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YOUTHS AND PEACEBUILDING IN AFRICA: SOCIO-POLITICAL & ECONOMIC EXCLUSION AND THE ROLE YOUTHS PLAY IN PEACE BUILDING IN AFRICA

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ABSTRACT

Peacebuilding consists of a set of physical, social, and structural initiatives that are often an integral part of post-conflict reconstruction and rehabilitation. It actively works to promote a culture of peace, intercultural dialogue and non-violent conflict transformation. Because of social exclusion, lack of opportunities, slow implementation of public policies that promote reparation and reconciliation, young people become exposed and vulnerable to armed or political recruitment, as a result, they are considered perpetrators of crime instead as peace builders. This paper portrays the unique potentials and actual contributions the youths of Africa have demonstrated in building peace in different African communities.

Key Words: Peacebuilding, conflicts, violence, youth exclusion

INTRODUCTION

There is no generally agreed definition of whom and what constitutes “youth”. Definitions vary between countries and organizations. In practice, “youth” is better understood as a transitional stage in life between childhood and adulthood, rather than as a rigid construct based on age. The United Nations General Assembly defined “youth” as the age between 15 and 24. The lowest age range for youth is 12 years and the upper age range is 35 in many African countries including Sierra Leone and Rwanda. The World Health Organization (WHO) and United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) use the term “adolescent” for those aged 10-19, “youth” for those between 15-24, and “young people” for those between the ages of 10-24 to reduce the differences.

Exclusion describes “a process by which certain groups are systematically disadvantaged because they are discriminated against based on their ethnicity, race, religion, sexual orientation, caste, descent, gender, age, disability, HIV status, migrant status or where they live” (DFID, 2005: 3). Exclusion can take place in several places such as public office, schools, workplaces, health sector and even in households.

Peacebuilding is broadly understood as activities that promote positive and negative peace. This means activities addressing root causes of conflict, prevention, and mitigation of all forms of violence, and to work towards healing and reconciliation. Peacebuilding encompasses all activities which aim to eliminate or mitigate direct, structural and cultural violence. According to Dr Murithi, “Peacebuilding is an ethical process that requires a close partnership, respect, and dialogue among all the actors”. Amongst these different actors include the youths who are considered future leaders. The United Nations Development Program's (UNDP) Youth Strategy 2014-2017 recognizes the involvement of young men and women in participatory decision-making and development processes as vital to achieving sustainable human development. In July 2016, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) launched its first Youth Global Program for Sustainable Development and Peace – Youth-GPS (2016-2020), a 5-years global programmatic offer on youth empowerment. Peacebuilding is designed to recognize, challenge, and change the thinking that has supported oppressive societal structure and moral exclusion.

Youth Inclusion in peacebuilding involves “empowering young people with the skills, attitudes, and knowledge to create a safe world and build a sustainable environment” (Harris & Morrison, 2003, p. 9). Even though young people are mostly regarded as perpetrators of violence and conflict in their communities, as members of a dynamic group in society, they still play a crucial role in positively transforming conflict situations and in building the foundations of democratic and peaceful societies. “Youth” is a very heterogeneous group encompassing people of various ethnicity, religion, race, gender, and class. Most youths in Africa are facing political, and socio-economic exclusion. This has created a tension between the aged population and the young population. The problem has always been on how to reconcile this conflict. The inclusion of young people in peacebuilding encourages young people's participation in the country's development. There is a growing body of literature on the roles of youth in participating as combatants in armed conflict and the effects of their involvement on development. In many different African countries, youths have been underestimated as the agents of change and peace builders because they are considered perpetrators of conflict.

This research explores the undiscovered roles of young people in peacebuilding. It explains how the social inclusion of young people in peacebuilding can reconcile and solve conflicts in our African communities. It also provides different ways in which peacebuilding can be effective and sustainable. This paper will portray youth's productivity when included in activities of peacebuilding and will present a practical implementation approach of peacebuilding by youths in Africa.

RESEARCH PROBLEM STATEMENT

African countries have failed in involving the youth in the development process (political, economic and social development) of their countries. There is a glaring evidence of the African country's underrepresentation of their youths in the development process (political, economic and social development). As such, “youth” ability to participate in different socio-political development activity (such as peacebuilding), remains undiscovered.

This research paper uncovers the different roles played by the youths in building peace (conflict and post-conflict) in Africa and highlights the major causes of such violence which can be attributed to socio-political and economic exclusion.

