

# CARRYING FORWARD THE MOMENTUM OF THE 2017 AFRICAN UNION YEAR OF YOUTH

LUANDA MPUNGOSE & LENNON MONYAE

*'Africa is a continent of young people; our demography is quite different from the rest of the world. Within three generations, 41% of the world's youth will be Africans'*<sup>1</sup>

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This paper reflects on the African Union's (AU) 2017 theme, 'Harnessing the Demographic Dividend Through Investments in Youth.'<sup>2</sup> Although there has been a focus on youth-related issues in 2017 there is a need to critically examine the gains and challenges the AU faced in meeting this objective during 2017. The African Youth Charter (AYC), plan of action and roadmap are some of the key guiding frameworks that have steered this theme. This paper argues that while youth empowerment frameworks and noticeable initiatives exist, there are shortfalls in the implementation and monitoring and evaluation (M&E) of meaningful youth participation. There is also a need for the harmonisation of existing regional instruments into state policy to achieve significant change.

## INTRODUCTION

According to the AU, about 65% of the total population of Africa is currently between the ages of 18 and 35 years,<sup>3</sup> making Africa the continent with the youngest population when compared to regions such as Europe and Asia. This is known as the 'youth bulge', defined by the UN Population Fund as an 'extraordinary youth cohort relative to the adult population.'<sup>4</sup>

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In Africa the ‘youth bulge’ can be defined as a large youth demographic that is either unemployed or underemployed due to lack of education, skills, formal work opportunities and low participation in policy processes. As such this ‘youth bulge’ can be viewed either as an investment opportunity or a liability for countries. Investments made in young people can position a country to unlock their full potential. African nations are faced with the task of creating a conducive environment for young people to be educated, employed and participate meaningfully in policy and political developments.

Acknowledging the youth bulge, the AU dedicated 2017 to ‘Harnessing the Demographic Dividend through Investments in Youth’<sup>5</sup>. It was welcomed by African governments, development partners and civil society.

This paper provides a review of the 2017 AU Year of Youth, its key achievements and its challenges. It reflects on the policy frameworks that guided this theme, such as the AU Youth Charter and the AU Roadmap on Harnessing the Demographic Dividend<sup>6</sup> and looks at the bottlenecks that hindered implementation as well as the successes and failures of AU youth dialogues such as the African Governance Architecture (AGA) High Level Dialogue – Youth Segment. Did the theme yield any tangible results or was it just a series of meetings and talk shops?

## AU POLICY FRAMEWORKS

Youth issues have long been an area of concern on the African continent. Dating back to the institutional transition from the Organisation of African Unity to the AU in July 2002, there have been a number of instruments that have been adopted to address these issues, some predating the AU.

At the Seventh Ordinary Session of the Assembly of the AU in Banjul, The Gambia, in July 2006, representatives of African youth organisations affirmed the importance of youth issues, culminating in the signing of the AYC. The preamble reads as follows: ‘Africa’s greatest resource is its youthful population and through their active and full participation Africans can surmount the difficulties that lie ahead.’<sup>7</sup>

The charter consists of three sections: i) The preamble highlighting the role and importance of Africa’s youthful population; ii) the ‘Rights and Duties of Youth in Member States’ in twenty-eight broad articles dealing with issues affecting youth, the role of AU member states and the youth’s role in social, political, economic affairs of the continent; and iii) deals with the technical aspects of signing, ratification, adherence and amendments. The charter is particularly important because it builds on earlier OAU documents such as the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child of 1990.<sup>8</sup> It remains the most comprehensive AU youth policy framework.

AU member states that are signatories to the AYC are obliged to uphold the charter through the empowerment of youth in economic and political participation. Article 11(2b) of the AYC notes: ‘States Parties shall take the following measures to promote active youth participation in society: Facilitate the creation or strengthening of platforms for youth participation in decision-making at local, national, regional, and continental levels of governance.’<sup>9</sup>

The adoption of the AYC in 2009<sup>10</sup> was followed by the Youth Decade plan of action (2009-2018)<sup>11</sup> which was approved and endorsed by African ministers in charge of youth affairs, the AU Executive Council and member states, to accelerate the implementation of the charter. The AU Youth Division, has fallen short in popularising and advocating the implementation of the plan of action, which expires in 2018. It has not published any updated information on the state of African youth since 2011. Despite the New Partnership for Africa's Development and the African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM) being named as potential accountability frameworks in Africa, there has been no concerted monitoring and evaluation of youth policies.

