

Youth Civic Participation and Governance: Effectiveness of the Young African Leadership Initiative (YALI) Civic Engagement for Increased Youth Advocacy and Policymaking Influence in West Africa

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Abstract: *Healthy democracies depend on young people participating in governance and policymaking processes, yet institutional hurdles frequently prevent young people from doing so. This paper uses a qualitative case study of the Young African Leadership Initiative (YALI) Civic Leadership track in West Africa to examine the effects of civic education and activities on strengthening democracy and amplifying youth voices. This paper examines the effectiveness of the YALI initiatives from the premise that when young people are equipped with relevant civic knowledge it can influence advocacy and decision-making purposes. It asks the question, - To what extent does Civic Engagement through the Young African Leadership Initiative Civic Leadership Management Track change the levels of its civic engagement, the civic skills of its participants, and their inspiration to actively take part in governance? To do this adequately, Ten (10) YALI alumni were interviewed in semi-structured interviews to determine how the program affected their civic engagement, skill set, and motivation to participate in governance processes. Findings show that young people have a deep mistrust of the political system. The young t people also have a high level of self-efficacy regarding their ability to advance the country if given more influence. Many important obstacles have been noted, such as youth groups' poor coordination, political parties' gatekeeping, youth priorities not being considered because of age hierarchies, and a lack of chances for civic engagement. YALI's civic curriculum, however, improved the participants' understanding of governance, their capacity for advocacy, and their drive for leadership. As such, the paper concludes that when young people are civically knowledgeable and given opportunities, they can influence positive advocacy and decision-making processes in Governance. Study beddings of this will be crucial in shaping policies that can unleash young people's democratic potential as active citizens and game-changing leaders. Hence, the policy implications of this paper are relevant to key national and international youth and democratic governance stakeholders in Africa.*

Keywords: Youth, Civic Participation, Governance, Civic Engagement, Advocacy, Policy Making, Decision-Making Process

1.1 Introduction

Youth involvement in political and civic life is important for good governance and healthy democracies (Ballard, 2014). This, however, has been challenged by many researchers, who have established that much of young people face challenges in their civic participation throughout the world, which include inadequate citizenship education, exclusion from political involvements, and lack of policies that are centered on young people (UNDP, 2014).

Even though it is one of the largest sectors of the population in most countries, youth are posed with systemic hurdles to positive involvement and participation in leadership roles and decision-making processes. The exclusion of young people from policymaking and decision-making just becomes a mockery of democratic governance and stops the perspectives of the youths from influencing policies that will affect their well-being (McLeod et al., 2015). This is apparent from the findings of the research conducted by UNDP on the participation of youth in governance and leadership across 7 African nations. Less than 2% of the youth indicated that they are consulted on a sometimes basis about the development and implementation of policies in both settings, local, and national. This disengagement emanates from a lack of civic education and an exclusionary political system (UNDP, 2020). When there are no means of voicing concerns and advocating their priorities, including each other in shaping government policy, the youth feel discriminated against and marginalized, leading to frustration.

Most of these challenges cut across developing countries. This study builds on work from across sub-Saharan Africa that finds relatively low levels of youth participation in community decision-making processes and leadership (Resnick and Casale, 2014; Sommer et al., 2013). For example, one study in Ghana revealed that only 38% of its youth participated in any political or civic group (USAID, 2018).

This paper sets out theout that in Sierra Leone, the youths who are below the age of 35 years constitute a third of the country's population. They represent great prospects for promotion in development (Statistics Sierra Leone, 2017). The negative effects of the civil war and inactive civic institutions have had a hindrance to young people participating actively in public life. Their work further

showed difficulties such as poverty, bad governance, lack of economic opportunities, regional, and ethnic tensions, and poor access to education; however, this has sidelined most young people from political and civic life (Maconachie & Hilson 2016; Wvrod 2008). Most of the youth exhibit low civic understanding since they cannot comfortably answer some government basic questions (Mannan, 2019). This situation threatens lasting peace and democracy.

