



# POLICY BRIEF

## Youth peacebuilders and conflict prevention in West Africa

Charles Ukeje

West Africa's youth landscape has changed significantly in recent decades. Young people are enjoying a vibrant civic and associational life despite the limitations imposed on them through human rights violations, governance deficits and insecurity. Youth peacebuilders in the region engage in conflict prevention mostly within localised and informal spaces. This is both because they lack opportunities and a platform to operate in formal spaces, and to avoid open confrontation with intrusive states.

## Key findings

- ▶ The problems young people face in terms of access to governance spaces and subsidised socio-economic opportunities are directly related to the wider governance, security and developmental problems in West African countries.
- ▶ Encouraged by the context in which they are emerging and operating, as well as by the vibrancy of associational life, youth groups have sprouted across West Africa.
- ▶ Youth peacebuilders are converging around conflict prevention interventions because they are relatively cheap, easy to design and implement, and linked to pressing survival and livelihood issues in their local communities.
- ▶ Youth groups are converging in informal, semi-formal and semi-autonomous spaces where they are able to have greater influence regarding state and society.
- ▶ Apart from their small sizes, poor resources and limited scope of coverage, youth groups are also constrained by multiple legal, administrative and political problems.
- ▶ Youth groups are taking advantage of three resilience options – as evident in their renewed public interest in volunteerism, participation in broad-based youth or civil society coalitions, and the creative use of the social media for advocacy and outreach activities.
- ▶ The current youth bulge in West Africa could present either opportunities or problems for countries, depending on how governments in the region commit to investing in their education, employment and welfare.
- ▶ There is considerable opportunity for youth groups to harness transnational collaborations around cross-cutting regional peace and security issues.

## Recommendations

### To the youth:

- ▶ Forge broad-based national and regional networks or coalitions with peer youth groups to gain visibility, recognition and access to government, institutions and resources to advance youth efforts on peace and security.
- ▶ Focus on enhancing the internal capacities of youth groups and networks in terms of human resources and expertise, and pursuing specialisation within the broader peace and security sector.
- ▶ Identify and establish institutional collaborations with peer institutions across the region, including sharing and exchanging best practices.

### To member states:

- ▶ Consciously move from short-term and ad hoc youth empowerment efforts to substantial and sustainable investment in education, employment opportunities and entrepreneurship for youth.

- ▶ Provide financial, technical and logistical support to youth groups working in the spheres of governance, peace and security, and give them the freedom to carry out their work.
- ▶ Mainstream youth and youth issues in national policies and across every sector, and also back them up with adequate laws and policies, without undue political interference or influence.

### To ECOWAS:

- ▶ Identify with, adequately fund and scale-up the participation of youth in regional peace and security initiatives.
- ▶ Create a dedicated desk, with experienced staff, on youth, peace and security in line with the continental priorities set by the African Union and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS).
- ▶ Encourage member states to invest more in the youth sector and activities, including fostering exchange programmes, lessons learnt and best practice among youth groups.

## Introduction

Africa's young citizens are contributing to several ongoing efforts to directly or indirectly tackle everyday governance, security and developmental problems. Whether they receive due credit for their efforts is questionable, given how many societies tend to malign or pay lip service to youth matters.

Adults often have the misguided view that young people are responsible for undermining public order in many parts of West Africa and across the continent.<sup>1</sup> Such misguided views generally miss several important points.

First, the idea that today's youth are unruly and troublesome is not only grossly exaggerated, but also misses the fact that the few who do fall into that category are themselves products of social decadence, neglect, marginalisation and exclusion.<sup>2</sup>

Second, and closely related to the above, is the general tendency to limit youths' access to economic, social and political opportunities in ways that end up creating among them a feeling of marginalisation, exclusion and alienation. This leads to frustration and pent-up anger towards society and their government.

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Third is that a considerable number of youth are, under difficult conditions, contributing to advancing society and development.

There is a danger in a single story<sup>3</sup> – and that is firstly that society and governments easily become fixated on the negative activities of the minority of youth, rather than the positive contributions of the majority. Secondly a single story ignores or diminishes the agency of youth in tackling the poor governance, security and developmental challenges experienced by countries in the region.

This policy brief sets out to challenge the widespread and mostly negative portrayal of youth in many countries by showing, in contrast, their multiple and considerable contributions to ongoing peacebuilding efforts across West Africa. It provides the context for understanding the multiple ways that youth peacebuilders in West Africa are navigating the numerous – and often complex – challenges that characterise the region.

