially when subjected to protracted conflict (the armed gangs of Liberia and Sierra Leone are instances of this). Under the wrong influence, movements for renewal can become nihilistic-millennarian armies.

The last fifteen years has seen much attention on the phenomenon of child soldiers, and rightly there are concerted efforts to criminalize the recruitment of these underage combatants. However, significant numbers of young soldiers are volunteers, pressed by personal and social circumstance to join armed groups. Some middle teenage soldiers are not only well-informed volunteers, but that they have gained many advantages from serving as soldiers. For example, for some Eritrean girls from traditional villages, joining the EPLF was a means for personal emancipation. Demobilization would have merely condemned them to a life of illiteracy, early marriage and domestic servitude. If such teenage volunteers can be treated not as misguided child soldiers, but as young adults demanding and requiring progressive social change, we can remove them from the military without demobilizing their social and political energy. To treat them merely as deluded or wayward children would be to depoliticize their project and to fail to address their grievances. It is much better to give them a real opening in democratic civil politics.

By listening to young people in an open and supportive context, by seeking to learn from their associations and their expectations and ideologies, we can identify the potential sites for such militant movements—and the causes that give rise to them. For the most part, what we hear from the bewildered young men and women who have been caught up in armed groups, is that they aspire to conventional forms of modernity: an education, a job, and a family. Many also have dreams of pursuing social justice and development, eradicating corruption and fulfilling the promises of liberation.

Recognizing both the risks posed by swelling numbers of discontented young people, and the opportunities for moulding young people's personalities, governments and political parties have also sought to inculcate values into the nation's youth, and promote youth leaders of a different sort—loyal and “responsible.” National service camps and re-education schools are examples of attempts to forge the desired qualities of citizenship among young people. In post-conflict countries where reconciliation and the forging of new national identities are crucial, such efforts can be laudable, and in the right hands they can encourage young people to be more open, collegial and dedicated. They can help individuals from formerly antagonistic groups reconcile. But they can also be mechanisms for the militarization of a new generation of young people, imparting to them a very selective set of values culled from a partisan reading of African customs. In extremis, the experience of a training camp can be an exercise in brutalization, a rite of passage into a new identity as a subordinate in an unquestioning hierarchy, in which leadership is provided to the most loyal, unquestioning and capably violent youngsters.

In most African countries, there is little meaningful interaction between governments and young people excepting recruitment for the army and paramilitary forces. Government attitudes are that “youth” are a problem: the source of social ills such as crime, delinquency, HIV/AIDS etc, or that they represent a danger of political upheaval, rather than the opportunity for renewal and reform. The combination of youth's demographic preponderance, political and economic marginalization, and readiness to engage in innovative forms of social and political mobilization, makes for an explosive mix. Positive governmental policies towards young people, in all sectors, need to be developed. Rarely do poverty reduction strategies, health programmes, “child” protection initiatives, and conflict prevention mechanisms pay adequate attention to young adults.

The majority of youth associations and organizations represent a middle ground between radicalism and co-option by established political forces. They offer potential for solving problems (such as unemployment, drug abuse, high-risk sexual behaviour), but simultaneously they hold the potential for exacerbating exactly these same problems through inappropriate “solutions” or the introduction of new problems. And many of these organisations are too weak, too poorly organized and financed, and too transitory to offer anything of substance to their members other than a fleeting sense of belonging and solidarity.

In European, American and Asian history, mass mobilization of conscripts for war has routinely generated pressure for democratic political change. Those called upon to fight for their country, enduring hardship and danger, have generally been a force for social emancipation, demanding their rights from a government that has asked them to risk their lives for their country. In Africa, this does not seem to be the case. Mobilization for war is rarely the cause for progressive social and political reform: quite the contrary, it is often accompanied by repression. One reason for this is the sheer numerical availability of young people and their estrangement from the formal social and political order. Young people are not a scarce resource, and as a result, political and military leaders tend to regard them as expendable. Not only does this approach often have tragic psycho-social side-effects, but it makes young people complicit in the destruction of the social mores they so desperately need.

Africa's armies are composed of youth. Government mobilization of young people takes a number of forms. Conscripting for the army is one case: though such is the scarcity of

alternative employment that most army recruits are volunteers. Party youth wings are another important phenomenon. These range from institutions with a real educational component to licensed thugs whose chief duty is to intimidate the opposition. The Rwandan Interahamwe represent an extreme case. The so-called “war veterans” in Zimbabwe are another variant. Most African countries—including democratic ones—have paramilitary youth wings, sometimes referred to by the euphemism of “party militants”. Often, their leaders turn a blind eye to delinquency, drug taking, rape and other anti-social and criminal behaviour, or even encourage them. We can expect HIV infections among these groups to be common. We can be confident that youth leaders who have enjoyed arbitrary power and impunity in these youth wings will not mature into considerate and democratic politicians.

## **Youth Leadership and Social Movements**

What does it mean to organize a social movement, whether local, national or international, in favour of youth? Despite the commitment of UNICEF, the Save the Children Alliance and other national and international organisations to a “global movement for children,” and widespread writing by rights activists, the thinking on what such a movement might entail has been modest. Meanwhile, young people have continued to do their own things, utilizing whatever meagre socio-political spaces have been open to them. A movement *for* children has failed to build on existing movements *of* young people.

