

Exploring Lost and Available Opportunities for Youth Empowerment in Selected African Countries

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ABSTRACT This paper aims to discuss pertinent lost opportunities towards youth empowerment as well as available opportunities to advance their empowerments. The paper uses dialogue, debates and perspectives from selected African countries such as South Africa, Botswana, Rwanda, Southern Sudan, DRC and Kenya. These are the countries that form evidence of the factors that have been discussed in the paper. Findings indicate the following environment militating against youth empowerment: Youth's exploitation of their labour by the their parents/guardians/ adults; being used as agents of violence and war by the adults/ governments; being used for voting purposes at the political expediency of the adults/politicians; adults' condescending attitudes towards the youth; being used by their parents/societies to advance cultures for the gains of their parents/societies, but detrimental to their rights; and their increased indulgence in drug abuse. The following represents avenues of empowerment: Their physical strength to tap resources; their capacity and access to higher education; capacity to embrace diversity and being explorative; and embracing the spirit of indigenisation. The paper concludes by advocating for increased recognition of youth as agents of development by adults, governments, NGOs and private sector; increased funding of youth activities; and increased goodwill from the government and the adults to offer them a platform to realize their potential.

INTRODUCTION

Many people in different contexts recognize and acknowledge the youth stage as an invaluable stage in effectuating different aspects of development (Harshal et al. 2009). However, this researcher feels that not much is being done to justify that recognition and acknowledgement. This could explain the preponderance of youth challenges compared to the adults in many countries especially of the developing world. This researcher recognizes the following motto by former African National Congress President, Oliver Tambo as an essential component of advocating, lobbying and positioning the niche of youth in any country.

"A nation that does not take care of its youth has no future and does not deserve one."
Oliver Tambo, ANC President in 2002 (Republic of South Africa 2009)

The above statement though a challenge may have been prompted by what may have been apparent in many countries as youth are taken for granted, are condescended and discriminated in terms of access to resources such as the jobs by the adults and generally the patriarchal mindset of the adults that place the youth in a basket of being children, irresponsible and be-

ings that require the direction of the adults. This mindset may have left many countries with a lower budget to look into the interests of the youth. While this situation may be changing with the advent of the human rights of the children, women and the youth, it is critical that discussions pertaining to how the state of youth hood has been undermined by the adults presents lost their opportunity. This could form an opportunity of filling in such gaps that undermine the capacities of the youth and therefore undermine their contribution to their countries' GDP.

Problem Statement

The ever widening lacuna towards youth empowerment in developing countries poses local, national and international challenges as the year 2015 of taking stock of the Millennium Development Goals tickles. The increased vulnerabilities of most youth in developing countries epitomized by poverty, unemployment, involvement in social ills such as crime and ever burgeoning cases of HIV and AIDS infections calls for an autopsy of the socio-economic and policy environments driving the quagmire. Such an autopsy, this researcher believes could indi-

cate the youth empowerment gaps and how such gaps could be filled in to ensure a sustainable youth development tempo.

METHODOLOGY

The paper uses a review of literature to elicit debate and discussion on the possible lost opportunities for youth advancement presented by different milieu and contexts of the selected countries. Such debates should also reveal the opportunities still available to be exploited for their empowerment. The paper uses journals, books and United Nations publications to make their arguments

Lost Opportunities for Youth Empowerment in Developing Countries

Teenagers /Children Used in Wars/Political Movement

It is unfortunate that in the last few decades, most wars in African countries especially endeavoring to overthrow the incumbent dictatorial governments or improperly constituted governments, or even democratically constituted ones have recruited youth and even children as young as 11 years to do the fighting (Mac-Ikemenjima 2008). Such countries include Democratic Republic of Congo, Southern Sudan. However, although peace has prevailed significantly especially in countries such as Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Mozambique and Uganda, these countries have had a history of recruiting child soldiers. Child soldiers have had an array of tasks such as fighting, supporting the fighters as porters, spies, messengers, look outs, etc. They have also been used as sexual slaves, human shields or in propaganda (Kenya Daily Nation 2012; Mac-Ikemenjima 2008). Having children involved in wars pose a lot of challenges in their lives. They could die, get maimed, and never have an opportunity to be at school. Child soldiering, therefore, violates the fundamental rights of children and compromises their opportunity to grow as lawfully abiding citizens of a country (Kang'ethe 2010; UNCRC 1989; OAU 1990).