These include the nature of the region's socio-economic and political environment as well as the inherent internal limitations common to youth groups themselves. It explains why youth groups across West Africa are predominantly involved in conflict prevention more than they are in other spheres of peacebuilding such as peace support operations and post-conflict reconstruction and development.<sup>4</sup>

It also explores what youth peacebuilders perceive as key enablers of their conflict prevention activities, the resilience options they adopt on a daily basis to address them such as encouraging volunteerism, building broader and national coalitions with peer youth groups and the wider civil society networks, and the creative use of social media for advocacy as well as outreach activities. It concludes by identifying some of the key factors hindering their capacity to deliver major interventions.

In terms of methodology, this policy brief is a product of the insights drawn from in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and months of moderated conversations with representatives of youth groups on the African Union (AU) Youth for Peace Africa online platform. The regional consultations for West Africa were held in Abuja, Nigeria, while four others hosted by the AU were held in Asmara, Libreville, Gaborone and Tunis.

Fieldwork was conducted in Guinea-Bissau, Mali and Nigeria to engage with youth peacebuilders in their different spaces. In my overall role as scientific lead for the study mandated by the AU Peace and Security Council, it was possible for me to relate to the diverse spectrum of youth voices and their aspirations across Africa that are represented in this policy brief.

The brief is divided into three parts. The first section provides a short overview of the youth landscape in West Africa. It shows how the region has witnessed a major demographic shift in favour of the youth, yet fails to mainstream them in terms of access to quality education, employment and livelihood opportunities. It further draws brief attention to how young peacebuilders in the region are navigating daily experiences of marginalisation and exclusion.

The second part provides the context of as well as explanations for the predominant focus on conflict prevention among youth groups working in the peace and security sector. The third, before the concluding section, examines the myriad constraints they confront and the three major resilience options identified earlier that they mobilise to address them.

## The youth landscape in West Africa

The population of West Africa more than quadrupled, from about 75 million to 325 million, between 1960 and 2018. The region's demographic outlook mirrors that of the continent, with young people between 15 and 35 classified as 'youth' under the African Youth Charter<sup>5</sup> accounting for more than 60% of the population of most countries.

Although young people in that age bracket account for 46% of the continent's workforce, the AU notes that they are unlikely to get and keep their jobs by 2063.<sup>6</sup> The implication is partly that limiting access to secured opportunities could lead to a feeling of alienation and frustration, even if there is no direct and strong causal link to anchor the supposition that the youth bulge automatically translates into youth violence.

Space constraints would not allow this policy brief to delve into greater detail regarding the complex social, economic, political and environmental factors that continue to hinder the full inclusion, participation and mainstreaming of youth in governance and development.

However it's important to note that a major challenge today is that the demographic surge towards the youth is happening at the same time that most countries lack the capacity to absorb them into gainful employment. It also comes at a time when governments are struggling to overcome the challenges hampering investment in adequate resources towards harnessing young people's potential for growth and development.

Recognition of this shortcoming, as well as the long-term and overall implications of it, led the AU to adopt a Roadmap on Harnessing the Demographic Dividend through Investments in Youth – pursuant to an AU Assembly decision that adopted the same theme for 2017.<sup>7</sup>

Nonetheless, young people are increasingly occupying spaces where they are finding new meaning and relevance in community service and are setting up multiple forms of associational networks to respond to societal needs. While some of these networks complement state efforts, others converge in informal, semi-formal and semi-autonomous spaces that are exclusive to them to promote peace and security initiatives.

Either way, West Africa is experiencing a steady gradual transformation and blossoming of associational life

among its youth that is yielding benefits, particularly in the peace and security arena.

By 'associational life',<sup>8</sup> I refer to the complexity of social – and sometimes politicised – relationships that evolve from the common and multiple pursuits of a group of individuals and associations. This is mostly outside the direct purview of the state, even if this is shaped in different ways by the state.

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For youth groups in the region and across the continent, the character of the associational life they cultivate or embrace is shaped by how they perceive the changing nature of threats to peace and security they encounter on a daily basis. It's also shaped by how effectively the state can exercise the writ of governance and deliver on promises of growth and development. It also depends on the extent of internal limitations that youth groups routinely face as they seek to establish autonomous spaces and more amplified voices to contribute to society and governance in meaningful and impactful ways.

Typically youth groups operate in contexts where they are constrained by threats directly or indirectly linked to the activities of state and non-state armed groups that are increasingly assuming transnational dimensions.

The region may not have the protracted armed conflicts and full-scale civil wars it had during the 1990s. However citizens continue to face threats linked to elections, zero-sum politics and violent transitions; land, natural resources and communal conflicts; religious extremism, insurgency and terrorist activities; and climate change-induced crises leading to forced mass displacements.