This, on the other hand, further exposes the disenfranchising nature of nation-building and the jeopardy it carries to the stability of a country, as young people, more often than not, see their leadership as illegitimate and detached Mo Ibrahim noted, "The problems facing Africa now cannot be addressed without its youth" (Mo Ibrahim Foundation, 2019). Civic Engagement, therefore, represents a powerful tool that can be actualized in the participation of the young by involving their voice in decision-making processes and actualizing their potential to be navigators of national development. Civic Engagement modernly forms the development of analyzing, critical thinking, building consensus, articulating interests, and inspiring decision-making (USAID, 2021). In so doing, this can develop a new generation of informed leaders with youth with civic capacities to give the voices of the young in constructing African democracies.

1.2 Purpose of the Study

The current study has been designed to investigate the impacts of civic education and civic engagement initiatives on the amplification of the youths' voices in governance and policymaking processes and the enhancement of capacities in youth advocacy. Although civic education aims at having an informed citizen, some research has assessed the purpose, and this study has indeed verified the importance of empowering youth to voice, articulate issues, influence leadership, and change national and local policies.

This study will help address the vacuum. Equally, the research will take an in-depth view of the capacity-building training on civic education and engagement that has been carried out in the last five years for young civic leaders from West Africa at the Young African Leadership Initiative Regional Leadership Centre, Accra. The research design of the mixed method will include focus group discussions, interviews, and surveys to ensure that the initiative will develop knowledge, motivation, and skills in the young people that will be applied in the uptake of the advocacy initiatives. It will also bring out a change in the way these youths engage with government officials, participate in dialogues, and transform policies after they have completed their YALI Training. Specific outcomes will include the best activities of civic engagement that inspire young people's advocacy and suggest some recommendations to YALI and the policymakers in developing initiatives for the empowerment of new generations of transformed young leaders (McMurray, 2019). These further help support to actualization of democratic principles in West Africa and further work for more transparency, participatory, and responsive governance in Africa.

2.0 Empirical Literature

2.1 Civic Engagement for Governance and Advocacy Skills

However, Civic Engagement remains a hopeful approach to enhance youths' involvement in policy-making. The investigation assesses the impact of such programs to enhance political understanding, efficacy, and participatory intentions of youth (Tenn, 2007; Youniss et al., 2002). Pedagogical studies have brought out the best practices for developing governance capacities, such as public speaking, the art of influencing leadership, and consensus-building (Winthrop & Matsui, 2013).

However, some empiric assessments predominantly focus on civic engagement translating into the voice and achieving youth advocacy in transforming local or national policies. Gaps in Research on Youth Policy Voice

Civic Engagement is an intellectual training that equips the youth to be citizens who can govern and possess the respective knowledge, skills, and values required (Winthrop & Matsui, 2013). Such approaches are liable to full scientific experimentation and research, which has proven that all types and forms of civic education and learning contribute to the formation of positive attitudes and behavior related to activism, engagement, and political process even in the framework of transitional democracies (Finkel & Ernst, 2005). Well-administrated, developed, and transforming civic education can enable young people to raise their voices and influence the policy-making processes that affect their individual and collective, as well as the communities they live in.

While the current academic research does provide a few useful contextual insights into the subject matter, rigorous evaluations concerning the efficacy and effectiveness of civic engagement in changing young people and their impact on policies are lacking. This proves that there is a dire need for research to assess the extent to which civic engagement initiatives can develop advocacy

skills, agencies in governance processes, and pathways for the youth to express their priorities that influence decision-making and policy outcomes.

To fill this education gap would be to strengthen worldwide public participation and democratic governance.

Civic engagement programs are well known for their ability to improve young people's motivation, knowledge, and abilities for taking an active role in lobbying and governance processes. The effects of these programs on young people's development of advocacy skills and governing capacity have been the subject of numerous empirical research.

In one noteworthy study, Beaumont (2010) looked at how a service-learning program affected college students' capacity for advocacy and civic involvement. As a result of participating in service-learning activities, participants' capacity to clearly state policy issues, interact with decision-makers in an effective manner, and galvanize community support for social change projects was shown to have significantly improved. The research emphasized the significance of hands-on learning experiences in cultivating pragmatic advocacy abilities.