UNICEF’s human rights approach to development and programming is an important step towards forging wider and more active participation of under-18s. This is concerned with reshaping development practice in such a way that UNICEF is no longer an external agency “acting upon” individuals and communities, but a process of change and emancipation driven by the priorities of the people concerned, with their full engagement in defining the targets and setting the strategy. This is a significant step. But it is in the nature of social movements that they resist any control and direction by external bureaucratic forces, however enlightened they may be. Social movements for emancipation take control themselves.

Key to progressive and effective social movements are coalitions between the main affected constituency—in this case, Africa’s youth—and those with professional or specialist skills and positions. Note that this is a coalition of equal partners, rather than the co-option of one party in the cause of the other. The greatest handicap faced by youth organisations is their shallow institutional memory and modest accumulation of expertise. This is more than compensated for by their energy and the amounts of time available to young activists. But professional advocacy and research organisations can contribute and shape youth organisations’ agendas, enabling them to define the issues of concern in a certain way, breaking them down into manageable pieces and pursuing them in a flexible but strategic manner.

A third partner in an effective coalition for social change are those individuals in government who are themselves motivated to bring about progressive change. Occasionally they are senior, inspired members of an administration. More often they are middle-ranking officials, whose peers outside government are engaged in social movements. Africa has many dedicated civil servants and parliamentarians. In democratic systems in which there are regular intakes of new individuals into the civil service, legislature and executive, the likelihood of these progressive individuals being present is maximised. Once again, the analysis leads us back to the importance of core democratic values and the civil and political liberties that underpin them. Participatory and democratic political systems provide the

necessary avenues for young people to rise, according to their talent and inclination, minimizing the chances of frustration and anti-social mobilization.

The immediate goal of a social movement may be to enact a change in government policy, perhaps ensuring that a right is enshrined in law. The broader goal is to change the moral climate, creating a new social consensus that a wrong, previously common, is now completely unacceptable. This is the process whereby slavery was abolished, women's rights were won, civil liberties were enforced, famine was conquered in India, anti-personnel landmines were banned, and the costs of treatment for AIDS were brought down. In some cases, these movements have seen themselves as struggling for "rights", and their successes have been marked when a new set of rights has passed into law. But in many other cases, although the activists may have called for "rights", the outcome has been more in the way of a robust public policy—for example workable famine prevention policies or a free health service. In these cases enforcement occurs through democratic political process and not through the courts. This is best seen as a "political contract" between rulers and citizens: a commitment to provide a public good, enforced through democratic processes including popular protest.

A central challenge for any social movement is to combine the vigour and spontaneity that comes from an authentic mass movement, with professionalism and sustainability that demands institutionalization. Too often, the vigour of a mass movement has dissipated as its leadership has become professionalized or co-opted into policy debates—or simply aged. Leadership roles by young people themselves will be essential if any movement is to prove effective and sustainable. In Africa today, it is highly significant that the specialist institutions for children—including UNICEF—are disconnected from the most vibrant movements of young people.

Analysis of social movements reveals one constant, which is that open and democratic societies are by far the best conditions in which effective social mobilization can occur. This is for the obvious reasons that freedom of association and communication are essential prerequisites for any independent organisations to flourish, while authoritarian or militarised states are likely to repress or co-opt any such organisations. In Africa, civil society organisations are flourishing across the board. However, in more authoritarian or unstable countries, local groups may rely more heavily on international alliances to press their case. This strategy has dangers. While external linkages can provide solidarity and protection, they may also distort national agendas, and domestic constituencies may lose their leadership role. And in the case of youth organizations, there is the structural challenge that youth leaders, because of their young age and limited exposure, rarely have the international connections to make an externally-linked strategy feasible.

## **Conclusions and Lessons**

The brief analysis in this paper has presented more questions than it has answered. How should governments and international organizations best engage with the force for positive change represented by Africa's multifarious informal youth movements? How could the potential for a positive social contribution of young "party militants" be maximised, and their criminal or radical potential minimized? How could the political motivations that child soldiers might harbour be translated into peaceful activism? What might be the best way to engage fruitfully with student unions and youth political movements?



This implies an emergent agenda for young people and governance that represents a radical change in existing practices. The participation rights of young people need to be taken seriously, so that they are more adequately represented in legislatures and other mechanisms for ensuring that citizens' voices are heard and taken into account. Institutions that represent the young, and that deal with the young, need their capacities enhanced. Young people, aged over 16 for example, could be granted the vote, and those slightly older (perhaps 21) could be given the right to run for elected public office. This would be a very powerful symbol of the emancipation of youth, and, more importantly, a means of channelling their political energies into strengthening democracy. Mechanisms for delivering services to the young, ranging from schools and clinics (especially sexual health services) to banks and micro-credit institutions, need strengthening with greater and more effective participation by their young clients and stakeholders. Civil society organizations, schools and universities, government departments, and regional organizations should all become concerned with young people, both reaching out to them and providing opportunities for learning and leadership within them.

The rights and needs of children and young people will not be fulfilled by any inter-governmental consensus statement or state commitment to the relevant human rights instruments. Those rights will be won only in the context of the demands of young people to be represented and heard, and the ability of youth leaders to articulate their concerns, building broad constituencies for social change.

The process of creating and developing young people's leadership cannot be directed. It can only be encouraged, most importantly by providing the right domestic environment. Another mechanism that can help is regionally and internationally networking youth organisations so that they can provide new platforms for progressive leadership

A rather straightforward lesson from this analysis is that the requirements for effective youth leadership of progressive social movements is not dissimilar to the requirements for a vibrant civil society, namely respect for civil and political rights across the board. Young people have some specific requirements, but like older citizens, they fundamentally require the freedom to organize and participate as they see fit.