

The Youth Bulge in Africa Opportunities for Constructive Engagement in the Political Process

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*"No one is born a good citizen; no nation is born a democracy. Rather, both are processes that continue to evolve over a lifetime. Young people must be included from birth. A society that cuts off from its youth severs its lifeline."
-- Kofi Annan*

I. Background

The National Democratic Institute (NDI) is a nonprofit, nonpartisan, nongovernmental organization that responds to the worldwide quest for popular civic participation, open and competitive political systems, and representative and accountable government. With its work over 25 years in 125 countries, NDI has extensive experience in the political arena – particularly at the nexus where citizens, elected leaders and government officials come together. The assumptions and conclusions of this paper reflect the results of the Institute's work with political parties, civic organizations, legislatures, youth organizations and individual young people. NDI currently has youth programs in 20 countries and has carried out more than 120 programs specifically targeting the political participation of young people around the world.

The youth bulge in Africa and on other continents presents myriad reasons for concern. Youth militia in Sierra Leone, political violence led by youth in Kenya, and the exploitation by political and military elites of young people in countries like Liberia and Rwanda are stark reminders of the negative impact exceedingly large youth populations can have in African countries. Because of these events, young citizens are often viewed as a source of instability and, as a result, are often marginalized from mainstream society.

At NDI, we recognize the potential risks of the youth bulge, but we also take the optimistic view that the participation of young people is fundamental to the success of a democratic society. NDI has found that when the aspirations of youth are constructively channeled into the political process – for example, through election monitoring, community organizing, or becoming active political party members – they can become agents of positive change and contribute to sustained peace. Often they find that well-organized and peaceful political action allows them to work directly with their adversaries, tribal and ethnic enemies.

Given the opportunity, youth would rather be peacefully engaged in society rather than be violent and they are prepared to be proponents for change rather than suppressors of dissent. While the youth bulge presents many risks for policy makers and politicians both in Africa and around the world, the opportunities for meaningful participation in the political process are plentiful – if they are made a priority and targeted in a constructive manner.

II. Politicians and Young People – Looking for Solutions

Across Africa, the political values of youth are usually allied with the political affiliations and values of their family, their community and, importantly, their tribe, ethnic group or region. However, NDI focus group research has demonstrated that young, first time voters are often more open to voting for new parties, more willing to change political allegiances and less loyal to established traditions – if presented with those options. Our programs have also shown that when young people find avenues for participating in society, they quickly become more confident and active community members than their older counterparts. They are frequently more enthusiastic, have more to gain from political participation and are more willing to take initiative and try new approaches. Youth are ready and willing to engage in the process.

Political leaders and government officials also understand the risks associated with the youth bulge in their countries and across the continent. This conversation is not only taking place in the conference rooms of think tanks and the pages of academic articles. It is also taking place among many African politicians and political parties – for example, in the halls of parliament in Kenya, inside the ministries of government in Rwanda and on the campaign trail in Sudan. And in many places, parties and their respective leaders are struggling to determine how to engage youth meaningfully in the political process.

In addition, parties see the electoral value of engaging youth as voters. U.S. President Obama's successful 2008 campaign, which mobilized hundreds of thousands of young, first time voters using information technology, has resonated across the world. Parties are beginning to realize they can change electoral outcomes by registering youth, targeting young people with a reform campaign message, and ensuring that there is a get out the vote (GOTV) strategy targeted to youth.

NDI believes there is a willingness on the part of both young people and political elites to engage; the challenge is how. It is a process that will not necessarily happen organically. It will require a facilitated, action oriented approach that gives young people the skills to create projects that will allow them to introduce ideas and solutions directly into the political system. It will also require consultation with government and civic leaders to ensure they not only understand the purposes of the engagement but that they buy in and support the efforts.

The following examples of NDI youth programs illustrate the various opportunities and challenges associated with engaging youth in the political process.

III. Kenyan Youth Demand More Engagement with Parties

NDI has been working with the political leadership of the main parties in Kenya since 2001. Assistance has focused on building more democratic internal party structures, creating open nomination systems, assisting in the development of negotiation skills among and between parties, and working to help parties enter into a coalition government. Engaging youth in the parties has been a priority for NDI and our Kenyan party partners, and for several years NDI facilitated the Young Political Leadership Academy (YPLA), a multi-partisan group of young people who were trained with skills and assigned specific projects that would be carried out within their respective parties.