In a similar vein, Lay (2012) looked into the long-term impacts of a youth civic engagement program on participants' participation in the political and legislative processes. Comparing program participants to a control group, the study revealed that program participants were more likely to take part in advocacy campaigns, attend public meetings, and communicate with political officials. The research emphasized how civic engagement initiatives might foster young advocacy and long-term civic engagement.

Kahne and Sporte (2008) carried out an extensive assessment of the effects that excellent civic education programs have on students' dedication to civic engagement. Their research revealed that students who participated in intense civic learning programs showed greater civic knowledge, improved communication skills, and a greater desire to take part in community issue advocacy. The research emphasized the significance of including experiential and interactive learning elements into civic education programs.

Torney-Purta et al. (2001) investigated the connection between civic education and youth participation in government processes in 28 different nations using a cross-national study. The findings showed that young people's inclination to engage in political party membership, vote, and advocacy actions is positively correlated with the caliber of civic education. The research underscored the importance of civic education in cultivating civic engagement and advocating for democratic principles among young people.

Although these empirical studies offer strong evidence of the potential advantages of civic engagement programs for strengthening advocacy and governance abilities, it is crucial to remember that many contextual circumstances might affect how effective these programs are. Dudley and Gitelson (2002), for example, emphasize how crucial it is to customize civic education programs to the unique cultural and sociopolitical circumstances of the community and to remove any structural obstacles that can prevent young people from participating in governance processes.

The majority of the empirical research emphasizes how important civic engagement initiatives are in providing youth with the information, abilities, and drive needed for successful advocacy and engaged involvement in political processes. Through the promotion of critical thinking, communication skills, and a feeling of civic duty, these initiatives can equip young people to effect positive change and aid in the growth of democratic and inclusive communities.

2.2 Research on Youth Exclusion from Policymaking

However, young people of the ages below 35 years form one of the largest segments of the world's population and have been documented through studies to show their progressive exclusion from political participation, decision-making, and policy formulation processes. Studies, qualitative and quantitative, have demonstrated that the levels of involvement and participation of youth in consultative processes conducted by government officials and local, let alone national, decision-making organizations or bodies have been very low (Ballington, 2008; UNDP, 2014). The qualitative studies from African countries stated challenges such as ageism; issues related to social norms discriminating against the perspective of the youth; and lack of well-coordinated youth bodies and independent bodies to help in facilitating young people's input on policies (CARE International, 2015; Restless Development, 2018). These setbacks overlook young people's priorities and insight into their detrimental contributions to policy outcomes.

Numerous empirical studies have demonstrated the ongoing exclusion of young people from these domains, despite the necessity of youth engagement in governance and policymaking processes being acknowledged. Not only does this marginalization erode

the fundamental tenets of inclusive and representative democracy, but it also denies policymakers important viewpoints and insights from a sizable portion of the populace.

Alarming high rates of young exclusion from policymaking were found in a thorough study conducted by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 2014) across seven African nations. Less than 2% of the young surveyed said they were even sometimes consulted about the creation and execution of local or national policy, according to the survey's findings. A number of reasons were given for this exclusion, such as a lack of civic education, exclusive political structures, and cultural norms that undervalued the opinions of young people.

Another study by Restless Development (2018) examined the difficulties young people encounter in influencing national policymaking processes. Ageism, a lack of organized young entities to promote involvement, and restricted access to decision-making places were among the many impediments that the research discovered. Due to these barriers, youth voices and priorities were effectively muffled, resulting in policies that did not take their concerns and goals into account.

In order to learn about young people's experiences with policymaking processes, CARE International (2015) conducted focus groups and in-depth interviews with participants from a variety of nationalities. The results showed a widespread sense of disempowerment and annoyance among young people, who believed that because of cultural norms that valued the views of elders and established power structures, their viewpoints were frequently disregarded or overlooked.