Given that the AU dedicated 2017 to youth, with a new roadmap, young people are rightfully expecting a detailed report on the gains of the previously adopted plan of action. The APRM Continental Secretariat in line with its AU expanded mandate, has recruited a chief governance officer and AU Agenda 2063 specialist who will oversee the APRM State of Governance in Africa Report to be presented at the January 2019 AU Heads of States summit.<sup>12</sup> Will this report cover youth issues and itemise progress made during 2017 in this regard on the AU's annual theme? According to the Head of the APRM Research Division:<sup>13</sup>

This State of Governance in Africa Report which is envisioned to be an annual contribution that reflects upon progress made by African states in implementing [its] aspirations ... should provide data and statistics on youth across all the thematic areas, keeping in mind that the youth constituency is not homogenous and youth issues should not be discussed in a vacuum as they run across various themes.

This report could provide an M&E component to the AU and document progress along with challenges faced by AU frameworks.

Has the 2017 AU theme been effective beyond releasing roadmaps and holding meetings?<sup>14</sup> Effective youth policies are at the centre of Africa's 50-year development vision – the AU's Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want and the UN's Sustainable Development Goals.<sup>15</sup> Achieving continental development as espoused in Agenda 2063 depends significantly on how the AU and its member states respond to the aspirations it sets out. Aspiration one of Agenda 2063 envisions a prosperous Africa, based on inclusive growth and sustainable development. Aspiration six strives for 'An Africa whose development is people-driven, relying on the potential of African people, especially its women and youth, and caring for children.'<sup>16</sup> More than ever, young people need to be viewed as partners rather than beneficiaries of policies and frameworks.

African leaders have witnessed the power of the youth, particularly its ability to organise around a common cause. 'Unless political leadership offers young people something to live for, social stresses such as unemployment can make them easy prey to those who offer them something to die for.'<sup>17</sup> Youth activism has revealed that young people can no longer be ignored in all aspects of Africa's governance and development. They have demonstrated collective agency in events such as South Africa's 'Fees Must Fall' movement in 2016, which put pressure on government to move towards free higher education for previously disadvantaged youth.<sup>18</sup> In The Gambia, after free and fair elections in December 2016, defeated President Yahya Jammeh refused to vacate office. Again, youth were at the forefront with the

'Gambia has Decided' campaign, which advocated for a peaceful transfer of power to Adama Barrow's administration. The 2016 'Not Too Young To Run' campaign in Nigeria resulted in the amendment of Sections 65, 106, 131 and 177 of the 1999 Constitution, reducing the age requirements for the office of the president from 40 to 30 years old. Without a doubt, these campaigns demonstrate that young people can mobilise to demand accountability from leaders and shape the governance landscape in Africa.

Notwithstanding such successes, Anne Kathurima, a member of the APRM Kenya Youth Working Group, holds that the disfranchisement of young people in governance systems remains a major challenge. She notes that the youth bulge on the continent has not led to sustained government efforts in mainstreaming youth issues into governance systems and this often results in radicalisation, violent extremism, political instability, economic and cyber-crimes.<sup>19</sup>

Some outcomes of the 29<sup>th</sup> AU Ordinary Summit in July 2017 were: a call for the AU chairperson to mobilise international support for Africa's quest in harnessing the demographic dividend by calling for a special session at the UN General Assembly and the creation of a global partnership on the theme. These have not yet come to fruition. If implementation of policies is not enforced, efforts made at the AU level run the risk of becoming obsolete before seeing any tangible results and/or outcomes.

