# Civil Society input to the Africa Commission
## on Effective Development Cooperation with Africa

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# African Youth
## - caught between Traditional Arrogance and Political Indifference

Several Sub-Saharan African countries have a relatively positive outlook on issues of democracy, public reforms and quest for development by political actors. Notwithstanding the positive outlook, many African countries are challenged with massive youth unemployment and hopelessness attributed partly to the indifference of political actors towards designing youth development policies and partly due to outmoded cultural practices by traditional leaders on roles of community members.

## Youth is neglected

Contrary to Western view of youth as an important resource that calls for investments into their future through education, inclusion in decision-making and formulating policies that seek to prepare the youth as future leaders and duty-bearers, African countries have either not understood the relevance of the youth as an important resource or the political and traditional leaders have neglected their roles and responsibility towards investing on and giving youth meaningful lives.

In most African countries the majority of the population is made up of young people thereby making them both an opportunity in terms of labour source for production, but importantly also a challenge for policy makers to be able to meet the resource needs in giving youth hopeful lives. This write-up seeks to present the challenges of youth from a Northern Ghana perspective, but the arguments and issues presented cuts across the entire country and across the African continent.

## Excluded from decision making

The youth of the region are faced with massive unemployment and above all marginalised from decision making processes both in their communities and national development issues. Issues affecting young people are attempted solved by political authorities and older generations without truly consulting young people for their inputs to address youth problems.

Youth challenges and exclusiveness from decision-making processes can be explained from political and traditional standpoints; the first is the general lackadaisical national and local political attitudes towards youth development policies- job creation, educational and recreational provisions for the youth.

The other explanation being the rather vertical power structures that characterise rural and traditional power relations and at the same time the perception of youth as ignorant, problematic and useless. All these lead to undermining the rights to participation by youth in decision-making processes even on issue that young people could solely deal with. They are virtually left with no room to learn by doing.

## Images and occupation

At community levels due to traditional hierarchical power structure based on age, the youth is under privileged and exempted from important community development issues managed by older men. Young people are often seen as inexperienced, arrogant, and lazy. Besides, educational opportunities in the rural areas are very limited in numbers and understaffed thereby leaving rural communities with highest dropout rates and subsequently making school leavers uncompetitive during competition for fewer jobs available for employment.

**Table 1**. Youth (15-24 yrs) unemployment rates (%) in selected African countries, both sexes, 1990-2004.

|  | Year | Rate |
|---|---|---|
| Sub-Saharan Africa |  |  |
| Botswana | 2001 | 39.7 |
| Ethiopia | 2004 | 35,0 |
| Ghana | 2000 | 15.9 |
| Lesotho | 1997 | 47.4 |
| Mauritius | 2004 | 24.9 |
| Namibia | 2001 | 44.8 |
| South Africa | 2003 | 60.1 |
| St. Helena | 1998 | 23.8 |
| Swaziland | 1997 | 55.2 |
| Zambia | 1990 | 20.9 |
| Zimbabwe | 1999 | 14,0 |
| North Africa |  |  |
| Algeria | 2004 | 43.4 |
| Egypt | 2002 | 27.1 |
| Morocco | 2003 | 17,0 |

**Source**: ILO (2006) Global employment trends for youth, Geneva.

Furthermore, farming, which used to be the major traditional occupation, has become the "losers'" job as it has become almost impossible for farmers to buy farm inputs to improve upon the yields due to the withdrawal

of state subsidies on these inputs. Farmers who might be lucky to make good harvest compete with cheap imported products from subsidised markets of the West. This has placed farming as the last alternative for the youth as job a possibility.

Figure 1. Youth employment - or under-employment - in Ghana.



## Policy responses inadequate

Moreover, policy responses to youth problems have been highly inadequate. The government of Ghana, for instance, formulated and implemented a national Youth Employment Scheme to employ youth in the service industry – education and health – in 2006. This policy gave lots of hopes to young people (especially secondary school leavers), but the whole idea has become a "white elephant" taking cognisance of the fact that the young people who hitherto depended on their parents and relatives for livelihoods suddenly became "employed" under the government scheme. The problem is that many of them worked for over six months or more before they got their first salaries and even until now the scanty salaries are not stable.

The paradox of this Youth Employment Scheme is that the salary is not sufficient to make them fend for their needs (education, health etc) but it does prevent them from the support they otherwise received from family and relatives if they were unemployed.

## Rural-urban migration

The biggest group that has become a worry for many policy makers, parents and relatives is the new breed of young unemployed girls and boys who embark on rural-urban migration to the large towns as well as the struggle by young people to seek greener pastures in the West with the hope of getting jobs to better their lives. The migrants, often girls (sometimes school girls as young as 12) are engaged into all kinds of menial jobs and prostitutions and often return to their communities with pregnancies and/or babies. The prostitution engaged in by these unsuspecting girls complicates the African/global fight against HIV/AIDS. In fact urgent political action with genuine political interest needs to be taken to address this socio-economic problem to protect and return hope to these young people.

## Negative spirals of hopelessness

At national level, education which is the surest way to build a good life is left with numerous challenges. The Ghanaian educational system is not responsive to national and local challenges and has been commodified to an extent that education (high school and tertiary in particular) has become a privilege and not a right to young people. Innovation and entrepreneurship that would otherwise have allowed young people to start their own firms either lack the skills to do so or even the capital to realise such ambitions.

These and many more have contributed to why illiterate parents wonder why they are constantly advised to educate their children when those already educated are without jobs to reciprocate their parents support in their acquisition of education. The educational irresponsiveness and corporal punishments at Ghanaian schools have made many parents and young people loose motivation to invest in their wards' education by parents and to stay in school by students, thereby reinforcing the negative spiral that characterise the youth with hopelessness, marginalisation, idleness and in worse cases criminality.

## Policy recommendations

- A **cultural revolution** is needed in Africa to change youth images, influence and institutions

- Youth should be included and consulted in **decision-making** processes

- Youth **employment** schemes should be based on fair remuneration and effective administration

- **Educational systems** in Africa should build on respect and involvement, not on disrespect and corporal punishment.

- Educational systems in Africa should spur **innovation and entrepreneurship** amongst youth

- Urgent action is needed to curb the detrimental effects of **migration** by youth