RESEARCH METHODS AND MATERIALS

This paper evaluates the Socio-Political and Economic exclusion of African youths. The research is explanatory in nature, adopting the qualitative method. A systematic search was carried out on electronic databases: EBSCO, SCOPUS and Google scholar, trying to identify research work and materials related to the domain.

The search terms include Peacebuilding, Violence and Conflict, Youths exclusion.

SOCIO-POLITICAL & ECONOMIC EXCLUSION

Youth's involvement in the decision-making process in developing countries (in Africa) is challenged by several factors: socio-political marginalization, corruption, dictatorship, and Unemployment. Having been excluding from political decision making and facing disproportionately, difficult economic contexts whilst ignored in peacebuilding potentials, youths have been unable to secure their own physical protection and wellbeing through lawful means, and this has made them more vulnerable to joining conflicts. At the global level youths are regarded as significant dividends of the global population such that they need to be included in every decision-making process in the country. However, in Africa today, the involvement of youths has been disrupted by their current geopolitical context and obstacles to opportunities.

Unemployment

Sub-Saharan Africa is experiencing a youth unemployment crisis of unprecedented magnitude. (World Bank, 2009). The high unemployment rate remains a rising problem in Africa, driving youths to violence and crime. Africa has a growing population of youths, the majority of which are unemployed. Ghana is the world's tenth largest and Africa's second largest gold mining industry, but unemployment still prevails. Ghana's real GDP growth reached about 15.2 percent when the country began its commercial oil production in 2011. Despite this strong growth performance, employment generation remains a challenge, with unemployment constituting one of the key labor market challenges in Ghana. The inability of job

seekers to secure gainful employment tends to create disaffection among these people and causes some of them, especially the youths, to resort to social vices such as criminal and political unrest.

Today in Southern Africa, over 51% of young women and 43% of young men are unemployed. This large unemployed population indicates lost potentials since communities and nations fail to benefit from what the young people can theoretically contribute. However, this high level of unemployment cannot be totally attributed to the rising population. Lack of investment in the infrastructure of high labor absorption sectors of Agriculture and manufacturing has created deep structural issues. For example, in many different African countries, the agricultural sector, employing millions of people today, is not subsidized by the government and is struggling to meet wage expectations. The inability of young people to gain employment opportunities excludes them in the socioeconomic development of their communities. Without access to employment or livelihood opportunities, most young people cannot afford the basic needs of life. Turning to menial jobs with little prospect for advancement coupled with the low income earned may also be a cause of youth frustration, embarrassment, and social separation. There are many studies that suggest that youth unemployment can cause conflict or lead to youth involvement in criminal activities such as the drugs trade, armed groups and other illegal trade that offer livelihood opportunities.

Socio-Political Marginalization (Poor Governance)

Youths in Africa remain very marginal in the political process. (AU, 2011 youth report). Excluding youths in the national and local electoral and consultation process is a means of denying them political participation. The absence of a youth-friendly environment that paves the way for one effective and meaningful youth political participation, creates the conflict of marginalization in the different African communities. Socioeconomic marginalization, unsound economic and social policies, corrupt government and political dictatorship are all evidence of youth's exclusion. Participation in political systems often does not provide an outlet for youths to express their needs, aspirations, and grievances. In many cases, young people grow up in African countries where rigidity, conservative power structures are the order of the day thereby excluding them from decision-making and do not meet their needs. Youths often turn to violence once they have the chance to just as a means of having their voices heard in a specific country. A recent example of an African country that is having the problem of marginalization is Cameroon found in Central Africa. In 2016 the English Lawyers from the English part of Cameroon (Northwest and Southwest Region) put up a street demonstration of marginalization in their courts. They complained of French Magistrates who had little or no knowledge of English common law system dominating their courts. This aroused conflict which led to some street demonstrations that was followed with the arrest of some renowned English Cameroon lawyers. Also, coupled with several factors such as unemployment, corrupt government and political dissatisfaction and dictatorship, the youths of the English regions of Cameroon and youths in the diaspora decided to join the struggle of the English lawyers to demand equal rights and inclusion. Boycotts, ghost towns and the use of the social media were all used in the struggle. Marginalization in all forms is a big challenge to youth inclusion in a community's development.

Another keynote example is the case of MENA. Youth policy in the MENA region is often neglected, lacking a “whole of government” approach, and young people often find themselves in “observer status” in policy cycles without much opportunity to shape political outcomes (2015 OECD Study)

Failure in Promoting Social Activities

Despite the international emphasis from WHO, UN, of the importance of social inclusion (sports) for child and community development, sport and play programs often remain on the margins of governmental support and attention. Resources allocated by national governments to give sport and play a chance as actors in development is usually limited in African Countries. Unlike the developed world countries such as Canada, Holland, USA, Norway, and Switzerland, that use sport in their foreign-assistance policies and provide targeted funding to a handful of sport-based initiatives, most African countries pay little attention using sports to develop foreign-assistance policies.

