

## **Beyond Banjul: It's time to implement the African Youth Charter**

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### **1. Introduction**

In July 2006, at the 7th ordinary AU summit held in Banjul, the Gambia, held two months after the first ordinary session of the conference of Ministers in charge of Youth in the African Union (COMY),<sup>1</sup> the Assembly of Heads of State and Government endorsed the African Youth Charter and declared the year 2008 as the year of the African youth and November 1 every year as African Youth Day.

The African Youth Charter was informed first of all by the call from member states for the development of a charter at their summit in Algiers in 1999. This was strengthened by the strategic plan of the Commission of the African Union (2004-2007), which had six key objectives: make the African Union Commission stronger and more responsive; formulate a shared vision on Africa's future (especially the youth); promote and defend Africa's positions in matters of interest to the continent and its people; contribute to Africa's cultural radiance; enhance international and regional cooperation; promote a new citizenship anchored on Africa's basic values, and on performance initiatives, and promote strong and integrated economies in Africa.<sup>2</sup>

Perhaps the most important determining factor for the development of the Charter was the status of the African youth report 2005. This report showed that the 'youth bulge' in African populations could be a significant opportunity for Africa to make real progress but this would require a deliberate effort and investment in youth development across the continent.<sup>3</sup> This article is intended to highlight what needs to be done by the member states to ensure that the Charter is taken into account in national development planning as it affects young people, and to ensure that it is implemented at national level through different mechanisms and existing national development frameworks.

### **2. The African Youth Charter**

The African Youth Charter is a basic legal framework to guide and support policies, programmes and actions for youth development and empowerment across Africa. The Charter addresses the rights and freedoms, as well as the welfare, development and responsibilities of the youth. The Charter commits state parties to guaranteeing the rights of young people to own property, move freely, express themselves, associate freely with other members of the society and to practice whatever religion they choose (articles 2-9). It further addresses the issues related to youth development, participation, youth policy, education, health care, poverty reduction, employment,

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<sup>1</sup> Detailed information regarding the conference of Ministers in Charge of Youth can be accessed at <http://www.africa-union.org/root/ua/Conferences/Mai/HRST/22%20mai/Welcome.htm>

<sup>2</sup> Mac-Ikemenjima, D (Nov. 2006). Long Road to Banjul and beyond: Process of the African Youth Charter and the role of youth in its popularization and ratification [www.uneca.org/adfv](http://www.uneca.org/adfv); Strategic Plan of the Commission of the African Union Volume 2: 2004 – 2007 Strategic Framework of The Commission Of The African Union- <http://www.africa-union.org/AU%20summit%202004/volume%202%20final%20-%20English%20-%20June%202004.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> The report can be accessed at [www.hsrb.ac.za/.../3641\\_Panday\\_Pan-African%20youth%20charter.pdf](http://www.hsrb.ac.za/.../3641_Panday_Pan-African%20youth%20charter.pdf)

security, leisure, recreation, environment, culture, youth with disabilities, girls' issues, youth in the diaspora and law enforcement (articles 10-25). The Charter also highlights the responsibilities of the youth regarding their own development and that of society (article 26).<sup>4</sup>

The Charter defines youth as any individual between the ages of 15-35. While this puts to rest the issue of a clear definition for youth on the continent, it also raises another very critical issue regarding personal growth and development. Youth is a transition period, and youth development programmes are put in place to support young people through this transition period. Given that life expectancy is significantly low for many countries, 50.5 years for the continent,<sup>5</sup> and as low as 42 in Sierra Leone,<sup>6</sup> how can we define being young up to the age of 35? When does the individual then grow up? At what age do they then contribute to national development efforts? At what age do they then become productive and take responsibility for their own wellbeing? However, given that the responsibilities of the youth is defined in the Charter, it provides an opportunity for 15-35 year olds to take responsibility for their own development and those of their societies, and hopefully this will Africa move forward very quickly.

The Charter came into force on 8 August 2009, following the receipt of the 15th ratification on 8 July 2009. To date, 16 countries have ratified the Charter with Rwanda being the first and Nigeria being the most recent. Other countries that have ratified the Charter are: Burkina Faso, Djibouti, Gabon, Gambia, Guinea Bissau, Libya, Mali, Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia, Niger, South Africa, Togo and Uganda; 32 countries have also signed the Charter.<sup>7</sup> Informally, information is available that Angola<sup>8</sup> and Zimbabwe have ratified, but these are yet to be officially received or recorded by the AU Commission. What remains is to put in place the relevant mechanisms and structures and mechanisms to ensure that the Charter is implemented.

### 3. Implementing the Youth Charter

At a meeting of the 11 pilot countries to advance the popularisation, ratification and implementation of the Charter held in May 2009, African Union member states outlined certain conditions under which the Charter can be implemented. These include that all member states should: ratify the Charter by the end of the year 2010; have in place national youth policies and action plans that take into account and support the implementation of the Charter (this also applies to countries whose national youth policies are not in compliance with the Youth Charter); have mechanisms for reporting on progress made with the implementation of youth policies and programmes; and strengthen their respective representative bodies for youth.<sup>9</sup> Thus the Charter provides the basis for greater coordination by the sectoral ministries responsible for youth, while

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<sup>4</sup> African Union (2006). African Youth Charter. Addis Ababa.

