

# **Enhancing Youth Participation in Electoral Processes in Africa**

**By**

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## **Introduction**

Participation in the political and electoral processes is a democratic right of all citizens guaranteed and protected by international conventions and declarations, as well as domestic laws. Regrettably, this right is often denied to constituencies most deserving by vested interests and dominant groups. The youth are the most significant and deserving of meaningful and purposeful participation in their country's affairs, yet they are the most marginalized or excluded citizens from political and electoral participation especially on the African continent. While they are a demographic majority, paradoxically they are a political minority. Thus, their energy, vibrancy, enthusiasm, creativity and innovativeness, which have been the hallmarks of progress and development in other climes, are misplaced and misdirected, rather than appropriately channeled to add value to African democratic development (Jega, 2017a). This unwholesome situation has to change, because as Mr. Kofi Annan has aptly observed, "...A society that cuts itself off from its youth severs its lifeline; it is condemned to bleed to death" (UNDP 2013). Africa

should not to 'bleed' to death. Enhancing youth participation in the electoral process in a constructive way would certainly offer a lifeline, as it would impact positively on democratic governance and socioeconomic development.

For elections to impact positively on governance and development, they have to have integrity. Youth constructive engagement with and participation in electoral processes would help address the integrity deficit, which currently overwhelms the conduct of elections in Africa and would pave the way for a sanitized leadership selection process that would catalyze good governance and overall desirable democratic development.

### **Youth Bulge**

Africa is said to currently have the largest youth population in the world. Even more significantly, its working age population is expected to more than double between 2015 and 2050. In 2015, out of a total population of 1.2 billion, 541 million (45.1%) were under 18 years of age. An additional 458 million (38.2%) were said to be in the age category of 18 – 45. Young people, in the age category of 15-35, often defined as the youth, are said to constitute one third (1/3) of Africa's population. This phenomenon, increasingly referred to by scholars as the "youth bulge", is potentially a demographic dividend, if carefully and purposefully harnessed. A young population is considered beneficial to countries, as it would seem to be correlated to economic development. However, given the current levels of youth unemployment and other acute youth-related challenges in Africa, the demographics may, unless care is taken, represent a ticking time

bomb (Lin 2012). When/if, such a huge young population is characterized by unemployment or underemployment, inadequacy of educational opportunities and entrepreneurial skills and capabilities, afflicted by multifarious health challenges, in addition to marginalization, disenfranchisement and exclusion from the electoral and political processes, it becomes a potential source of socio-political and economic instability as well as acute crises and wide ranging conflicts.

In Africa's current circumstances, harnessing the potential contribution of young people to its democratic development, and enhancing their active participation in the political and electoral processes, are tasks that must be pursued with vigor and accomplished successfully. The challenges to accomplishing these, which are many, must be systematically identified, analyzed and appropriately addressed.

### **Enhancing Youth participation for Electoral Integrity**

While there is a lot to be done to address the predicament posed by the youth bulge in Africa, among the priorities would be enhancing the participation of youth in the electoral processes, because this would expand the democratic space, nurture inclusivity, bring the boundless energy and creativity of the youth into the political and governance processes; and significantly, facilitate the entrenchment of a culture of electoral integrity, which is now most desirable for deepening democracy in Africa. African countries have slowly but steadily embraced democratization; in many countries elections are now held periodically, regularly. However, the necessary and

desirable task of deepening democracy has been hampered by the recurring deficit of electoral integrity.

In the early phase of transition to democracy in Africa, in the era of the so-called 'Third Wave' of democratization, which commenced in the 1990s, some theorists postulated that regular and periodic elections are sufficient indicators of democratization and maturity in democratic development (Lindberg 2006 and 2009). This assumption, however, is now increasingly contested, with mounting evidence being adduced, which prove that without electoral integrity, regular and periodic elections merely represent the formalistic trappings of democracy, while the substantive aspects (e.g. accountable leaders, good governance and economic development) are being systematically eroded and undermined (Norris 2014; Norris and others 2015; Jega 2017b).

Without electoral integrity, votes cast by the electorate would not count, mandates would be bought or stolen, the "elected" officials become irresponsible and unresponsive to the needs and aspirations of the electorate, and electoral outcomes not only face crisis of legitimacy, but the entire agenda and processes of democratization become unstable and conflict ridden. Until and unless there is electoral integrity, for example in the manner in which an EMB discharges its roles impartially, competently and professionally; election procedures are transparent and accountable; citizens, as legally registered voters turnout to exercise free choice and their choices actually count; democratization would be devoid of its desired substantive attributes of popularly elected and accountable

leaders, who deliver on their electoral promises and who nurture and entrench the quality of government, in terms of harnessing public resources to address the fundamental needs and aspirations of the citizens.

