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Revitalizing Youth-Driven Peacebuilding and Conflict Prevention in Africa¹

Brian Kithinji²

Abstract

As the deadline for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals fast approaches, global progress towards peace, security, and strong institutions remains significantly distant. Over 600 million youths live in fragile and conflict-affected areas, where ongoing violence has severely hindered their socio-economic advancement, access to healthcare and education, psychological well-being, and social engagements. Despite these challenges, youths continue to play a pivotal role in peacebuilding, conflict prevention, and countering violent extremism. When provided with opportunities for meaningful participation, they continuously demonstrate resilience and contribute effective solutions in their communities. In a world where armed conflicts, radical violent extremism, political tensions, declining trust in institutions, ethnic and religious divisions are prevalent, alongside emerging threats such as climate change, it is crucial to reevaluate the Youth, Peace, and Security (YPS) Agenda to define a path to a brighter present and more secure today. The key highlights include:

- i. Existing approaches to peacebuilding in Africa are insufficient and have failed to address the structural and cultural factors that underpin conflicts. The increasing frequency of climate change events and their resulting effect on human displacement could further ignite ethnic tensions and crime in urban areas.
- ii. Youths who seek to contribute towards peacebuilding are burdened by the lack of access to financial resources, local resistance to youth-driven peacebuilding efforts, cultural legacies, and weak institutions that are unable to offer strategy.
- iii. Policy interventions that could help foster sustainable peace and resilience in communities affected by conflicts include localization of peace processes, inclusion of climate security policies in the Youth, Peace, and Security Agenda, and expanding access to funding for youth-led initiatives.

Keywords: Peacebuilding, conflict resolution, youth.

Introduction

The youth demographic has become too large to ignore. Nearly 1.8 billion people, roughly 23 per cent of the world's population, is between the ages of 18 and 24 years, 90 per cent of whom live in developing countries (UNDP, 2022). This demographic is projected to grow further, particularly in Africa, which is projected to host 42 per cent of all youths worldwide by 2030. However, their active role in peacebuilding at grassroots and local levels is often under-acknowledged and excluded from official peace processes. In Africa, the prevailing narrative surrounding the youth bulge tends to be pessimistic, viewing them more as a potential threat than as agents of positive socio-economic transformations. Youths are frequently stereotyped as inexperienced or unqualified to contribute

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meaningfully in the society. This ideology is very visible in how policymakers have approached youth inclusion for decades. The fear of youth has generated policies that disproportionately targets the bodies, minds, and social worlds of the young for co-optation or destruction, ostensibly to protect the government from unidentified threats and opposition (Scheper-Hughes, 2004). Moreover, youth inclusion has become tokenistic, and programs created for youths are limited to awareness and sensitization – its short-termness not helping to forge sustainable peace. The failure to provide substantive opportunities for youths in peacebuilding is derailing the world from achieving SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions).

In 2015, the United Nations Security Council unanimously passed a landmark resolution that kick-started the Youth, Peace, and Security Agenda. Resolution 2250 recognizes that “young people play an important and positive role in the maintenance and promotion of international peace and security.” It foresees youth engagement within five pillars: Participation, Partnerships, Prevention, Protection, Disengagement and re-integration. Further Resolutions 2419 and 2535 built on these pillars, and forced a continental and regional realignment towards adopting the Youth, Peace, and Security Agenda. The African Union launched the Silencing the Guns initiative in December 2019 and founded the African Union Youth Ambassadors Platform to provide a youth voice in continental peacebuilding strategies. Regionally, the COMESA Youth Advisory Panel, East African Community Youth Ambassadors Platform, SADC Youth Forum, ECOWAS Youth Council, and IGAD Youth Forum for Peace were created to accomplish similar goals.

However, these approaches have been ineffective in stopping armed conflicts and enhancing security across the continent. Over the past 12 months, political violence and conflicts have risen by 15 per cent, impacting one in seven people worldwide (ACLED, 2014). The World Bank identifies 13 African countries as currently in conflict, and a further 15 as experiencing state fragility. It is therefore vital to reimagine youth-driven peacebuilding and conflict prevention by addressing the structural causes of violence, increasing inclusivity in peace processes, and accounting for emerging threats such as climate change.

