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African Youth Charter: Prospects for the Development of the African Youth

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Introduction

The youth phase of life is an interesting and an important phase of the development of any human societies. This phase of life shows signs that an era (childhood) is over and marks the beginning of a new phase that transcends into adulthood. In his writings, Herbert Spenser categorized the human society as one of two societies, the militant society and the industrial society. The first known as the militant society involves societies in which the regulative system dominates the sustaining system. In this society, cooperation is compulsory and enforced by the state, the society is autocratic, warlike and religious. The second type of society is the industrial society; which is peaceful and republican; cooperation is voluntary, through the means of the market. In this society, the state exists for the benefit of its members and not vice versa (Collins and Makowsky, 1993). As youths we need a mixture of the two societies, the militant society to restrict us of our excesses and the industrial society to enable us show our potentials and contributory efforts to the development of our nations and our continent. This is partly why we are gathered here today to deliberate on the Appropriation, Dissemination and Implementation of ECOWAS Instrument and Endogenous Democratic Governance and Conflict Prevention Mechanisms in West Africa and to chart the way forward for the African youth.

Today, Africa is known to the rest of the world as a third world society, Africa in this sense is symptomized by poverty, the scourge of HIV/AIDS, endemic and persistence crisis/conflict, bad governance, and above all, a continent without prospects for her teeming youths. Undisputable, youths are the ones who hold the key to our continents development in the 21st century.

At the very foundation of this important role of the youth is the challenge of their participation in the quest towards nation building. Suffice it to say that, since the adoption of the African Youth Charter (AYC) by the Seventh Ordinary Session of the African Union Assembly held in Banjul, on 2nd July, 2006, a session of a new era had began in the continent where the issues and problems of the youth are to take pre-eminence in our everyday discussion.

Although, the AYC is the focus of this presentation, we are not simply going to review its provisions. Rather, we shall focus on the prospects and challenges of its implementation and as it affects the overall development of the African youth, both mentally and physically and to a larger extent his existence as a citizen of his country within ECOWAS and the continent in general.

In doing this, the paper will be divided into five parts. The first is the introduction, followed by the second part which focuses on the conceptualization of the term youth. The third part explores the African Youth Charter, while, the fourth part examines appropriate ways of implementing the Charter for the benefits of the youth, the region and the continent in general. Lastly, the fifth part bears the conclusions of the presentation.

Conceptualizing the Term Youth

The issues, problems, and the focus on youth became a world issue in 1965 when the General Assembly of the United Nations (UN) adopted the Declaration on the Promotion among youth of the Ideals of Peace, Mutual Respect and Understanding

between Peoples; stressing the importance of the role of youth in today's world, especially, its potential contribution to development (UNDPI, 1995:172). Since then, youth and their issues have attracted considerably affections. The word youth has become common place, but then, who is a youth?

The term "youth" has no luxury of definition, it is embedded with semantics; it gives rise to confusion and conflicting images. To some youth is a threat to existing status quo, while to others youths are the hope of the future (ADF-V 2006:1) The concept of youth takes different meanings giving to it by individuals and nations.

In Africa, like developed countries, nations draw a line on youth at the age at which a person is given equal treatment under the law – often referred to as the age of majority. This age is often 18 (eighteen) years in many countries and once a person passes this age, they are considered to be an adult. However, the operational definition of the term youth often varies from country to country, depending on specific socio-cultural, institutional, economic and political factors.

United Nations General Assembly, the Commonwealth and the World Bank have attempted to homogenize the categorization of youth age. For the UN and World Bank, youths are those persons falling between the ages of 15 and 24 years, and for the Commonwealth youth is the age bracket between the ages of 15-29 years. For some countries the age could be extended to 35 years, as in Ghana, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, as shown in the table below.

Youth ages in different ECOWAS countries

Country	Youth Age	Majority Age	Voting Age
Ghana	18-35	18	18
Sierra Leone	15-30	18	18
Nigeria	18-35	18	18
Senegal	15-35	18	18
Gambia	15-35	18	18
Guinea Bissau	15-35	18	18
Mali	15-35	18	18
Cote d'Ivoire	15-35	18	18
Burkina Faso	15-35	18	18

Summarily, we can say that youth generally refers to the period of life that is neither childhood nor adulthood (maturity) i.e. somewhere in between the early period of existence, growth, or development.

