APRIL 2012

AFRICA PROGRAM POLICY BRIEF NO. 5

Moving Targets:
Youth Priorities and the Policy Response in War and Post-War Africa

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In war and post-war Africa, youth populations are colossal and most governments are weak. The elemental youthfulness of Africa's war-affected has created a daunting yet virtually overlooked irony: that while youth are demographically dominant, many if not most consider themselves to be members of an outcast minority.

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IT IS THIS COMBINATION OF ENORMOUS youth cohorts and their widespread alienation, together with unsteady governance and pervasive insecurity, which creates exceptionally challenging circumstances for governments and their international partners in war-affected Africa today. These challenges include:

- Youth programs that may unintentionally demonstrate exclusion, since they provide islands of assistance for the fortunate few in a vast sea of need. Pressure to expand numbers and demonstrate success, moreover, runs the risk of backfiring if the participants consist of relatively well-off youth;

TABLE 1: United Nations Definitions of Young People by Age[1]

DESIGNATION	AGE RANGE
Child	0-17 or 0-14
Adolescent	10-19
Teenager	13-19
Young Adult	20-24
Youth	15-24

- Government and international agency policies which are not youth-centered. Even when they claim to be, the policies often emphasize institutional priorities, not those of the marginalized youth majority;

- The social distance separating establishment figures who dominate government, community and civil society institutions from most youth. The gap is frequently vast, raising questions about the extent to which mainstream, elite government, community and youth leaders represent ordinary youth;

- The strong tendency to equate "youth" with male youth appears to enhance damaging stereotypes of males as potentially dangerous and of females as virtually invisible.

Unprecedented numbers of young people in weak and war-torn African nations, in short, tend to be characterized by the gap between what most youth need and what governments and international donors think they need, not to mention what they actually get. The situation thus calls out for a re-think of current approaches to the youth challenge in war-affected Africa.

Defining Youth

One of the reasons that youth challenges are so difficult to address is the lack of agreement about exactly who youth are. There are at least four reasons for this:

First, the reliance on age ranges invites confusion. The United Nations (UN), for example, defines youth as people between ages 15 and 24. Yet this definition overlaps and conflicts with UN definitions for other categories of young people (see Table 1, above):

Adding to the confusion is the fact that African member states, and citizens of those states, often have entirely separate age ranges for youth. The African Union (AU), for example, defines both "youth" and "young people" as "every person between the ages of 15 and 35 years" (African Union 2006: 3).

Second, the trend to equate "youth" mainly with male youth is almost as common in international agencies as in African societies. It is complicated by the fact that the implicit meanings of "youth" and "gender" in the development world tend to be exclusive. This is illustrated by the following comment from a veteran Western donor official. "When you talk about gender," the official remarked, "you're talking about women and girls, while youth is largely about young men. In practice, that's what the terms mean."

Third, being a youth is about much more than age. In many cultures, the time of being a youth is situated between childhood and adulthood. The term captures that stage of life when preparations for becoming an adult man or woman take place. In much of Africa and well beyond, gaining adulthood first requires a formal, recognized marriage and having children. But before this can happen, male youth usually must meet specific marriage prerequisites, such as land ownership, a job with a stable income, a house, or payment of a bride price consisting of livestock or cash. Many males never achieve any of these prerequisites in their lifetimes. Female youth, meanwhile, must wait until someone seeks to marry them. But what if no one does?

Fourth, the youth identity is increasingly hard to escape. It is so difficult, in Africa and elsewhere, that new terms have been invented to characterize the trap that

many youth face. Diane Singerman has coined one of them: "waithood," which applies to Egyptian and other Middle Eastern youth who are waiting to become adults through marriage which, without sufficient funds, cannot occur (2007: 6). In West Africa, Mats Utas uses a term to describe males who are moving beyond the normal age range for youth – yet have failed to achieve social recognition as men. They are called "youthmen."[2]

Class and Marginalization

Quandaries over youth definitions routinely overshadow the underlying separation of youth by social and economic class. Members of the elite youth minority may be deemed youth leaders even when suspicion between elite and non-elite youth is rife and their respective priorities and outlooks conflict. The terms "non-elite youth," "marginalized youth," "excluded youth," "alienated youth," and "ordinary youth" are merely different ways to describe the very same African youth majority.

