EXAMINING THE CRITICAL ROLE OF YOUTH'S PARTICIPATION AS CATALYSTS FOR SUSTAINABLE SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC DRIVERS OF DEVELOPMENT

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: The purpose of the study was to examine the critical role of youth participation as catalysts for sustainable social and economic drivers of development in Africa.

Theoretical Reference: The study adopted the theory of Positive Youth Development to contextualise the aim of the study. The study argues that, youth workers and other service providers using a youth development approach would be able to analyze the theories in this study and determine what influences their practice, anticipate the results of their interventions, choose the best course of action at each stage of the process, and explain their actions when working with young people.

Method: Through the application of qualitative research techniques, the study primarily used peer-reviewed secondary sources available within the public domain. Since they provided the researchers with a great opportunity to connect with the body of knowledge already in existence and allowed the researchers to gain insight into the thoughts and experiences of other scholars regarding the area of study. Hence advanced searches of baseline literature were used to collect qualitative data.

Results and Conclusions: The literature review examined the vital role that young people play as engines for long-term social and economic development in several African. The study argued that youth involvement promotes project ownership and sustainability and increases young people’s ability to meet their basic needs.

Implications of Research: Unemployment has caused Africa a lot of woes as youths embrace violence rather than embarking on projects that would benefit the continent. The paper concluded that unless impediments to the actualisation are expunged, the African continent will still take its back seat in this era of unprecedented development.

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EXAMINANDO O PAPEL CRÍTICO DA PARTICIPAÇÃO DOS JOVENS COMO CATALISADORES DE IMPULSIONADORES SOCIAIS E ECONÔMICOS SUSTENTÁVEIS DO DESENVOLVIMENTO

RESUMO

Objectivo: O objectivo do estudo foi examinar o papel crítico da participação dos jovens como catalisadores para motores sociais e económicos sustentáveis do desenvolvimento em África.

Referencial Teórico: O estudo adotou a teoria do Desenvolvimento Positivo da Juventude para contextualizar o objetivo do estudo. O estudo argumenta que os animadores juvenis e outros prestadores de serviços que utilizem uma abordagem de desenvolvimento juvenil seriam capazes de analisar as teorias deste estudo e determinar o que influencia a sua prática, antecipar os resultados das suas intervenções, escolher o melhor curso de acção em cada fase do processo e explicar as suas ações quando trabalham com jovens.

Método: Através da aplicação de técnicas de pesquisa qualitativa, o estudo utilizou principalmente fontes secundárias revisadas por pares e disponíveis no domínio público. Uma vez que proporcionaram aos pesquisadores uma grande oportunidade de se conectarem com o corpo de conhecimento já existente e permitiram que os pesquisadores adquirissem conhecimentos sobre os pensamentos e experiências de outros estudiosos em relação à área de estudo. Assim, foram utilizadas pesquisas avançadas na literatura de base para recolher dados qualitativos.

Resultados e Conclusões: A revisão da literatura examinou o papel vital que os jovens desempenham como motores do desenvolvimento social e económico a longo prazo em vários países africanos. O estudo argumentou que o envolvimento dos jovens promove a apropriação e a sustentabilidade do projecto e aumenta a capacidade dos jovens para satisfazer as suas necessidades básicas.

Implicações da investigação: O desemprego tem causado muitos problemas a África, uma vez que os jovens abracem a violência em vez de embarcarem em projectos que beneficiariam o continente. O documento concluiu que, a menos que os impedimentos à concretização sejam eliminados, o continente africano ainda ficará em segundo plano nesta era de desenvolvimento sem precedentes.

Originalidade/Valor: O estudo defendeu que os jovens devem ser envolvidos como conselheiros, colaboradores e partes interessadas para que as iniciativas de desenvolvimento sejam eficazes e representativas. Para garantir o envolvimento dos jovens, não basta contar apenas com conversas pontuais; é preciso haver um processo contínuo.

Palavras-chave: iniciativas de desenvolvimento, sustentabilidade, desenvolvimento económico, participação juvenil.
EXAMINAR EL PAPEL CRÍTICO DE LA PARTICIPACIÓN DE LOS JÓVENES COMO CATALIZADORES DE LOS MOTORES SOCIALES Y ECONÓMICOS SOSTENIBLES DEL DESARROLLO

RESUMEN

Propósito: El propósito del estudio fue examinar el papel fundamental de la participación juvenil como catalizadores de motores sociales y económicos sostenibles del desarrollo en África.

Referencia teórica: El estudio adoptó la teoría del Desarrollo Juvenil Positivo para contextualizar el objetivo del estudio. El estudio sostiene que los trabajadores juveniles y otros proveedores de servicios que utilicen un enfoque de desarrollo juvenil podrían analizar las teorías de este estudio y determinar qué influye en su práctica, anticipar los resultados de sus intervenciones, elegir el mejor curso de acción en cada etapa de el proceso y explicar sus acciones cuando trabajan con jóvenes.

Método: Mediante la aplicación de técnicas de investigación cualitativa, el estudio utilizó principalmente fuentes secundarias revisadas por pares disponibles en el dominio público. Dado que brindaron a los investigadores una gran oportunidad para conectarse con el conjunto de conocimientos que ya existe y les permitieron conocer los pensamientos y experiencias de otros académicos con respecto al área de estudio. Por lo tanto, se utilizaron búsquedas avanzadas de la literatura de referencia para recopilar datos cualitativos.