African Youth Charter and the Challenges for Youth Development in Africa

The African Youth Charter is a document prepared by the representatives of youth organization of the African Union (AU) Member States. The document was presented to the AU on 2nd July 2006 at the Seventh Ordinary Session of the Assembly, held in Banjul, the Gambia, where it was considered and adopted. However, this presentation summarizes the key provisions of the Charter.

The AYC is made up of a Preamble and two Parts. Part one deals with the “Rights and Duties of Youths in Member States. This part is also made up of twenty-eight articles. Part two is the “Final Provision of the Youth Charter and is made up of three Articles. A critical assessment of the Charter shows that it touches on almost every pertinent issues gravitating around/affecting the youth, especially the youths of African descent.

A recap of world history especially the histories of Europe and America between the 16th to 18th centuries, tells us that, what the present day Africa is experiencing is not different from what they experienced then. At that period of their history, the evils of industrial revolution took toll; there were child labor, bad factory conditions, hordes of beggars, and paupers, squalid poor houses and debtor’s prisons, periodic crisis of unemployment etc. It was these bad and critical conditions that drove Marx into radicalism (Collins and Makowsky, 1993:84) and ended up advocating for a revolution. However, this paper is not advocating radicalism, neither a revolution, but a peaceful and evolutionary approach towards attaining the goals of youths in our continent, which is what the AYC sets out to do.

In that quest, the AYC is actually the document to chart that cause, but the basic challenges are dual faceted. First, on the one hand, the goals of youth can be attained if our national governments will take the AYC more seriously and treat the issues of youth with affections, taking into consideration the fact that the youths are tomorrow’s future and also the leaders of tomorrow. Second on the other hand, if the youths complementing the role of government, can stand up for themselves, taking into consideration the spirit of self realization, and are able to do what they should do to attained the height of development

Importunately, some remarks in the preamble are quite impressive and the writers of the document should be applauded. Of value in that section is the statement by Union Members that they are:

Convinced that Africa’s greatest resource is its youthful population and that through their active and full participation; Africans can surmount the difficulties that lie ahead (AYC, 2006:1)

This is saying that, our parents and elders across the continent still have faith in the youth and they accept as true that for the survival, progress and development of Africa, its youth are a resource base that should be tapped and be the basis of focus. The above statement was reaffirmed twice in the preamble. One part of the affirmation is focused on the need to take appropriate measures to promote and protect the rights and welfare of children and youths as stipulated in the 1989 Convention of the Right of the Child* and the 1999 African Charter on the Right and Welfare of the Child**. The other part of the affirmation attests to the fact that, cultural development rest with the youth.

Again, of significance in the preamble is the recognition given to the youth as partners, assets and a prerequisite for sustainable development and for the peace and

* see the 1989 Convention of the Rights of the Child

** see also The 1999 African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child

prosperity of Africa with a unique contribution to make to the present and to future development. From all indications, the African Youth Charter, have come to give the African youth a pride of place and share as partakers of development of their various nations, regions and the continent. It has also given them great recognitions as partakers and parties in development.

According to the African Youth Charter, the first eight articles deals with provisions relating to individual rights otherwise known as human rights, and these are the inalienable rights of the youths. As a result, a glamorous future of the African youth is feasible if and only if the provisions of these articles, articles 2 (Non Discrimination), 3 (Freedom of Movement), 4 (Freedom of Expression), 5 (Freedom of Association), 6 (Freedom of Thought, Conscience and Religion), 7 (Protection of Private Life), 8 (Protection of the Family) and 9 (Property) are followed and implemented by national governments. As article one (Obligation of State Parties) stipulates:

(1) That States Parties of the African Union to the present Charter shall recognize the rights, freedom and duties enshrined in this Charter.

(2) That State Parties shall undertake the necessary steps, in accordance with their Constitutional processes and with the provisions of the present Charter, to adopt such legislative or other measures that may be necessary to give effect to the provisions of the Charter.

In articles 10 (Development) and 11 (Youth Participation) the Charter recognized the contribution of youths to development, and admonished national governments to create a conducive platforms for economic, political, social and cultural development and benefits of the youths. However, this can come about in two ways as articles 11 (1) and (2) states. First, it allows for individual youth development with the aid and encouragement of their home government. Second, it gives youths, the privilege of being partners in the development of their respective countries and by extension their sub-regions. This will be through participation of the youth in parliament and other decision making bodies, creating platforms and equal access to decision making and information, as well as giving priorities to policies and programmes of youths, to enable interaction with marginalized youth, out of school and out of work youth. This to larger extent gives room for motivation and reintegration of these youths into mainstream society.