Moreover, Resnick and Casale's (2014) study on the voting habits of different generations in sub-Saharan Africa discovered that younger generations were less likely than older generations to cast ballots in elections. The authors explained this trend, in part, by attributing it to the underrepresentation of youth interests in policy discussions and the seeming gap between youth concerns and political processes.

The empirical data makes it abundantly evident that young exclusion from governance is a pervasive and ongoing issue in a variety of settings. Young people's unique perspectives and insightful opinions are lost on policymakers as a result of this exclusion, which also challenges the fundamentals of democratic participation. It will take coordinated efforts to remove systemic obstacles, advance civic education, and establish inclusive spaces for young people to participate in political processes in order to address this issue.

2.3 Theoretical Foundations of Youth Political Development

The theories of youth political socialization have stated instances of the evolution in youth civic engagement and perspectives. For instance, the socialization theory points out the impact of certain factors such as schools, community groups, family, peer groups, social organizations, and media on transforming the civic identities of young people (Langton & Jennings, 1968). From the life cycle theory, growing up age experiences, such as marriage, employment, and education, that set off social and political involvement and participation, were taken as youth transformed into adulthood (Flanagan & Levine, 2010). Generational theory seems to focus on the changing historical events and socio-political backgrounds that mold and modify the worldwide perception and value of youth generations (Braungart & Brangurat, 1986). It explains that these theoretical bases of explanation give reasons that affect adversely or positively the citizenship and political activation process among the youth.

2.3.1 Theoretical Framework of analysis.

2.3.1.1 Socialization Theory

According to Langton and Jennings (1968), the socialization theory highlights how schools, peer groups, families, community groups, social organizations, and the media can influence young people's civic identities. This theory holds that a variety of socializing agents, including family units, peer networks, educational institutions, and media outlets, are important in forming young people's civic attitudes, values, and behaviors.

The socialization theory is pertinent to my research because it offers a framework for comprehending how the Young African Leadership Initiative (YALI) Civic Leadership track's civic education and engagement activities might influence participants' civic identities, attitudes, and actions. By exposing participants to a curriculum designed to enhance their knowledge, abilities, and drive for civic involvement and leadership, the YALI program acts as a socialization tool.

Critics of Socialization Theory: According to Quintellier (2015), socialization theory has been criticized for potentially oversimplifying the intricate process of identity construction and ignoring the agency and individual differences among young people. Critics contend that because people actively analyze and balance the influences they get from different socialization agents, socialization is a two-way process.

2.3.1.2 Life Cycle Theory

According to the life cycle hypothesis, young people get more involved in society and politics as they move through various life phases and experiences, such as marriage, work, and school (Flanagan & Levine, 2010). According to this hypothesis, certain life events and milestones that occur as a person transitions from adolescence to adulthood like getting married, finding a job, or going back to school serve as triggers that increase young people's civic and political engagement.

The YALI program targets young people at a moment where they may be moving into adulthood and experiencing key life events that could influence their civic engagement. For this reason, the life cycle theory is pertinent to my research. The program's objective is to give participants the information, abilities, and drive to participate more actively in governance and policymaking processes, which is consistent with the expectations of the life cycle theory.

Critics of Life Cycle Theory: According to Quintinier (2015), one critique of the life cycle theory is that it makes the assumption that there is a universal pattern of life events and transitions, which may not take into account the varied experiences and circumstances that young people from various cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds face. Critics contend that the theory might fail to take into account the impact of structural elements on people's chances for civic involvement, such as gender, race, and socioeconomic status.

3.0 Research Methodology

To adequately address the research question and achieve the objective of the research, this study adopts a qualitative research approach, organized around a critical review of literature and desk-based inquiry. Primary data was collected through the use of semi-structured interviews with past participants of the Young African Leadership Initiative (YALI) Program held in Accra, Ghana. The primary data source for this study was 60-90 semi-structured interviews with the alumni, who happened to be the participants. Further questions sought to get information from them about the impacts on YALI's civic engagement, leadership skills gained, knowledge of governance involvement, and some challenges faced by young people. Interviews were conducted in English and were recorded. Interview participants were selected through purposive sampling techniques

Secondary data was obtained from existing scholarship in books, peer reviewed journal articles, YALI annual report of activities and internet reports

Data was analysed thematically and through word verbatim. Thematic analysis represents the thematic elements that are in line with research questions from participants' responses. The drawing out of thematic elements in line with the research questions from participants' responses was carried out using open coding and constant comparison in inductive thematic analysis (Thomas, 2006). These themes from the data were reorganized by the use of NVivo software. Word Verbatim involved the use of direct quotes from interviews. The findings brought to light the strengths and weaknesses of YALI in developing youth policy engagement.

