

# OUR COMMON FUTURE: WHY THE UGANDAN YOUTH STILL MATTER

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The significance of the youth in shaping global affairs is an undoubted fact. In Africa, and particularly in Uganda, the youth are increasingly becoming forerunners in initiatives and actions to redeem and re-focus the future of the continent. Examples of this initiatives range from young people starting up businesses to youth who have initiated social movements and political activism to address some of the systemic policy and political conundrums that continue to draw us backwards. Innovations by young Ugandans have birthed enterprises like Safe Boda, Enjuba, etc. which have created numerous economic opportunities and addressed social problems that continue to enmesh the country.

Young women and men are using their creativity and agency to create their own spaces for action, or “youthscapes”, in which they try to subvert authority, bypass the encumbrances created by the state, and fashion new ways of functioning and maneuvering on their own. Civic movements and pressure groups like the jobless brotherhood, poor youth, etc. have mounted a reasonable amount of pressure on the NRM government to create a fair political ground for youth engagement.

Amidst these positive youth actions, there is a growing concern that the Ugandan youth population, which is one of the highest in the world, is a ticking time bomb ready to explode. With almost 20% of

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the population falling within the youth age bracket and another 56% being children, the country is coming to terms with the bitter fact that reaping the demographic dividend from this youth bulge is an illusion. Whichever youth unemployment data<sup>1</sup> one chooses to take, the reality is that finding a decent job in Uganda is fast becoming a distant possibility for the majority of young Ugandans. Thousands of job seekers are poured to the job market, which keeps shrinking as the country's macro-economic performance worsens. Even with the over 6% economic growth rate, praised by the economists as one of the best in Africa, the number of jobs created are not increasing - leading to a "jobless growth"-dilemma. For instance, every 1% GDP growth increase in Uganda generates only 400 jobs, which is far below the international standard of 10,000 jobs that should be created with a corresponding 1% GDP growth rate. The failure of the Ugandan government to create a robust framework for youth economic empowerment is a recipe for disaster. The 2007 World Development Report, for instance, noted that poverty is not only the cause of violence, but it is now its primary cause.

In the midst of this obscurity, the level of optimism among the Ugandan youth is on a record high. Youthonomics, a global youth ranking think-tank initiative, in comparative study of 64 countries in 2015 found out that Uganda is currently the worst country to live in as a youth. The irony, according to the study, is that Ugandan youth are the second most optimistic cohort of young people in the world, only behind Norway. What explains this juxtaposition of the current state of hopelessness and the assumed future harbinger of hope harbored within the Ugandan youth?

Perchance, one explanation lies in the rising middle class<sup>2</sup> section, which George Soros perceives is 'one of the few bright spots on the gloomy global economic horizon'. According to the 2014 Poverty Status Report, 37% of Uganda's population belongs into the 'middle class' category. In the capital Kampala and a few upcountry towns like Mbarara, several traits of middle-classism are exhibited by the visible spike in consumption patterns. On the one hand, this consumerism is creating a bulge in the service sector, whilst on the other hand, it is hampering entrepreneurship as saving earned cash due to the induced 'cat race' syndrome. Moreover, Uganda largely remains a subsistence rural economy with about 72% of the population directly eking a livelihood from the rain-fed small holder farms. A significant portion of the urban

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<sup>1</sup> Whereas African Development Bank 2013 projects the youth unemployment rate in Uganda to be as high as 83%, civil society organizations like Action Aid put it at 62% and the government statistical abstract claims unemployment in Uganda is less than 5%.

<sup>2</sup> According to the African Development Bank, the 'middle class' are a group of people who earn between the minimum thresholds of \$4 a day and a maximum of \$20 a day.

**Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e.V.** population is living below poverty levels while rural-urban migration leads to an increasing bulge in non-productive activities like boda-boda riding and street vending, widening the informal sector and its attendant misnomers like low taxation.