Resultados y conclusiones: La revisión de la literatura examinó el papel vital que desempeñan los jóvenes como motores del desarrollo social y económico a largo plazo en varios países africanos. El estudio argumentó que la participación de los jóvenes promueve la propiedad y la sostenibilidad del proyecto y aumenta la capacidad de los jóvenes para satisfacer sus necesidades básicas.

Implicaciones de la investigación: El desempleo ha causado muchos problemas a África, ya que los jóvenes adoptan la violencia en lugar de embarcarse en proyectos que beneficiarían al continente. El documento concluyó que a menos que se eliminen los impedimentos a la actualización, el continente africano seguirá estando en un segundo plano en esta era de desarrollo sin precedentes.

Originalidad/Valor: El estudio argumentó que los jóvenes deben participar como asesores, colaboradores y partes interesadas para que las iniciativas de desarrollo sean efectivas y representativas. Para garantizar que los jóvenes participen, no basta con depender únicamente de conversaciones puntuales; es necesario que haya un proceso continuo.

Palabras clave: iniciativas de desarrollo, sostenibilidad, desarrollo económico, participación juvenil.

1 INTRODUCTION

The study looks at the critical role of the youths as catalysts for sustainable social and economic development in selected African states. The study responds to the research question of what critical role the youth’s participation plays in sustainable social and economic development. The objective of the study seeks to explore the effective
participation of the youth population in social engagement for sustainable development and promote social change, as well as their empowerment for economic development. Studies show that there are over one billion young people who reside in underdeveloped nations across Africa and this presents an opportunity for participation in activities (Enaifoghe & Durokifa, 2021).

Youth involvement encourages ownership and sustainability of initiatives and improves young people's capacity to meet their subsistence requirements. The study argued that if development strategies are to be successful and representative, young people must be involved as advisors, collaborators, and stakeholders. It is not sufficient to rely solely on one-time discussions to ensure the engagement of young people; it must be an ongoing process. Africa's youth is believed to be at the forefront of economic transformation and it is important to understand their critical role in effecting change and development both socially and economically (Enaifoghe & Dlamini, 2021).

More than 400 million people in Africa are between the ages of 15 and 35, making it the continent with the youngest population in the world (African Development Bank, 2020). The African Development Bank (AfDB) estimates that only one in six people in the continent are employed for a wage, with a third of them being jobless and discouraged. This study briefly examines the current state of African youth policies in light of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and discusses how the principles of youth mainstreaming might be effectively implemented to boost sustainable development planning and policies in the subregion.

It is argued in literature that, one of the most important factors in realizing the 2030 Agenda is ensuring youth participation through the means of policy implementation (Jegede et al., 2019). Supporting the execution of pertinent initiatives to foster young people's potential as change agents and engaged citizens for peace and development falls under this category (Jegede et al, 2019). To fully realize the demographic dividend in the subregion, many strategies are needed. These include methods for enabling African youth to realize their aspirations, enhancing their abilities, and promoting the rights of all youth, all of which will help create more diverse, resilient, and long-lasting communities and countries.
2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study adopted the theory of Positive Youth Development to contextualise the study within social theories. Youth workers and other service providers using a youth development approach would be able to analyze the theories in this study and determine what influences their practice, anticipate the results of their interventions, choose the best course of action at each stage of the process, and explain their actions when working with young people.

3 THEORY OF POSITIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT

In comparison, this perspective addresses issues that young people face as they get older. According to Damon (2004) and Peterson (2004), the theory focuses on the potential for growth and positive behaviours in adolescents rather than their flaws. By imposing these characteristics, one's strengths are strengthened, safeguarding them against actions that jeopardize their health, increasing the likelihood of successful educational outcomes, and enhancing their resilience in an attempt to combat potential socio-economic issues (Benson, 2002:125; Peteru, 2008:28). This idea, in its essence, approaches youth from a positive and unbiased standpoint, seeing them as resources as opposed to issues.

The ideology of positive youth development arises when the potential plasticity of human development is matched with developmental assets, as stated by Lerner et al. (2002:11). The approach views youth from a strength-based perspective, acknowledging that their strengths align with their limitless potential (Benson, 2002:125; Damon, 2004:14; Peterson, 2004:14; Villaruel et al., 2003:1). It is critical to note that, despite praising youth involvement and participation in development processes, the positive youth development theory recognizes that these efforts fall short. Hence, to help young people behave "responsibly" and foster institutional support, more should be done to help them focus their energies in "positive directions" (Peteru, 2008:28). Therefore, this idea inspires youth to reach their maximum potential (despite their issues) and to look for and accept help from their social and professional networks (e.g., family, peer group, the school, community). To generate productive youth who can contribute to their families, communities, and society, the role of youth workers would be to establish an enabling
environment (Borden, Craig, & Villaruel, 2004:77). The five P's listed below, which are underlined by Villaruel et al. (2003:353), form the foundation of the positive youth development theory:

3.1 POSSIBILITIES/OPPORTUNITIES AND READINESS

Prospects and arrangements pointing to what avenues are open to young people in local communities? This is the process of creating opportunities that will help young people grow in all spheres of their lives, including socially, emotionally, intellectually, morally, spiritually, and physically. According to Pittman (1993:22), programs should give young people the chance to grow in a variety of ways and assist them in avoiding risk factors that obstruct positive outcomes.

