COVID-19 and it’s Impact on Youth Participation in Development in West Africa

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Introduction

The coronavirus health crisis has exacerbated the challenges of youth participation and inclusion in development in West Africa. The impact of this crisis has been twofold. On one hand it has had serious impacts on youth, while on the other hand it has made it possible to experience the innovative potential of the youth and their ability to contribute to development. Beyond the challenges it has generated, the Coronavirus crisis also offers States the opportunity to rethink their national policy to strongly include the continent’s young men and women, and to consider the need for specific youth protection.

Although young people represent more than half of the African population, their participation and inclusion in the process of development and sustainable peace building in West Africa remains low. According to the UN Security Council in its resolution 2250, the youth play a key role in conflict prevention and resolution and in the sustainability of peace as well. Consequently, peacebuilding and the prevention of conflict and violence can further be promoted through youth inclusive governance in this part of the continent where development processes are slow, and conflicts are more recurrent.

The issue of youth participation and inclusion has become even more relevant considering the Coronavirus which took over the world since December 2019 and kept tightening its grip in the first quarter of 2020. In this regard, the World Health Organisation (WHO) officially declared the Coronavirus a global pandemic on March 11, 2020. As a result, countries around the world have embarked on a prevention, control, and response approach towards the pandemic. Ban on public gatherings along other measures have resulted in the closure of schools, places of worship and other activities that required people to gather. Several West African countries have decreed either partial (Benin) or total (Ghana) lockdown to reduce the risk of contamination.

Our analysis will discuss, on the one hand, how the various measures have affected all social strata, particularly young people, with emphasis on the access to education, employment, civic participation and the level of gender inequality. On the other hand, the analysis also shows that the youth, apart from being mere victims passively suffering the impact of the Coronavirus, have also proved that they are actors to be taken seriously in the management of the pandemic. The latter did not remain idle even though they were affected by the pandemic. In a context where the participation and contribution of young people in the management of the pandemic is widely challenged, our research shows that they did indeed and significantly assist I the fight and management of the coronavirus.
1. The Impact of the Pandemic on Youth Education and Employment

In the area of education and training, the disruption of the school/university calendar across the continent in a bid to limit the spread of the virus is widening the gap of unequal access to education which is taking a toll on the academic performance of students. School closures due to the Coronavirus have affected more than one billion students worldwide. According to the International Labour Organisation (ILO)\(^2\), more than 267 million young people were already out of school, without jobs or training in Africa\(^3\). The ILO predicts that this number will increase as a result of the pandemic.

With respect to the socio-economic and employment impacts, this crisis has contributed to the rise in youth unemployment. Prior to the emergence of the pandemic, the informal sector absorbed about 93.4% of the African population\(^4\), with more than 96% of young people in sub-Saharan Africa found in this sector and over 70% of them with insecure jobs. According to an ILO report published in April, the crisis led to a 60% drop in the incomes of informal workers worldwide in the first month, with Africa and America having the highest rates in terms of lower incomes estimated at 81%. Young people facing such high unemployment and underemployment are even more susceptible to this crisis. An ILO survey to assess the impact of the pandemic on youth employment shows that at least one in six young people lost their jobs during the crisis. The lockdown coupled with other measures, such as the suspension of the certain trade activities in several African countries forced thousands of young people to stay at home, resulting in a reduction in their income. This situation increases the already existing inequality in equitable access to basic needs.

2. The Impact of the Pandemic on Civil Participation and Gender Equality

In terms of youth participation and engagement, it is important to differentiate between civic and political engagement.

In civic engagement, the right to freedom of association was dealt a major blow following Covid-19. This reduced the level of mobilisation and engagement of young people significantly. Despite the restrictions on freedom of association, most young people were resilient and proactive in managing the impact of the crisis on their communities. As an illustration, we can cite the Burkinabe artiste Malika Ouattara and the Malian activist Adam who respectively used their influence to raise awareness about Covid-19 and distributed hygiene kits to help fight the spread of the virus. This strong mobilisation of the youth in the fight against the Coronavirus illustrates their strong potential and should lead to the adoption of policies that encourage active involvement of the youth in the management of crises; be it health like the coronavirus or political, social and economic.

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1 UNESCO : Coronavirus Impacts Education
3 Covid-19 : More than one in six young people out of work due to the crisis (ILO)
With respect to political participation, however, measures restricting fundamental freedoms, if left unchecked, could lead to a decline in the political engagement of young people followed by low voter turnout in the upcoming electoral processes in Benin, Ghana, Côte d’Ivoire, Niger among others.