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This middle class bulge also presents opportunities, which can be harnessed to consolidate democratic enhancement. 2,400 years ago, Aristotle made a classical argument in defense of the middle class' role in promoting democratic development and the rule of law. His thoughts were premised on the fact that the middle class tends to be educated and has just enough prosperity that members of that class can see themselves becoming rich someday, so they don't punish the rich, and they have compassion for the poor, being that many of them lived in poverty<sup>3</sup>. Accordingly, the middle class stands between the two extremes of the poor and the rich, thereby facilitating the creation and maintenance of a democratic society.

However, the current democratic predicament is a complete opposite of Aristotles' classic political thought. Instead of championing democratic consolidation in Uganda, the majority of the middle class is either coopted into the clientelistic network of undemocratic leaders or is simply disinterested to actively and constructively participate in improving the democratic landscape of the country. In fact, the majority of those who clamor for change are mostly the poor urban dwellers who are usually not the shrewdest or the best skilled politicians. According to the Aristotelian tradition therefore, unless the middle class youth in Uganda wake up and get out of their comfort zones, the political and policy challenges that continue to riddle the country may not be addressed in the near future.

Youth participation in the political economy processes today is both largely inadequate and unconstructive. This argument is further buttressed by the fact that most youth are rather being engaged in passive activism – as in the case of, for instance, commenting, liking, retweeting, etc. on social media rather than taking direct action that might spur the much needed socio-economic and political transformation. Youth have also been engaged in various entrepreneurial initiatives, contributing to Uganda's recent Virgin Group's ranking as the most entrepreneurial country in the world in 2015. However, high business mortalities undo these gains, as 80% of the enterprises perish even before celebrating their first birthdays.

This anomaly bears the question: are the Ugandan youth equipped with the 21<sup>st</sup> Century skills and knowledge to spark the socio-economic

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<sup>3</sup> Underground Network (2016). Why Inequality Matters – Aristotle and the Middle Class

**Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e.V.** and political revolution that the country direly needs? The debates around Uganda's education system provide some relevant illuminations. The education system has been blamed for its colonial approach, devoid of critical thinking and being 'hands-off'.

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This is not only mirrored in the inability of young Ugandans to be good managers and shrewd entrepreneurs, but also in their lack of creativity, inventiveness and low enthusiasm to work hard, as well as in the increasing levels of mediocrity. As a result, the level of youth self-reliance in Uganda is appallingly low, a situation which exacerbates the dependency burden on the few having jobs – hence creating and maintaining a continuous spiral of hopelessness.

Nevertheless, the government and other stakeholders can play a role to avert these predicaments. The agricultural sector, which is the mainstay of Uganda's economy, should be reinvigorated. The government's continuous focus on the service sector over the last years should be revisited, since growth in services only creates a limited number of employment opportunities, a condition caused by the increasing automation of the service sphere. 'We need to build small-and medium-scale agro-processing plants around the country to provide incentives to peasants to commercialize their activities. Agro-processing will raise and stabilize farm-gate prices, which are still very low and fluctuating – the main reason why the sector is stagnant<sup>4</sup>. This can be supplemented by investments in irrigation projects to break the continuous reliance on the unpredictable rainfall patterns, which is now worsened by climatic change. Other stakeholders like the civil society, political foundations, etc. have a role to play too. At the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, our aspiration is to lead the way:

### **The Nature and Significance of KAS' Work with the Ugandan Youth**

KAS sees engagement with the youth as an investment in the future of Africa. Even with a candid knowledge of the various risks and challenges involved in such investments, KAS believes that it is a worthwhile investment, because the future of Africa rests on the youth. After this stark realization, KAS has designed projects that directly aim to reinvigorate the youth and make them constructive change agents over the past years. From empowering youth to become active policy formulators and influencers to equipping them with the necessary leadership skills, KAS is at the forefront of youth empowerment in Uganda.