Indeed, youth can engage with the electoral processes in two fundamental ways. First, youth can partner with EMBs to discharge roles, which would improve the integrity of elections. Constructive, broad-based and active participation of the youth in the electoral processes would no doubt add value to the quest for electoral integrity and good democratic governance in Africa. Secondly, they can, better still, get involved formally by joining political parties and actively engaging as candidates for elective offices, not just merely as voters.

However, significant questions arise: How can youth participation be enhanced and by whom? Who bears the main burden in enhancement of roles? How, specifically, can youth themselves, engage in the electoral processes? I try to briefly address these questions in what follows.

### **Bearing the burden of enhancing youth participation in electoral processes**

Young people can by themselves or in partnerships, enhance their participation in the electoral processes. And they can participate in different ways and at different levels and gradations. What is key is unity of purpose around a broad agenda for collective action. Although the youth are not a homogeneous social category, they can,

working together, in youth-led groups, and or in partnership with other youth-oriented or youth-friendly CSOs, develop a common agenda for action to enhance their participation in the electoral processes. Youth cannot, and should not, expect their challenges to be addressed and battles to be waged by others for them, while they remain indifferent, with an attitude of “siddon look” (i.e. sit down and watch). They have to be in the forefront of advocacy and activism for the advancement of their collective interests. Youth have to struggle for their rights, of course with the support and encouragement of youth-friendly, youth-oriented and youth-focused individuals, groups and organizations.

In addition, broad based alliances and partnerships have to be forged amongst the range of stakeholders working on youth political empowerment, which would catalyze enhanced participation of the youth. The Key stakeholders would be supranational, international and continental actors; national governments; credible civil society organizations and credible youth groups. Through these partnerships at least three broad programs of action could be formulated and implemented as follows:

1. Reforms of the legal framework to expand democratic space and scope for youth engagement and participation; youth-friendly legal framework that identifies and removes barriers to youth engagement and participation. Reforms of the legal framework would create and improve the enabling environment for youth engagement and participation by, for example, removing barriers and reducing age requirements for contesting elective offices.
2. Mobilization, or ‘rebooting consciousness’ of youth for active participation; to address apathy and indifference, and to motivate and increase youth participation

3. Building and developing capacity and skills of youth for leadership and greater participation in the political and electoral processes

### **Nature of participation by youth**

Young people engage in the electoral processes both formally and informally. The general tendency, however, has leaned towards informal engagement by way of activism or advocacy in youth-led groups or through other youth-friendly/youth focused civil society organizations, in enlightenment, sensitization, voluntary community development efforts, etc. Formal participation, such as, voting, joining political parties and contesting for elective offices, is most desirable but that is where the challenges are profound. World wide, youth have tended to be apathetic and indifferent to formal engagement in electoral processes. But this is more so in Africa compared to the situation in other continents. African youth tend to be skeptical of politics and political parties; they see politicians as dishonest and corrupt, and they distrust electoral processes and EMBs (Goremusandu 2017). They view government as insensitive to their needs and aspirations. Indeed, they get “turned off” and “turned out” by the recklessness of politicians in trying to win elections “by hook or by crook”.

Yet, it can be argued that the demographic dividend can best be gained through active formal engagement of youth in the electoral and political processes, arguably with better prospects than in the economic sphere through world Bank inspired entrepreneurial projects. Youth should be encouraged not only to be entrepreneurial; or to only vote, but also to join and actively participate in political parties; and to contest for elective offices where there are no legal

impediments; and where there are such impediments, they should struggle to have them removed and enable them contest.

Some analysts are skeptical about the prospects of young people making positive contributions to Africa's democratic development. For example, Professor Lumumba of the anti-corruption fame in Kenya has expressed concern that the predilections of young Africans with consumerism, crime and wrong role models may make them more corrupt in governance, than the older generations. On the contrary, I tend to think that if given the opportunity of effective constructive engagement in politics, young Africans would help tremendously to reposition Africa for a better future predicated on democratic development. It is their exclusion and alienation from politics that frustrates them and makes them more aggressive in the pursuit unwholesome ventures, as coping strategies.

### **The Role of EMBs**

Election Management Bodies (EMBs) have a crucial role to play in catalyzing and enhancing the role of youth in the electoral processes. This is one area where EMBs have to be pro-active to sensitize, to mobilize, to enlighten and to engage youth and civil society organizations to expand the scope of youth involvement in the two fundamental ways suggested earlier. The Nigerian experience since 2010 shows clearly the extent and magnitude of constructive roles youth, youth-led and youth-focused CSOs play in bringing about electoral integrity. A few examples would suffice:

1. Youth activists significantly contributed to INEC's use of ICT in voter registration, in sensitization and public enlightenment, in the deployment of mobile and web-based platforms for



verification of status of registration, for identifying which polling unit to go for voting, and in setting up and managing the highly impactful INEC Citizens' Contact Center (CCC); a multi-media service for information dissemination, voter education and public enlightenment.

