

Africa in the Wider World

Editor

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12 | Banking on Africa's Youth

Nicole Goldin

As Africa's heads of states convene at the White House with President Obama to build stronger relationships, increase trade and investment in the continent, and partner for the development of their future, let us hope youth are central to the conversation. Why?

Of Africa's over 1 billion citizens, roughly 60 percent are below the age of 30; and the number of youth on the continent is expected to double to 600 million by 2050. They are and will be Africa's doctors, teachers, lawyers, entrepreneurs, engineers, farmers, journalists, and political leaders. We know of extraordinary young Africans such as William Kamkwamba, whose clean-technology innovations are changing Africa's energy landscape; Ola Orekunrin, who identified an urgent medical need and started Flying Doctors Nigeria Ltd; and Alengot Oromait, who at age 20 is Uganda's—and Africa's—youngest parliamentarian. While they are not alone in displaying the creativity, tenacity, talent, and courage many of this generation possess, far too few of Africa's youth are being given the opportunity to realize their potential. At the same time, too many young people live in adversity, insecurity, and poverty, and face social, political, or technological disenfranchisement—putting their and their communities' future at risk. More often than not, the quality of life of their parents, siblings, and children rests with them and they hold the key to breaking or sustaining cycles of poverty.

If the continent is to see more Williams, Olas, and Alengots, Africa's youth population cannot be sidelined, for without improving their wellbeing, the continent and the world at large are in jeopardy of missing their economic, security, and development goals. There is an opportunity for Africa's youthful and large labor force to spearhead higher productivity, increased consumption, and an economic dividend—just as East Asia's rapid and sustained “miracle” growth in the 1980s and 1990s was attributed in part to its large, youthful, educated, and highly productive workforce.

But demography does not ensure this destiny.

To realize a “demographic dividend,” population ratios must not only result in a boon to the labor supply, but fertility rates must also decline, thereby lowering the burden placed upon the workforce by the very young and old. Although fertility rates are decreasing in Africa, according to the World Health Organization, the proportion of births that take place during adolescence is still roughly 50 percent in sub-Saharan Africa, compared with about 2 percent in China and 18 percent in Latin America and the Caribbean.

At the same time, it is an open question whether African economies will be able to successfully absorb and maximize the productive capacity of their youth.

Africa needs to generate 1 million new jobs a month just to keep up with new entrants to the jobs' market and at the same time improve the supply side of the labor market by providing young people with good-quality education and training. For example, there

are still gaps in secondary school services, particularly for girls, and in a survey of labor market experts in 36 African countries by the African Economic Outlook, 54 percent identified skills mismatches as a significant constraint to employment and economic growth.

What we know from the study of youth development, however, is that the spheres of their lives are interdependent—if they are healthy, they will learn more; if they learn more, they are more likely to earn more (especially young women, who are then likely to delay marriage and have fewer children); if they have decent employment and a sense of purpose and value, they are more likely to be “good” citizens and less likely to engage in risky or damaging behavior.

Thus, to seize the demographic opportunity and mitigate the challenges, African leaders and their global partners must understand and address youth wellbeing holistically. The recently released inaugural *Global Youth Wellbeing Index*¹ shows that Africa faces pockets of challenges and ample opportunities to improve youths’ current status and chances of future prosperity. For example, though Uganda places in the lowest tier of youth wellbeing, Ugandan youth are faring well in entrepreneurship.

This first Index measures the standing of young people in 30 countries on 40 indicators across six domains of youth wellbeing: citizen participation, economic opportunity, education, health, information and communications technology, and safety and security. Of the 30 countries, eight represent Africa: Egypt, Ghana, Kenya, Morocco, Nigeria, South Africa, Tanzania, and Uganda. Given that a number of indicators are resource or infrastructure oriented, it may not be surprising that overall the African countries fall into the lower tiers of youth wellbeing. Indeed of the eight, only Morocco and Ghana land above the bottom tier of youth wellbeing, and Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, and Nigeria hold the bottom four ranks respectively. However, when looking at each domain, the lower-income sub-Saharan countries, Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda, rise to the top of the citizen participation domain, suggesting they are societies that place a high value on community participation. Further, when looking at indicators assessing youths’ perceptions, African youth are, in most cases, feeling optimistic while their peers in wealthier countries are feeling the opposite. This optimism, coupled with the massive size of the youth population and the potential talent they hold, is an explosive combination that can transform the continent.

In conflict-affected environments, understanding and responding to youth dynamics and demands may be an even more pressing need. In terms of consolidating peace and stability, young people—who are often both victims and perpetrators—must be party to reconciliation, peacebuilding, and political transitions with constructive and meaningful channels in which to participate. Similarly, economic and social recovery efforts must recognize that the unique developmental needs of youth are often interrupted by conflict. They must provide second-chance learning platforms, networks, and inclusive economic and financial systems. African youth can be an asset in rebuilding families and communities beset with conflict, violence, or crime, or if left on the margins, a source of insecurity.

¹ Nicole Goldin, *The Global Youth Wellbeing Index* (Washington, DC: CSIS, April 2014), https://csis.org/files/publication/140401_Goldin_GlobalYouthWellbeingIndex_WEB.pdf.

Investing in youths' needs such as increasing access to information and communications technology, equipping youth with the education and skills demanded by today's job market, ending child marriage and improving healthcare—especially sexual and reproductive health—will help improve their current status and build a stronger foundation for adulthood.

The White House summit serves as an important platform for provoking thought and informing a new era of development cooperation and diplomacy—one that ensures that youth are not only on the agenda, but present at the table to contribute to the policies and development of their own nations. Africa presents the world with great opportunities for political engagement and investment, neither of which will be realized if its young cohort is left behind. A sustainable approach to meeting the aspirations of Africa's youth will require a systems view, one that ensures that policies, institutions, infrastructure, and services are inclusively serving the needs of young people in a meaningful way.

Currently, some 500 young African professional and civil society leaders are embarking on an academic, practical, and cultural learning journey at universities across the United States as Washington fellows, the new flagship of the Obama administration's reimagined Young African Leader's Initiative (YALI). As someone who helped launch YALI in 2010 from the State Department, led the First Lady's Young African Woman Leaders Forum in 2011, and personally observed the 2012 Mentoring Partnership in action, I firmly believe in and know the importance to our collective interests of identifying, supporting, and building a relationship with the continent's emerging business, civic, and political leaders. However, while recognizing and nurturing a promising cadre of young African leaders, the United States and its African partners must also take bigger strides to ensure that all of Africa's roughly 350 million youth are given the opportunity to follow their footsteps. This means serious policy dialogue and the allocation of resources to address youth employment, education, health, safety, and rights at scale. The warning by former secretary of state Hillary Clinton that "the world ignores youth at its peril" is as true for Africa as anywhere. Investing in young Africa's promise is a far better course of action for us all.