3.2 PARTICIPATION

Are we aware of how young people spend their free time? This strategy seeks to comprehend, inform, and include young people (Damon, 2004:15). It is imperative that youth not only recognize their roles as individuals, citizens, and members of a group but also embrace them. Youth involvement shapes the path and provides young people with a voice in their development by enticing them to participate in processes that have an impact, involve them in group decisions and outcomes to attain justice, have an impact on outcomes, reveal instances of power abuse, and realize their rights (United Nations Convention on the Rights of a Child, 1989 as cited in Peteru, 2008:25)

Young people are given the chance to contribute to solutions rather than problems by taking part in local, national, and international decision-making processes (Peterson, 2004:64-68). Sensitivity to youth's participation as the foundation for a cogent, integrated strategy to meeting their needs was found in a situational analysis study of youth in the Netherlands (Van Kampen, Beker & WilbrinkGriffioen, 1996:1). Hence, education for sustainable development is a means of giving young people the information, morals, and abilities they need to make decisions that will enhance their quality of life. According to Brown (2004:11), including young people in the decision-making process will empower them and improve their livelihoods because decision-making is a component of human
capital. When it comes to empowering and developing young people in this setting, youth workers and those in charge of youth development have a crucial role to play.

3.3 PEOPLE

Who are the individuals who regularly engage with young people? Who oversees the youth initiatives? Youth workers are designated as the people in charge of youth programs, however, Benson and Pittman (2001:4) emphasized that community involvement and investment from the public and commercial sectors are essential for juvenile development (Berlian et al., 2024; Benson, 2002:139). The President of the National Urban League emphasized the value of family in daily interactions with young people and the necessity of maintaining these relationships by characterizing youth development as what parents do for their children on a good day (Benson & Pittman, 2001:94).

3.4 PLACES AND PLURALISM

What Youth Resources Are Available? How can you get access to them? This entails assessing the tools available to youth to fulfil their needs and reach their full potential. This will involve determining whether the opportunities, resources, and support networks required for young people's development are available (Benson & Pittman, 2001:94). To mobilize resources for the kids, service providers in the youth development sector have a part to play.

3.5 PARTNERSHIP

Do young people participate as partners in the development and execution of programs that impact them? This perspective advocates for the inclusion of youth in decision-making processes that impact their lives as well as the lives of other youth. Encouraging kids to take charge of their own development and include them in decision-making processes might help them build a feeling of ownership (Benson, 2002:140). From the foregoing, it is clear that this theory aligns with the concept of youth development since it emphasizes positive outcomes for the kids while taking into account
the underlying causes of harmful behaviours. These results are referred to as the "five C's." They consist of skill, assurance, morality, rapport, involvement, and concern (Lerner et al., 2002:24–23; Villaruel et al., 2003:7; Wheeler, 2000:11).

Sustainable livelihood approaches and the right-based approach can coexist with the positive youth development philosophy. Putting young people and their concerns front and centre by acknowledging their current livelihood strategies, social environment, and adaptability, as well as making sure that young people contribute to the development of the community or society in which they live, are some of its main focus areas. Other areas include knowledge and decision-making as part of the capital base, personal and social development of young people, and building the capacity of individuals and groups to develop a stronger sense of identity and belonging (Brown, 2004:11–12; Krauss & Suandi, 2008:6).

Placing young people and their concerns front and centre by acknowledging their current livelihood strategies, social environment, and adaptability, as well as making sure that they contribute to the development of the community or society in which they live, are some of the key points of emphasis. It also focuses on knowledge and decision-making as part of the capital base, personal and social development of young people, and strengthening the capacity of individuals and groups to develop a stronger sense of identity and belonging.

4 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This qualitative study examines a range of literature in the area of study. The paper used advanced search and thematic content data analysis to acquire the majority of its data from peer-reviewed secondary sources. With written materials that are in the public domain, this method enables the researchers to examine a variety of literature that was gathered through desktop-based research. While researching the critical role of youth participation as catalysts for sustainable social and economic development, a thorough literature review was conducted due to the complexity of the study under examination.

The study primarily used secondary sources through qualitative research techniques. Since they provided the researchers with a great opportunity to connect with the body of knowledge already in existence and allowed them to gain insight into the thoughts and experiences of other scholars regarding the area of study, advanced searches
of baseline literature were used to collect qualitative data. The researchers gained a solid understanding of the vital role of youth as drivers of development through this qualitative investigation.

5 THE CRITICAL ROLE OF YOUTH PARTICIPATION

Young people in present-day encounter numerous obstacles in their quest to build a promising future for themselves. Young people's prospects have drastically declined in high-income economies, and there are serious worries about their future financial security and employment status. In low-income nations, where many employees engage in informal employment, which the International Labour Organisation defines as erratic, poorly compensated, and lying beyond the ambit of the law, the situation is worse for young people (Enaifoghe & Dlamini, 2021). Several of the global development concerns are particularly acute for children and young people. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) for 2030 were adopted by the United Nations Sustainable Development in September 2015 (Billimoria, 2016). Young people are a driving force for progress, but only if they are given the opportunities and skills necessary to realize their potential, support development, and contribute to peace and security, according to the aims.