The reasons for this are manifest across Africa today, particularly in war and post-war Africa. Most youth struggle to attain and retain culturally mandated adulthood prerequisites. Most education systems allow only a small fraction of youth to receive formal schooling beyond primary school, and many do not even finish primary school.[3] Work opportunities are often tenuous, not well paid and of low social status, with the economic opportunities for female youth significantly more constrained than those of their male counterparts. Land or house ownership of any kind is also frequently hard to come by. Marriages, when they occur, mainly constitute unofficial, unrecognized, informal arrangements. Whether within or outside such unsanctioned unions, it appears safe to say that most youth will likely become parents at some point.[4]

These factors and more leave vast youth cohorts on the edges of proper African society, in a state of public unease and embarrassment, and with a strong sense of being overlooked and misunderstood. Seeing oneself as a social outlier naturally informs the identities that youth develop and the directions they follow. War and its messy aftermath scrambles the youth situation further. Wars, for example, make rural areas unstable or unpalatable for many youth. Meanwhile, the attractions and hope that urban life inspires drive many war-affected African youth into cities – post-war cities across Africa feature booming youth populations – while many more youth, it surely seems, aim to get to cities some time soon. Clotting urban streets and neighborhoods, male and female youth in war-affected African cities symbolize how young people seem to be everywhere while at the same time occupying a separate world.

The Ex-Combatant Paradox

Cities regularly contain quantities of ex-combatants, who tend to congregate as "disgruntled" and socially isolated youth. They may not look like much: quite often ragtag, skinny and poorly educated. But such impressions can be deeply misleading. In theatres of war, child and youth soldiers can be exceptionally brave and accept high degrees of risk. They can also be replaced, should they be badly wounded or killed, by newcomers who join or are abducted into fighting forces. At the same time, military commanders frequently perceive a level of capability in youngsters that elders and other influential adults in peacetime simply do not see or appreciate. It is a crucially important dividing line between civilian and military life for young people: youngsters in fighting forces are often quick to demonstrate their daring as fighters and their ability to assume high levels of authority and responsibility. Some even become, officially or unofficially, military officers.

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Paradoxically, many adults in military outfits thus simultaneously exploit young people to horrific ends while recognizing a degree of potential and capability in them

that no one else seems to see. This fuels ex-combatant frustration after wars, when their military talents and achievements are routinely overlooked. Many male and female ex-combatants struggle to gain social acceptance and economic stability. Some never achieve it.

Demographic Distortions

Nothing has inspired more misconceptions about youth and war in Africa than distorted interpretations of demography. To begin with, sub-Saharan Africa's youth demographics are conspicuous. The median age of the region's population is unusually young, standing at a mere 18.6 years (Freemantle 2011: 1). It is the only region in the world where the youth population "is projected to continue growing rapidly into the foreseeable future" (World Bank 2006: 33). The region's birth rates "remain at almost twice that of the next highest region" (Green 2012: 243-4).[5]

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The response from governments and analysts about what is known as the youth bulge (a demographic "bulge" is thought to exist when an immoderate proportion of an adult population consists of youth) has often been narrow and tilted toward the potential security threat that large youth populations appear to present. The emphasis on security and demographics has become a particular clarion call in the North, where influential writers like Robert Kaplan (1994, 1996) and Samuel Huntington (1996) set the stage for exceptional concern regarding unemployed male youth following the terrorist attacks in the U.S. on September 11, 2001. As Urdal observed, youth bulge demographics "have become a popular explanation for current political instability in the Arab world and for recruitment to international terrorist networks" (2007: 90). This is what might be called the "youth bulge and instability thesis," which emphasizes quantitative correlations between large youth populations and political instability and continues to have influence on policymakers.[6]

Yet fundamental information on youth today remains largely neglected. For one, a simple correlation, however powerful, is not a cause. A correlation, in addition, cannot evaluate the role of youth as peace builders in today's post-war nations (most recent African conflicts are now over). Finally and crucially, even when violent conflict emerges, few male youth join in (Barker and Ricardo 2006: 181). The tendency to view male youth in a foreboding light is built on a narrowly conceived set of information: largely consisting of quantitative statistical data, with little or no qualitative information about the priorities, trajectories and perspectives of youth themselves. Critical misperceptions are accepted because the views of ordinary youth do not play a part.

Gender and Threat

Although male and female adolescents and youth are jointly threatened by war and instability, a young person's gender can profoundly determine their options and trajectories. In general, adolescent boys and male youth are more likely to get sucked into war as fighters while girls and female youth play a variety of sexual, domestic and military roles for combatant groups. Both suffer harrowing experiences because of their involvement. However, following wars, boys and male youth are far more likely to receive formal reintegration support. The case of post-war Sierra Leone illuminates how girls and female youth who were associated with military groups "are more likely to slink home anonymously (with their pregnancy or their baby) and try to keep the whole thing quiet" (Shepler 2010: 97).

Boys and male youth who do not become soldiers may assume other risk-taking roles, accepting dangerous work situations such as mining in war zones or launching into urban areas in search of work, money and hopefully something beyond sheer survival. At the same time, boys and male youth quite often have more economic options at their disposal than do their female counterparts.

