African Youth Transitions to Adulthood and the SDGs

Expert Group Meeting
"The Role of Families and Family Policy in Supporting Youth Transitions"
Doha, 11-12 December 2018

Alcinda Honwana
Inter-Regional Adviser on Social Development policy, UNDESA

Africa is the youngest region in the world, with a population of 420 million aged between 15-35, in 2015, and estimated to rise to 830 million by 2050. But the transitions of young Africans to adulthood have become increasingly uncertain. A growing number of young women and men, both educated and non-educated, find themselves unemployed or underemployed, and must improvise livelihoods in the margins of dominant social and economic frameworks.

In this presentation, I will develop four main arguments:

First, the vast majority of young people in African cities are living in what I refer to as 'waithood', a prolonged, difficult and dynamic transition into adulthood.

Second, young people are responding to the pressures of waithood in multiple ways. Young Africans are not simply seating and waiting for better days, they are creatively fashioning new ways of being and contributing to society.

Third, the young are not indifferent to what is happening around them. They have been moving from dispersed and unstructured interventions into more organized forms of social and policy engagement.

Fourth, young people are already engaged in promoting sustainable development. But the critical question is how to harness the energy and the creativity of the youth to become critical drivers in the implementation of the SDGs.

Waithood: waiting for adulthood

Waithood is a portmanteau of the word *wait* and the suffix *hood*, meaning waiting for adulthood. It constitutes a liminal space in which young people are largely excluded from major

socioeconomic institutions and political processes. Whatever their class background, many youths have no secure jobs and cannot afford to establish families and setup their own households.

Liggey, which means work in *Wolof*, the most widely spoken language in Senegal, is celebrated as an important marker of adulthood. The ability to work and provide for themselves and others defines a person's self-worth and position in the family and in the community. Yet, the majority of young people in Africa, are unable to attain the sense of dignity embedded in the notion of *liggey*.

Joel, a young Mozambican man, shared the following:

"Before, our fathers went to work in the mines in South Africa and came home with enough money to pay lobolo for a girl, build a house, and start a family…"

Indeed, and as Joel points out, becoming a labour migrant in South Africa constituted a rite of passage into adulthood, as jobs in the mines helped young Mozambican men to become husbands, fathers, and providers for their families and, in turn, allowed young women to become wives, mothers, and homemakers.

Today, however, African societies no longer offer reliable pathways to adulthood. Traditional ones have broken down, and new models are yet to be developed. In Liberia and Sierra Leone, for example, the term *youthman* describes the large number of unemployed 35-year-olds and older still struggling to attain social adulthood.

Many young people see waithood as stemming from national and global policies that have failed to reduce poverty and to promote broadly distributed economic growth.

Youth Responses to Waithood

Despite the difficulties, young Africans are not merely sitting and waiting for their situation to change of its own accord. Waithood is propelling them to be creative and to improvise livelihoods outside of dominant economic and familial frameworks.

From interviews with young people, in my book *The Time of Youth* I describe the extemporaneous and precarious nature of their lives in waithood. Young Mozambicans use the Portuguese expression *desenrascar a vida* (to eke out a living); young Senegalese and Tunisians use the French word *débrouillage* (making do); and young South Africans said: *"we are just getting by."*

The idea of *desenrascar a vida, débrouillage or getting by* situates the waithood experience in the realm of improvisation or "making it up as you go along" and entails a conscious effort to assess challenges and possibilities. Young Africans in waithood are creating new dynamic sites for inventiveness and survival in the margins of society.

This is the experience of many young men and women who engage in street vending, cross-border trading and smuggling; those who migrate illegally within the continent or to Europe; and those who end up in criminal networks as swindlers, traffickers, gangsters and fighters.

Some young people become entrepreneurs in the informal economy by taking up activities such as repairing electronic devices; making and marketing clothing and jewellery; and doing hair and nails. Others are creating new artistic, musical, and performance forms; making graffiti, painting murals. They are also use social media, writing blogs and becoming savvy Internet users.

But waithood also represents a period of social political marginalization. Young people often complain about political repression, social injustice, humiliation and loss of freedom and dignity.

Youth Social and Political Agency

Youth have always been involved in processes of social change, by creating the spaces within which they try to get by and assert their rights. Bayat calls these dispersed actions 'non-movements,' described as "quiet and unassuming daily struggles", outside formal institutional channels, in which ordinary activities blend with political activism.

Indeed, if we pay careful attention to the lyrics of their songs, the verses of their poems, the scripts of their plays, and to their discourses and images on Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, WhatsApp and Tweeter we will uncover a strong critique of the *status quo.*

However, over the past decade, young people have been moving from this moderate encroachment on public space, into an open and more vociferous takeover of the national political stage, questioning their waithood status and demanding better futures.

In Tunisia and Egypt young people took to the streets to articulate grievances ranging from unemployment to the denial of free expression and civil liberties, ousting Ben Ali and Mubarak in 2011. In Dakar, rallying around the movement *Y'en a Marre*! (Enough!), Senegalese youths voted massively to remove Abdoulaye Wade in the 2012 elections. In Burkina Faso, in 2015, *Le Balai Citoyen* (The Citizen's Broom), led thousands of young Burkinabe in streets demonstrations

against the government, driving Blaise Compaore out, after 27 years in power. Also, in 2015, South African university students protested against fee increases and called for the transformation of the educational system.

Youth protest took place in many other countries and continue to be a common occurrence in our political and social lives.

Yet, despite these successful protests, young Africans have not seen fundamental changes in their socio-economic and political conditions. Many young activists realize that translating a protest movement into an ongoing political presence that can shape public policies and effect transformational change constitutes an immense challenge.

Notwithstanding, young people continue to engage in civil society associations and other platforms for collective action at various levels, both in the real and the cyber worlds.

Youth and the Implementation of the SDGs

By definition, "sustainable development" entails development to meet present needs without compromising the future. Therefore, youth constitute a critical stakeholder in our efforts to build a sustainable future.

In this regard, UNDESA's Division for Inclusive Social Development (DISD) has been developing a project on "Youth Contributions to Peace and Security in the framework of the Sustainable Development Agenda" in Togo, Burkina Faso and Cote d'Ivoire. The project offers a holistic perspective that connects peace and security to sustainable development, focusing on the everyday life experiences and needs of young people.

The project established youth networks that congregate hundreds of young people trained through this project, and many others mobilized by them. Members of the network are connected by a *WhatsApp* group through which they communicate, exchange and share information, and organized joint activities. The networks have enabled young people to build coalitions and partnerships amongst themselves and establish collective strategies of intervention at various levels.

In Togo, Burkina Faso and Cote d'Ivoire youth networks have been engaging government officials, members of Parliament, civil society and the private sector to discuss policies and programs that affect their lives. They have been organizing training for diverse groups of young people at local and community level, and activities in the areas such as: environmental protection (plastic and

waste collection, neighbourhoods sanitation campaigns, tree planting etc…); public health (blood donations, hospital visits and support for the sick); entertainment, sports and recreation (theatre, musical concerts and sports competitions); ICTs (training programs on the responsible and effective use of social media) among many other.

Despite the challenges they face, the young are already making efforts to better their lives and contribute to a more sustainable future. They are beginning to use their voices and energy to engage in the formulation of public policies and programmes that will have a positive impact on their lives.

However, the key questions are:

(i)   How can these positive experiences be mainstreamed and replicated?

(ii)   How to engage youth, at various levels, in meaningful participatory governance for policies and programmes that matter to them?

(iii)   How to strengthen youth participation and contributions towards the implementation of 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development?