5.1 YOUTH PARTICIPATION IN SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Youths can be regarded as the powerhouse of today's future simply because, demographically, youths contribute to a large fragment of society. In 2015, the United Nations accounted the global youth statistic using the ages of 15-24 years to be 1.2 billion which accounts for 16% of the global population that is, one out of every six people globally (UNDESA, 2015). This figure is projected to increase by 7% come 2030 (UNDESA, ibid). In Africa, the continent has been referred to be one with the fastest-growing youth population globally with 60% of its populace under the age of 25 (Ndondo, 2022, Olubiyi et al., 2024). This figure has been projected to continue growing until 2050 unlike other continents whose youth population figure has witnessed a slow growth (Ndondo, ibid).
Great potential lies with the youth and they have a great ability to fulfil the achievement of a sustainable developed country through their push for sustainability in the political, social, economic, and scientific arenas. Youths drive innovation and change in the world with their fresh perspective which can be used to drive awareness of sustainable development (Murni et al., 2024). Their high figure indicates they have a key role to play in the success and actualization of policies such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), Agenda 21, and Agenda 2063. In population studies, having a youthful population presents a significant opportunity to promote the growth and advancement of the economy and country especially if it is utilised well (Waluyo et al., 2024). This understanding has been affirmed by the United Nations through the key role it keeps playing in empowering and engaging youths.

For instance, in 2009, the General Assembly proclaimed 2010 the International Year of Youth: Dialogue and Mutual Understanding. In 2018, the Secretary-General launched Youth2030, the first ever United Nations system-wide strategy on youth, and in 2020, the Secretary-General under his call to action for human rights has created space for young people to participate in shaping decisions that will affect their future. In September 2022, the General Assembly adopted resolution A/RES/76/306 to strengthen the UN’s engagement with the youth. Notably, the importance of providing youths with these policies and platforms will grant the youths an opportunity to engage and exercise their rights toward sustainable development.

According to the United Nations, youths’ well-being and participation are key drivers of sustainable development in the world. Thus, engaging young people in developmental programs has an impact on their personal development as well as societal development. According to a statement by the Nigerian President, Muhammadu Buhari, youths could propel leaders into taking action toward development (Ebosele, 2015). Jegede et al (2019), in their study, affirmed that youth involvement is the key to achieving sustainable development.

Hence, youth participation and engagement is essential for not just addressing the many challenges youth face but for ensuring the achievement of an effective and sustainable delivery process. By participating in various engagement processes, youths can amplify their needs and concerns. As well as ensuring decisions made consider long-term implications and prioritize the well-being of coming generations which is the fulcrum of sustainable development “meeting the need of the present without
compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own need”. Youths’ participation in social engagement makes them invested in creating a more equitable, prosperous, and environmentally responsible world for themselves and those who will follow.

Youth engagement empowers individuals, fosters social cohesion, and creates a legacy for future generations because society can benefit from their fresh ideas, problem-solving skills, and unique perspectives. This perspective towards the actualization of sustainable development has been recognized by the United Nations, and a body has been created for it through the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA). UNDESA serves as the focal point for youth in the United Nations and provides a platform to help increase youth participation.

5.2 YOUTH EMPOWERMENT FOR ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Economic development for youth in Africa refers to the various initiatives, policies, and programs that aim to promote economic growth and development among young people on the continent. This can include efforts to improve access to education and skills training, provide support for entrepreneurship and innovation, and create job opportunities for young people. Many African countries have a high proportion of young people in their populations, and youth unemployment rates are often higher than those for other age groups (International Labour Organization, 2015; The World Bank, 2018). What this means is that economic development for youth is therefore a critical issue in Africa, as it can help to promote social and economic inclusion, reduce poverty and inequality, and drive sustainable economic growth.

Hence the study aims to look at the critical role of the youths as catalysts for sustainable social and economic drivers of development in selected African states and beyond. The objective of the study is to explore the effective participation of the youth population in social engagement for sustainable development and promote social change, as well as an empowerment tool for economic development. The study is contextualised within the African region due to the high rates of youth unemployment in Africa which evokes the urgent need for youth economic development after all “the future is in the youth”.
The African Development Bank (2020) confirms that the African continent also has the youngest population in the world, with over 60% of its population under the age of 25. Hence, these demographics present a unique opportunity for economic growth and development if they are properly empowered and equipped with the necessary skills, knowledge, and resources. What this simply implies is that youth empowerment is crucial for economic development in Africa. Overall, economic development for youth in Africa is essential for promoting inclusive and sustainable economic growth on the continent, reducing poverty and inequality, and creating a brighter future for the next generation of African youth.

Youth empowerment for economic development refers to efforts aimed at promoting the economic participation and contribution of young people to their communities and economies. Ali and Simbanegavi (2020) and the African Union Commission (2019) confirm that, the term "youth" generally refers to individuals between the ages of 15 and 35, and youth empowerment for economic development encompasses a range of interventions, programs, and policies that seek to promote the economic wellbeing of young people. Therefore empowering young people economically can help to create jobs, boost economic growth, reduce poverty, and promote social inclusion for sustainable economic development.

