

Strategies for Effective Youth Engagement in Uganda's Democratic System

Nele Krüger

Abstract

This report provides a comprehensive synthesis of the views, ideas and opinions that emerged from countrywide discussions on the constraints and opportunities for meaningful youth engagement in Uganda's democratic processes. The University Forum on Governance and Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung organised a series of youth debates to examine the central question of why youth participation in Uganda's political system still remains ineffective despite the existence of legal provisions and representation structures for youth participation. The report suggests a multi-level approach for overcoming the challenges young people face as a way of strengthening youth engagement in democratic governance.

1. Introduction

The University Forum on Governance (UNIFOG) and the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS) hosted a series of regional youth debates in Uganda to explore the constraints and suggest solutions to the challenges relating to meaningful youth participation in political decision-making processes. The debates took place in all four regions of Uganda, starting with the Eastern Region on 5 October at Civil Service College in Jinja, followed by the Central Region on 15 October at Makerere University in Kampala. This was followed by the debate on 28 October in the Northern Region, held at Gulu University and the final one on 13 November in the Western Region, which took place at Mbarara University of Science and Technology.

Prior to conducting of the regional debates, a training workshop had been held with a view to equip young

leaders with the relevant skills of debating and public speaking. Twenty-three youth and student leaders took part in the three-day training which strengthened their abilities in analysing, presenting and argumentation. Trainees from this programme were invited to join panel discussions in the regions where they were able to give their views on youth political engagement in Uganda. The debate series focused on the causes, challenges and opportunities for youth participation in Uganda. This report thus analyses the discussions and tries to answer the deep-seated and fundamental questions regarding the low impact of youth participation in Uganda's political processes.

2. Why youth?

Whereas almost half of Uganda's registered voters are between the ages 18 and 30, effective and constructive participation of youth in the political process remains low. Uganda's affirmative action policy presents the broad category of youth as a marginalised group. Since the youth form a significant portion of the country's population, it seems contradictory to define the youth as a marginalised group. Is there any correlation between youth marginalisation and political participation? In a country like Uganda with a rising youth population whose political participation is seemingly low and unconstructive, this question begs a critical synthesis.

Ugandan youth are face several challenges, such as poverty, unemployment, a poor education system and inadequate access to health care. While official sources rate the youth unemployment rate at

7.7 per cent,²⁰⁰ experts estimate that the percentage of unemployed youth is much higher. According to other sources, the youth unemployment rate is estimated to be much higher owing to inefficient reporting systems. It is estimated that almost 60 per cent of the Ugandan workforce is engaged in the informal sector, which excludes them from security mechanisms like health insurance or pension funds. Most young people are engaged in subsistence agriculture and have no prospects of a decent paid job. Moreover, the proportion of the working poor in Uganda is still high. Missing job opportunities and an education system which does not provide young people with relevant work-related skills relegate a big proportion of the youth to the unproductive sectors of the economy. The expected doubling of the workforce size in the next 20 years will only exacerbate the situation.²⁰¹

For such challenges to be addressed, the youth need to be represented in the democratic process to formulate and implement effective policies and overcome the above-mentioned problems. Although youth structures, youth organisations and youth representation exist in parliament, they do not have a relevant impact on political parties, on the local councils and on the national political processes.

The next session presents a comprehensive narrative and synthesis of the youth and political participation processes in Uganda.

3. Format of the youth debates

The format of the debates was designed to ensure lively and constructive interaction between the

200 See Uganda Labour Market Profile 2014 by Ulandssekretariate.

201 See Uganda's Employment Challenges by the Ministry of Finance, Planning and Economic Development.

panel and the audience. Therefore, a moderated-led discussion divided in different phases was introduced. Besides topic-based panel discussions, the audience was frequently given the opportunity to respond to the arguments discussed on the panel.

The panel consisted of students and youth representatives who had been prepared in preceding training workshop or are engaged in civil society and youth leadership functions in different organisations. Participants were students and youth leaders from the four regions to give their views on the topic, exchange solutions and get motivated to take action. All in all, approximately 1,000 youth were engaged in the nationwide debating campaign.

4. Discussed topics

During the debates, different challenges that youth face participating in decision-making process were discussed. The panelists made input on topics like youth representation, youth unemployment, poverty and education, which were commented on and discussed by the audience. In the following section, the main problems affecting youth participation in Uganda's political process will be discussed in order to understand the current situation and to find the way forward.

4.1 Diversity of the youth

The discussions observed that Ugandan youth represent significant diversities to the extent that the connection between youth and their leaders is very weak. Typically, most youth representatives have a better financial background and will have attained a higher education level than the majority of youth in Uganda, which causes the problem of a lack of understanding of the needs of the youth. Even though some

participants promoted the idea of having a united youth movement, the realities on the ground do not make any such idea viable. Only 19.4 per cent of the youth of 20 to 30 years of age live in urban areas while most of the youth still live in rural areas.²⁰² Young people in Uganda grow up in different environments and cultures and attain different education levels. The interests of young women might differ from the interests of young men and an 18-year-old youth will probably have other ideas regarding the development of the country from a 30-year-old youth. Little attention has been paid to the diversity of youth in the public debates and yet it is a key factor of ineffective youth participation. Efforts to unite the youth have failed in the past and new approaches are needed to address the diversity.