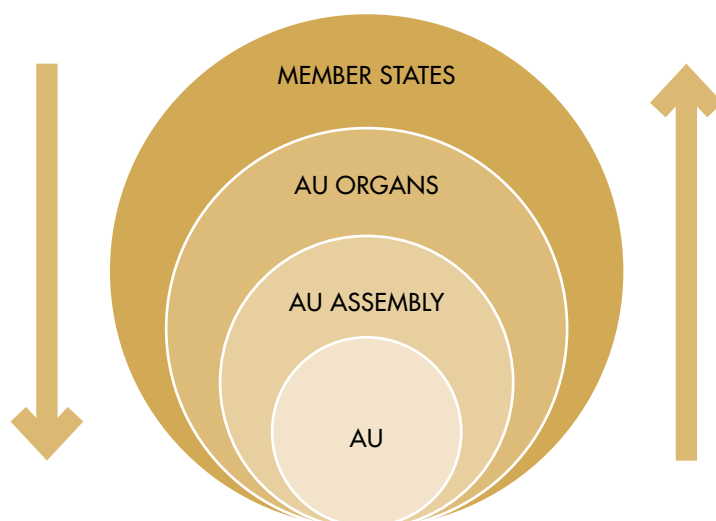
## LIMITATIONS OF THE AU

'It is important to understand how the AU is organised and how it functions in order to manage expectations of what it can achieve.'<sup>20</sup>

The AU as a regional body does not have the power to implement or enforce policies on its member states. This remains a key challenge for the effectiveness of policy frameworks and themes adopted by the AU Assembly and welcomed by member states. The proposed policies are not legally binding and countries can therefore hide behind sovereignty when called into question.

Figure 1 illustrates the flow of the AU frameworks which can be pushed upwards to the AU from its constituents, or downwards from member states. The AU proposes the frameworks and themes which are then advanced to the AU Assembly of Heads of State and Government, where they are debated and adopted. The AU organs including the assembly, executive council, the pan-African parliament and others are tasked with compiling the technical components and operationalising the frameworks.<sup>21</sup> Member states are responsible for domestication and implementation of policies and as such, the successful implementation of AU themes is dependent on member states.

**FIGURE 1** FLOW OF AU FRAMEWORKS AND THEMES



Source: Developed by the authors

**BOX 1** RWANDA'S SUCCESSES IN YOUTH POLICY ADVANCEMENT

Rwandan President Paul Kagame, as the current AU chairperson, has been tasked with reforming the AU. He is charged with addressing challenges faced by the youth demographic, which he called, 'a new generation of problem solvers, who see further and work smarter.'<sup>22</sup>

In 2017, Kagame inaugurated the [Youth Connekt Africa Summit](#) in Kigali which brought together more than 2,500 participants: development partners, members of academia, successful entrepreneurs, artists and youth opinion leaders from across the continent. The keynote address by Jack Ma, founder and executive chairman of the Alibaba Group – a Chinese multinational e-commerce retail and technology conglomerate - signalled Rwanda's support of young African entrepreneurs with innovative start-ups. A key outcome of this summit was the establishment of the [Innovation and Empowerment Hub](#) along with funding allocation, particularly in the age of the fourth industrial revolution (an era that is characterised by new ways of using technologies that are embedded in societies and even human bodies).<sup>23</sup> Digitisation and technological innovations are measures that should be taken into account in the skills development and empowerment of Africa's youth.

Since its inception in 2012 by the Rwandan Ministry of Youth and ICT, YouthConnekt has created opportunities for more than 4,000,000 young people between the ages of 16 and 34 to participate in Rwanda's development through job creation, ICT innovation and skills development.<sup>24</sup> This initiative has been successful in attracting big companies like the Alibaba Group who have since committed to hosting 200 African entrepreneurs at their headquarters to gain work experience in fields such as e-commerce, artificial intelligence and the internet. Furthermore, they are providing \$10 million to support youth entrepreneurship. The Rwanda

model of youth engagement has demonstrated that skills development, technology and innovation are at the heart of effectively including the young demographic in the economy.<sup>25</sup> Such initiatives, if imitated by other African counterparts, could drastically reduce unemployment in AU member states. (Youth unemployment in Rwanda is very low by African standards. According to Statista<sup>26</sup> Rwanda has seen a decline of 1.1% in youth unemployment from 2014 to 2018, following a peak of 4.4% in 2013–2014.)