Youths Used as Voting Tools for Political Expediency of the Adults

In countries such as Kenya, the youth have been used and wooed to vote politicians to pow-

er without the politicians taking the developmental aspects of the youth seriously. Youths are also in record of being used to cause chaos for political expediency of the adults. For example, in the 2007 Kenyan General election, the youths were wooed by handouts and false promises of unemployment benefits by some politicians. The promises never materialised. The youth fell into the trap of being used as voters because of their vulnerabilities such as unemployment, ignorance etcetera (Elsby et al. 2009; Government of Kenya 2011).

Adults' Condescending Attitudes Towards the Youths

In many patriarchal societies, children and youth are seen as passive beings whose role is to serve the adults. This has led to many youths being misled by their adults as they believe they are what their parents see them. The adults' attitudes in some cases have been responsible in lowering the youths' assertiveness, confidence, autonomy, and even vision for the future (Clacherty et al. 2005). Reprimanding the youth through corporal punishment, humiliation, and insulting them have empirically been validated to make the youths uncooperative, experience apathy and be prone to law breaking. This compromises their state of citizenship (Shmuel 2010; Clacherty et al. 2005). The dictatorial attitude towards children impedes their mental, social, emotional and intellectual development. This impedes their autonomy, ambition, vision and makes them embrace a feeling of worthlessness and apathy (Clacherty et al. 2005). Some adults mistake the condescending attitudes and treatment of youth and children as a way of maintaining discipline.

Youth Used to Advance Their Parents' Customs, Traditions and Cultures Against Their Human Rights

In Kenya, the government and NGOs are fighting desperately the battle to retain the teenage youths at school as parents prioritize their children's cultural rights to be married against their rights to education and development (Kang'ethe 2013a). For instance, among the pastoral communities such as Maasai, Turkana, Pokot, female genital mutilation (FGM) is still being practised. This is despite Section 14 of The Children's Act of 2001 in Kenya being in

place that protects children against harmful cultural practices under which FGM falls (Government of Kenya 2010; Kang'ethe and Takudzwa 2013). The above scenario points to the fact that adults prioritize the cultural rights embedded in their cultures, traditions and customs to the detriment of the rights of their children to education and also determining their future through education pursuit. This they do, not only for expression of social capital embedded in these cultures, but also for financial gains. This is because as the initiates get into adulthood through the rite of passage, then they are considered culturally ready for marriage. It becomes an important source of parents' wealth. The rite is considered very culturally and socially relevant in that men from such communities do not marry women those who have not undergone the ritual (Kang'ethe 2013a). FGM compromises the health rights of the teenage youths to access further schooling. By being wedded off, their chances of bettering their economic position through education are diminished (Kang'ethe and Rhakudu 2010; Kang'ethe 2013a; Woldemicael 2009).

Youths Used as Agents /Tools of Production

In most patriarchal societies, such as Kenya, children and youth are treated as agents of economic production. Although it may be argued that their involvement is a panacea in that it serves as an economic training to gather experience for their future, their economic involvement in many cases and contexts does not promise their empowerment. It is for economic expediency of their parents/adults. In many pastoral ethnic groupings in Kenya such as Maasai, Turkana, Rendile, Pokot, the younger youths are persuaded by their adult parents to go to cattle herding as soon as they do their Kenya Certificate of Education (Grade 7); or are persuaded to abandon school before they finish standard seven (Grade seven). Such youth, therefore, are trapped in the vicious circle of life that their parents undergo, mostly the life of ignorance and poverty (Galaty 1991). In these societies described above, the youths especially before marriage are viewed as the dependants of the adults and therefore not given opportunities to express their thinking or ask to be rewarded for their economic productivity. The adults in most cases exploit the youth for their own economic

expediency. This tendency to exploit may discourage the development of their potency and motivation to be hardworking (Lawler 1994).

