

## **Financing Youth's and Equality Agenda: Which Approach in Africa?**

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### **Why Youths and Equality?**

If we do not want to judge this generation on the wrong side of history, this is the time to focus on the youths. We must invest in them, we must learn from them, and we must partner with them. There can never be development in Africa without the development of the youth. The challenge of development in Africa is hinged on developing the productive capabilities of its youths, in particular females. We need to mainstream them in the current development agenda, and create the platform to enable healthy relationship and/or interactions between the boys and girls. No doubt, culture is a strong component of Africa's identity, but it is our responsibility to promote fair, non-discriminatory, non-violent culture that will guarantee that both boys and girls thrive in a culture of equality – equality of access to basic human rights.

Gender equality is the chore of development in Africa. This is recognized in the MDGs. The eight key points in the MDGs – universal basic education, eradicating extreme poverty and hunger, improving maternal health, reducing child mortality, combating HIV/AIDs etc – all depend on engendering equality in the society.

### **Some basic facts that affect youths in Africa**

- Not less than 33 million children in Sub Saharan Africa (constituting 45% of the world total) are still “missing” out in the development track just idling away and not usefully engaged. In some countries, about 60% of the youths are unemployed (regarded as the highest in world). Young women are even less likely than young men to have jobs. Consequently, many youths are ready victims of unwholesome activities, including sex trafficking. (see pics). Of the 33 million, not less than 54% are girls. These girls suffer particularly sexual abuse, sex trafficking, violence, discrimination and other degrading treatments. An emerging disturbing trend is the increasing number of youth soldiers and those that are trafficked for drugs and cross-border migration.
- Gender inequality remains a drawback. Many societies are still overburdened by a variety of unwholesome practices, laws and customs that undermine the well-being of girls and constrain their access to jobs, livelihoods, meaningful careers, bargaining power, political influence, and entitlements. They are often victims of discriminatory harmful customary

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practices like child marriage, son preference, female genital mutilation etc that are still deep-seated in the culture that undermine their freedom and good life. Besides, the majority lack entrepreneurial and technological skills that could help them to take advantages of new technologies. Girls carry the major responsibility of household chores, and income generating activities in the informal sector and labour market. They bear more of the burden of HIV/AIDs pandemic, oftentimes dropping out of school or not usefully engaged in order to stay home as caregiver.

- There is currently a high level of redundancy among youths across the region. A majority, more among females, are trapped in the lowest –paid, least skilled and high risk occupations.
- A large number are out of schools working mainly as labour. Nearly 33 million children of primary school age are still not enrolled in school. School dropouts is 42%. Of the out-of-school youths in the sub-region, 54% were girls with a large concentration of them (more than 1 million each) in Burkina Faso, Cote d'Ivoire, Kenya, Mali, Nigeria and the Niger.
- Poverty is a major challenge to education of youths in the region, and particularly female education. Statistics show that about 43% of the population subsist on \$1/day (UNICEF, 2005), with the majority having no income activities. Rather than schooling, majority of youths scramble for a living by: hawking goods and wares in the streets, working as labours, prostituting, and roaming the streets etc. UNICEF reports (2005) indicate that of the over 140 million children in developing countries, 13 % of those of school age have never attended school. This rate is 32% among girls and 27% of boys. An estimated 80% are deprived of their right to education by poverty” either because their families are incapable to afford the costs of schooling, or because their parents are unemployed, or because they just have to work for a living (UNICEF, 2005). The disparity in the impact of poverty is associated with the prevailing gender ideology in the society, in which case females are worst hit because of their ascribed lower status in relation to male.
- Nearly 20 million Africans are reportedly immigrants, of which a majority are youths below 25 years, even some are highly skilled.

### **What are the Challenges?**

The capability of youths to feature in the new global economic world is anchored on their literacy profile. Education is the pathway to empowerment while empowerment is the core of gender equality and the pathway to “equitable access to power, resources and decision making” (Linkages, 2004 [www.iisd.ca/4wcw/genstat.html](http://www.iisd.ca/4wcw/genstat.html)) at the household, institutional and societal levels. Empowerment of girls and boys ensures the building of human resource skills for leadership and meaningful participation in all spheres of society. Available evidence shows that 1% increase in GER contributes about 0.1% to per capita GDP growth (EFA report, 2007). Consequently, responding to the challenge of educating youths, in particular girls, is the greatest achievement of the present time that the continent can bequeath to youths today, to mobilize them to tackle the intertwined challenges of poverty, hunger, disease, famine, hiv/aids and conflicts that constitute drawback to development. Denying education rights ultimately harms the society at large because it affects the “country’s ability to grow, to reduce poverty and provide its people – men, women and children – a better life” (UNESCO, 2005).

Poverty and HIV/AIDS pandemic constitute other major challenges confronting youths that have to be addressed. Africa has the highest rates of HIV/AIDS transmission in the world. A total of 28 million people are currently living with HIV/AIDS out of which 47% are women, while there are 19.1% HIV/AIDS orphaned school children (UNICEF, 2005). Furthermore, 15 million children under 18 years are orphaned by this deadly disease of which 80% are reported to live in SSA. UNICEF report shows that young people aged 15-24 accounted for 40% of the 4.3 million new infections in 2006. “By 2010, over 18million African children under the age of 18 will have lost one or both parents to HIV/AIDS, and the number of double orphans will increase by about 2 million over the period” (UNICEF 2005).