3 Results

3.1 Youth Perceptions of Governance

The interviews brought out a frustrated and bitter distrust among young people toward their political leaders. This made them see that corruption was a disease and lifestyle within the private institutions and political parties, hence lowering the confidence of the young people to take up leadership roles.

For example, one of the interviewees noted, "bribery is in the increment; if you need simple government services like a permit or a license, it is of the notion that government officials are out there to exploit their citizens, not to serve them." (YALI graduate #3). Another stated, "shady deals and embezzlement of funds" (YALI graduate #8) as instilling negative perceptions. In the midst of all, the youth have continued to demonstrate high interest in their personal and collective political ambition concerning their potential to be involved and contribute to nation-building through active engagement in governance.

As said by one of the interviewees, "We the youth have the power, ambition, and knowledge to address many problems if allowed to serve" (YALI graduate #5). Another one indicated the preparedness to "take the mantle and discuss the new path, free from corrupt practices." (YALI graduate #9). These views brought out a desire for transformative young people's participation. Generally speaking, present barriers of the time on advocacy and policy the argument was that the key challenges to make a positive impact on policies and leadership could best be addressed by participants advancing reasons among the following that led to their marginalization from policy-making platforms: removal of the youth's priorities, challenges from the political party structures, and

lack of networks and platforms for advocacy and opportunities for civic education. For most of them, the consultations on policy were not only dominated by the elderly but often sidelined or not listened to because of a few traditional age limits, while other categories are based on the classification of age groups and gender. One summed up this feeling as "the feeling that we are not experienced, mature, or knowledgeable enough to provide impactful solutions" (YALI graduate #2).

There was an accusation that the political entity in place was a gatekeeper and controlled by the existing elite, where it would not let new influencers in. In the same way, the participants mentioned that there should be stronger advocacy groups, movements, and coalitions that further assist in amplifying the collective youth agendas and are non-partisan. Impacts of civic engagement on governance knowledge All the participants underlined that, through and with participation in the YALI civic education curriculum, they had further expanded their understanding of the governance systems, advocacy channels, current affairs, and various pathways of engaging with the personalities in decision-making. For example, a YALI graduate said, "I gained a lot more clarity on how budgets and policies are formulated, parliament's role, and opportunities for public hearings where we can raise our concerns" (YALI Graduate # 7). Another mentioned, "I learned how to design messages, form coalitions with other youth civic groups, and use the media to checkmate our leaders." (YALI graduate #10)

This shows how strong YALI is in availing precisely actionable civic knowledge. Means to enhance youth influences in decision-making the recommendations covered areas that included the need to have more access to civic knowledge, reduction of the restrictions of voting ages, formal consultative youth organizations, and seed funding to young people's organizations and initiatives. Other areas included stronger commitments from government officials to integrate young people's priorities into policy decisions. As one put it, "We need Young People's Advisory Councils, like some other African countries have established" (YALI graduate #6). Another youth went on to call for the public leaders to "prove that they consider our concerns and choices by implementing the recommendations we will bring to the table." (YALI graduate #1). Such actions can develop a culture of "engaged youth citizenship". Discussion Connection to Existing Theory and Literature. The participants' feedback is in line with what was found in previous studies on how gradual barriers affect the impactful involvement of young people in governance across Africa. For example, Mati et al. (2010) and Resnick & Castle (2019) found some similar problems surrounding the behaviors of elderly people that are calling young people to be inexperienced and traditions around decision-making of elders and organizational structures related to the policy voice of young people and the gatekeeping of political parties.

