

Conference Report

Potsdam Spring Dialogues 2017

sef:

Future Prospects for Africa's Youth. Regional and international strategies

Rebekka Hannes

62 per cent of people in Africa are below the age of 25. By 2100, more than one third of the world's young people will live in sub-Saharan Africa. A key task for African policy-makers, therefore, is to offer young people prospects for the future. Key elements are improving young people's political participation, narrowing social inequalities, providing training opportunities and creating jobs.

At the Potsdam Spring Dialogues 2017, representatives of international and youth organisations, the development community, civil society and the African and European private sector identified positive strategies, but also gaps, in African youth policy. Among other things, the level of priority so far given to youth policy was critically reviewed. Another issue of particular interest was what young Africans are demanding from politics and what action they themselves are taking to plug the gaps in areas as diverse as anti-violence projects to business start-ups. And finally, the Dialogues considered what Europeans and Africans can learn from each other's youth policies

Youth: an African Union priority in 2017

"Youth is the African Union's priority in 2017." This was made clear by H.E. Dr Martial De-Paul Ikounga, African Union Commissioner for Human Resources, Science and Technology, in his keynote. The AU has chosen "Harnessing the Demographic Dividend through Investments in Youth" as its theme for 2017. From Dr Ikounga's perspective, it is self-evident

that Africa must make positive use of its population growth: "Otherwise, in future, we will bear responsibility for conflicts that arise out of untapped potential." Quality education and skills development are essential in empowering young people. Fostering entrepreneurial spirit is also important, not only for young people themselves but also for economic development across the continent.

Implementing a comprehensive youth policy package is a major challenge. An ambassador attending the Dialogues struck a critical note: "There are so many declarations, so many initiatives, so many programmes" – but not enough action to change the



H.E. Dr Martial De-Paul Ikounga

reality of many young people's lives. The fact that the African Youth Charter has still not been ratified by 18 AU states is a damning indictment, not least of the AU itself. "As if these questions don't come up in those countries," Dr Ikounga complained.

The BMZ's Marshall Plan – an insensitive choice of words

Germany, too, has made African youth empowerment a key focus of its development cooperation. This is reflected in the Cornerstones of a Marshall Plan with Africa, unveiled by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) in early 2017 and presented by Holger Illi at the Potsdam Spring Dialogues. The plan aims to leverage more private investment in order to improve conditions for African youth. It recognises that one of the most important questions that must be answered is how to create jobs for the 20 million people who enter the African labour market every year. The BMZ is therefore promoting the African youth employment agenda: for example, with the BMZ's support, the AU's Skills Initiative for Africa aims to create five million jobs. However, the term "Marshall Plan" came in for criticism from the participants. Job Shipululo Amupanda, Commissioner for African Diaspora and External Affairs at the African Youth Commission, called it "insensitive in its highest proportion". Dr Ikounga was equally critical, pointing out that the historical allusion has no relevance to the African context.

Identifying positive alternatives

Dr Ikounga's call for youth policy to be future-oriented as a form of prevention policy was echoed by Ilwad Elman, Director of Programs and Development at the Elman Peace and Human Rights Centre in Mogadishu. She highlighted the important role that young people can play in preventing radicalisation and supporting conflict resolution and regional development. Her organisation works mainly with ex-combatants, who share their first-hand experience with other young people in order to show that there are better options than armed conflict. In her view, identifying positive alternatives is one of the most important strategies in combating the rise in radicalisation. She had words of encouragement for participants: "Let young people put forward a different perspective. Let them tell their stories."

Ilwad Elman also put paid to some of the stock theories surrounding radicalisation. Recent studies show that extremism arises from a combination of factors, not all of them religious. For many young people, the decision to join groups such as Boko Haram and al-Shabaab is motivated by their lack of prospects. Many young Africans feel frustrated because their

needs are not being recognised and addressed by politicians. Extremist groups give them the opportunity to exert influence through direct action. By contrast, gaining a hearing from the political establishment is often very difficult.



