Testimony of Krystal Strong, Ph.D
Assistant Professor
University of Pennsylvania

Hearing on "The Youth Bulge in Africa: Considerations for US Policy"
U.S. House of Representatives
Committee on Foreign Affairs
Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, Global Human Rights, and International Organizations

February 13, 2020

Chair Karen Bass, Ranking Member Chris Smith, and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for convening this timely hearing and for the opportunity to advocate for the expansion of support for African youth.

In thirty years, one quarter of the world's youth population will reside in Africa. The future of the continent is tied to the extent to which this population is able to transition into sustainable livelihoods and societal roles in which youth are valued and supported in their contributions.

Over the past fifteen years, as a researcher and educator, I have studied the leadership and activism of African youth across the continent, in educational contexts, in civil society, on social media and digital spaces, and through arts and culture. Through this work, I have personally engaged with hundreds of young people, learning about their experiences, their aspirations, the significant challenges they face, and their perspectives on what is needed to bring transformation to their communities.

Young Continent, Old Leadership

It is worth emphasizing that Africa's youth majority is not a new reality and, for decades now, youth have been at the center of global policy and research concerning political stability and social and economic development in Africa. Scholars have written extensively about challenges youth face in the wake of civil war, military regimes, economic reforms, and foreign aid dependency, which disproportionately affect young people.[1] As is likely familiar to members of the Subcommittee, Africa has the worst educational inequalities in the world[2] and youth represent sixty percent of the unemployed population in African countries. Even among working youth, ninety percent are poor or likely to be poor.[3]

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[1] For example: C. Christiansen et al. (Eds.). (2006). *Navigating youth, generating adulthood. Social becoming in an African context*; A. Honwana and F. de Boeck (Eds.). (2005). *Makers and breakers. Children and youth in postcolonial Africa*; A. Honwana. (2012). *The time of youth. Work, social change, and politics in Africa*; D. Resnick and J. Thurlow. (Eds.). (2015). *African youth and the persistence of marginalization*.

[2] Global Education Monitoring Report, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Institute for Statistics, http://en.unesco.org/gem-report/statistics. J. van Fleet. (2012, September 17); Africa's education crisis: In school but not learning. Retrieved from https://www.brookings.edu/blog/up-front/2012/09/17/africas-education-crisis-in-school-but-not-learning/

[3] International Labour Organization. (2015, October 9). Still no recovery for Africa's youth unemployment crisis. Retrieved February 11, 2020, from https://www.ilo.org/africa/media-centre/pr/WCMS_413566/lang--en/index.htm

Perhaps what is less appreciated is the ways that the social and economic challenges African youth face are compounded by their lack of political power. An overwhelming source of frustration young people commonly expressed was the significant gap in power between youth and elder leaders in the workplace, educational institutions, and especially in government. Though youth under the age of 30 make up 70% of Africa's population, the average age of African leaders is 70 years old. Of the world's longest-serving leaders, half of them are African presidents. This means that, on average, only 15 to 21% of the population of African nations was alive when their presidents took office.[4]

The power and generation gap between leaders and youth is important context for the sharp increase in youth-led and youth-involved movements for regime change, which we have seen take place in numerous African nations over the past decade, including Tunisia (2011), Egypt (2011), Burkina Faso (2014), Democratic Republic of Congo (2015), and Burundi (2015), The Gambia (2017), Zimbabwe (2017), Sudan (2019), and Algeria (2019). But, rather than view the resurgence of youth-led movements with fear, I find it more productive to interpret this activity as an indication that African youth are deeply invested in social change.

Africa's "Fix It" Generation

The language utilized to characterize African youth and their future prospects does not typically encourage us to regard this population as agents of change, or even favorably. Some of the most influential scholarly works and policy analysis have described this population as "lost," "forever youth," "stuck," in "waithood," and as a "ticking time bomb." This rhetoric conveys immobilization, risk, and hopelessness. Indeed, it is true that youth in Africa face multiple and compounding forms of marginalization. However, what is lost in this discourse is the significant ways that young people are responding to social exclusions by deepening their social and political engagement.

