



## **The African Youth Charter: An Opportunity for African Leadership in Development**

Layusa Isa-Odidi

August 2009

### **Introduction**

The adoption of the African Youth Charter (AYC) by the 7<sup>th</sup> Ordinary Session of the African Union (AU) Assembly on July 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2006, represented a concrete step towards the prioritization of youth within the activities of the continental body. Now, with the Charter coming into force in August of 2009, it is important to explore whether it truly supplements the youth movement, creating avenues for youth participation, and what must be done to improve and ensure its efficacy.

This article will briefly analyze the AYC, highlighting its most significant provisions and discussing the opportunity that Africa has to spur its own development by first enabling the youth to develop themselves. It will close with a three-point plan for African leaders to follow in order to capture the full momentum of this initiative.

### **Status of the Charter**

In July of 2009, after the 15<sup>th</sup> legal instrument was deposited, the African Union announced that the Charter would come into force during August of 2009.<sup>1</sup> An additional three countries have announced their ratification but have yet to deposit the original version of the legal document to the African Union Commission. About half of the remaining African countries have signed, but not ratified the Charter. Activists across the continent continue to work towards further popularizing the document.

### **African Leadership in Development**

The African Youth Charter is the first document of its kind intended to be adopted across an entire region. While giving a presentation at a recent Africa-Europe Training Course, which, with the support of the Council of Europe North-South Centre, brought together youth from the two continents, the vice-president of the European Youth Forum expressed his hope that those working “in the North-South Centre take this opportunity to learn from [their] African partners.”<sup>2</sup> The Charter is a model that can be adapted by any community wishing to protect and develop its youth population. It can stand as an example for the world to follow in the area of youth rights, which is often forgotten between general human rights and children’s rights.

It is logical that Africa lead in this area, given the special role of youth on the continent. Nowhere in the world will youth be such a large determinant of future development. 20.4% of the population is between the ages of 15 and 24 alone.<sup>3</sup> Another 42% of the continent’s inhabitants are now below the age of 15. These 400 million people will become ‘youth’ – within the definition of the Charter – over the course of the next two decades.<sup>4</sup> Providing African youth with the tools and protection to develop themselves will enable them to

---

<sup>1</sup> African Youth Charter to Enter Into Force. AU Press Release No. 142. July 20, 2009.

<sup>2</sup> First African University for Youth and Development. European Youth Forum. June 22, 2009. <<http://www.youthforum.org/en/node/1107>>, accessed June 25<sup>th</sup>, 2009.

<sup>4</sup> World Youth Report. Department of Economic and Social Affairs, United Nations Publications. p. 80.

<sup>4</sup> 2008 Africa Population Data Sheet. The Population Reference Bureau. 2008. <<http://www.prb.org/pdf08/africadatasheet2008.pdf>>, accessed June 30<sup>th</sup>, 2009.

develop their countries in turn. Perhaps more important, the Charter's formula of providing rights while exacting duties creates an internal symbiotic relationship which serves as a guarantee that African progress will not be forced to rely on foreign intervention.

### **The Need for a Separate Treaty for Youth**

Some might question the need for a document geared towards youth. Shouldn't their sheer numbers and the coverage provided by the numerous existing African human rights treaties suffice? However, relying exclusively on previous treaties does not take into account the specific barriers and, in some cases, deliberate exclusion, youth face. In both the political and business sectors, those making the decisions ignore, and sometimes even fear, the fact that youth are considerably more experienced with the changing technology and effects of accelerated globalization that drive international relations and the global economy.

In fact, the very way in which the Charter defines 'youth' – 15-35 years – is telling. One would think that, given that the median age in Africa is considerably lower than that in the rest of the world, the definition of youth would follow a similar pattern; yet, the reality is the exact opposite. This age range, far less arbitrary than it may originally appear, represents those who go unheard by their governments. African politics, at all levels, are currently dominated by men over the age of 40, several of whom have held their positions for decades, including some presidents (Col. Muammar Gaddafi of Libya, 40 years; Denis Sassou-Nguesso of the Congo Republic, 30 years; Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe, 29 years). Even at home, many young Africans are told not to question their elders and this sentiment permeates much of society. Consequently, it has been extremely difficult for young people to have their voices heard, let alone responded to. Only when they are considered worthy of the same rights and respect as their elders could the need for a separate youth charter possibly wane.

### **Analysis of the Charter**

#### *The AYC vs. Other Related Documents*

Although the preamble of the Charter maintains a focus on youth, the first nine articles closely resemble those one might expect from, and, indeed, can find in, almost any human rights document, including the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights. The following articles concerning development, participation, the national youth policy, and education, form the crux of the document's unique importance; these will be discussed in more depth below.

The Charter is also special in that it is the first to comprehensively address the rights to be provided for and the responsibilities to be expected from African youth. European nations have addressed some youth issues with documents such as the Youth Information Charter and other countries have certainly show their youth organizations a great deal of support. However, this is the first time such an all-encompassing document has been intended for adoption by over 50 nations.

#### *Why the AYC is an Effective Document*

As a document drafted primarily by those whom it is intended to effect, the Charter is very much aligned with the needs of *African* youth, rather than simply being a reiteration of an existing international treaty. In addition to barriers to political participation, the charter highlights other concerns, such as peace and conflict<sup>5</sup> and access to credit<sup>6</sup>, that bear heavily

---

<sup>5</sup> African Youth Charter. July 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2006. Art. 17. <<http://www.africa->



on what rights require protection. A document that ignored the unfortunate facts that some areas of Africa have been ravaged by conflict for decades and that a significant majority of Africans lack the collateral necessary to take out loans from a bank would leave several important concerns unaddressed.