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<sup>4</sup>R. Ggoobi (2015). Why is growing Uganda's economy not creating jobs? Sun Rise Newspaper <http://www.sunrise.ug/opinions/columnists/ramathan-ggoobi/201501/why-is-growing-ugandas-economy-not-creating-jobs.html>



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This is done by embracing a wide array of approaches packaged to offer a comprehensive solution to some of the greatest challenges like youth unemployment, inadequate political representation, and voicelessness among others that continue to remain the *Achilles heel* of youth participation in the affairs that directly affect them.

To put KAS at the cutting edge of youth empowerment in Uganda, the first objective of our 2017-2019 Strategic Plan directly focuses on youth socio-economic and political development. Objective 1.1 states that "Political leaders and emerging politicians - especially women and youth - are strengthened in their capacity to drive the programmatic work of their respective parties and put forward their positions in political decision-making bodies as well as in public discourse".

Objective 1.2, which mostly puts young people on the democratic consolidation agenda, states that "Young leaders and elected youth representatives at local and national level are aware of their democratic role and responsibility, able to engage in constructive political dialogue and participate actively in political decision-making".

KAS' approach to youth empowerment in Uganda is underpinned by the need to foster constructive engagement, capacity building, policy influence and networking to create a robust pool of Ugandan youth. This way, the youth become empowered to not only be active participants in the democratic and development process but also and to create synergies on initiatives meant to empower the youth.

### **KAS Youth Focused Partners**

In order to fulfil the previously mentioned objectives, we partner with selected organizations from the civic society and government sectors on a plethora of initiatives that empower the youth in Uganda. For instance, our flagship youth policy platform, the Young Leaders Think Tank for Policy Alternatives, has been at the forefront of shaping the policy landscape in Uganda for more than five years now. Bringing together a pool of talented and brilliant young minds under one roof, the platform provides a Think & Act Launchpad for influencing and accelerating policy formulation in Uganda. This pool of young leaders has provided a comprehensive analysis of relevant policies in Uganda, ranging from agriculture to education and electoral reforms, offering a youth perspective and alternative policy approaches. Over the years, several think-tank members have emerged as some of the country's leading policy activists, championing the creation of a levelled platform for young people in policy-making processes.

To enhance youth political participation, KAS, through the University Forum on Governance (UNIFOG), has effectively nurtured and sharpened youth's political acumen and leadership skills by organizing stu-

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dent debates and dialogues on a number of key subjects, including electoral democracy, diversity and religious tolerance. Such forums have indeed provided a platform for debates and intellectual engagements, which serves as a stimulus to strengthening democratic development.

For close to three decades now, KAS has supported Action for Development (ACfODE) to empower young female leaders in Uganda through programs like the national youth debating contest, youth conventions and young politicians' capacity building initiatives.

To contribute to human capital development among the Ugandan youth, KAS partners with Uganda Martyrs University (UMU) in order to offer scholarships to over a dozen students each year. To date, this initiative has supported over 100 students in pursuing their degrees in the fields of democracy and human rights, local governance, administration and development.

With platforms like the Interparty Youth Platform (IYOP), which was created by KAS, many young people across the political spectrum have been brought together to address common challenges facing the young people, regardless of their political affiliations.

Again, through the National Youth Council, we support initiatives that strengthen the institutional frameworks of government led youth initiatives. Most recently, we are focusing on female young leaders who are unfamiliar with the intricacies of the political arena.

Lastly, LÉO Africa Emerging Leader's Academy and Review magazine is another unique addition to our continuous efforts and innovations to support young people in Uganda, inspiring them and celebrating their achievements in the socio-economic and political landscape.

It is an undoubted fact that policy discourses that disregard the current bulge in African youth demographics are perilous to development in the continent. Governments, Civil Society Organizations and other relevant stakeholders in the development arena must therefore place youth issues at the center-stage of their work. Currently, the compass direction is pointing towards a bleak direction, making youth bulge a curse rather than a blessing. This means more task still lie ahead.