3.2 Youth level of Satisfaction with the YALI initiative as a mechanism for Youth Voice in Governance Processes.

The life cycle theory argues that as young people move through different life phases and experiences, such marriage, work, and school, they become more involved in society and politics (Flanagan and Levine, 2010). Young people's civic and political engagement is heightened by these life events and milestones acting as triggers.

This brings out shared values and worldviews that emerge among African youth (Mo Ibrahim Foundation, 2019). Furthermore, the greater need for access to civic engagement by young people reaffirms recommendations by the UN on such interventions in developing new generations of engaged citizens and leaders, since participants noted that indeed civic curriculums enhance knowledge in governance and motivation (UNDP, 2014).

Finally, according to the research, the program "emphasizes a need for civic engagement to be firmly based in local context and culture" (Tuwor & Sossou, 2008). This will be instrumental in the strengthening of efficacy through the inclusion of indigenous leadership paradigms and accountability. This would, therefore, mean that such socially constructed meanings can be easily shifted, reformed, or redefined.

The qualitative interviews conducted with YALI alumni offer significant insights into their opinions regarding the program's ability to strengthen the voices of young people in political processes. All things considered, the results point to a high degree of participant satisfaction, recognizing the beneficial effects of the effort on their advocacy abilities, knowledge, and desire to participate in policymaking.

The participants' perception of an improvement in their advocacy abilities and understanding of governance systems was one of the major topics that came out of the interviews. A significant number of participants reported developing a stronger comprehension of the functions of different political entities, the process of formulating policies, and the avenues for public participation and feedback (Winthrop & Matsui, 2013). "I gained a lot more clarity on how budgets and policies are formulated, parliament's role, and opportunities for public hearings where we can raise our concerns," said one participant, for example (YALI Graduate #7). Participants' ability to negotiate the intricacies of governance procedures and find practical avenues for advancing their priorities was enhanced by this increased knowledge.

In addition, the YALI program gave participants the tools they needed to effectively advocate, including tactics for media engagement, coalition building, and message development. A participant expressed, "I learned how to design messages, form coalitions with other youth civic groups, and use the media to checkmate our leaders" (YALI Graduate #10). With the use of these abilities, participants may successfully voice their concerns, rally support, and demand accountability from those in charge (Dudley & Gitelson, 2002).

Interestingly, the interviews showed that participants felt more driven and confident in their abilities to influence good change and participate in governance processes. If given more power and access to platforms where decisions are made, participants indicated a strong belief in their ability to address social issues and support the development of their country. For advocacy activities and civic involvement to be sustained, this feeling of empowerment and self-belief is essential (Ballard, 2014; Youniss et al., 2002).

Nonetheless, the participants duly noted the enduring obstacles and hurdles that impede their ability to convert their learned knowledge and abilities into concrete impacts on governance procedures. These barriers include political parties' gatekeeping, ageism, a lack of organized young bodies, and restricted access to places where decisions are made (UNDP, 2014; Restless Development, 2018). It will take coordinated efforts from all stakeholders to overcome these obstacles, which continue to be a major issue.

Participant suggestions for strengthening young voice in governance processes addressed these issues in a number of ways. One of the measures used to guarantee that policymaking takes into account the interests of youth was the establishment of institutional consultation institutions, including Youth Advisory Councils (Resnick & Casale, 2019). Participants also underlined the necessity of government representatives making greater pledges to enact recommendations made by young people and incorporate youth viewpoints into policy choices (CARE International, 2015).

It is noteworthy that contextual factors, including gender, socioeconomic level, and cultural norms, may have an impact on the participants' experiences and views (Kamara et al., 2019). When evaluating the results, it is also important to take into account the limitations of the study, such as the small sample size and the unique demographics of the YALI participants.

Overall, the results indicate that although the YALI program has been successful in raising participants' motivation, advocacy knowledge, and abilities, there are still major obstacles in the way of converting these improvements into meaningful impact over governance procedures. It will take a multipronged strategy to address these issues, including the creation of official consultation institutions, more resolute promises from policymakers, and ongoing initiatives to strengthen and elevate the voices of young people in the policymaking process.