Ilwad Elman

Broadening participation

"Young people are political!" This message from Ilwad Elman makes participation a logical imperative. "Politicians must start listening to young people – and not through consultations and surveys," said Hans-Joachim Schild from the Institute for Vocational Training, Labour Market and Social Policy GmbH (INBAS) with conviction. It is essential to establish structures which give young people genuine opportunities to participate in political decision-making. In many African cultures, however, it is still considered disrespectful for young people to contradict their elders. This makes it difficult for them to claim a public space in which to voice their demands, said Ilwad Elman. For Job Amupanda, therefore, radicalism is not necessarily bad. "Sometimes, young people have to radicalise in order to effect change," he said.

"Young people will always find ways of getting politicians to listen to them," he continued. This does not necessarily mean participation in the traditional sense through elections, involvement in government, etc. The Arab Spring and the toppling of dictators, for example, would not have happened without youth protests. Like other participants, Amupanda called for a stronger emphasis on young people's achievements in Africa.

Kristen Aigro, Board Member at the European Youth Forum, agreed. In Europe, young people are not adequately represented as well. This is evident, for

example, in the fact that the average age of MPs does not correspond to that of the population at large. But traditional metrics such as youth voter turnout are not particularly informative, as young people express their opinion in other ways, for example by purchasing specific products, boycotting events, sharing political content online and volunteering. Many young activists make very effective use of social media: with Twitter, Facebook and WhatsApp, they can reach thousands of people instantly. This allows counternarratives to be presented – a point which was emphasised by Ilwad Elman. In repressive regimes, social media offer space for free expression – if they are available. However, the impact of social media, also in relation to youth radicalisation in Africa, should not be overstated. In many regions where large numbers of young people are joining extremist groups, there is no access to social media at all.

Narrowing inequalities

This, in turn, is a reflection of the glaring inequalities which must be narrowed if young people in Africa are to gain better prospects for the future. Charles Vincent Dan, Special Representative on Youth and Social Inclusion at the International Labour Organization (ILO), identified four drivers of inequality in Africa: 1. lack of suitable employment opportunities; 2. lack of access to education; 3. gender; and 4. lack of social welfare. For Mamusa Siyunyi from the Social Development Policy Division at the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA), the fundamental problem is that wealth remains

concluded. Addressing inequalities is not a matter of resources – it is a matter of priority.

Quraysha Ismail Sooliman from the University of Pretoria offered an insight into the #FeesMustFall protest movement. In this, South African students express their discontent with a political establishment that does nothing to narrow inequalities or dismantle the remnants of colonialism, instead entrenching them further. The protests began in October 2015 in response to an increase in fees at South African universities. For Quraysha Ismail Sooliman, the protests are not only an expression of social inequality and inadequate or inequitable access to education. They also show that young people, their motives for gaining an education and their potential as a political force are underestimated by the ruling elites.

Skilling young people

The importance of investing in young people's education was demonstrated by Misan Rewane, Chief Executive Officer and Co-Founder of West Africa Vocational Education (WAVE) in Lagos. "Skills over schools and competencies over credentials" is her core mantra. In many countries in Africa – and, indeed, in Europe – the education system is not aligned to labour market needs. "There is no real dialogue between them," she complained. As a result, in many countries, companies and organisations find it impossible to hire employees with the right skills even though thousands of young people are looking for work.

For Per Börjegen from the Skills Initiative for Africa, which is run by the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH, the major challenge is to facilitate broad-scale acquisition of vocational skills. Technical colleges and training systems are a good starting point, but ultimately, employers should take action as well. One solution, according to Misan Rewane, is to involve them in teaching to a greater extent so that they can build the skills their companies need. Misan Rewane highlighted one particular problem: "Many young people are not aware of the skills they have and the skills they need to get a job."

DHL GoTeach is an example of a successful intervention by employers. Faneva Raharimanantsoa, GoTeach Coordinator from Madagascar, gave a presentation on the project, which operates in 26 countries. In Madagascar, local DHL staff mentor children at SOS Village d'Enfants, seeking to inspire and motivate these young individuals by sharing their own professional experiences and easing their path into the world of work. Training by members of the local community also helps to narrow inequalities, she explained. It is particularly difficult for marginalised or stigmatised young people to gain a training place or any prospect of formal employment.