2. Youth participating in the National Youth Service Corps Scheme (NYSC) and those in tertiary institutions performed generally commendable roles as voter registration officers and presiding officers during elections
3. Youth role models, drawn from the music industry, *Nollywood*, *Kannywood*, sports and media, partnered with INEC and engaged in mobilization of youth for voter registration and for voting.
4. Youth groups were very active in voter education and community mobilization, as well as in peace-building and conflict resolution.
5. Youth groups created virtual communities for knowledge sharing, sensitization, enlightenment and empowerment
6. Youth and youth-led groups were similarly very actively involved in election observation as well as in the networks of CSOs, with which INEC regularly held dialogues and consultative meetings for the conduct of elections with integrity.

I believe that, EMBs can pro-actively and carefully build mutual trust and confidence with stakeholders, which engenders constructive engagement of youth in the electoral processes. They can also, in their interactions with other stakeholders help to engender an enabling environment for young people to register, to vote and to engage with the political decision-making arena and impact public policy. I believe it is possible to do this without losing focus of the EMBs' core mandate of conducting and managing elections professionally with impartiality.

Shari Bryan (2010) has articulated key principles, for effectively engaging the youth in the political process, to guide the activities of

youth-focused development partners, as well as civil society organizations, which are worthy of note and serious consideration.

They are here summarized/abridged as follows:

1. There is need to ensure that in designing a program, it reflects the priorities of the youth participating in it; i.e. letting the youth to set the agenda
2. The need to provide facilitation and training for leadership and other skills for youth
3. Encouragement of action-oriented activities that enable youth 'to learn by doing'
4. Facilitation of contact and connection between youth and political and community leaders
5. Encouragement of work in multi-party setting to help engender mutual trust and confidence
6. Ensuring that 50% of participants are women in youth programs and activities
7. Establishing buy-in and consensus of political and community leaders in pursuit of youth related programs/activities.

Similarly, the UNDP (2013) has documented and published "A Good Practice Guide", for enhancing participation of youth throughout the electoral cycle, which EMBs should give serious consideration to in designing their programs of activities in the context of the electoral cycle. These can be summarized as follows:

### **1. Pre-Election Period**

- 1.1 Civic education in schools and universities
- 1.2 Training programs for youth
- 1.3 Support to youth-led community development and volunteer organizations
- 1.4 Helping to bridge the digital divided
- 1.5 Promote and encourage youth interaction with political parties
- 1.6 Use Online platforms for youth knowledge sharing and networking among politically engaged groups
- 1.7 Encourage affirmative action measures
- 1.8 Support strong political party youth wings
- 1.9 Provide capacity building for young members of political parties

1.10 Address training and mentoring needs of young women

## **2. Election Period**

2.1 Ensure youth involvement in all phases of voter education campaigns

2.2 Utilize entertaining methods and multimedia strategies to catch attention of the youth

2.3 Include youth on EMB advisory boards, as well as engage them as poll workers and election observers

2.4 Develop interactive Online tools to reach out to computer-literate young voters

## **3. Post-Election Period**

3.1 Make voices of youth heard in parliament (and in government)

3.2 Facilitate youth-led national councils and or parliaments

3.3 Arrange tours to parliaments young people

3.4 Initiate internships for students

3.5 Train and support young members of parliament

3.6 Initiate and support youth councils at the local levels

As the Nigerian experience with elections in 2011 and especially in 2015 amply demonstrates, an EMB derives substantial benefits and value addition reflected in the quality of its preparations and the integrity of its conduct of elections, by increasing involvement of the youth in the electoral process. However, there is need to go beyond merely using youth as peripheral agents in the conduct of elections; the greater need is in getting youth actively in the political and electoral processes, as conscientious voters, as credible political activists and as credible and responsible elected public officials. The more good young people we can infuse into the African murky political arenas, the better the chances of cleansing it and repositioning the conduct of politics to be focused of good, democratic development, with quality delivery of public goods and

services. There is a saying that, if good people remain aloof and stand aside, and don't involved in politics, then bad people will continue to have a field day. We need young people in politics to help clean and clear the 'Augean stable' of African politics. Young people in Africa would need a new slogan: **#Occupy political spaces!**

## **Conclusion**

While commending the African Union Commission for organizing the 4<sup>th</sup> EMB Forum on the theme: "Harnessing Demographic Dividend through enhanced Youth participation in the electoral processes"; I urge that we shift emphasis from conferences to more practical action-oriented programming; and I therefore call for greater concerted action to foster and increase youth participation in the political processes generally and in the electoral processes in particular. More specifically, I call upon the African Union (AU) to initiate measures that would quickly result in the adoption of a "positive youth development approach" by member countries; it is an approach, which recognizes and places priority on youth as active participants in societal development in all its ramifications, rather than the conventional approach of perceiving them merely as passive recipients of doled out goods and services (Sweigart 2017). This will go a long way to concretely engender youth enhanced role in the electoral processes in particular and in the political processes in general.

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