Often documents fall flat when signatories find it difficult to translate abstract ideas into concrete action; in the AYC, much of the work has already been done and what remains is finding a space for these mechanisms within existing government services. The guidance provided allows nations to either augment their existing policies or create entirely new ones.

The largest challenge lies not in the text of the Charter, but in convincing governments of the importance of securing meaningful youth participation in government, rather than only as a part of civil society, and ensuring gender equality in any advances made.

### *Charter Highlights*

Article 11, on participation, essentially represents one of the key goals of the document. A survey of 38 African countries showed that 30% of young people, aged 15 to 17 are afraid to voice their opinions.<sup>7</sup> Youth should be allowed to participate both in their individual governments, contributing to decision-making processes, and as permanent representatives in delegations sent to the AU and the UN.

Article 10, on development, refers to the direct development of youth populations so that they may be informed advocates and political participants. The notion of participation as an important tool for developing oneself has been espoused in the past and was cited by political philosopher, John Stuart Mill, as the highest form of utility for human beings.<sup>8</sup>

Finally, Article 21, on youth in the diaspora, is indispensable given the large numbers of African nationals abroad. Including this population can turn the much-discussed problem of the 'brain drain' into an advantage. Pride for and responsibility to the continent should be felt in all African youth, regardless of location. Connecting these youth, either symbolically, through a charter, or physically, through exchange programs, is of paramount importance, as they have much to learn from each other, all of which can eventually be directed to African development.

### **3-Point Plan**

While there is much to be done as part of the successful implementation of the Charter, the following 3-point plans highlight some of the most immediate.

#### *African Union*

While the African Union cannot necessarily dictate the policies of any particular country, it can certainly institute its own in order to encourage those actions that enable a greater degree of youth participation and should do so in the following ways:

---

[union.org/root/UA/Conferences/Mai/HRST/Charter%20english.pdf](http://union.org/root/UA/Conferences/Mai/HRST/Charter%20english.pdf)>, accessed June 25<sup>th</sup>, 2009.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, Art. 14, 2d.

<sup>7</sup> Bloeman, Shantha. *African Youth Seek More Opportunity to Voice Their Opinion*. June 16<sup>th</sup>, 2009. UNICEF. <[http://www.unicef.org/media/media\\_49997.html](http://www.unicef.org/media/media_49997.html)>, accessed June 27<sup>th</sup>, 2009.

<sup>8</sup> Mill, John S. *Considerations on Representative Government*. May 1<sup>st</sup>, 1861. Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation. <<http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/5669>>; accessed, July 9<sup>th</sup>, 2009.

- **Make obligatory the inclusion of youth in delegations sent to international summits:** Incorporating youth in national delegations (and not simply under observer status), whether at AU or UN meetings, would ensure that the decisions made properly represented the populations they were intended to affect.
- **Sponsor programs dedicated to building awareness about African and international politics:** Development, both for the individual and for the continent, requires *informed* participation. Educational programs should focus on the structure and operations of the international system and the ways in which individual governments' decisions affect international politics and vice versa.
- **Spearhead the initiative towards equivalence between African universities:** This will give African youth more flexibility with education and employment opportunities across the continent, while forcing participating countries to make their education systems more effective and efficient. Unfettered access to its combined human capital would strengthen the African bloc as a whole. An important part of this equivalence is giving students the opportunity to learn the languages necessary to study in various parts of the continent, including English, French, Arabic, and Portuguese.

#### *National Level*

National governments will be responsible for the majority of the implementation and should do the following:

- **Eliminate all obstacles to the free operation of youth organizations:** Youth organizations in many African countries face financial, legal, and bureaucratic barriers, particularly when first registering. Governments can benefit from removing these barriers, as young people have proven that they are capable of amassing resources for their own development when given the opportunity.
- **Implement policies geared towards increased inclusion of youth in government:** Some of these measures include the institutionalization of regular consultations of youth when making decisions, specific positions for youth, and limits on how long incumbents can hold office.
- **Work together to make education comparable across the continent and individually to improve the quality of and access to education, particularly at the tertiary level:** Africa does not exist within a vacuum. Mere improvements in education should not be the end. African youth must be able to compete on an international scale without having to leave their continent in pursuit of foreign degrees. The fact that the vast majority of AU leadership themselves acquired their postgraduate degrees outside of Africa is indicative of the problem.

#### **Conclusion**

The AYC initiative involves four phases: the drafting of the text of the Charter, the popularization of the document, the implementation of national policy, and the monitoring and assessment of these policies and their effect. The first phase has been completed and, after a slow start, the second phase appears to be progressing as well. Several countries are currently in the third and most difficult phase: implementation. This will be different for each country depending on the needs of its youth, the quality of its current programs, and the way

in which its government is structured. Mistakes will be made, but the fourth phase will allow for evaluation and adjustment.

The result should be the creation of an empowered generation with the experience and ability to harness its own development for that of the African continent. While this is already happening in the absence of a binding treaty, the Charter will certainly accelerate the process. This will also be the first time that a comprehensive framework of youth rights are recognized and protected on a regional level, which is an accomplishment in and of itself.

\*\*\*

*The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of AfriMAP or the Open Society Institute or Soros Foundation Network.*