States have limited capacity to effectively respond to the above and other structural root causes of conflict. These include socio-economic challenges, particularly widening inequality gaps; a decline in the quality of service delivery and provision of basic goods such as education and healthcare; corruption; and weak or dysfunctional justice systems and institutions. This has contributed to the emergence and proliferation of youth groups as part of broader civil society initiatives to tackle the many social, economic and governance problems.

However many youth groups are themselves constrained by internal limitations or contradictions. This is besides the plethora of problems in the legal, institutional and political contexts in which they operate. For the most part, the key internal limitations that youth groups working in the peace and security sector face are due to their weak or non-existent institutional capacities to attract the kinds of expertise and resources required to operate.

This also explains why they generally tend to be smaller in size, can take on only a few issues, operate mostly at the community level, and are generally reluctant to innovate, expand or join broader national or regional coalitions for visibility and greater impact.

## Why youth focus on conflict prevention

The conflict prevention activities youth peacebuilders are involved in vary depending on multiple factors or circumstances. They engage in activities regarding early warning, prevention of violent extremism, and that promote dialogue among disputing parties at communal levels. They are also involved in issues around voter education and mobilisation, youth participation in governance and advocacy on behalf of vulnerable groups, as well as socio-economic empowerment, environmental activism, and neighbourhood security watch.

As part of concerted efforts to enhance their participation in peacebuilding, youth are mobilising and converging around the spectrum of conflict prevention activities in ways that could alter the stereotypes that portray them in a bad light.

Building Blocks for Peace in Nigeria, for example, engages in early warning, organises peacebuilding and vocational training to minimise vulnerabilities to exploitation and increases awareness of their positive contributions. They have also facilitated dialogue and mediation in communal issues, which to a large extent has prevented the escalation to violence.

In Ghana, the Young Peace Brigades developed a vibrant community engagement strategy to win the confidence of key stakeholders to address the chieftaincy and boundary dispute in the Obuasi area of the country's Ashanti region.<sup>9</sup> The National Forum of Insertion for Extra-School and Professional Training (Fórum Nacional da Inserção para Formação Extra Escolar e Profissional da Guiné Bissau, FONAIPEP) in Guinea-Bissau also successfully brokered the deadlock between government and the national teachers' union which saw the closure of all schools for almost 10 months.<sup>10</sup>

Other young networks focus on actions around education, public sensitisation and interfaith dialogue to promote peace and social cohesion. Children and Young People Living for Peace in Nigeria implements targeted advocacy programmes to mitigate and bridge gaps for community cohesion especially between youth and religious leaders in communities.

The Muslim Scouts of Mali, with over 3 000 members in Bamako and other administrative regions, has carried out several activities in this regard including a major interfaith conference at The School of Peacekeeping Alioune Blondin Beye in 2018.



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Evidence from the field suggests that when they pursue their activities under a wider umbrella youth or civil society coalition, or engage in issues that are topical and have broader public appeal, youth interventions can easily contribute to creating spaces for dialogue and the brokerage of peace.

Despite the dangers of open and direct confrontation with the state on sensitive governance issues, many countries in West Africa are seeing the emergence of youth groups that are becoming more constructive and visible within the political sphere.

In Nigeria, for example, the Youth Initiative for Advocacy, Growth and Advancement, YIAGA Africa, was at the forefront of the successful campaign that led to the passing of the Not Too Young To Run bill into law just before the 2019 general elections. The law reduced the legal age to contest for elective positions, which eventually contributed to a visible increase in youth political participation nationwide.

Quoting the Independent National Electoral Commission, YIAGA Africa reported that youth between the ages of 18 and 35 accounted for 51.11% of the 84 004 084 registered voters, out of which 46.3% turned out to vote in the 2019 presidential and National Assembly elections. Overall, also, youth candidacy increased from 21% to 34.2% between the 2015 and 2019 elections.<sup>11</sup>

In The Gambia, youth-led groups such as Making Our Visions and Aspirations Reality and the National Youth Parliament (NYP) were actively involved in national bipartisan efforts to promote peace and pro-democracy campaigns to encourage citizens' participation and to generally foster youth participation in decision-making processes ahead of the 2016 December presidential elections.

Following the inauguration of a new democratic government, the NYP has continued to create local awareness about civic rights and participation as well as launch accountability platforms for public officials to openly give account of their stewardship.

In 2012, Open Mali played a key role in ending the political stalemate between youth and government that eventually led to a commitment by the latter to hold general elections in 2018. The government acknowledged the success of the workshops in offering a roadmap for transition and a platform for national dialogue on contentious issues relating to citizenship,

governance, human rights and the negative effects of climate change on peace and security.