This can be achieved through various initiatives that provide young people with the skills, training, and support they need to start businesses, access employment opportunities, and become productive members of their communities for economic development on the African continent (The World Bank, 2018; Haregewoin & Dargie, 2017).

5.3 YOUTH ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT INITIATIVES IN AFRICA

In light of this background, there are some examples of economic development initiatives for youth in Africa which also include government-led programs such as the Youth Enterprise Development Fund in Kenya and the Youth Employment Tax Incentive in South Africa. Employment accelerators such as the Harambee Youth Employment Accelerator, and digital skills training programs such as Digital Skills for Africa. Other examples include private sector-led initiatives such as the Tony Elumelu Foundation.
Entrepreneurship Program, which provides funding, training, and mentorship to young entrepreneurs across Africa.

As well as the Mastercard Foundation Scholars Program, which provides scholarships and support for young people to access higher education and build careers (Mastercard Foundation, 2021). These initiatives as elucidated below are designed to provide young people with financial support and access to resources, training, and mentoring to help them start and grow their businesses thereby contributing to economic growth and development in Africa as argued by (Tony Elumelu Foundation, 2021).

- The Tony Elumelu Foundation Entrepreneurship Program is a 10-year, $100 million commitment to identify, train, and empower 10,000 African entrepreneurs. The program provides funding, mentorship, and training to young entrepreneurs across Africa (Tony Elumelu Foundation, 2021);
- Harambee Youth Employment Accelerator is a non-profit organization that connects young people with job opportunities and provides them with the necessary training and support to succeed in the workplace. The organization has helped over 500,000 young people in South Africa, Uganda, and Rwanda (https://www.harambee.co.za/);
- Enjazi Youth Employment Program is a partnership between the World Bank and the Government of Tunisia that aims to create job opportunities for young people in Tunisia (The World Bank, 2018). The program provides training and support to help young people acquire the skills they need to participate in the workforce;
- Digital Skills for Africa is an initiative by Google which aims to train 10 million young Africans in digital skills by 2022 (Mastercard Foundation, 2021). The program provides online training and resources to help young people acquire the skills they need to participate in the digital economy;
- Youth Advocacy for Reform and Democracy (YARD) is a youth-led organization in Zimbabwe that advocates for civic and political engagement among young people. The organization provides training and support to help young people participate in the political process and influence policies that affect their lives (Kabonga, Zvokuomba and Nyagadza, 2021);
- Young African Leaders Initiative (YALI) was the brainchild of Obama’s Administration in a bid to contribute a certain quota to the development of young African leaders, thus affecting the continent and world at large positively. In 2010,
President Obama launched YALI intending to assist young African leaders as they stimulate growth and success, fortify democratic governance, and enrich peace and security across Africa. Through this program, the United States has invested substantial resources to improve leadership skills, drive entrepreneurship, and connect young African leaders and with Americans (Mafuta, 2014).

6 CATALYSTS FOR SUSTAINABLE SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC DRIVERS OF YOUTH DEVELOPMENT

Beyond the aforementioned government-led initiatives and private youth economic initiatives (Oluwasegun and Ige, 2018) argue that there are also some other ways youth empowerment can contribute to economic development in Africa as discussed below.

6.1 ENTREPRENEURSHIP

Youth entrepreneurship is an effective way of creating jobs and stimulating economic growth. By providing young people with the necessary training, mentorship, and resources to start and run their businesses, they can create new opportunities for themselves and others (Ali and Simbanegavi, 2020). That in turn can facilitate economic growth and development through expansion of output in an economy. Through economic multipliers, youth entrepreneurship can create a platform for attracting global investment into the continent which further pushes the economic development frontier.

6.2 EDUCATION AND SKILLS TRAINING

Youth empowerment also involves providing access to quality education and skills training. This can help young people acquire the knowledge and skills they need to participate in the formal economy and contribute to economic growth. For instance, the African Leadership Academy in South Africa provides a two-year program for young people from across the continent, focusing on leadership development, entrepreneurship, and African studies (The World Bank, 2018).
6.3 ACCESS TO FINANCE

Access to finance is a significant challenge for young entrepreneurs in Africa. Providing financial support, such as microcredit and venture capital, can help young entrepreneurs start and grow their businesses. The Tony Elumelu Foundation Entrepreneurship Program provides seed funding, mentorship, and training to young African entrepreneurs (Tony Elumelu Foundation, 2021). The African Development Bank's Youth Entrepreneurship Investment Banks provide loans and other financial services to young entrepreneurs.

6.4 TECHNOLOGY

Technology is transforming the way business is done in Africa. Young people who are equipped with the skills to leverage technology can create innovative solutions and contribute to economic growth in various sectors. To ensure investment in digital infrastructure and skills in Africa, initiatives such as the Digital Opportunity Trust provide training and mentorship in digital skills and entrepreneurship to young people in Africa, with a focus on women and girls (Kabonga, Zvokuomba and Nyagadza, 2021). The African Union's Digital Transformation Strategy also aims to promote digital skills and infrastructure across the African continent (African Union Commission, 2019).