Youth Indulgence in Drugs and Drug Abuse

To say the least, as the effects and processes of modernization, civilisation and globalisation takes toll in different countries (Kang'ethe 2013b), the issue of drug consumption has become a menace in both developed and developing countries. Drug consumption, especially alcohol consumption in Southern African countries of South Africa and Botswana is associated with many aspects that negatively affect different facets of development, ranging from motor accidents, crime, family break ups, and slowing the pace of development of many people especially the youths (Peltzer et al. 2011). This calls for various strategies to be mooted in order to address its spin-offs. Perhaps this is why United Nations continues to invest heavily in the fight against drugs. The following advocacy message succinctly underscores the negative effects of drug abuse (United Nations General Assembly 2003):

“drugs destroy lives and communities, undermine sustainable human development and generate crime. Drugs affect all sectors of society in all countries; in particular, drug abuse affects the freedom and development of young people, the world’s most valuable asset. Drugs are a grave threat to the health and wellbeing of all mankind, the independence of states, democracy, the stability of nations, the structure of all societies, and the dignity of millions of people and their families” (United Nations General Assembly 2003).

South Africa remains, besides its ever escalating cases of crime one of the countries whose drug consumption and peddling is high. Due to this, perhaps one can argue that there is an inextricable relationship between the prevalence of crime and drug phenomenon in the country. The common drugs consumed include alcohol, tobacco, cannabis sativa (marijuana/bhang) (Peltzer et al. 2011). However, a new drug called *Whoonga* has been on the market. It is an addictive dangerous new drug made from a mixture of anti retroviral drugs (ARVs) and heroin and/or marijuana. It causes violent behaviour among the users. Perhaps this is why stealing of ARVs has been a common feature in South Africa. Cas-

es of people being waylaid as they leave the clinics to collect the ARVS have not been uncommon (MRC Research Brief June 2009). The consumption of drugs is negatively affecting the lives of the youth especially the school or college going youths (Pretoria News 2000; Department of Education 2000). Studies by Dube (2007), for instance, indicated that students' abuse of drugs made their performance to deteriorate; had negatively affected their relationships with other people and their lives in general, and they had been arrested for criminal offences. The incidence above can be corroborated and reinforced by a survey conducted among learners in 2002 by Reddy et al. (2003) that indicated that 49.1% reported ever having drunk alcohol, 30.5% reported ever having smoked cigarettes, 12.8% ever having used cannabis in their lifetime. Although drugs can be taken also because of their healing capacities, offer some comfort, pain relieving and as a form of peer socialisation, it is their excess taking or abuse that poses bodily harm (Kang'ethe and Rhakudu 2010). In South Africa, drug and substance abuse is concomitant with major social changes associated with the transition from apartheid to equality; violence and crime; high rates of unemployment; technological changes; and an ever-worsening AIDS epidemic (Brook et al. 2011).

The situation in Botswana is not very different from the South African situation; only that Botswana's crime rate is low compared to the South African setting. The drugs that are commonly abused include alcohol, *dagga*, ecstasy and glue sniffing. Alcohol is heavily abused in Botswana and is responsible for increased road carnage and other HIV and AIDS related sexual risk taking behaviours (Pitso 2004). *Dagga* (Pot) is the second most abused drug, although the ratio of alcohol abuse to *dagga* is about 95% Alcohol and 4% *dagga*. Ecstasy, which is not very common or not widely known is an illegal drug that acts both as a stimulant and an energizer. Ecstasy is taken orally, usually in a tablet or capsule, and its effects last approximately 3 to 6 hours. Glue sniffing, though on a very small scale is on the increase as street children start appearing in town and cities. Studies by Weiser et al. (2006) reported a strong relationship between heavy drinking and multiple high risk sexual behaviours such as HIV and AIDS, including intergenerational sex, among both men and women in Botswana. Another corroborative re-

search undertaken by Pitso (2004) in liquor outlets in the towns of Mahalapye and Selebi-Phikwe noted that heavy alcohol consumption reinforce myths, misperceptions and fears about sexuality and condom use.