Finally, youth groups are responding to problems linked to their limited access to socio-economic opportunities such as quality education and gainful employment. They are realising that the little access young people have to gain proficiency in vocational training and entrepreneurship, for example, further constrains livelihoods and survival; and this increases their inequality and frustration with society. Consequences include young people's vulnerability to becoming targets of recruitment by gangs, extremist groups and trafficking networks, among others.

Youth groups are now establishing start-up businesses and ideas incubation laboratories that not only keep them busy but also open up opportunities for youth employment in diverse sectors such as telecommunications, music, film, fashion and the arts.

In Guinea-Bissau, the Business Incubation and Development Centre is a youth-led initiative supporting young people to create serious, healthy and supportive business ecosystems, with particular emphasis on economy, agribusiness, information and communications technology, small-scale industry and crafts, and tourism. In 2019, Messengers of Peace – Liberia launched the Technology for Peace Boot Camp to improve computer literacy in rural Liberia.

It also encouraged young people to harness the vast positive potential of the internet, and to network, build brands, access opportunities and spread messages of peace. It aimed to stimulate the interest of youth in internet peacebuilding activities, and generally to monitor youth participation in community development and peacebuilding.

Although a pan-regional consciousness hasn't matured to the point that youth groups in different countries across West Africa can tap into and benefit from transnational engagements, the potential exists for this to happen in the near future.

One group that already recognises the value of multi-country networking is the *Jeunesse G5 Sahel* based in Bamako, which currently operates in the G5 Sahel countries – Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger. The group's leadership recognises that the youth question is connected to many governance, developmental and security problems faced by the Sahel region.

In May 2019 the group launched the second strategy document on how to revamp the ‘fight against extremism and radicalisation of youth’. It had far-reaching proposals on how member states, regional economic communities and regional mechanisms, the AU, United Nations and G5 Sahel countries could help harness the youth dividend.

Invariably as more youth groups engage in peer-to-peer exchange and learning in the near future, they could increasingly bridge the gaps in regional networking.

The Economic Community of West African States’ (ECOWAS) recognition of the opportunities for viable partnerships with youth networks through its dedicated youth development centre in Ouagadougou and youth academy in Bamako could contribute to upscaling such initiatives.

In addition, maintaining a well-resourced and fully fledged youth, peace and security unit within the ECOWAS Commission, as the AU has done with the creation of the Youth for Peace Africa Programme within the Peace and Security Department, would bring about greater concentration, convergence and coherence, beyond current ad hoc and disjointed efforts.

Young peacebuilders tend to focus on conflict prevention, merely touching on other spheres of peace and security such as conflict management and resolution, peace support operations and post-conflict reconstruction and development.

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The reasons for this are important. First, the conflict prevention issues they focus on tend to relate directly to survival and livelihood within their immediate communities. Second, conflict prevention interventions require far less capital to design, implement and accomplish key milestones than other peace and security activities. This is in terms of financial, technical, human and logistical resources.<sup>12</sup>

Third, the skills and competencies required to engage in basic conflict prevention activities are relatively accessible

and easy to acquire for young people; many merely involving improvisation and learning by doing.

Young people consider conflict prevention to be relatively less state-centric and politicised

Finally, young people consider conflict prevention to be relatively less state-centric and politicised than others key aspects of peace and security like disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration, and peace support operations, in which the state is overtly and predominantly in charge.

## Constraints and resilience options

The youth groups that participated in the regional consultation, field visits and online discussions generally reported being constrained by issues relating to their weak organisational structures, limited expertise and competences of their members, poor resource bases and resource mobilisation capabilities, and limited scope or coverage of their activities.

Most youth groups are small, poorly resourced and so locally embedded that they end up becoming products of specific needs that change with circumstances. They are also constrained by external factors such as legal and administrative restrictions imposed by government, volatile and murky political contexts, and the sometimes obtrusive disposition of state officials towards civil society organisations, including youth groups. All these, for the most part, make the agency of less visible in critical policy spaces.

Nonetheless, the spaces for youth civil society organisations to freely operate and thrive have expanded considerably in the past decade, particularly as the benefits of uniting under single, stronger umbrellas (rather than acting in silos) are recognised.

The prospects will get even better as more youth groups participate in transnational networks that prioritise peer-to-peer learning and exchanges. Already they are engaging in multiple activities such as volunteerism, setting up coalition or umbrella groups, and using social media for advocacy and outreach activities in ways that allow them to overcome daily issues, or to reposition themselves to achieve better intervention results.