After the 2007 elections, which erupted into weeks of deadly violence that killed more than 1,300 people and displaced tens of thousands, it was apparent that the youth bulge was part of the problem. Spurred by political elites, many of the perpetrators and victims were young people.

In 2008, during regular YPLA activities, many of the young participants discussed how the parties had taken advantage of them during the electoral violence and ultimately failed to address their issues. The group decided to create a coalition that would move beyond skills training and begin to advocate on certain issues – particularly unemployment. The coalition would be called the “Inter Party Youth Forum” (IPYF) and its goals were to take youth issues directly to party leaders and demand solutions.

With support from NDI, this coalition was launched and now has the endorsement of the leadership of Kenya’s main political parties. But initially there was great skepticism among party leaders who were concerned about the advocacy nature of the coalition and feared that issues would be raised that they would not be able to address. As a result, NDI spent several months discussing IPYF with party leaders, ministers and government officials to ensure that there was buy-in and encouragement of the Forum.

In September 2010, the IPYF hosted a conference with over 500 youth from across the country, representing different ethnic, religious and political allegiances. The leadership of Kenya’s seven leading political parties sat in attendance, endorsing this remarkable effort by young Kenyans. The conference was broadcast across the country on television and radio.

The IPYF is an example of a forum for politically-active youth from all the main parties to identify and campaign on issues they have in common. This process takes partisan competition out of discussions about youth engagement. It therefore represents a valuable means of overcoming a “divide and rule” tendency, which has dominated Kenya until now. The fact that IPYF has been formed with the active support of the parties themselves demonstrates that parties are gradually starting to view youth differently and are looking for ways to engage them more constructively.

IV. Rwanda Parties Attempt to Empower Youth

Rwanda's 1994 genocide is a vivid example of how young people were manipulated to serve as a tool of political elites in the elimination of the Tutsis. Young people of both tribes, Hutus and Tutsis – were forever scarred. This recent history has led the government to carry out initiatives to encourage young people to engage in the reconstruction and reconciliation process. As part of this effort, in 2008 the leaders of Rwanda's main political parties asked NDI to help increase the organizational and management skills of young people so they could take on roles within the parties.

It required delicate negotiations. For over three months, discussions took place between NDI, its local partner, the Forum of Political Parties of Rwanda (FFP), and the leadership of the parties. The result was a 75-hour skills building and training curriculum called the Youth Political Leadership Academy (YPLA) for forty students that focused on 1) understanding the role of parties in a democratic society; 2) the organizational aspect of parties; 3) communication and organizing party trainings; 4) skills for pursuing a political career; 5) ethical leadership; 6) negotiation, mediation and conflict prevention skills; 6) good governance for parties; 7) introduction to contemporary African politics; and 8) using information and communications technology in parties.

The results of the YPLA were positive. A majority of the graduates took on significant campaign or management roles in their parties during the 2010 presidential elections or participated in some way during the election process. In June, NDI took the top four graduates on a study mission to Ghana, where they met with youth party leaders and representatives of civil society. Since then, the four have become spokespeople for the academy and generated increased interest in the program. The Rwandan political parties were excited about the outcome and want to continue the effort for another year with the possibility of turning the academy into a regional project for the Great Lakes area.

V. Yemen Youth Break New Ground in Resolving Tribal Conflict

In Yemen, tribal conflict is a backdrop affecting the country's economic development, governance and national stability. Disputes over land claims and competition for resources and government services often lead to violence and cycles of revenge killings that can extend over a decade, hindering the work of government and international development agencies, and isolating citizens from the state.

Within tribes, young people are particularly affected by, and increasingly engage in, violence. With almost half of Yemen's population under age 15 and another one-third aged 15 to 29, a significant percentage of the population is growing acclimated to violence as the primary means to address or resolve conflict

To help deal with this problem, 40 young men and women, all under the age of 30, came together in July to form the country's first cross-tribal youth council. Located in the conflict plagued Mareb governorate, the youth council is part of an 18-month program led by NDI to engage youth in the Mareb and Shabwa governorates to resolve conflict and build relationships between young people and community leaders to address issues that

contribute to violence. The council will advocate for youth to municipal and tribal leaders, learn and teach conflict prevention and problem solving skills to students, and serve as mediators among youth in their communities.