The United Nations Guidance for Effective Mediation defines “inclusivity” as the “extent and manner in which the views and needs of parties to conflict and other stakeholders are represented, heard, and integrated into a peace process,” (UN, 2012). As world leaders embark on implementing the pact of the Summit of the Future, youth-led movements continue to call for their voices to be included in the Youth, Peace, and Security Agenda, and more institutional support to implement grassroots initiatives aimed at capacity-building peace-builders and promoting dialogue and social cohesion.

Embracing Positive Peace Approach

Political violence and conflicts over resources are rising across the continent. In conversations on advancing the Youth, Peace, and Security Agenda, the impacts of conflicts on youths are rarely addressed. However, the prolonged exposure to conflict, violence, and its resulting effects, which include economic decline, displacement, and breakdown of social structures, have drained the psychological well-being of the youth population. Conflicts have exacerbated hunger, poverty, and disease in Africa, especially for those forced to live in squalid conditions in refugee camps, where they also face heightened risks of sexual violence and exploitation. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimates that more than 30 million Africans have been displaced by conflicts and violence, majority from conflict zones in Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, Libya, Mali, Somalia, and Sudan. These refugees are often unable to attend school or gain meaningful employment, increasing their chances of joining armed groups to fight in wars for food or minimal compensation. In Eritrea, the persistent implementation of the mandatory military conscription rule has driven youths to flee the country, further destabilizing the Horn of Africa region (Plaut, 2016).

Peacebuilding in Africa is quite complex due to the uniqueness of each conflict zone. However, overall approaches to peacebuilding in the continent focus on eliminating direct violence to avert bodily harm or loss of property (Bangura, 2022). This approach is widely preferred by governments and some civil society organizations because it provides “quick” results. However, its short-term nature ignores the underlying causes of social inequalities stemming from marginalization and colonial legacies that have created room for conflict recurrence. As such, it may be described as “negative peace.”

In reevaluating the Youth, Peace, and Security Agenda, it is pertinent that policymakers look to foster positive peace, which aims to address the structural and cultural violence that results in resolving social injustices. Africa bears scars from decades of colonization and dispossession of community lands and cultural artefacts, nation boundaries that divided communities, and state violence, repression and marginalization by post-independence governments. By embracing a positive peace approach, all relevant actors can resolve these issues concretely, in the process eliminating potential conflicts and fostering sustainable social cohesion and harmony.

Threat of Climate Change to Sustainable Peace

Climate change has emerged as the leading threat to national security, particularly in Africa, which is most impacted continent. Recognition of this threat has led to the adoption of policy frameworks

such as the Bamako Declaration on Access to Natural Resources and Conflicts between Communities in November 2019, to improve collaboration and coordination across the African Union member states in addressing climate-related security risks. However, such policies do not address the threats of climate change-induced human displacements. The increase in adverse weather-related events such as floods, prolonged droughts, rising sea levels, and prevalence of invasive species is causing mass human migration that has the potential of destabilizing the continent (Kithinji et al., 2023).

Over the past decade, roughly 21.9 million people were displaced annually due to climate change (International Displacement Monitoring Centre, 2021). The International Organization for Migration (IOM) further warns that by 2050, more than 90 million people in North Africa and another 86 million people in sub-Saharan Africa will be forced to migrate to escape the impacts of climate change in rural areas. When migrants move to other areas, it causes tensions with host communities over land and water resources. Additionally, the lack of economic opportunities in the areas they have moved into can lead the youths to engage in crime and violence. For instance, Lake Chad, the largest freshwater lake in the Sahel region, lost 90 per cent of its water mass in the past fifty years, displacing at least 5 million people (Brookings Institution, 2017). These displacements have been directly attributed to be responsible for the rise of Boko Haram, a radical Islamist terrorist group that has killed tens of thousands of people in Nigeria, Chad and Cameroon (Badewa, 2022).

Climate change has also contributed to rural-urban migration with migrants more likely to settle in overcrowded informal settlements in urban areas. The proportion of urban population in African countries has increased from 8 percent in 1970 to 21 percent in 2021, driven by prolonged droughts and loss of economic output in the rural areas (Global Center for Climate Mobility and Africa Climate Mobility Initiative, n.d). With African cities projected to swell due to extreme climate events, there is a growing likelihood of a rise in gang crime and violence in informal areas that lack social amenities and opportunities for upward mobility.