6.5 STRENGTHENING GOVERNANCE AND INSTITUTIONS

Haregewoin and Dargie (2017) argue that improving governance and strengthening institutions can promote transparency, accountability, and the rule of law. This can create an enabling environment for businesses to operate, promote foreign investment, and enhance economic growth. In this case, the African Union's Agenda 2063 promotes good governance and democratic institutions, with a focus on youth empowerment and development (African Union Commission, 2019).
6.6 INVESTMENT IN DIGITAL INFRASTRUCTURE AND SKILLS

The digital economy is rapidly growing in Africa, and young people can benefit from access to digital infrastructure and skills. This includes improving access to high-speed internet, promoting digital literacy, and supporting the development of digital startups (AFDB, 2016; AFDB, 2020).

6.7 ACCESS TO MARKETS AND VALUE CHAINS

Young people in Africa can benefit from access to markets and value chains. This includes connecting young entrepreneurs with buyers, suppliers, and investors, and promoting trade and investment within the region. The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) promotes intra-African trade and investment, providing opportunities for young entrepreneurs to access new markets and value chains (AFDB, 2020; Farashah, 2015). The African Development Bank's Jobs for Youth in Africa initiative supports the development of value chains and markets in key sectors, including agriculture and manufacturing.

6.8 PROMOTING SOCIAL INCLUSION AND GENDER EQUALITY

Addressing social inequalities and promoting gender equality can help ensure that all young people have equal opportunities to participate in the economy and contribute to sustainable development (Barnard, 2019). This includes addressing discrimination, promoting social protection programs, and supporting initiatives that empower women and girls. In this regard, the African Youth Charter promotes the rights and inclusion of young people in Africa, with a focus on marginalized groups through training, mentorship, and access to finance (African Union Commission, 2019).

These ways provide a clear indication that youth empowerment is essential for economic development in Africa and any other part of the global community in essence. Thus, by providing young people with the necessary resources, skills, and knowledge, they can create new opportunities for themselves and contribute to economic growth in their communities and countries.
7 CHALLENGES THAT CAN HINDER YOUTH EMPOWERMENT FOR ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT IN AFRICA

Despite the existence of these catalysts that enable the promotion of youth empowerment for economic development in Africa, several challenges can hinder these catalysts thereby affecting the effectiveness and efficiency of these catalysts (African Union Commission, 2019). What this implies is that the efficacy of all the other initiatives meant to promote youth empowerment will not operate at its full maximum. Thus, there is a need to ensure that these challenges are diminished as much as possible for the African youth. Some of these challenges include limited access to education and training evident in how many young people in Africa lack access to quality education and training, which can limit their ability to acquire the skills and knowledge needed to succeed in the workforce or start their businesses (African Development Bank, 2016).

Another major challenge is the high levels of youth unemployment which are generally arguably often higher than those for other age groups across Africa. This can be attributed to a lack of job opportunities, limited access to capital, and inadequate training and support for entrepreneurship. Another stumbling block can be attributed to limited access to finance which is a critical challenge for young people in Africa who want to start their businesses (African Union Commission, 2019). However, many financial institutions are reluctant to lend to young people, who are seen as high-risk borrowers.

Barnard (2019) highlights how there is also a lack of supportive policies and regulatory frameworks citing governance issues with many African countries lacking supportive policies and regulatory frameworks that can facilitate youth empowerment and entrepreneurship. This can include policies that restrict the growth of small and medium-sized enterprises, as well as those that do not provide incentives for businesses to hire young people. We can also not overlook how societal and cultural norms can pose challenges to African youth empowerment. This can include gender-based discrimination and stereotypes, as well as the stigma associated with starting a business or pursuing non-traditional careers (Farashah, 2015).

Thus, all these challenges have very high chances of inhibiting youth economic development and empowerment in Africa if not curtailed sooner. Hence addressing these challenges is essential for promoting youth empowerment and economic development in
Africa and more efforts should be put in place to improve access to resources to create job opportunities for the youth to overcome these challenges and promote inclusive and sustainable economic growth on the continent.

8 DISCUSSION OF RESEARCH FINDINGS

One cannot excuse the fact that Africa is confronted by a myriad of challenges which could stall or slow down the pace of her advancement towards the realisation of sustainable social and economic development through the youths. However, despite the efforts by African states to ensure the attainment of economic development on the continent, the impacts have been minimal as seen in the literature. Also, the issue of volatile governments on the continent has made youths more prone to violence, rather than being productive. The problem of access to quality education and training seems to have incapacitated would-be entrepreneurs from possessing the requisite skills needed to transform and make this agenda a reality (Vale et al., 2022; Akinola 2023).

The high level of illiteracy coupled with the slow pace of youths in embracing technology, to arrive at a higher pedestal when compared to other youths especially in the developed world is a minus for Africa. This trend needs to be worked on to maximize the gains of youth dividends in Africa. The hesitant nature of African financial institutions in giving out grants or loans to the youths is highly discouraging. No wonder youths have embraced drug peddling and cybercrime to express their frustration against the state and these financial houses (Maluleke 2023; Severino 2023).