4.2 Weak leadership

There are numerous allegations and facts related to youth political representatives being engaged in political malpractices. Some panellists blamed the youth representatives for misusing money and the youth representation structures for being ineffective. Representation structures exist but do not reach down to the grass roots and do not serve the interests of ordinary youth.

Others pointed out that the design of the representation structures for youth was not the main problem. The National Youth Council, for example, is elected from the grassroots and formed by representatives from the village level up to the national level. According to the participants, a bigger problem was that the NRM occupies the youth representation structures and opposition candidates had fewer chances to be elected. Moreover, youth still lack information on

elections, representation and political decision-making processes, which leads to a low turnout of youth on the polling day and a poor understanding of democratic principles.

4.3 Youth unemployment, underemployment and poverty

Participants also alluded to the interplay between politics and economics. This introduced the concept of economic democracy which underpins the essence of youth political participation in Uganda. Owing to limited gainful engagement of youth in productive economic activities, young people will always be attracted by financial incentives from political elites who use youth as a stepping stones to their political interests. The rationale of this thinking is that, unless youth become active economic actors, their voices and demands will always be taken for granted.

Some youth representatives see a political position as a job opportunity rather than a platform to represent the interests of young citizens and to influence political decision-making processes. Because of unemployment and poverty, a political position is oftentimes associated with a stable income in the first place, which leads to poor representation of young people.

Poverty always fuels bribery, which puts poor youth in a difficult situation. The participants noted that people who are suffering have no option but to sell their vote to the candidate who offers the most money or goods for daily consumption.

The relation between unemployment, poverty, bribery and corruption can be described as a vicious circle (see below). High unemployment and underemployment rates lead to poverty, which creates the conditions

202 See Poverty Status Report 2014 by Ministry of Finance, Planning and Economic Development.

for bribery and corruption which then results in poor leadership that fails to effectively address the unemployment problem. As long as young people have limited chances to live a self-sustained life, they will always depend on the financial resources of the elites. Bribery is thus seen as a source of financial help for vulnerable youth and not as a source of poor leadership that does not provide any solutions to the unemployment problem.

4.4 Lack of funding

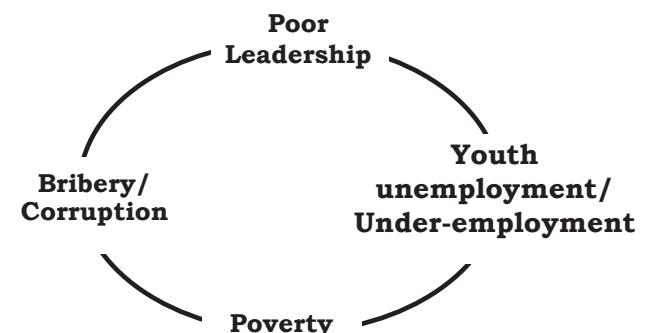
Since the majority of youth are not engaged in productive work, funds for youth organisations come mostly from foreign sources and can be easily controlled by the funder. Financial dependence also means depending on the interests of the funder that might differ from youth interests. Moreover, the youth do not feel very connected to their youth organisations when they do not have to contribute to them, which endangers their serious impact on the democratic system. Another significant issue which emerged during the debate series is the fact that there is an increase in the number of youth groups being formed, mostly during campaign periods to attract political rents, but which suddenly perish after the elections.

4.5 Gender inequality

Women are not equally represented among the youth. An increasing number of young women in Uganda are also excluded from actively participating in democratic and political processes. Poor civic education and little access to relevant political information as well as the dominant culture of social discrimination against women produce a male-dominated political environment. Although a legal framework allows equal participation by women and men, prejudice against

women on the pretext that they are not suited enough to hold political positions and low support for female candidates by the community make it very difficult for young women to stand for a political position.

Figure 1: Vicious circle of unemployment, poverty, bribery and poor leadership



Author's conceptualisation

4.6 Cultural mindset

Youth in the Ugandan society are still viewed as a group that needs guidance by elders. Young people are not trusted to have the capacity to fill and manage certain positions in politics, society or the economy. That leads to the exclusion of young people from effectively influencing decision-making processes and leading their fellow youth. High political positions are occupied by elders who are not willing to create space for the younger generation. A hierarchical structure where elders are viewed as a wise and infallible small group of people potentially makes it very difficult for a society to bring in alternative and fresh ways of thinking.

Some debaters partly attributed this problem to the education system, which they argue, is constructed around such hierarchical orders – a factor which inhibits youth's ability to be critical and generate new ideas.

5. The way forward

Most of the issues raised during the debating series is part and parcel of a broader challenge in the Ugandan political discourse. To address this challenge, a multi-pronged approach which requires the concerted effort of the various and relevant stakeholders is critical.

Most significantly, youth should accept that they are not a homogeneous group but rather a combined entity of individuals with different interests. A youth movement comprising all young people is thus only possible if youth are able to agree on basic demands and policies. Otherwise the diversity of youth should be much more recognised in public debates since it is almost impossible that half of the Ugandan population should have the same interests and ideas regarding the future of their country. In fact, this diversity should be harnessed since it presents an opportunity for shaping youth political participation landscape in Uganda.