Fred Swaniker, the co-founder of the African Leadership Academy and African Leadership University, describes the current generation of African youth as the generation that will fix what past leaders have broken.[5] My research experiences affirm this as a tangible possibility. In diverse contexts across the continent, I have found that youth are not waiting for political leaders to hand over power in order to claim the power to assume leadership roles within their communities. On the contrary, young people are taking on the work that governments and social institutions are meant to do in the absence of adequate resources and with great creativity.

In this testimony, I seek to highlight what I have identified in my research as the three most important contexts in which progressive youth leadership is emerging in Africa: organized student politics, civic protest, and youth leadership development initiatives.

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[4] David E. Kiwuwa. (2015, October 29). "Africa is young. Why are its leaders so old?" Retrieved June 27, 2017, from https://www.cnn.com/2015/10/15/africa/africas-old-mens-club-op-ed-david-e-kiwuwa/index.html.

[5] Fred Swaniker. (2014). "The leaders who ruined Africa, and the generation who can fix it." Retrieved, February 10, 2020, from: https://www.ted.com/talks/fred_swaniker_the_leaders_who_ruined_africa_and_the_generation_who_can_fix_it.

Organized Student Politics

Between 2006-2012, I lived at the University of Ibadan, Nigeria's flagship university which educates 35,000 students, while I was conducting my doctoral research on student politics after the end of military rule. Like many other African nations, university campuses in Nigeria have played a vital role in educating national leaders. During the decades of military rule, campuses became important battlegrounds in the struggle for democracy led by students. However, in the latter years of the repressive military regimes of Generals Babaginda and Abacha, student politics was suppressed violently and infiltrated by the state. Though military rule ended in 1999, the university is still affected by the suppression of organized student political activity. In 2010, I witnessed the return of organized student union politics after being banned for a decade, and I studied the affect the opening of student leadership opportunities had on this first cohort of youth to grow up in the context of democracy.

In my research, I describe how students began to see themselves as professional politicians.[6] Student leaders assumed nicknames like "Senator" and "Honorable" and began to imagine future careers dedicated to public service for themselves. The broader student population enthusiastically participated in campus elections and watched their votes count in the selection of student representatives. For many, the campus would be the only context in which they would experience "free and fair" elections, given the significant challenges Nigeria has faced in building a transparent, representative democracy.

For their part, elected student leaders took their roles quite seriously, devising ambitious plans to improve the conditions of their under-resourced schools. One student leader planned to buy generators for the campus library so that students could have electricity to study during frequent campus power outages. Another student leader hoped to provide wi-fi service to residents of a dormitory, to provide internet access in absence of stable campus internet service.

Ultimately, neither student was able to execute these goals. This is because student leaders face overwhelming challenges, mostly related to access to funding and resources, as well as an institutional climate that is unsupportive and often hostile to student leadership. Students were met with disciplinary punishment when they protested and even when they merely criticized the university administration. This was the case in 2016 when a student journalist was suspended for one year for publishing an opinion essay that was critical of the university management, and again in 2017 when the university suspended the student union for two years for its role in staging a campus protest.

What I wish to emphasize is that schools are rare social institutions where African youth have opportunities to gain practical experience in leadership and representative governance–but only when they are given the institutional support to do so.

[6] Krystal Strong. (2017). "Practice for the Future: The Aspirational Politics of Nigerian Students." *Anthropological Perspectives on Student Futures*, pp. 119-131. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Civic Protest

Recent scholarship indicates that Africa is in the midst of a wave of popular protests that are predominately led by young people. In the book *Africa Uprising: Popular Protest and Political Change*, authors Adam Branch and Zachariah Mampilly identify more than one hundred large scale protests across 40 countries between 2005-2014 that were related to economic insecurity and grievances against African governments.[7]

In my own research, I have worked to address a significant gap in our current understanding of youth-led civic protests in Africa. This gap is related to the exclusion of school-based protests from most datasets that are publicly available. In my ethnographic research in Nigeria, school protests were a regular occurrence across educational institutions. Over the past three years, my research team has collected qualitative data on school protests in every African country since 2000. Our purpose is to understand the characteristics, frequency, and catalysts of civic protests in educational institutions with the goal of better understanding the challenges facing youth in schools and the range of youth responses to these conditions.