The high rate of unemployment has further exacerbated the youth bulge hypothesis in Africa. The large population of youth who are willing and able to work but have been excluded from job opportunities will certainly be veritable tools in the hands of politicians, who will use them to perpetrate all forms of violence since they have no means of livelihood. Worse still, when these youths have been dumped by their principals who are politicians, they resort to violent crimes like kidnapping and hostage-taking (Ungor 2022; Ikeke 2023). Some even revolt to militancy by carrying arms against their governments; causing distortion in the political process and in some cases, snowballing into civil wars in Africa (Arogbofa, 2022).

In some African countries, the youths have become foot soldiers of Islamic fundamentalism, extremism and terrorism; committing heinous crimes against humanity.
and the states. In some instances, some have carried this illicit trade across borders, thus becoming trans-border terrorists or criminals as the case may be (Cocodia, 2022; Ismail et al. 2022). Some states are also culpable in that they have not provided supportive policies and regulatory frameworks that can facilitate youth empowerment and entrepreneurship (Ofori-Sasu et al., 2023). Issues of corruption are also endemic in Africa because it has impeded the pace of advancing youth empowerment programmes.

There are instances where funds allocated for such programmes end up in individual pockets. A critical subject matter is also that of accountability. Many executors of projects that are youth-friendly in Africa, hardly account for the money budgeted for such ventures. The role of civil society comes to the fore, in that civil society groups often hold accountable those who are at the helm of affairs in actualizing youth-centred programmes.

Gender bias in the form of existing traditional norms, customs and values seems to be a hindrance to the fulfilment of this goal apparently, some occupations have been assigned male roles due to the primordial patriarchal nature of the African setting. We have seen some male-dominated occupations being done well by females in these contemporary times. Misogyny seems to be the order of the day in Africa, no wonder the a call for gender mainstreaming and balancing in many African states.

8.1 THE CRITICAL ROLE OF YOUTH IN GLOBAL DEVELOPMENT

The average age of the population in the globe today is under 25. Future challenges include effectively addressing these youths' specific needs. Over one-sixth of the world's population is made up of youth, or people between the ages of 15 and 24, but they are rarely acknowledged as a distinct group despite the significant influence they will have on the future. More than any other group, today's youth will have an impact on how people in both wealthy and developing nations live in the twenty-first century. Sadly, hundreds of millions of children, especially young women, lack access to school, job training, career possibilities, and health services, severely limiting their prospects for the future from a young age (Enaifoghe, Dlelana, Durokifa & Dlamini, 2021).

Youth may retaliate by engaging in risky or harmful behaviour against themselves or society as a result. Although youth are frequently seen as contributing to societal issues, they are valuable resources for the political, social, and economic health of their
communities. Protecting adolescent rights and giving them the resources they require to contribute to the health and well-being of society is essential to addressing major global dangers, such as the spread of HIV/AIDS, rising levels of poverty, and the instability of governments in emerging nations.

8.2 THEME 1: ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITIES

The topic of work is complicated for young people and teenagers between the ages of 10 and 14 are typically protected by a separate set of laws and international agreements than those between the ages of 15 and 24, who can typically work legally. The reasons, methods, and timing of a young person's entry into the workforce can determine their position and employment chances in the future (Enaifoghe, Aina & Durokifa, 2021). Between the ages of 5 and 14, around 250 million younger adolescents and kids labour in some form for compensation, and roughly 120 million do so full-time (Weiss, Whelan & Gupta, 1996). School and employment are not always incompatible, but young children who drop out of school to start working are significantly more likely to stay in poverty and experience health problems.

For young people, employment may be economically necessary, contribute to their independence and self-worth, and ensure the future financial security of their families. The capacity of girls and young women to earn money may affect their capacity to make decisions about marriage and procreation. Unmarried ladies have become the main labour force for high-tech and export-driven sectors in various nations. However, employment may be a dead end if young people only work in the riskiest, lowest-paying, and least desired jobs (Enaifoghe & Zenzile, 2023). Additionally, the expanding commerce and technology industries in the modern global economy demand people with a higher degree of expertise.

Age-inappropriate and dead-end jobs are a concern, but unregulated, insecure work in the informal economy, such as street hawking, can be dangerous. The informal sector provides limited opportunities for today's youngsters to have a healthy and bright future in the absence of suitable support services and sensible economic growth plans. Youth unemployment is a significant concern (Enaifoghe & Zenzile, 2023). In poor countries, more than half of those between the ages of 15 and 24 are not in school and are not employed, which has several potentially harmful effects.
8.3 THEME 2: YOUTH UNEMPLOYMENT AND ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITIES

Numerous reasons, such as a shortage of skilled labour, governmental regulations, and problems with globalization, contribute to unemployment. The issue of economic opportunity is that stable societies depend on giving young people the chance to engage in meaningful employment as tabulated below.