There is also an urgent need to embrace social media as a tool for fast, cheap and easy mobilisation of youth. In fact, this is already a ripe opportunity since a significant portion of Ugandan urban youth are already networked on social media. This is evidenced by the increasing social media debates initiated by youth on platforms like Facebook and Twitter. It is, however, important to be cognizant of the fact that a majority of young people still remain outside the social media train. In fact, only 34.2 per cent of the population in Uganda has access to the internet and a smaller percentage uses social media on a regular basis.²⁰³ For those who use them, social media are still a helpful tool to communicate

and organise movements or other political activities.

In terms of addressing the leadership problem, one of the panelists, Ms Florence Acuma, coordinator of Apac District Youth Network (ADYN), provided a best practice model for how to strengthen youth organisations. ADYN provides the structure for strong youth organisations from the village level up to the district level and, therefore, ensures the representation of the grass roots at the district level. Open and inclusive platforms where youth have the opportunity to exchange ideas, discuss local challenges and formulate alternative approaches for their community are needed countrywide. That would not only lead to more political discussions and involvement but also contribute to holding youth leaders accountable due to a stronger engagement on both sides.

Young people are often not aware of the legal frameworks under which their leaders act and they might not know that cases of corrupt representatives can be taken to court. Going to court is the last option people have in a democracy and should be open to anyone who feels that governmental entities are not acting within the law. To raise awareness of the legal basis, civic education is the answer and should not only be conducted by civil society but should also start in schools.

Still, this does not resolve the problem of the frequent exclusion of youth representatives from the decision-making process at the district level and the inaudibility of youth voices. That problem can only be overcome when young people are engaged in the productive sector and gain bargaining power, and thus become economically empowered.

²⁰³ <http://www.ucc.co.ug/files/downloads/Q1-Market%20Report%202015.pdf>.

Therefore, new jobs in productive areas are needed. The panelists urged the government to identify promising economic sectors and provide the needed infrastructure as well as policies to create new jobs.

The economic empowerment of young people is a key issue in creating the conditions for imbuing young people with self-confidence and equipping them with bargaining power. Only when youth contribute massively to society through taxes and economic growth will they have the power to hold their leaders accountable and successfully demand that their interests be catered for by putting pressure on their leaders. This would lead to a mindset change since the dynamics of power between the old and the young generations would change. In this regard, youth would be more respected and trusted and, owing to that, be able to effectively engage in democratic governance.

However, the above does not answer the question about how young people can attain economic empowerment. As described earlier on, Uganda is lacking job opportunities. Some would urge the government to take action and identify promising sectors where new jobs are being created as well as provide a legal framework that attracts investors. But that is only one side of the coin and does not reflect the whole problem. East Africa is a big market with a lot of demand for various products, which creates opportunities for innovative entrepreneurs. Young people often lack the self-confidence and the financial background to realise their ideas and do not have the space to develop innovations. Access to loans needs to be much easier for young people and the education system has to be reformed so that it can provide students with more practical skills.

Preparing the ground for empowering young people should also be in the

interests of the government since the demographic trend shows that the workforce is going to grow and might affect the stability and peace of the country if most people do not have any prospects for finding a job and earning a stable income. Therefore, it is only for its own good that the government should make an effort to break the vicious circle of unemployment by implementing effective policies to solve the problem.

Demands should not be made only on the government but also on the youth themselves. Young entrepreneurs need more support from their fellow youth to support their business ideas, to promote their products and to invest in their businesses.

To ensure gender equality among youth representatives, participants suggested that pro-women policies and more civic education be fostered particularly at the grass roots. A look at the policies and laws which are in place clearly shows that there are plenty of laws existing to ensure equality between women and men. The main problem which needs to be addressed is the lack of implementation of these policies. Ensuring the implementation process only will not fully contribute to stronger engagement of young women in politics; there is also need for a mindset change, as mentioned above. Civic education for the grass roots and training for young women in political positions is the most effective tool when addressing gender inequality.

6. Conclusion

In the light of the plethora of challenges constraining active and constructive youth participation in political processes, there is still one bullet which might shoot down this predicament – job creation. This is because jobs bring decency and economic empowerment. In fact, the

availability of more jobs portends to reduce the use of youth as a pedestal for political elites to propagate their selfish political agenda. Only after the youth have gained economic power and are able to contribute to society will the cultural mindset change and young people be more respected and trusted in their community. Right now the political elites are only able to suppress youth representation structures because young people are less able to stand up against it. Thus economic empowerment of youth is the key to creating a society where power is not concentrated in the hands of a small group of elders but equally divided, which creates the conditions for meaningful youth engagement in democratic governance.

However, the experiences from the youth debate series clearly show that there is still need to discuss the challenges, exchanging possible solutions and raising awareness of the immense potential that young people have. Youth debates might not directly lead to the economic empowerment of youth but are the first step towards a broader understanding of the cause of poor political engagement of young people and possible solutions.