Creation of the council required overcoming significant obstacles and followed a lengthy negotiation process with tribal and government officials. In Mareb governate, roadblocks included long-standing and fierce tribal rivalries, cultural norms that keep women largely separated from men, and the limited ability of government to deliver services and respond to the root cause of conflict.

NDI spent nearly two months meeting with tribal sheikhs from Mareb and other governorates, as well as with the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Local Administration, the Governor of Mareb, ministry representatives at the local level and local councilors to secure buy-in for creation of youth councils. Government and tribal leaders raised concerns about the challenges, and local leaders also feared creating demands on the government that it could not meet. But ultimately, the leaders were eager to discuss effective ways to improve youth participation in their communities and tribes and how they could play an active role in the success of the youth council initiative.

At a launch of the program in July, the Mareb Governor Naji Bin Ali Al Zaidi and Sheikh M'Fareh Mohammed Buhaibeh, a respected Mareb tribal leader and negotiator, lauded the youth council's aims and encouraged the young women and men as they embarked on the new initiative.

The council's July meetings featured training in strategic planning, fundraising and local resource development, conflict resolution and mitigation strategies, and leadership and team building. NDI has focused on encouraging youth to work together across gender and tribal divides; build and strengthen the relationship between the youth council and the elected local council; create a conducive environment for regular interaction between youth, tribal leaders and the government; and promote discussion of conflicts facing Juba District.

In the last few months, the Al Juba Youth Council has already developed solutions to some long standing conflicts in Mareb. Among the council members were two young men – one the son of a prominent sheik and the other the son of a leading member of a rival tribe – who have been embroiled in an ongoing dispute between their respective tribes. During a three-day training in July that NDI facilitated, the two youth were reluctant participants in a broader discussion about tribal conflict and they refused to speak directly to one another out of tribal loyalty. The issue at hand was a proposal by the Yemeni government to build a school for girls in the district. The two young men's tribes had been fighting over where this school would be built.

Using skills learned during the workshop and through a role-play on peer mediation, the two men were able to broker an agreement to resolve the dispute. They proposed establishment of a Ministry of Education committee to study the best location for the school looking at the number of girls that would benefit and the proximity to their

villages. The two youth council members presented the proposal to the sheikhs of their tribes, who accepted the terms and plan to engage the Ministry of Education.

VI. Seven Key Principles for Effectively Engaging Youth in the Political Process

The success of youth programs have depended largely on the proposition that young people are given the opportunity to determine priorities, while political and civic leaders are given the opportunity to understand the benefits of direct engagement with youth. The following steps have helped NDI in carrying out over 120 youth participation programs around the globe.

- § **Design a program that reflects the priorities of youth participating in the program.** Allowing youth to set the agenda, builds trust and creates buy-in and ownership.
- § **Provide facilitation and training.** Young people have limited substantive exposure to issues and policies. It's important for them to not only articulate their problems, but also how to identify the solutions.
- § **Encourage action-oriented activities.** Young people do not respond as well to lectures as they do to activities. Design projects or community activities that allow them to take responsibility; make decisions and learn by doing.
- § **Facilitate the connection between youth and political and community leaders.** For many young people, this may be the first time that they have come in contact with public officials or community leaders. Laying the groundwork for a introduction is essential and helps raise the profile of the youth and their projects.
- § **Work in a multi-party setting.** By requiring multipartisan activities, young people are required to work, collaborate and problem solve with political, ethnic and tribal rivals. It requires them to learn negotiation and mediation skills, and drop their natural defenses so they begin to see one another as a young person who shares many of the same ambitions and interests
- § **Ensure that fifty percent of participants are women.** Women are disenfranchised in almost every country and have tremendous challenges to break into the political arena. Representing over 50% of the youth bulge, women need to have a seat at the table.
- § **Establish buy-in and consensus of political and community leaders.** Constructive youth engagement in the political process cannot happen without the support and tacit agreement of political and civic elites. Taking time at the outset to address any concerns or objections of leaders will ensure effective programming,