### **Which approach?**

Education:

At this point of development in the sub-region, it is critical that countries adopt proactive approach to the domestication and enforcement of the instruments on human rights. Regarding EFA goals, countries must adopt enduring law on compulsory and free education up to age 16 or basic education level. Whereas many countries in SSA supposedly pursue UPE with a few providing free tuition primary education<sup>2</sup>, the gains have been insignificant in altering school drop-out because the underlying impediments that keep children out of school are yet to be addressed. One major impediment to schooling is the high direct/indirect costs to families in the context of poverty. Parents still bear the significant costs of schooling like books, uniform,

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<sup>2</sup> e.g Benin, Burundi, Hana, Kenya, Lesotho, Mozambique, Rwanda and the United Republic of Tanzania

transportation and midday meal. What this signifies is that the enforcement of compulsory schooling is unachievable and unrealistic when the major impediments of poverty still incapacitate a majority of parents to bear the costs of schooling and household living. The reality on the ground is that only the implementation of compulsory schooling that is established within the framework of policies on poverty elimination (or reduction) can be effective as strategy to discourage parents from engaging youths in supposedly income generating activities and other 'burden reduction' ploy of marrying out young girls. Once free-compulsory basic (or primary) education (that is backed by targeted approaches towards poverty elimination) is legalised, all forms of violation can be criminalised targetting parents/guardians who pull out their children from school for labour, or child labourers, or those who give out/marry under-aged girls, or sexual abusers, or those who molest girls to scare them from schools. Additionally, proactive law on minimum age for marriage (not below 18 years) is a crucial tool for disempowerment of the perpetrators of child marriage from invoking tradition to keep girls out of school. Undoubtedly, many countries require review and enforcement of laws on rape, sexual abuse, maltreatment, certain types of child labour and other activities that are detrimental to survival of girls/boys in school.

SSA must draw lessons from the developed countries that have attained parity and equality. These countries have long-lasting laws on compulsory schooling, specifying the minimum age that children must stay in school (free) and prioritising public spending on education. Equally, many governments in the region can guarantee 'legal free tuition' for basic schooling (including one free meal per day) should they remain committed to education by re-prioritizing their spending and reducing wastages. Many countries will need systemic reforms of the education system to minimize the impact of the follow-up explosion in enrolment through measures that are aimed at expanding facilities, providing sufficient human and financial resources and putting in place appropriate mechanisms that guarantee safe schooling, especially for females.

## **2. Targeting out-of school youths**

While expansion of basic education will keep many youths in school, the multitude of out-of-school youths that are currently roaming the streets or not gainfully employed must also be targeted through vocational/entrepreneurial education/training. Creating youth skills development initiatives that have strong political backings and commitment to train them in various vocational and technical skills would go a long way to reduce youth redundancy and increase self-reliance and economic stability. No doubt, investing in these sub-groups of youth pays high dividends as it will reduce social insecurities, mischief and unwholesome activities

that accompany idleness. As many youths that is gainfully engaged, the better for economic growth and national security. One reason that the continent is witnessing increasing number of children soldiers, robbery, economic migrants etc among the youths today is because they do not have guaranteed future.

### **3. Expanding employment opportunities**

The primary responsibility of governments and adults is to assist the youths to find productive employment in order to prevent the problem of illegal migrants that has become inundating to the continent. We need to give them opportunities to legitimate work

4., Creating Youth Initiatives that will provide platform for males and females to dialogue, interact and engage in healthy competition.

In view of these challenges, specific continent-wide actions/initiatives for monitoring progress towards youth development will include:

1. Creating observatories to monitor progress of countries towards eradication of all barriers to the development of youths in particular schooling. A Coalition of NGOs in SSA should take responsibility for coordinating and facilitating the initiative with financial drive by AAU and other regional bodies. AAWORD is ready to take the bold step to initiate an observatory on gender issues which is to be located in Dakar, Senegal. The reality on the ground is, **who is willing to fund? And Who is willing to collaborate?**
2. Developing indices to rate best countries of the year across the region and compensating best countries publicly. Countries will be required to do stocktaking and compilation of practices that promote non-discriminatory and fair opportunities for youths, which would be judged against the indices.
3. Creating a regional-wide web for information dissemination about opportunities (formal sector employment, skill development programmes, ICT capacity enhancement initiatives, etc) across the region to keep the youths abreast and avail themselves of opportunities.

### **Conclusion**

The paramount issue in the quest for equality in Africa is development of youths, male and female. The society must create space for them in the political, economic and social arena in order to enable them to contribute to development of society at large from their perspectives. They are getting restive, and we must embark on bold initiatives that guarantee youths their fundamental human right. Specific continent-wide programmes that can effectively empower youths will also address redundancy among them. Finally, specific indices are required to

monitor and assess progress of countries in meeting the needs of youths, which the various regional bodies must show commitment.

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