It should also be noted that the Coronavirus pandemic may, if not yet, undermine efforts already made on some of the issues of concern. These include the issue of gender equality, the participation of girls and women, and women’s empowerment. This is not because to changing priorities and declining attention to these issues, rather, the impact of crisis management initiatives. As Mohammad Naciri, head of UN Women in Asia, stated, “Women are hit harder by economic repercussions such as those induced by COVID-19, especially since they work proportionally more than men in precarious jobs.”

The tide of gender-based inequalities may be greater in the aftermath of the crisis. Regarding employment for instance, more women are likely to lose their jobs and are more affected by job loss than men. Similarly, a study conducted by some civil society organisations including WANEP (West Africa Network for Peacebuilding) highlights the impacts of the pandemic on women in all sectors of activity in West Africa. Thus, the fight to reduce teenage pregnancy, physical violence, and other gender-based violence is likely to be highly compromised.

All this highlights the need to address the major challenges related to the effective involvement of youth in governance and development process in West African countries and for an inclusive and effective post-Coronavirus recovery plan. That is to say that “a society that cuts itself off from its youth severs its lifeline; it is condemned to bleed to death” as pointed out by the former Secretary of the United Nations, Kofi Annan.

3. A Strong Involvement of Youth in Crisis Management

Although a small fraction of the vulnerable are young people, it does not make them completely immune to Coronavirus. Young West Africans, while prone, are a formidable tool in the battle against the coronavirus. No sector has been able to resist the genius of imagination, innovation and proactivity of African youth right from initiatives that act as barriers to the spread of the disease, through to support/accompaniment actions aimed at mitigating the frustrating effects induced by the implementation of measures taken by States to counter a large-scale spread. Multiple anti-Covid actions carried out in West Africa, were developed and implemented by young women and men, individually and collectively, for the well-being of their communities.

As influential people, young people have developed resourceful ideas, exploiting all resources, especially Information and Communication Technology (ICT), to contribute to the management initiatives and to assist governments and communities in the implementation of the measures taken. Many applications such as AntiCoro in Côte d’Ivoire, SOS-Covid in Cameroun, « Covid-19 Auto-Contrôle » in Benin developed by the digital sector to enable users to self-diagnose, hence help reduce congestion in hospitals already in difficulty. Moreover, playful awareness-raising applications such as Gamifikathon have emerged in Benin.

Social media was also used effectively in this youth fight against the Coronavirus. The medium was used to raise awareness of the emerging Coronavirus pandemic, its transmission patterns, and the challenges to restricting the virus’s large-scale spread. Similarly, in order to minimise the risk of a decline in academic performance, young people have developed e-learning

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5 COVID-19 and gender equality, G7 countries must ensure gender equality for a better future for women at work, International Labour Organisation
6 COVID-19: What are the gender implications?
7 Putting gender equality at the heart of the post-COVID-19 economic recovery.
8 Covid-19 a Threat to SDG 5.3: Eliminating Female Genital Mutilation Technical Note, April 2020
9 A directory of innovative initiatives developed in the Francophone space is available.
applications, such as SCHOOLAP-cours online in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, aimed at making official education content available to all through an online application; or VIRTUAPROFS-Educational assistance in Niger for assistance and tutoring for primary and secondary level pupils available 7 days a week. Virtual WhatsApp and Messenger (Facebook) classes bringing together learners and teachers for small tutorials have been developed in this same way. In all, teacher-student groups on social media have multiplied.

About the provision of services, delivery services have increased, especially in the restaurant industry. This enabled government staff and other workers, particularly in West African states who were on a partial lockdown, to place their orders and have them delivered without having to move. For instance, the “Yes Food” and “Diaym Mbourou” (‘sell me bread’ in French) programmes set up by the young Omar Basse, co-founder of the Yobante Express marketplace, which allows food to be delivered to all regions of Senegal with a maximum limitation of physical contact. Likewise, fast lunch delivery services were offered by young people on social media platforms such as WhatsApp and Facebook.

For example, youth associations such as the VIAME association in Benin, thanks to the ACoR Stop COVID 19 initiative, have travelled to the most remote communities, raising awareness on the wearing of masks, social distancing and offering anti-covid-19 kits; or the “One person, one disinfectant” operation of the Local Youth Corner association in Cameroon, which aims to prevent the spread of the virus among poor populations. Some youth used their imagination to create automatic solar-powered handwashing machines in Benin, Ghana and Senegal. For example, a young engineer in Ghana set up a solar-powered automatic handwashing sink that detects human hands. In Benin, the same is true of the invention of an automated handwashing machine using solar energy by students at the University of Abomey-Calavi.

Young people are without doubt the key actors in the fight against the Coronavirus pandemic because of the extent and quality of their contribution and collaboration with West African governments, which has developed through this crisis. A collaboration between authorities and the youth in the management of the pandemic has been initiated in many West African countries. For example, the official website of the Benin government has a section that lists the initiatives implemented by young people in Benin in response to the virus.
This unsolicited mobilisation of youth against the Coronavirus pandemic is indeed evidence that African youth can play a key role in creating an Africa free of the problems that have long undermined it. As the driving force of the continent’s development, the youth should no longer be left on the side-lines waiting for “the future”.