<sup>5</sup> World Bank

<http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/COUNTRIES/AFRICAEXT/0,,contentMDK:20266824~menuPK:538117~pagePK:146736~piPK:226340~theSitePK:258644,00.html>

<sup>6</sup> IRIN Africa <http://www.irinnews.org/Report.aspx?ReportId=82018>

<sup>7</sup> The Progress/ status report on the African Youth Charter can be downloaded on the African Union website [www.africa-union.org](http://www.africa-union.org)

<sup>8</sup> News Paper reports The Gambia: N/A Ratify African Youth Charter <http://thepoint.gm/africa/gambia/article/na-ratify-african-youth-charter>; South African Government Information website

<http://www.info.gov.za/speeches/2009/09050810551002.htm>; Angola: Parliament Approves adhesion to the African Youth Charter (posted on all Africa.com) <http://allafrica.com/stories/200905220372.html>; Zimbabwe: Zim Committed to Youth Charter (posted on allafrica.com) <http://allafrica.com/stories/200906100080.html>

<sup>9</sup> Report of the workshop on the Member States-AUC Strategic Initiative on Youth Policies and the African Youth Charter, May 26-27, 2009.

providing the youth with a tool for advocacy and demand for greater accountability of government work.

The first step towards the implementation of the Charter is to put in place the relevant frameworks and institutions that are needed to advance the status of youth in each member state. These include: the institution of a government ministry or department responsible for youth affairs, the institution of a national youth coordinating body (council or federation or association as the case may be), the development of relevant national youth development frameworks, and the allocation of adequate budgetary resources for youth development. This will then be complemented by other efforts like the creation of focal points within the diverse line ministries affected by the provisions of the Charter, in order to facilitate coordination across sectors. To enhance planning, the Charter should serve the basis to align national data-collection systems to the age bracket 15-35 across member states, while data collection should be an ongoing process.

There has been some seeming confusion about how to implement the Charter. Some countries have proposed to develop separate implementation frameworks for the Charter, while others have indicated that the provisions of the Charter have been integrated into their respective national youth policies. However, the presentation by South Africa's National Youth Commission points in the right direction: the Charter must be implemented within the framework of existing policies at national level, especially the National Youth Policy. Other policies to be adapted include the constitution as well as national policy frameworks on human rights, health, education, employment and various others.<sup>10</sup>

If the implementation of the Charter is integrated into other national policies in this way, countries will incur little or no extra budgetary costs. Statutory budgetary allocations in the different sectors are often intended to provide services to the entire population. However, in implementing the provisions of the Youth Charter, each sector must keep in mind the need to create specific services for young people between ages 15-35 within that sector. Health services must take into account the need for this age bracket to access tailor-made reproductive health services including abortion services, advice on contraception and access to HIV medicines. Ensuring that services are tailor-made require that the regular trainings that are received by service personnel take into account training for these youth-specific issues without creating new programmes. For education and skills development training, these services are mainly targeted at the youth. However, more needs to be done to ensure that curriculum meets market demands, but these can be done within the broad framework of education sector reforms.

One critical question has been asked over and over again: is the African Youth Charter the solution to Africa's youth development problems? The answer is both yes and no. The answer is yes because at the very minimum the Charter provides the basis for young people to advocate for their rights and it will serve as the guiding framework for youth development. Broadly, the Charter will also serve the means to guide long term planning on youth development. Already, the declaration of the years 2009-2018 as the decade on youth development in Africa will assist many member states to think long term in their youth development planning. Many member states have national planning horizons set quite far in the future (for example, 2016 for Botswana, 2020 for Nigeria, Rwanda and Malawi, or 2030 for Zambia), thus the Charter will assist these countries to integrate youth issues within their long-term national development frameworks. A plan of action for the years 2009-2018 is also being developed by the AU Commission as a

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<sup>10</sup> [www.pmg.org.za/files/docs/090123dfa.ppt](http://www.pmg.org.za/files/docs/090123dfa.ppt)

means to advance the implementation of the Youth Charter over the next decade, this will in a significant way provide further guidance to the work of member states.<sup>11</sup>

The African Youth Charter guarantees the participation of young people in parliament,<sup>12</sup> committing member states to guaranteeing a number of seats for youth, using a quota system. This is already operational in some countries: Uganda and Rwanda are good examples. Affirmative action must be implemented at national level regarding youth participation, and this must be done in a structured way, as part of national development policy. Increasingly, young people are taking leadership on their own terms and leading the change processes in their countries, they should be given a chance to participate.

Affirmative action should also target the labour market. Unemployment rates in Africa are significantly high. This is a direct result of weak education systems, and is a direct cause of poverty, which drives many social and health problems. Because of this connection between employment and education, education systems must be shaped to meet market demands and not just education for the sake of education. Opportunities must also be provided to the young people to develop skills while at school in order to enable them get jobs immediately after leave school. This can be done by adopting and implementing affirmative action, regarding employment policies.

Education must be made accessible to our young people, and efforts to provide loans, grants and the like must be expanded.

In order to bring the provisions of the African Youth Charter to fruition, youth groups must start to organise. Advocacy campaigns on specific issues in the Charter. They must also start to organise around the political processes to get themselves and their peers into public policy making spaces. However, it is important for youth to also demonstrate (provide models) how implementation is possible through the work of their organisations by undertaking HIV/AIDS education initiatives, participating in community volunteer teaching initiatives, getting involved in volunteer health care and environmental programmes. The 26th article of the African Youth Charter points clearly in the direction of the role of youth in such activities.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The African Youth Charter is a practical step towards the full empowerment and development of Africa's youth, who constitute around 20 percent of the continent's population.<sup>13</sup> While the diverse efforts to ensure that the Charter is implemented are being undertaken, it is important for all stakeholders to clearly appreciate the importance of investing in youth, not just as a burden to society, but as a resource for development. Only when the youth are well served that the future of any nation can be fully guaranteed.

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*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.*

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<sup>11</sup> [www.africa-union.org/youth.htm](http://www.africa-union.org/youth.htm)

<sup>12</sup> Article 11.2a.

<sup>13</sup> World Youth Report 2007. United Nations, New York