

# Conclusion

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Within the greater theme of youth in Africa, a number of subthemes run across the different chapter contributions. The first is the discussion around the ‘youth bulge’ or ‘youth crisis’. The youth bulge theory is based on the argument that developing countries undergoing demographic changes are more vulnerable to conflict. This is based on the presumption that larger populations of unemployed and unengaged youth are likely to be frustrated, which can subsequently manifest itself through violence. The theory furthers this argument by explaining that if young people are left without alternatives, there is a high likelihood that they will revert to violence to correct social and economic injustices. The chapter contributions cognisant of the fact that this argument could hold some truth do, however, also explore the opportunity that could find expression in the growing numbers of the youth population. Over time and through different examples, as evidenced in the different case studies, there is the recognition that with the right investment and programmes in post-conflict Africa, the youth populations can be our greatest opportunity.

It follows, therefore, that a fundamental argument across the various chapter contributions is a positive narrative in the situation of youth across the continent. The Liberia case, for instance, shows that youth have the power and potential to effect change. So whilst the challenges of a non-engaged youth are central to the discussions in this monograph, the positive engagements of youth in the different states are also discussed. The discussions here move beyond the victimisation of youths to the reality of them as agents of social change. The Kenyan illustration, though worrying in the larger discussions on the social contract, shows an example of young populations addressing governance concerns for less-privileged populations. Perhaps the answers to

better peacebuilding and reconstruction lie in the everyday engagements and expressions of young people in these countries. The presumption of their lack of agency and inability to define their engagement is possibly one of the greater mistakes that make youth engagement and governance ineffective.

Despite the recognition of the opportunity that a growing youth population represents, the bigger question is how that opportunity can be realised. This is the obvious reality that many post-conflict states find themselves in, characterised by huge percentages of poor populations. In such contexts, the question of how to harness opportunity through youth remains. The Sierra Leone chapter, for example, analyses the commitments made by different actors to engage and address youth, so as to mainstream youth considerations into the national agenda. The significance of youth and the danger of marginalisation, evident in the causes of the civil war in Sierra Leone, underline the importance of engaging the youth. It is, however, instructive that even in Sierra Leone the method to harness this remains elusive.

Another theme underlying the discussions across the different contributions is that of the manipulation of youth populations by the political elite. This is perhaps most evident in the Kenya and Sierra Leone case studies, where the youth are often used for violence and intimidation, and mobilised for blind support on the basis of ethnicity. What is interesting is that the violence associated with the youth in these case studies is, more often than not, the result of manipulation by one actor or individual. Poverty and survival politics continue to dominate the reasons why many young people find themselves constantly used to inflict violence and cause havoc in their societies. The reality of this manipulation by political elites cannot be understated.

Discussions around the context of youth are paramount. An argument made in the context of South Sudan is that the youth populations are the products of the environments in which they live. The daunting reality of everyday life continues to threaten the very attempts of development, and the attitudes and actions of youth populations continue to be defined by this reality. In such cases, the engagement of youth must be contextualised within that reality. The on-going dilemma, of course, is how the urgency of addressing youth can be tackled

within the long-term endeavours of peacebuilding. A prevailing argument in all the chapters has been that effective strategies for engaging the youth must focus on the structures and the culture of violence that characterise the lives of many youths.

An interesting argument made in the different contributions is that the challenges of youth are closely interlinked with the root causes of any conflict. The problems of youth cannot be separated from the challenges that continue to plague the post-conflict states discussed in this monograph. The nature of marginalisation, prevalent in so many African states, needs to be addressed if solutions are to be found. An important contribution made in this monograph is the discussion around the on-going domination of power structures by an 'older elite' at the exclusion of young people. Discussions of peace and the maintenance of it will require the participation and inclusion of the younger generations.

Governance continues to be a challenge, as is evidenced in the different studies. Related to the challenge of governance is that of security, with huge segments of the population struggling for physical, economic and social security. In addition, there are the issues of service delivery and the custodian role of the state. Across the different case studies, it is evident that there is the need to engage a more holistic pattern of reconstruction that seeks to engage youth in the contexts of their environment, if meaningful and sustainable opportunities are to be realised.

Throughout this monograph there is a constant realisation that the youth are an important constituency and the failure to engage this population group is problematic. The challenge lies in how this could be done or in the inability to engage, but more in the lack of willingness to engage, by those in power. The failed commitments made by governments and the international community continue to bedrock the frustration of youth. The unfulfilled policies drafted to address youth, without including their voice, and the lack of continuous commitment to include this constituency are the greatest threats to ensuring a holistic youth population. There is need for a more rigorous commitment to understand and engage the youth for the sustainability and durability of peace in post-conflict societies. This work is one such contribution.