Insufficient and Unequal Education/ Training

Unequal and lack of access to education can become a source of tension, which can lead to violence, rebellions, and conflict led by disgruntled youths. Most youths in some African countries do not have access to education and even when they succeed in getting an education, having a job is not a luxury.

ROLE OF YOUNG PEOPLE IN PEACE BUILDING IN AFRICA

Youths have become an important instrument of peacebuilding work in communities experiencing severe conflicts. Even though the efforts of the youths in peacebuilding in certain African societies are yet to be discovered, other communities can justify the importance of youths in peacebuilding, restoration and rebuilding relationships. The United Nations Security Resolution on Youth, Peace, and Security (UNSCR 2250), passed in December 2015, acknowledges youths as activists of positive change and peace. It emphasizes the importance of inclusive environments for youth peacebuilding through economic, social, and development activities.

The next generation of leaders, facilitators, and stakeholders will emerge from among the current cohort of young people, therefore, their engagement in the peace process/peacebuilding and the shaping of their political attitudes and skills in the period will have important long-term implications. Whether the focus of concern is with technical conflict management or broader conflict transformation, youths are important in post-conflict peacebuilding. In different contexts, youths are moral guardians, amoral thugs, and in other places, they are a mix of both. According to Article 11(1) of the African Youth Charter, every young person shall have the right to participate in all spheres of society including peacebuilding.

Lederach argues that genuine conflict transformation requires more than attention to 'the technical task of transition' (1998, 186) but a shift 'away from a concern with the resolution of issues and toward a frame of reference that focuses on the restoration and rebuilding of relationships' (1996, 24). Most peacebuilding projects will look at the oppressed and work with them to get the society to understand their plight. Every young person shall have the right to social, economic, political and cultural development with due regard to their freedom and identity and in equal enjoyment of the common heritage of mankind. (Article 10(1) African Youth Charter, 2006)

Youth may be key actors in terms of negotiation and mediation. For example, youths played several roles serving as marshals and demonstration in South Africa. The Acholi Religious Leaders Peace Initiative (ARLPI) mediated violent conflicts between the Acholi and their Jie neighbors, between Teso and Karimojong rural communities, and between rebels and the government. Even though the IRCSL could not prevent the coup in 1997 and stop the violence completely, they acted as a bridge between the government and rebels throughout the peace talks in Abidjan in 1996. Youths have served and worked with different organizations that have enhanced peacebuilding in Africa.

Youths play a key role in promoting cultural diversity in their communities, promote the links between cultural minorities and engage in activities of political awareness in their different localities. Youths can also be international ambassadors of peace-promoting different exchange programs in science, technology, culture and even tourism. To eliminate ethnic conflict in Burundi, the youths of Bujumbura have engaged in sports development activities that promote inter-ethnic tolerance and understanding by bringing young people from different ethnic backgrounds together for sport related activities. The International Olympic Committee and the United Nations Development Program have actively supported this initiative launched by the young people in Bujumbura. Aside from the usual physical and health benefits that are usually attributed to sports, the youths of Burundi are using sports activities to promote peace building through teamwork, cooperation, and respect. This builds confidence by acquiring skills and encourages a meaningful connection to adults through positive coaching relationships. The youths of Burundi have used sports to effectively tackle stigma and discrimination between ethnic groups and to reach out to the most vulnerable populations including girls, adolescents, and street children. Sports have been an international language for peacebuilding. During the Nagano Winter Olympic Games in 1998, the UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan used his knowledge after observing the Olympic Truce intervene to seek a

diplomatic resolution to the crisis in Iraq. North and South Korea marched under the same flag of the Korean Peninsula at the opening ceremony of the Olympic Games in 2004. Today, football, (soccer) played by youths in Africa is a medium of Intercultural diversity between different African countries.

After 15 years of civil war in Liberia, women (young and old) came out in their numbers crying for peace. This caught the attention of International organizations (United Nations) who later intervened. The participation of these women was based on three key measures: reconciliation, re-humanization and re-establishing relations. Some women organizations performed several activities such as convincing ex-combatants to participate in Disarmament Demobilization Rehabilitation and Reintegration (DDRR) and assisting to re-integrate child soldiers in their communities. They destroyed small arms and light weapons, supported refugees and promoted non-violent conflict transformation within their communities.