Furthermore, in article 12, the Charter focuses on national youth policy and it advice national policy makers of Member States to create, and develop comprehensive and coherent national youth policies. You will agree that in some of our countries, we have in place national youth policies and we even have Ministries of Youths, but the question is how effective are these policies and the Ministries? It is left to us as individuals to judge. For instance, in Nigeria, we have a Ministry of Youth, Sport and Culture that takes care of issues and problems of youth. However, from assessment, the Ministry is ineffective, riddled with one problem or another, in a nutshell, they concentrate more on sports than on the issues and predicaments of youths. Invariably,

these Ministries associate youths with sports. But the question is, is it through sports that the problem of the youth will resolve? Neglecting issues of human security and development affecting the youth, will adversely affect the future of the youth and by extension the future of the continent. We should not forget that, today, there is correlation between poverty, underdevelopment and conflict.

Of utmost importance are articles 13, 14, 15, and 16. These articles deal with the issues of education, skills development, poverty eradication, socio-economic integration of youth, sustainable livelihoods, employment and health. It is undisputable that these are major issues of concern to our nations and the continent at large. According to World Development Report (WDR), there are 1.3 billion young people now living in the developing world. This is the largest-ever youth group in history (www.worldbank.org/wdr, 2007), imagine us neglecting this group. Refusing them access to the stipulations in the above articles will exceedingly create widespread disillusionment and social tensions for our regions and continent.

Underdevelopment and poverty has been the quandary problems of developing countries. The irony is that underdevelopment begets poverty, and poverty in turn entrenches underdevelopment. These two concepts complement one another. Unfortunately, these two concepts are the major causes of crisis and conflict in the sub-region. Poverty alone has been a major bane to education, skill acquisition, and employment.

Poverty has become endemic and dynamic, its degree vary from place to place across the continent and the sub-region. People may move in and out of poverty as a result of many factors. These may be natural disasters or health problems, lack of access to credit, or the lack of natural resources, unemployment, discrimination on the grounds of gender, lack of confidence and integrity, race, disability, age, or ill health etc. among these categories of people and if the above factors causes poverty, then the worst hit are the youth, young girls and women.

Today, education is becoming more expensive by the day, while at the same time the nitty-gritty of our formal education is being destroyed. Education both formal and informal should be at the core of youth development. In that stead, the government should endeavor to create a system of education that also gives priority to skill acquisition to the child and the youth, especially for those who are dropouts or prefer that kind of education.

Education without employment opportunities is worthless. The problem of unemployment seems to also play a significant role in African conflicts. It's been said that an idle mind is the devils' workshop. Therefore, the government should also create jobs and employment opportunities for those with vocational and specialized skills. This to a significant extent should be a major aspect of a strategy for poverty eradication.

In terms of health, youths are the most affected too. The pandemic of HIV/AIDS affects youths more. The ages of 15 years to 25 years are the most affected. Other related infectious diseases inclusive. For a very long time, the issues of health have been neglected in Africa. Health it is said is wealth. A healthy person is an active person, and that vigorosity is seen in their input in the spheres of social, economic, and political life. A nation with a healthy generation is a nation positioned for prosperity

and development. But that is also feasible if the provisions of article 16 (1) and (2) as stated below are applied by State Parties:

- 1) Every young person shall have the right to enjoy the best attainable state of physical, mental and spiritual health; and that
- 2) States parties shall undertake to pursue the full implementation of this right and in particular take measures to ensure all about health is provided.

However, what the Charter meant by ‘all about health’ includes the provision of the best health and medical facilities, easy access to medical and health care especially for those in rural areas, addressing pandemics such as HIV/AIDS, malaria and institutional preventive measures, control consumption of tobacco, alcohol etc, provision of rehabilitation centers for drugs addict, provision of technical and financial support to build institutional capacity of youth organization to address public health concerns both for disabled, raped and early marriage victims etc.

The African continent known to us and the rest of the world today is Africa filled with contradiction, with the crisis and conflicts, Africa where in some countries, democracy and governance seems to be an illusory. Be that as it may, as an African initiative, the Youth Charter signifies that the youth has an important role to play in the promotion of peace and security in Africa. But that is only if they are given the opportunity to do so in line with article 17. In recent time, the concept of security have moved away from its conventional notion of state security to human/alternative security^{****} which takes into consideration the individual and basic necessities of life including protecting the environment for sustainable development as is seen in article 19 of the Charter.