Just like the case of South Africa where high intake of drugs is associated with high crime rate, the drug consumption terrain is more or less the same in the country of Kenya. It is believed that drug abuse is one of the factors behind the increase in crime rate in Nairobi and Mombasa (UN Habitat 2002; Gatonya 2009; Karen 2006). The drugs commonly abused include *bhang* (Marijuana or cannabis sativa), heroin, cocaine, and *chang'aa*. *Chang'aa* is an illicit brew made from sorghum, maize or millet. It is believed to be even more dangerous than commonly known drugs such as *bhang*. To say the least, *chang'aa* in Kenya is responsible for many deaths, disabilities and other social problems in the country. Common clinical problems include impotence and erectile dysfunctions. The brew is locally described and known as "kill me quick" reflecting its lethal capacity. It is also called "*kumi kumi*", which literally mean "ten ten". This means it's cheap and is affordable, costing only KSh 10.

Ten Kenyan shillings is less than one South African Rand. *Chang'aa* is sometimes mixed with other concoctions/ingredients/substances to make it even stronger. The issue of its fatality has constantly been hitting Kenyan's print and electronic media. For example, in 2000 at least 137 people died, 500 were hospitalized and 20 were blinded in Nairobi after drinking *chang'aa* laced with methanol (Rowan 2000). The spate of *chang'aa* taking has become a Kenyan landmark especially among the poor people even today (Rebecca et al. 2010). Kenyans also abuse *khat*, mandrax and glue sniffing. Glue sniffing is very rampant among the street children and street families (Kang'ethe and Gaseitsiwe 2012)

Opportunities for Youth Empowerment

Their Physical Strength and Potential

In many African countries, youth age bracket ranges from 12-35. This is the age where the youth are strong, can be directed by the parents or other adults to do productive activities (Republic of South Africa 2009). They are physically strong and their minds are still growing. Glo-

bally, the youth occupies most places of schooling and other learning institutions. Compared to the adults, the youths are also fast in adapting to new dynamics of information technology and globalisation. They can tap and exploit the resources faster than the adults. It is therefore critical that their energy is directed to productive use. Incontrovertibly, the youth have also shown their strength and capacity through their involvement and competitiveness in various extracurricular activities while adults play the role of coaching, mentoring and guiding their progress and progression (Piaget 1990; Vygotsky 1978). It is therefore critical that the adults who may have had ample experiences in many aspects that the youth may be doing take responsibility and be role models, mentors, guide, coach. This is to ensure that the youth are on track. This is because it has been proved empirically that the stages of identity crisis have crippled many youths and rendered them useless. This is usually a big blow to the country concerned (Vygotsky 1978).

Youth Easily Embrace Diversity and are Explorative

A greater number of youth is still flexible, can easily migrate and explore new economic frontiers. This has made the youth to easily migrate to other countries in search of education and greener pastures. In fact in many countries of Africa, migrating to the western world has almost become like a rite of passage where all the youth are expected by their communities and societies to try their best to move to one of the stronger countries in search of a job, education and good life (Bennet 1992; Ifekwunigwe 2013). However, this has been overexploited making people to be illegal immigrants in western world countries. It is very embarrassing when these people are caught, as they are deported. That can be embarrassing and could have immense psychological loss to the individual concerned. It is also a source of bilateral stress and conflict.

Opportunities to Acquire Higher and Quality Education

To say the least, most youth have the opportunity to access good and sophisticated education that can expedite and churn economic development. To this end, many countries even

the less developed ones have invested heavily in education especially in higher education in order to fill in the most labour gaps that have remained unfilled for long (Republic of Botswana United Nations 2004). The increase in the number of universities and tertiary institutions in many African countries tell of a success story in ensuring that countries are going to make a significant score in the 2015 Millennium Development goal's stock taking (Republic of Botswana United Nations 2004). The end result has been that most countries have been able to export skills to other needy countries. For example, Kenya has been exporting most of its human resource to both South Africa and Botswana. This is because the government has been able to offer scholarship and bursaries to the people who qualify for degrees and other tertiary courses. Although there has been a scramble for these opportunities, at least the government and the private sector have been able to provide significant training opportunities that have seen Kenya's literacy levels and its human resource base get stronger and stronger. The presence of close to 40 universities in Kenya is a pointer that the youths of today have a better opportunity to easily acquire the skills which they can use, either to look for employment in other countries, or use it to informally create jobs. Three decades down the line, there were only a few universities which trained only a few people.