Round-table discussion with Ilwad Elman, Job Amupanda, Henning Melber (Chair) and Kristen Aigro (l.t.r.)

concentrated in the hands of the few: "Young people from poor families stay trapped in a cycle of poverty," she observed. According to Hans-Joachim Schild, the problem for policy-makers is that many young people – both in Africa and in Europe – face several of these barriers simultaneously. Young people experiencing social exclusion do not constitute a homogeneous group. Nonetheless, this does not justify inertia: "It's a scandal that in our societies, we continue to exclude so many people from the chance of a good life," he

The attendees agreed that the new technologies are changing the opportunities not only for participation but also for learning and skills development. But this means that the nature of the offer must also change. Misan Rewane sees this as another opportunity: “Everyone deserves individual learning.” Lifelong learning, tailored to each person’s needs, can be provided more simply and cheaply with new technologies.



Job Amupanda

Who pays?

But what about funding these and similar programmes? According to Per Börjegen, this responsibility lies with everyone who benefits: the government, which has a better educated citizenry; companies, which have a more productive workforce; and students, who gain better prospects for the future. As Misan Rewane explained, WAVE is often criticised for asking the two sides – employers and trainees – to contribute financially. “Poor people are willing to pay for services,” she said. In fact, the poor often feel denigrated if they gain the impression that they are receiving handouts. However, WAVE only submits a bill once graduates have found a job – and the fees are based on income. Donor-funded projects also came in for sharp criticism, with several participants pointing out that they cannot, by definition, be sustainable.

Motivating young entrepreneurs

For some young people, self-employment is another pathway into work. Misan Rewane explained some of the factors which frequently underlie their decision to set up on their own: in Nigeria, for example, 75 per

cent of business start-ups come from a lack of trust in employers and the social welfare system. “If you run your own business, you have more control,” she said. So what can governments do to support young entrepreneurs? Anna Dominick Lyimo from Tanzania’s National Economic Empowerment Council (NEEC) explained that in her experience, start-ups often fail due to a lack of finance. Others qualified this statement: although start-up finance is important, it is not the crucial factor. Once again, having the right skills is essential for new entrepreneurs. Microfinance is a complex issue for banks, but it helps young people take the first step towards self-employment. In order to provide more security for banks and motivate young entrepreneurs, Misan Rewane recommended establishing conditionality for financial support, with the next tranche of funds only being disbursed once a specific milestone has been reached on the journey towards successful start-up.

Anna Dominick Lyimo criticised the fact that the education system in Tanzania – as in many other countries – is geared towards training people for a future as employees. The option of becoming an employer plays virtually no role in school and vocational training. The NEEC is therefore working for the inclusion of basic commercial skills, including how to produce a business plan, in the curriculum for all year groups. Barbara Nitsche from Potsdam Chamber of Industry and Commerce (IHK) added that it is also important to assuage potential entrepreneurs’ fear of failure – and to cut red tape: “New entrepreneurs should be able to focus on the essentials,” she said.

Anna Dominick Lyimo called for reforms of the tax systems to make them more supportive of business start-ups. Tax relief during the early years is a good option. Misan Rewane suggested providing more subsidies for upskilling, as start-ups cannot afford to recruit highly qualified applicants. Those they do hire often move on to positions with large companies as soon as they have gained enough knowledge and skills. This aspect should be given more consideration by policy-makers and the tax authorities.

Bringing the Potsdam Spring Dialogues 2017 to a close, Job Amupanda repeated his criticism that youth policy in Africa is not given the priority it deserves. This is evident from the fact that the ministries responsible for the youth portfolio invariably have to cover a range of other policy areas as well. At the same time, the political establishment should reach out to more groups within society in order to facilitate genuine participation by young people, offer them prospects for the future and prevent radicalisation.

Imprint

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Dechenstr. 2 : 53115 Bonn : Germany
Phone +49 (0)228 959 25-0 : Fax -99
sef@sef-bonn.org : @sefbonn
www.sef-bonn.org

Editor
Dr Michèle Roth

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Hillary Crowe

Design Basic Concept
Pitch Black Graphic Design
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