## KEY ACHIEVEMENTS OF THE AU 2017 YEAR OF YOUTH

The African Governance Architecture (AGA), a space for dialogue between various stakeholders, whose mandate is aimed at harmonising African political and institutional frameworks for the promotion and sustenance of democracy, governance, human rights and humanitarian assistance on the continent, was a key driver in the promotion of the AU's Year of Youth. Young people on the continent were engaged through the AGA Youth Engagement Strategy (YES)<sup>27</sup> which aimed at bringing young people into Africa's conflict prevention, peacebuilding and good governance efforts. Its flagship High Level Dialogues on democracy, human rights and governance in Africa, commonly known as DG Trends and last held in Pretoria in November 2017, provided an inclusive space for youth to interact with civil society organisations, government officials, AU representatives and youth networks on different issues affecting young people. This was effective in popularising the AU theme, promoting inter-generational dialogue, getting buy-in from different stakeholders, networking and sharing of best practices. However, can the AGA mandate go beyond promoting and obtaining buy-in?

Another initiative was the establishment of the AU Youth Volunteer Corps in 2010. The objectives of the programme include providing opportunities to serve and gain skills, knowledge and international exposure, as well to promote Pan-Africanism to youth.<sup>28</sup> The programme has been running since 2010 with a continuous annual intake. There is no data that measures the impact and success of this initiative.

The next decade (2018–2027) has been declared the 'African Decade for Technical, Professional and Entrepreneurial Training and Youth Employment' and, with the institutionalisation of the Pan-African Youth Forum a budget of 1% of the AU programme has been allocated to the newly established African Youth Fund.<sup>29</sup>

## KEY CHALLENGES OF THE AU 2017 YEAR OF YOUTH

As of March 2016, the AYC has been signed by 42 member states, ratified by 38 and is yet to be signed and/or ratified by three undisclosed member states.<sup>30</sup> The data provided by the AU Youth Division is vague, however, and does not account for all AU member states. While this is a relatively high number of signatories and ratifications, the pace at which the AU member states are domesticating the charter into national legislation is discouraging and suggests that this theme was not demand-driven.

In most cases AU member states have not reaffirmed their commitments to uphold the provisions of the charter. For example, Article 12 of the AYC compels signatories to develop a comprehensive and coherent national youth policy and not all have done so.

Some have tried to address youth issues. Although South Africa, in March 2018, established the YES programme – a compact between government, business and labour to create employment for young people – youth remain marginalised, playing a minimal part in the formal economy and governance of the country. Approximately 67,4% of young people under the age of 25 are unemployed,<sup>31</sup> despite active participation in South Africa's political landscape.

There is almost a total absence of monitoring and evaluation to measure progress made in the decade of the youth. If progress is not measured, policymakers cannot assess the impact and effectiveness of the Youth Decade plan. Furthermore, without systematically documenting the challenges, there is no way to keep track of areas that require improvement.

Engagements like the AGA High Level Dialogue have demonstrated some limitations in that there are no actionable and implementable solutions following the discussions. The panels are more focused on discussing great initiatives and stories of best practice without providing a formal written output on what the AU and its member states should achieve, how, and by when.