We quickly identified large-scale student protests like the "Fees Must Fall" movement, which began in South Africa in 2015 in response to proposed tuition fee hikes and quickly escalated to a national movement demanding for free and decolonized education. We also worked hard to identify school protests that were not widely reported in international or national news sources.

What we have learned after identifying more than 1,100 incidents of school protest across the African continent, so far, is that school protests encompass a broad range of political action. They are most often non-violent demonstrations, but can also include class boycotts, obstruction of school activities, property vandalism, and can escalate to full-fledged uprisings as in the case of "Fees Must Fall."

Our preliminary data suggests that these activities are concentrated in public institutions and higher education and appear to be increasing in frequency. Our data also indicates that the causes of school protests usually falls into three categories: (1) infrastructural issues like lack of water and electricity, (2) government and school administrative policies that negatively affected students such as fee hikes, and (3) the targeting of student activists for disciplinary action.

What I wish to emphasize here is that civic protests are another significant arena for youth political activation. Whether occurring in schools or other social spaces, whether organized or spontaneous, positive effects of civic protests can be identified by participants years later. Civic protests teach young people how to articulate demands for societal changes and affirm their agency in seeing to it that they are implemented.

Youth Leadership Development Initiatives

Youth leadership development initiatives are a recent phenomenon compared to organized student politics and civic protest, which both have a long and well-documented history in African countries.

[7] A. Branch and Z. Mampilly. (2015). *Africa Uprising: Popular protest and political change*. Chicago: Zed Books.

I first became aware of the growing availability of global opportunities for African youth seeking to develop their leadership capacity through the network of Nigerian student leaders, who were a part of my early research. Since graduating from university, several members of this cohort have participated in international programs which target African youth for "leadership development."

One former student is a teacher at the African Leadership Academy, which is a two-year South African high school. Another alum was in the 2015 cohort of the U.S. State department funded Mandela Washington Fellowship, which is the flagship program of the Young African Leadership Initiative (YALI) established under President Obama. Yet another former leader was awarded the Mandela Rhodes Fellowship, which provides scholarships for a master's degree in a South Africa to African youth, who have a track record in leadership and entrepreneurship.

I became interested in understanding youth experiences in these programs and how youth imagined these leadership opportunities would affect their life trajectories. Since 2016, my research team has maintained a database of global educational initiatives that work to develop African youth leadership. Thus far, we have identified roughly 250 unique educational programs, most of which were established in the past decade. We also surveyed or interviewed over one hundred African youth, who have participated in these global opportunities.

In our analysis of these youth leadership development initiatives, we noticed six educational approaches. These programs tend to be organized as: brick-and-mortar institutions, short-term programs, funding opportunities, conferences, networks, or online learning opportunities. The table below provides an overview of the characteristics and distribution of programs according to their representation within our data, their geographic spread, duration, the age of eligibility and enrollment. Based on the data we have collected, most youth leadership development initiatives are directed toward creating short-term leadership training programs, providing scholarships for study or grants for youth-led initiatives, and the establishment of leadership schools.