Now is the time to involve young people in governance, development and in the building of lasting peace on the continent.

However, while it is true that African states were already struggling to adopt an inclusive youth and gender policy, the current pandemic soon focused on the challenges related to this issue. Consequently, the commitment of West African States to promote and facilitate the participation of youth in society requires bold actions in the face of the devastating consequences of the pandemic on this youth.


As demonstrated earlier, the coronavirus health crisis has increased the challenges of youth participation and inclusion in development in West Africa. Providing a safe space for greater youth participation requires that more efforts be made to address some of the challenges.

The health crisis beyond the challenges generated, however, also provides an opportunity for states to rethink their national policies in favour of a better inclusion of young men and women in West Africa; and to consider the specific needs of youth protection and development.
Indeed, the world after the coronavirus will face a huge challenge of reformation in all sectors. This is therefore an opportunity for leaders to integrate the youth layer into decision-making bodies to ensure their involvement. The post-Covid-19 world could be characterised by high unemployment and increased financial crisis. Preliminary estimates by the ILO show an increase in global unemployment of up to 5.3 million, which could increase the vulnerability of young people and lead to radicalisation and violent extremism. It is therefore important to proactively take appropriate measures to ensure that young people are considered in all processes and policies for the recovery of Africa in the aftermath of the pandemic.

As actors and at the same time victims of crises, clear strategies need to be developed to prevent this vulnerable group of young people from being exploited by the extremist and terrorist groups developing on the continent.

The first area of urgent concern is youth education and literacy; two important forces in youth empowerment. To achieve this, educational policies should be reviewed and even readapted to provide proper education to learners as soon as possible. African leaders will also need to work to improve upon education online to enable young learners to work from home and provide them with appropriate learning materials. States should also reinforce their policies for youth literacy, especially those in rural areas.

A second area of concern worsened by the current crisis is the persistent issue with youth employment and empowerment in West Africa. As highlighted above, youth employment is an area that has been highly impacted by the effects of the Coronavirus. Thus, there is a need for African states to improve the socio-economic well-being of young people. In order to do so, it is therefore necessary to adopt educational policies integrating “education, employment and social protection” that are adequate to facilitate the transition from school to employment, reinforced by a guarantee plan for the benefit of the youth, and favouring youth entrepreneurship and professional integration. Effective participation and inclusion of young people in West Africa cannot be achieved as long as the employment problem persists.

Another area that require great attention is that of digital access and connectivity in African countries, particularly in the rural communities. In terms of cost, efficiency and coverage, access to the Internet still leaves much to be desired in most African countries. This health crisis has shown that it is impossible to provide education for young people with the usual methods adopted in our education systems, which are not conducive to distance learning. Hence, digital technology should play a fundamental role in the education and training of African youth, especially in times of crisis. Promoting digital inclusion and connectivity and integrating digital education into the school curriculum are a necessity.

To promote the political participation of young people, authorities would have to develop strategies to bring them closer to major decision-making bodies. Visiting groups or internships in national parliaments (participation in committee work and Parliamentary sessions) and in government (Joining the Cabinet of Ministers) would...
develop the youth’s interest in public governance. Moreover, the legal framework of most African countries remains a barrier preventing the effective participation of young people in decision-making. Why not, for instance, standardise the minimum age for voting and eligibility? This will help to create an atmosphere for greater participation of the youth. Likewise, guarantee freedom of association, public demonstration and expression, including that of the press and on social media, so that activities on social media are no longer censored. In the end, any youth who disseminates or shares information is no longer treated as a common criminal. The involvement of young people in debates and issues concerning them should be systematic in order to better take into account their point of view and to make use of their creative potential. Similarly, it is necessary to restore trust and dialogue between “the elite and young people” for inclusive governance in the aftermath of the crisis and the consolidation of young people’s civic engagement.

**Conclusion**

As youth participation is a process with diverse characteristics, the well-being and protection of fundamental rights are necessary for better participation of young people in post-pandemic recovery and development. The Coronavirus crisis beyond its consequences is an opportunity for West African states to rethink their youth policy. The development of a nation cannot be achieved through a policy that does not integrate the active population in that society. The reforms mentioned above are only possible if there is a firm political will on the part of states to include young people. Civil society organisations therefore have an important role to play in advocating for the implementation at the state level, the various resolutions on youth participation taken by both the United Nations and the African Union. They should contribute to making youth participation a reality, as influencers and agents of social transformation, sustainable development, and peacebuilding in the region.