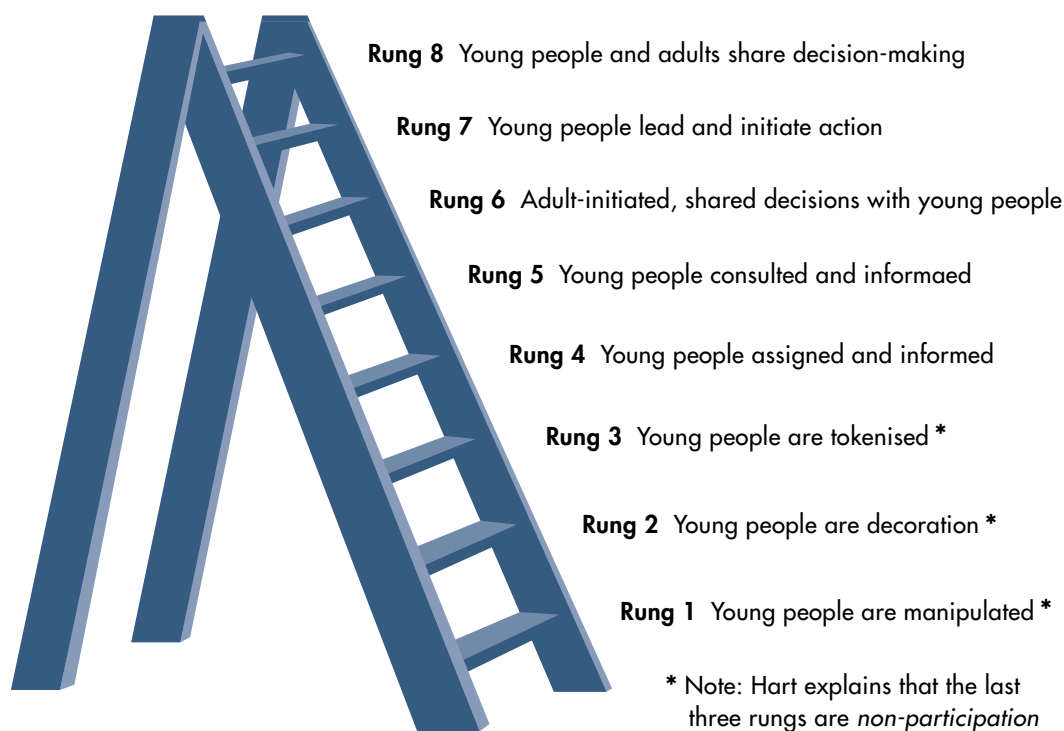
Meaningful youth participation (as illustrated by Figure 2) distinguishes the different levels of youth engagement, from young people being manipulated at the lowest level to young people and adults sharing decision making at the highest. Having high level consultations like the sixth AGA High Level Dialogue Youth Segment in November 2017 enhanced participation of youth from around the continent in governance issues. However, meaningful youth participation calls for young people to be included in the decision-making process. Rwanda and Uganda reserve seats in the legislature for youth representatives,<sup>32</sup> an example of Rung 8 in the ladder of participation. In contrast, while the AU has decided to allocate 1% of its budget to respond to youth issues, young people are not involved in the budgetary process and the budget vote. It is unclear whether the issues that are funded articulate the views and aspirations of young people and can be considered tokenistic.

## CONCLUSION

The extent to which Africa will benefit from its youth bulge and reap the rewards of the demographic dividend depends heavily on favourable and meaningful policies pertaining to employment, education, entrepreneurship, human rights, citizenship and political inclusion.

The continental vision and the 'Africa We Want' as championed in Agenda 2063 require Africans to craft policies that are fit for purpose. The dedication of the year 2017 to youth by the AU was a step in the right direction and indicated that Africa is a continent that recognises the growth of the youth population and seeks to invest in youth as part of the AU's developmental agenda. Lessons can be drawn from previous frameworks like the AYC which illustrate that a major hindrance to

**FIGURE 2** ROGER HART'S LADDER OF YOUNG PEOPLE'S PARTICIPATION



Source information: Adapted from Hart R, 'Children's Participation from Tokenism to Citizenship. Florence: UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre

realising objectives is lack of implementation by member states. The AYC plan of action expires in 2018 and it is not clear what has been achieved since its inception in 2008.

Without reports that track gains and implementation, there is no concrete evidence of any investments made toward youth. The continent does not need new instruments to track progress. There are already existing tools like the APRM through its expanded mandate and the AGA, which the APRM currently chairs. These should be the focal point in the M&E of advancements of the key deliverables set out in the charter, its plan of action and the roadmap.

Furthermore, initiatives such as promoting continental networks and exchanges among young people do not require huge budgets. Beyond the AU Volunteer Corps, there should be efforts to support AU youth clubs at various institutions of learning across the continent. These are the breeding grounds for young intellectuals who will take Africa forward. African youth need to rightfully take their place in Africa's development to create and share unique African experiences and reshape the African narrative.

Key policy actions needed are ones that expand youth opportunities, such as affording young people the necessary skills to fully participate in the economy



and decision-making. To seize the potential of youth, leaders need to immediately prioritise education, employment, human rights and political inclusion. Africa stands to benefit through investing in young people who can contribute meaningfully in achieving the aspirations of Agenda 2063. If not, the momentum seen in the AU will be left behind in 2017.

## ENDNOTES

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