4. Policy Recommendations

This paper, by exploring young people's perceptions of the barriers toward governance and leadership involvement, gives programmatic implications and policy in large numbers. This could expand youth advocacy by improving organizational structures, such as youth advisory councils, which ensure that new laws and policies feature at the very center of their discussion. Reducing voting age restrictions to match the civic readiness of youth exhibits would allow for the direct shaping of platforms and leaders by young people.

Targeted support that bolsters the collective capacity of these youth civic groups and networks might turn the tide of their potential for grassroots mobilization and collective action. This would include stronger commitments of elected leaders toward perennially including youth priorities in policy formulation. Limitations and Future Research. As such, exploratory, qualitative research based on a small, non-representative sample, the present study can show findings that are not statistically generalizable. Subsequent research should, therefore, seek to determine whether such themes resonate at scale among the continent's young people in Africa. As YALI trains and equips already civic-motivated youths, further research should be conducted on the perspectives of non-participants in the program. Longitudinal qualitative data may provide richer insight into how civic education impacts evolve. In that line, a comparative study of different civic programs might thus bring out nuanced strengths and weaknesses between the cases with their programs in transforming young people's advocacy capacities and opportunities. Overall, further studies are critically needed to guide policies that amplify youth policy voices across Africa.

Recommendations to Elevate Youth Voice in Governance

To capitalize on these governance aspirations, institutions must become more participatory. According to Resnick and Casale (2019), the exclusion of youth undermines the legitimacy of representation and leadership in the place of work. Based on the success witnessed in countries like Tunisia, it is relevant for a permanent setting to develop and convey youth policy priorities through the invention of national and district-level youth councils (Restless Development, 2018). It will also ensure the lowering of the voting age to 16 or 18 years, as has been realized by Malawi, Uganda, and South Africa, which will enable them to have a direct say in the selection of leaders and accountability of the same (Farthing, 2010). The scholars have also advised that one approach that should be taken in helping build the capacity of schools and community programs is that of "immersive, issues-based civic education in schools and community programs" to the mainstream.

Real commitment from the leadership to integrate youth input will include transparency, sharing decision-making authority, and acting upon the evidence-based recommendations given. Research Significance for Youth Empowerment.

Conclusion

This paper has provided critical insights into the youth perspective on governance in West Africa. This is a disillusioned youth who has watched as corruption has frittered away the tenuous legitimacy of leadership. Yet, youths indicated great self-efficacy to help catalyze national development if provided greater access and voice in policy making. Furthermore, the study has been able to draw the following systemic barriers to active youth participation in governance processes: exclusion from decision-making venues, lack of consideration of youth priorities due to cultural age hierarchies, lack of access through gatekeeping in political parties, coordination between youths from various groups, and deficiency in civic engagement. However, it was established that the civic training under YALI has the potential to broaden knowledge regarding governance, improve various leadership, increase motivation for leadership. The potential pathways to increase youth voices in policy and decision-making processes include the establishment of formalized Youth Advisory Councils, reduction of the voting age thresholds, increased funding and capacity building of youth civic networks, stronger commitments by leaders towards the implementation of youth-driven recommendations, and mainstreaming immersive civic engagement.

Overall, the findings light the dual nature of deep frustrations but also high aspirations for West African youth to contribute to ethical, engaged governance. The findings have important implicit implications for African Youth Ministries, Youth-focus Organisations and other national and international stakeholders interested in Youth Engagement and Democratic Governance in Africa

Research Significance for Youth Empowerment

This study provides vital youth perspectives to inform policies and interventions that unlock youth potential. This will ensure democratic, fair progress only in case all different voices, but mostly youth consider the face of Africa's future is going to be maximized. The UN has repeated that civic education and empowered participation can turn the tables around given age-based power imbalances (UNDP, 2014). This is while research to sustain the reforms remains of essence. He argued that this is through the ultimate enabling of the youth themselves to the leading of implementation of changes that will eventually let their innovation and lots of energy bear fruit across all sectors.

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