Program Features	Number of programs	Percentage of data	Region (number of countries in region)	Duration	Enrollment	Eligible Ages
Short-term programs	113	46.7%	Africa (21); North America (2); Europe (7); Asia (1); Australia (1)	3 weeks–2 years	2–1000	9–35
Scholarships and grants	71	29.3%	Africa (11); Asia (2); Australia (1); Europe (6); North America (2)	1–5 years	1–140	9–35
Brick-and-mortar institutions	37	15.3%	Africa (11);	2–5 years	25–800	11–25
Conferences and meetings	74	30.6%	Africa (18); Asia (1); Europe (2); North America (1)	2–7 days	25–3,000	13–35+
Networks	62	25.6%	Global	Ongoing	500–40,000	15+
Online learning	12	5%	Global	3 weeks–6 months	200–2,000	15+

Overview of Global African Youth Leadership Programs

Unlike organized student politics and civic protest, African youth leadership development programs are receiving widespread support from governments, corporations, foundations, educational institutions, and community-based organizations around the world. These programs have the most explicit mission of development the leadership capacity of African youth and tend to recruit young people with more educational and socioeconomic opportunities than their peers.

Recommendations

Africa's youth population presents an opportunity for the U.S. to play a critical support role in shaping the future of the continent. I have emphasized in my testimony activities that illustrate young people's drive to transform their communities with the hope that these examples of grassroots youth leadership can offer a rubric for how we can meaningfully and respectfully shift our approaches towards Africa in ways that will benefit this population.

My recommendation is that we better engage with young people where they are already socially and politically engaged, and that we leverage relationships with African governments to persuade leaders to create youth-centered policies and leadership opportunities.

This can be accomplished with three approaches:

1. **Expand educational and leadership opportunities in the United States**

This recommendation draws upon current strengths in U.S. policy toward African youth. The longstanding Fulbright program and more recent State Department initiatives like the Young African Leadership Initiative and Tech Women provide opportunities for young African leaders to receive professional and leadership training, develop relationships in their respective fields, and to connect with African youth from other countries. Youth participants in these programs that I have interviewed expressed how beneficial these programs were due to the exposure and support these opportunities offered. These efforts should be expanded and opportunities for continued support should be offered to youth after they return to their respective countries. It is worth highlighting that the recent increase in travel restrictions for citizens of many African nations undermine young people's ability to take advantage of such opportunities. Lifting these travel restrictions and prioritizing African youth in travel for educational and leadership opportunities is an immediate first step in the direction of expanding support in this area.

2. **Support youth leadership development in African countries**

As I have noted, there has been a remarkable increase over the past decade in youth political engagement in schools, civic protest, and through initiatives that specifically focus on youth leadership development. The U.S. already supports youth leadership development on the African continent through four YALI regional leadership centers, but there are still opportunities to do more. Youth leadership initiatives tend to favor more populous nations with higher levels of educational achievement (i.e. Nigeria, South Africa, Kenya, Ghana, Egypt). This means that primary and secondary educational institutions and smaller nations are less integrated into emerging leadership networks around the continent. Expanding leadership centers to more nations, integrating primary and secondary institutions, and providing more forms of direct

support to youth leaders would help build the capacity of the youth leadership ecosystem and institutions that are already important contexts of youth leadership development.

3. Pressure leaders to create youth-centered policies and leadership opportunities

The U.S. has long standing relationships with African leaders whose approaches to governance are not reflective of democratic values or inclusive of young people. Though engaging with young people in more meaningful ways should be our greatest priority, shifting our engagement with African leaders is also critically important. The government policies of many African countries impede the ability of young people to go to school, to find jobs, to start businesses, to peacefully protest, to receive medical care and other social services, and to run for elected office. The U.S. should use its alliances to play a larger role in putting pressure on African leaders to create youth-centered policies and leadership opportunities.

With an ageing population of leaders and a rapidly growing youth population, it is certain that we will continue to witness significant leadership changes across the African continent. How these leadership transitions will play out will be shaped fundamentally by the degree to which African youth are welcomed into positions of leadership, broadly defined. The U.S. can play a supportive role in peaceful transitions of power if we engage with African youth and governments in ways that expand opportunities for young people. My recommendations to expand educational and leadership opportunities for youth in the United States, to support leadership development in African countries, and to pressure current government leaders to created youth centered policies are all feasible approaches.

I thank you for the opportunity to offer testimony in support of African youth and look forward to your questions.