Barriers to Youth Inclusion in Peace-building

SDG 16 encourages the participation of youth in decision-making processes and peacebuilding efforts, recognizing them as critical stakeholders in achieving sustainable peace. While progress has been made in recognizing the contribution of youths in peacebuilding and conflict prevention, there are still several barriers faced by youth peace-builders when it comes to accessing and acquiring necessary support for their work. One such barrier is the weakening of public institutions, which embody the public trust and can help to mediate differences and prevent people from resorting to violence to achieve “justice”. The United Nations Secretary General Antonio Guterres, during a

speech on the International Day of Democracy on 15th September 2023, warned world leaders on the threats of democracy and its effects on increasing tension and turmoil. African countries must take concrete steps towards strengthening and renewing their democracies, which could have a correlating effect on increasing the inclusion of young people, particularly those from marginalized groups such as Persons with Disabilities (PWDs), the LBTQIA+, and indigenous communities.

Recently, there have been some efforts to include youths in the African Union processes. In November 2023, during the Africa Youth Month, the African Union launched the 1 Million Next Level Initiative aimed at empowering 300 million young Africans by the year 2030 through skilling and capacity-building programs. By addressing the 4Es+H (Education, Employment, Entrepreneurship, Engagement, Health and Well-being), this initiative seeks to unlock the potential of Africa's youth demographic, drive economic growth and development, foster social inclusion and stability, and strengthen governance and democracy. However, such programs have been noted by experts in the past to lack tangible policy operationalization, financial preparedness, and member state accountability (Aminga & Krampe, 2020).

Additionally, youths in peacebuilding continue to face challenges in acquiring financial resources to support their work. The current grant-making framework is very long and has extensive eligibility criteria that specifically excludes young peace-builders as they lack an established track record or government-issued documentation. Additionally, youths make up the largest percentage of the more than 2.5 billion individuals who are estimated to be excluded from financial services (UNCDF, n.d.). They are 33 per cent less likely to possess a saving account compared to adults, and 44 percent less likely to engage in formal savings institutions.

Partnerships have often been touted as a solution towards addressing the financial challenges youths face but studies indicate that youth organizations that engage in such frameworks do not experience benefits of ownership, space to grow their institutional capacities and track records as they desired (ACCORD, 2023). The donor community also rarely consults with young peace-builders about the barriers they face in accessing funding, therefore, perpetuating the lack of informed financial strategies and limiting local ownership.

Aside from the institutional challenges, youths in peacebuilding often face resistance locally; especially in trying to challenge cultural norms and stereotypes that lead to violence. The set up in Africa puts elders at the top of societal decision-making, while young people are expected to remain silent and not challenge the actions or words of their elders. Additionally, peacebuilding is increasingly foreseen as an income generating venture, where participants can access donor funding,

and therefore the elders want to have a stake in these resources. If left unaddressed, the lack of youth sovereignty will be the biggest hindrance towards achieving sustainable peace in Africa.

Policy Recommendations

1. The African Union and regional blocs should reevaluate their approaches to peacebuilding by moving towards a positive peace approach that holistically addresses the structural and cultural factors that lead to conflicts in Africa, through accelerating land reforms, enhancing democratic processes, implementing rule of law, resolving historical injustices, and providing equal opportunities for advancement and upward mobility.
2. Youths in peacebuilding should have ownership over the division and allocation of financial resources; and funding instruments must be highly flexible, simple, and open. Eligibility criteria, application procedures, and reporting requirements should be made simple, clear, and accessible to all youths.
3. African governments could consider localizing their peacebuilding and countering violent extremism strategies by incorporating indigenous knowledge and providing sovereignty to communities to take ownership of such processes.
4. The international community should reform the Youth, Peace, and Security Agenda to include specific measures to address the emerging threats of climate change. Such measures can include the formal recognition of climate migrants, mobility planning, community empowerment, and inclusive development options. The humanitarian aid community led by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) can facilitate safe and orderly climate migration by addressing the current legal lacunas on the recognition and protection of climate migrants in the 1951 Refugee Convention.
5. The United Nations Climate Security Mechanism should be expanded to provide financial and technical support towards youth-led movements in Africa.

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