During the civil war in Sudan, there was an ambiguous loss of some boys which led to their migration to three different countries namely: Kenya, United States, and Ethiopia. After 13.7 years of separation, families of the lost boys were found in Sudan. The youths (the lost boys of Sudan), played an important role in re-establishing relationships between the lost boys and their biological families. In the search for their missing families and relations, the lost boys of Sudan visited four different countries. They spent over a decade in Ethiopia during their search and were violently chased away following a change of regime. Interviews with over 147 lost boys in 1993 revealed that 72% of the boys were uncertain as to whether they would see their families again (Jeppsson & Hjern, 2005). Advanced communication technology in the United States enabled those who had migrated to the US to find and rebuild relationships with their lost families. The Sudanese refugee youth anxiety to reestablish their long-lost relationship with different family members was a great role they played in achieving peacebuilding.

One celebrated contemporary case of youth influence in peacebuilding is the role played by the nonviolent youth movement 'OPTOR' (Resistance) in Serbia, helping to undermine the Milosevic regime (NYT 2000; USIP 2000).

Muslims youths in Africa have used the Islamic religion (through non-profit organizations and other religious institutions) to act as peace builders in different Muslim communities. For example, Muslim Women's League in Southern Sudan, Kisima Peace and Development Organization in Somalia, Interfaith Action for Peace in Africa as led by Sheikh Mbacke, Interfaith Mediation Center, Nigeria, Coalition for Peace in Africa and Merhamet in Bosnia-Herzegovina are all organizations found in areas where Islam is the state religion and are led by a Muslim religious actors who use Islamic values, teachings, and practices to transform conflict and reconstruct relationships between Muslim communities. Even though the percentage of Muslims youths who actively participate in the activities of peace restoration is limited, their efforts usually go unrecognized because of the prevailing conflicts in Muslim communities. Religious texts are used to justify violence and hatred. As such today, some Muslim communities in Africa use the Islamic religion for conflict resolution and peacebuilding. The involvement of Muslim religious leaders in the Coalition of Peace in Africa (COPA) of Kenya contributed to the dissemination of democracy and human rights in the Muslim community. Through sermons, preaching and lectures, they connected various issues to Islamic values and principles and that influenced their constituents.

Education for peace is "education for the long haul, for the ongoing struggle" (Reardon, 1988, p. 47). "Peace education should be a necessity" (Ihejirika, 1996). Many African youths are engaged in conflict resolution through peace education. Two youth peace education groups created in Sierra Leon and Nigeria act as a good example of this study. "Concerned Youth for Peace in Sierra Leone" is an education for peace group that was created in 1996 by young men and women who believe in the promotion of international co-operation and peaceful solution of conflicts. They strive to unite organizations and individuals committed to the peace process through educational programming, materials, and a sharing of ideas and resources.

Another non-formal youth program in Nigeria that utilizes the arts to promote peaceful interaction and personal understanding (Ekwueme, 2001) The "Center for Conflict Resolution", and was founded by the South African youths and its Projects, works for a "just and sustainable peace in South Africa" (Dovey, 2000, p. 95). This project started with youth involvement and has now covered a wider population of the community. The expansion of this project created the "Peace Education Partnership Program", a service "that was more programmatic, long-term and implementation-focused". After the implementation of this program, peace education was incorporated into the school's curriculum and that paid attention to creative and constructive approaches to conflict and mediation analyses in South Africa.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

It is necessary to put in place Policies and programs to address youth exclusion and violence. Lately, an increasing number of international organizations and NGO's (e.g. UNICEF, UNHCR, ILO, WHO, World Bank) and other donors such as DANIDA GTZ, USAID, have stipulated the importance of working with youths and have developed strategies, policies and programs in a variety of sectors in conflict-affected areas. Their experience suggests that the main first step in addressing the correlation between youth exclusion and violence is for an organization to recognize the importance of youth and the role they play as both partners in, and beneficiaries of, development and conflict prevention and to reflect this through a high-level policy statement. With this, it will be easier to structure specific policies that target youth and violence.

It is also a recommendation to include youths in programs/research for it is not possible to carry out studies on youths without having them tell the story and relate to the work being done about them. Youths should be encouraged to engage in technology which is the next springboard for Africa's socio-economic development. Youths are the next generation of leaders, stakeholders, and facilitators, so their engagement in the peace process/peacebuilding and the shaping of their political attitudes and skills in the period will have important implications in the long run (Miall 1999).

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