Table 1
Youth Policy Agenda

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Recommendation for policymakers on youth participation and development</th>
<th>Details</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>➢ Promote initiatives and the enforcement of laws that safeguard children against exploitation and violations of their human rights, such as labour laws, rules governing the legal age of marriage, laws governing inheritance, and laws that stop human trafficking.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>➢ Create legislation and national policies that support youth growth, paying particular attention to youth employment.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>➢ Create financial opportunities, credit, and savings programs for youth-run businesses.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>➢ Increase the number of training initiatives that provide young people with marketable occupational skills to improve their employment prospects.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>➢ Encourage initiatives and regulations that deal with the causes of youth unemployment.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>➢ Ensure equal opportunity for young men and women by eliminating sexism.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: the authors (Enaifoghe et al., 2024)

8.4 THEME 3: EDUCATION AND TRAINING

A significant number of school-age youngsters worldwide do not attend school. Less than one-third of secondary-age kids attend school in the least developed nations. Millions of kids and teenagers either attend really bad schools or drop out early. Many families cannot afford the costs of sending their children to school because they must work at home, they reside in rural areas without access to schools, or all three (International Center for Research on Women [ICRW], 2001). Due to the belief that wives and mothers can perform the duties that determine their social status in many societies without needing an education, families frequently discourage females from attending school. Without education, the vast majority of these kids would develop into poor, unwelcome adults who are prone to a range of social and medical issues (Population Council and the International Center for Research on Women [ICRW], 2000).

Youth must therefore receive a high-quality education if they are to develop the skills necessary to land well-paying professions, engage in politics, and make wise life decisions. According to studies, there is a direct link between basic education and increased earning potential, the expansion of democracy, and environmental
conservation, especially for girls (Jacobs, Asokan & Venkatesh, 2000). Decades of studies have also demonstrated the basic relationship between girls' and women's education, their families' financial and physical well-being, and both.

8.4.1 Education and Training

Table 2

The most crucial investment a country can make in its youth, especially for females, is access to high-quality primary and secondary education as well as appropriate training

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Recommendation for Policymakers of Youth Education and Training</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Promote initiatives that ensure that every girl and boy has access to basic education, including those that address the reasons why young children don't attend school.</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Make improvements to the existing educational systems in developing nations, such as lowering student-teacher ratios, raising salaries and training for teachers, and expanding access to and usage of ICT.</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employ women instructors as role models for girls and review the curriculum to make sure it promotes gender equality rather than reinforcing sex stereotypes.</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase access to secondary education, especially for girls, and provide scholarships for underprivileged kids, especially girls.</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase vocational education, especially instruction for female students in non-traditional trades.</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase non-formal educational options for young people so that they can gain better problem-solving, decision-making, and self-esteem and a range of other life skills.</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

8.5 THEME 4: YOUTH AS PARTNERSHIP

One of the difficulties in taking part in socioeconomic growth is the lack of trust that young people have in the current political, economic, and social systems. They are tired of the persistent threat to their physical safety posed by surveillance and militarized policing practices against activists and people of colour (United Nations Population Fund [UNFPA], 2001). They are also tired of ongoing worries about corruption and stale political leadership. More young people believe in artificial intelligence systems than they do in human leaders. Governments might need to help young people get over challenges including inequality, a lack of education, and shoddy infrastructure.

It is encouraged to treat young men and women as partners to thrive in environments where families, communities, and adults cherish them by upholding their rights and appreciating their contributions. Youth development is aided and effectiveness is increased when young people are involved in the creation and administration of policies, programs, and other decisions that influence their lives. Where initiatives created by adults for youth have failed, partnerships between adults and youth can succeed. For
economic, political, and social stability both now and in the future, it is crucial to acknowledge the valuable resource that our youth represent and the connection between their growth and our future.

**9 CONCLUSION**

Conclusively, the paper analyses the decisive role occupied by youths and the centrality of youths to the success and sustainability of socioeconomic development in Africa. The paper contends that unless impediments to the actualisation are expunged, our continent will still take its back seat in this era of unprecedented development. Unemployment has caused Africa a lot of woes as youths embrace violence rather than embarking on projects that would benefit the continent. Many governments are also not helping matters as they have not provided the impetus necessary for the advancement of the youths in their respective countries. However, the efforts of some states and private individuals who have taken the lead to empower youths should be commended. Notwithstanding the rough terrain, Africa can do more in this regard.

**10 RECOMMENDATION**

Given the findings discussed above and the conclusions reached, the study recommends that the African government prioritise young people to be part of decision-making as they are the future of the continent. Apart from the involvement of young people in decision-making, African governments, financial institutions and the private sector at large should create conducive environments for African youth in business to thrive. The failure rate of small businesses in Africa is alarming given the potential that small businesses have on economic development that has been elusive for Africa.

Programmes like the Tony Elumelu Foundation, the Young African Leaders Initiative and many other programmes that seek to create capacity for young entrepreneurs in Africa must be expanded in their capacity to reach a wider net of young people who are interested in becoming entrepreneurs. Further, the problem of youth unemployment deserves to be treated as a priority by all African governments as it is at very unsustainable rates. As a result of such high levels of youth unemployment, young people have been used as instruments by politicians to commit political violence and other
peace-destabilizing activities which have further put Africa far from the economic development frontier.

Lastly, education needs to be given priority by African governments. The literacy rates in the continent have been a deterrent factor to economic development and young people are the most affected and that limits their contribution to economic development despite Africa being the youngest continent in the globe. If some or all of the mentioned recommendations are addressed by African governments, young people can have an increased role towards the socio-economic development of the continent.
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