South Africa is doing very well in terms of youth education. With the policy of massification of education in South Africa, where the country give opportunity to as many youths as possible to gain entry into school system, this means that very soon the literacy rate for the country that stands at 87% is likely to improve (Kraak 2000). To improve the performance of the erstwhile middle level tertiary institutions, the government policy effected a national merger, where the technical colleges (Technicons) offering certificates and diplomas were merged with the already degree awarding universities. This means that those who were pursuing certificates and diplomas now have opportunities to pursue their studies up to degree level (Kraak 2000).

However, the issue of massification has attracted critics and compliments. Some think that countries should not blindly pursue the policy of massification; while others contend that the human resource training should be balanced with the human resource gaps in the country. This is

to avoid a situation in which so many people have graduated with degrees and yet they are not employable (Kraak 2000; Subotzky 2000). However, this researcher takes education as an asset to open locked and unyielding doors of the economy. He perceives education as a tool to challenge the mindset and possibly come up with newer ways of doing things. This means that this researcher considers the policy of massification an ideal one. He indicates that "Let people get education, even if they do not get jobs, they will help create them". This researcher is motivated by the jobless graduates from Kenya who have been able to start informal settings that have become source of employment. What is necessary is people and government to undergo a paradigm shift to shed off white collar mentality that has crippled many African countries for a long time (Mupedziswa 2005).

Embracing the Spirit of Indigenisation

As a solution to tackle underdevelopment in developing countries, several scholars have been advocating for countries of the developing world to consider indigenising and changing their school and institutional curricula to reflect the demands of the economies on the ground (Osei-Hwedie and Rankopo 2008). These scholars opine that the curricula that most developing countries use are still western based curricula crafted by the westerners during the time of colonialization and in case of South Africa, apartheid to suit their own development goals and objectives (Vladimir 2010; Zastrow 2008). This is why scholars like Midgeley, Osei-Hwedie, Mupedziswa and Kang'ethe (Kang'ethe 2013c; Osei-Hwedie and Rankopo 2008; Mupedziswa 2001, 2005; Midgeley 1999) have increasingly continued to voice and advocate for a paradigm shift that will see countries craft their own culturally driven, socially relevant and people driven curricula. This is with the hope of addressing many development gaps in their countries. If not, the curricula should be reformulated, restructured, and panel beaten to fit in African situations and contexts (Osei-Hwedie and Rankopo 2008). This concept of indigenizing the economies is fully supported by World Health Organization as it advises countries of the developing world to consider taking the option of "going back to the roots" by considering reconceptualising and rethinking their indige-

nous ways of tapping and harnessing their resources in the ways they know best other than relying on western based methodologies (WHO 2002). This researcher hopes that if developing countries' youth were to embrace and adopt indigenisation, countries will no doubt increase their developments. Increasingly and through the informal sector, Kenya is accepting and embracing indigenisation as an option of development (Maverick 2013).

CONCLUSION

Countries of the developing world need to realise the potential and resources that their youth possess. They equally need to understand how the governance, patriarchal and socialisation have oppressed and suppressed the youth to an extent of the youth viewing themselves as passive in development paradigm. The youth need to be released from the trap. The adults need to respect, position, and propel their youths to take their niche in the development agenda of their countries. Their potential can take the developing countries further if it is positively tapped and harnessed. They need to be funded by government, NGOs and private sector. Government and societal goodwill is especially critical to give the youth a platform to express and realise their potential. The youth of today are exposed to aspects of modernisation and globalisation. All they need is government and societal good will, to be guided, mentored, coached and guided as they exploit their talents, knowledge and intuition to effectuate development.

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