The Charter also addresses in articles 17 to 19 some destabilizing factors of the African continent. These are issues of law enforcement and the issues of conflicts, the reverse of peace and security. This is one provision that should be considered more seriously. As youth we should learn a culture of peace and also create an enabling environment for Disarmament, Demobilization, Rehabilitation and Reintegration (DDRR), for countries that are just coming out of war. As the Introductory Note of the Sahel and West African Club workshop observed, Africa has plenty of cultural mechanisms on which to capitalize for the attainment of peace, we should make astute use of this (especially, ECOWAS mechanisms for peace and the early warning system).

**** Defining human/alternative security, Tickner, posits that the individual should become the unit of analysis. In that sense, human/alternative security doctrine tries to redefine security from the politico-military terms as the protection of the boundaries and integrity of the state and its values against the dangers of a hostile international environment to define security from a perspective that includes conflict on the periphery as well as economic and environmental issues. An economic dimension of security is defined in terms of the state secure systems of food, health and trade. More to say, the individual situated in the broader social structures is the starting point of security, which Tickner sees as the bottom-up approach (2001: 38, 48).

In other words, we should evoke socio-cultural mechanisms based on historic social and more or less long-standing experience^{††††}.

Article 23 underscores gender problems, specifically the subjugation, discrimination and marginalization of girls and women. Today, women constitute at least half of the human race, yet on the basis of three recognized dimensions of inequality – economic status, social position, and political power, women occupy a secondary place in relation to men, a position comparable in many respects with that of minorities.

Several indices have been used for measuring women's empowerment. First, economically; it is worthwhile, to know that people living in the peripheries, especially women, shoulder the burden of the world's poverty, particularly those in the Least Developed Countries (LDCs) and sub-Saharan Africa. Secondly, in the area of education, a report of the World Bank on higher education in 2004 observed a low enrolment of women in higher education worldwide. Focusing on the issues of quality, responsiveness and equity, the document explained that women constituted 25 per cent of the enrolment in Africa (Imoukhuede, 2004; Ubi, 2007).

And thirdly and politically, several reasons like lack of education, traditional and cultural stereotypes, lack of opportunity, have constituted a hindrance to women's political empowerment. A trace of African history from the early days of independence to the present day shows that women have been discriminated and marginalized politically.

Like article 23 (1) (a-n) posits, all women have rights to share in the benefit of growth and development. And if sustainable development is to be achieved, then an engendered approach to development policies and practices is essential. Development strategies must target projects that benefit girls and women, particularly those in the subsistence sector.

Article 24 (Mentally and Physically Challenged Youth) and 25 (Elimination of Harmful Social and Cultural Practices) are almost dealing with the same issue. Today, it is observed with dismay the way disabled people amongst us have been treated. In the decade of Disabled Persons (1983-1992), in 1987 and in 1992, the UN acknowledge that despite many efforts, disabled persons continued to be denied equal opportunities and in many societies remain isolated. As a fact, these people have been discriminated and marginalized upon. One thing is indispensable, these individuals have the same right as other human beings, and as article 24 states, these persons have the right to proper medical care, economic security, rehabilitation, training, education, sports etc as well as the right to live (life to its fullest) any where, whether in ones country or anywhere in Africa, either with one's own family or foster parents (AYC, article 24, p.18; UNDPI, 1995:174).

Whereas, article 25 though, self explanatory, looks at societal norms, customs, traditions and culture that has overtime acted as a hindrance to the development of the African youth. Some customs, traditions and culture, have been used to undermine the existence of African youths, and to an extent retard their development.

^{††††} Sahel and West Africa Club/OECD and ECOWAS (2007:6): "Introductory Note". Workshop on Appropriation, Dissemination and Implementation of Regional Instruments and Endogenous Democratic and Conflict Prevention Mechanisms in West Africa, held in Dakar and Saly, 14th-19th October, 2007.

Prognosis for Action and the Implementation of the African Youth Charter

Articles 26, 27, and 28 are provisions relating to the way forward for the appropriate dissemination and implementation of the provisions of the Charter. This in essence is a tripartite dimension, which involves the responsibilities of the youths in respect of their own development i.e. what the youth should do to achieve development in line with the provisions therein in the Charter, as well as the responsibilities of the State Parties to this document and the responsibilities of our regional and continental organizations (ECOWAS, AU), all these relating to ways by which these entities can improve on the life and existence of the African youth and how they can be enhanced to channel their energies towards attaining goals for their overall development.