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Recently West Africa has seen an increase in the number of young people volunteering their time, expertise and resources to support societal causes or interventions that improve peace and security.

Evidence from interactions with youth leaders and members shows that volunteerism firstly helps them keep busy during the holidays, or over the 'gap' period between graduation and employment. It can also be a 'side hustle' that gives them the satisfaction of civic engagement and responsibility. Also, volunteering experience on their résumés and future job applications enhances job prospects.

Second, they are forming or joining umbrella youth and civil society coalitions or networks as a way to navigate or overcome some of the problems they face. Networks enable economies of scale that help youth groups overcome problems more easily than smaller and less experienced individual groups.

Finally, youth groups recognise the importance of the media, especially social media, in advancing and maintaining robust engagements. This explains why youth resilience is increasingly expressed through new social media as well as in various art forms such as poetry, music, visual and creative arts. These platforms and avenues allow them to communicate their emotions and priorities, tell compelling stories about their daily lived experiences, and showcase how they perceive society and its numerous contradictions.

## Conclusion

The current youth bulge that West Africa faces presents both challenges and opportunities to promote and maintain peace and security. One immediate response is for West African governments to prioritise investment in and access to qualitative education, employment creation and conducive environments to foster entrepreneurship among the region's youth. They could do this either individually or collectively under ECOWAS. This would help achieve the 'new' goal of an ECOWAS for the people.

As long as the values, norms, customs, practices, mindsets, structures and institutions of state and society in the region are skewed against the well-being and mainstreaming of youth in development, young people could end up turning against the society that failed to protect them and secure the future they wanted.

## Notes

- 1 C Ukeje, Youth Movements and Youth Violence in Nigeria's Oil Delta Region, in C Daiute, Z Beykont, C Higson-Smith and L Nucci (eds.), *International Perspectives on Youth Conflict and Development*, New York: Oxford University Press, 289-304, 2006; also, C Ukeje and A Iwilade, A Farewell to Innocence? African Youth and Violence in the Twenty-First Century, *International Journal of Conflict and Violence*, 6, 2, 339-351, 2012.
- 2 I Bangura, Promoting Youth Inclusion and Participation for Better Peace-building in the Mano River Basin, Institute for Peace and Security Studies, Policy Brief, 13, 06, March to April 2019.
- 3 C Adichie, The danger of a single story, TEDGlobal 2009, [www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda\\_ngozi\\_adichie\\_the\\_danger\\_of\\_a\\_single\\_story](http://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_ngozi_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story), 2009.
- 4 Interviews with leaders of youth groups during regional consultations and field visits across West Africa, August to January 2019. The regional consultation for West Africa held in Abuja, Nigeria, in October 2019 attracted over 30 leaders and members of youth groups drawn from 14 West African countries.
- 5 Although most African countries have aligned themselves with this AU-defined youth age bracket, there are still considerable variations in the classification of youth from one country to another, and between major inter-governmental institutions on the continent. The African Youth Charter was adopted in July 2006 but was only entered into force 13 years later, on 8 August 2019. See African Union, [https://au.int/en/treaties/african\\_youth\\_charter](https://au.int/en/treaties/african_youth_charter), accessed on 20 May 2020.
- 6 African Union Roadmap on Harnessing the Demographic Dividend through Investments in Youth, in Assembly/AU/Dec. 601 (XXVI) of 2017.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 For a short exposé on associational life, read the excellent review article by M Bratton, Beyond the State: Civil Society and Associational Life in Africa, *World Politics*, 41, 3, 407-430, 1989.
- 9 General discussion and personal exchanges with a representative of the group during the AU Youth for Peace Regional Consultation for West Africa, Abuja, September 2019.
- 10 Interviews with several youth leaders – including a focus group discussion with members of FONAIPEP – in Bissau, the capital of Guinea-Bissau, August 2019.
- 11 YIAGA Africa, How Youth Fared in the 2019 Elections, Abuja, June 2019.
- 12 On a more global scale, this was also the conclusion of the UN High-Level Independent Panel on Peace Operations which amplified the cost-effectiveness of conflict prevention when compared with other types of peace and security interventions. See UN, Report of the Independent High-Level Panel on Peace Operations presented to the Secretary-General on 16 June 2015, [https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/HIPPO\\_Report\\_1\\_June\\_2015.pdf](https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/HIPPO_Report_1_June_2015.pdf), accessed on 29 May 2020.

## About the author

Charles Ukeje is a professor in International Relations at Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Nigeria. He served as lead consultant for the African Union Peace and Security Council-mandated study on the roles of youth in, and their contributions to, peace and security in Africa; and is the lead author of a forthcoming report on the same topic.

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