Indeed, adolescent girls and female youth constitute an exceptionally at-risk population. The case of Mozambique illustrates the range of threats that many

girls face, including orphans who cannot be located and girls who are sold into sexual service or into domestic work, which constitutes "a clear, modern form of international slavery" (Nordstrom 1999: 69). Girls and female youth can become "victims of sexual predation by peacekeepers" while some men turn "to younger and younger girls" in the hope of having sex while not contracting HIV/AIDS. Stories also surfaced in Mozambique of girls (and boys) being killed for body parts that are used in local medicines (Ibid.: 68). To put abuses such as these into context, McKay and Mazurana explain that, "Within strongly patriarchal societies [which are common in Africa]... girls and women are oppressed in countless ways." Beyond the threat and realities of sexual violence perpetrated largely against girls and female youth in war zones, they also may suffer "sexual exploitation and abuse in their communities by boys and men" and may be pressured by their parents "to exchange sex for goods or money" or marry men "who have raped and abused them" (2004: 17).

A Look Ahead

Interviews with youth experts and government and non-government officials indicate that there are a host of current practices that minimize the potential for positive impact on ordinary youth in war and post-war Africa. They include:

- Pre-set, sector-driven institutional priorities for youth that do not align with ordinary youth priorities;
- Narrowly drawn youth definitions;
- The outsized and distorting influence of elite male youth;
- The tendency for international agencies to emphasize numbers-driven youth programs with limited reach;
- Evaluations that stress internal performance indicators over context. Reportedly, some effectively rubber-stamp existing programs.

Given the substantial challenges outlined in this article and surfacing in interviews, developing a new approach to youth challenges in war-affected Africa (and beyond) is recommended. Such an approach should emphasize:

1. *Using qualitative research to gather the priorities of ordinary, marginalized, male and female youth* and use them to directly inform government and international agency priorities. Among the questions the research should probe is how youth achieve adulthood and what happens if they fail.
2. *Employing a youth definition that recognizes class and gender differences as well as marriage and adulthood challenges*.
3. *Emphasizing policy reform over program work*. Government and donor policies have the potential to reach far more youth than the fraction of all youth that programs normally reach. Enlarging the policy advocacy work of international agencies is crucial. This would include advocating against policies that disadvantage youth (such as restrictions on informal economies and limited youth access to housing, land and reproductive health) or facilitate predatory practices against youth (such as the actions of police and other security forces), which collectively run the risk of further marginalizing youth.
4. *Establishing learning environments for all youth work*. Governments and donor and implementing agencies may be under pressure to reach as many youth as possible and demonstrate positive impact right away. However, effectively reaching huge numbers of marginalized youth is difficult. Honest mistakes will be made. Maintaining an ability to reform interventions over time is vital.
5. *Instituting high quality evaluation procedures* that support learning and ensure that youth not benefiting from policies and programs are featured in evaluation and follow-up work.

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Notes

1 All age ranges except those for adolescents are from the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) of the United Nations. The adolescent age range is from UNICEF (2011: 8).

2 Mats Utas writes of Liberian male youth that "many young men lost even the possibility to establish themselves as adults, by building a house, or getting married – even though they continued to become fathers, of children for whom they could not provide. Chronologically, they outgrew youth, but socially they became 'youthmen'" (2005: 150). Utas cites Abubakar Momoh as the source of the "youthmen" term (1999). The Sierra Leonean singer, Steady Bongo (Lansana Sheriff), sings about the difficulties of failed manhood in his 2008 song, "Youthman."

3 The connection between marginalization and limited or no access to quality education is often seen to be emphatic. Williams, for example, argues that "Marginalized children are those who, because of individual or group characteristics, do not receive a basic education" (2007: 2). Concerning conflict and post-conflict contexts, Chaffin has noted that "Education has been established as a core service in emergencies and post-conflict, but mostly at the primary level. Youth [ages] 15-24 are usually left out" (2010: 8).

4 Already, by 1999, Calvès was able to draw from several sources to highlight that "one of the most significant changes" in the "timing and sequencing of family formation events" in sub-Saharan Africa has been "the increasing prevalence of pregnancies and births among adolescents who are not formally married. Because young African women and men postpone first marriage but often do not wait for marriage to become sexually active, premarital pregnancies and births are on the rise" (1999: 291).

5 Although Green mixes "Africa" with "Sub-Saharan Africa" in his book chapter, he appears to be referring exclusively to Sub-Saharan Africa.

6 A particularly influential publication in this regard was *The Security Demographic: Population and Civil Conflict after the Cold War* (Cincotta et al.: 2003). More recent discussions include Goldstone 2010 and Sommers 2011. Sommers 2011 also details the youth bulge and instability thesis.

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