With the adoption of the AYC, focus should be on promoting the implementation of guidelines through the following ways:

Responsibilities of Youths to themselves

- To begin with, youth should endeavor to realize who they are, their potentialities and contributory efforts to development, which is undisputedly a requisite to the life of any nation.
- Youths within member states should organized programmes on youth issues and run them on National TV and radio stations (taking into consideration the provisions of the AYC and its dissemination).
- They can even start a magazine watch or even create comic publication with youth stories, this will, and at the same time be use to disseminate the content of the AYC.
- Youth clubs and organizations should be encouraged amongst youths, as this might be a preliminary platform for dissemination and implementation of the AYC in their respective countries.
- Through the help OECD, Sahel and West African Club (SWAC), an African youth website should be created and hosted by the youths in their home countries and loaded with information on youth issues and programmes. This website will also disseminate information on the child, youths and young girls and women's rights as enshrined in the Charter and other conventions and protocols.

Responsibilities of National Government

- National governments should integrate youth policies and programmes and strengthen channels of communication between youths and policy makers as well as between generations.
- National government should endeavor to have a long term strategy for youth work and also reinforce inter-agency cooperation on youth issues and programmes.
- National government should promote environment conducive to the rehabilitations and empowerment of youths, while mobilizing and equipping their youths with necessary capacities to enable them to face the challenges of tomorrow and to realize their full potentials.

- National government should build schools, build rehabilitation centers, vocational centers, etc. for out-of-school youths, disabled persons, victims of other causes, etc, and create employment opportunities for their teeming youths.
- Government should build and rehabilitate prisons (remand homes) to cater for youths that contravene authorities. Also, special rehabilitation centers should also be created to cater for free inmates.
- National governments when designing and implementing macro-economic and social policies should include women's perspectives. Such processes should institutionalize their participation.
- women's contribution to socio-economic development as producers and workers should also be recognized in the formal and informal sectors (including home based workers), while appropriate policies relating to employment and to her working conditions should be drawn up and consider a policy of state.

ECOWAS and AU Responsibilities for the youth

- The sub-regional and continental organizations should adopt standardize rules in Africa for the equalization of opportunities for persons with disabilities. And through national government endeavor to shun the discrimination and marginalization of these persons.
- Sub-regional and continental organization should harmonize their national youth policies, thereby creating a framework for cooperation among youths at regional and continental levels.
- Sub-regional and continental organization, through national government, should mobilize the African people around the visions of the AYC.
- Like in the UN, the AU and ECOWAS should create room for African youths and those in diaspora to find support projects involving young people.
- The sub-regional and continental organizations should create African youth programme of action towards development which will provide practical guide for policy makers and youths in Africa.

Conclusion

The African Youth Charter is indeed a unique instrument for the protection and safeguarding of the African youth because it takes into consideration African values with respect to youth development. Young people in Africa are a quintessence of energy, initiative and creativity. Because they are young they contribute or can contribute greatly to enhance the economy of our respective nations. They play an interesting and important role in national development. The importance of the AYC document on the one hand presupposes that, the goals of development are only attainable where the youths are aware of their innate responsibilities to themselves, their family and their nation. And on other hand, any nation failing in its responsibility to recognize and give its youths a place or fails to give them the opportunities to show their potentials, that nation is heading towards doom, because its future will be bleak, without hope, without moral values, and unproductive.

Truly speaking, we have never seen a time in history where the youths in Africa are as neglected as they were in the last decades of 20th century and even in the present 21st century. And that is why we are saying that the adoption of the AU Youth Charter

would never have come at a better time than now. It came at a century, when it looks like all hope is lost, a time when many nations in Africa are failing, or have failed, a time when many nations in our regions, in the continent are no longer positioned for social provisioning.

Therefore, with the AU Youth Charter in place, and with the spirit of dedication and progress, we hope that countries in Africa, especially countries within West Africa, will dedicate themselves to ratifying the Charter and implementing the provisions therein to the good of the youths and the future of their nations and the continent. Therefore the African Youth Charter should be seen as a legal binding instrument and a vital lobbying tool for the protection and promotion of the child and youth's rights.

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