Introduction

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There is a shift and recognition that the conversation of peace can no longer belong within the confines of a particular few elites but that, if durable and meaningful peace is to be realised, this must be a conversation of the masses. This realisation is coupled with the growing reality that there is a steady increase in the world's population of individuals that would be clustered as youth. According to the Human Sciences Research Council's Youth Policy Initiative, 90% of this youth population can be found in developing countries (HSRC). Furthermore, between 2010 and 2015, the number of youth living in sub-Saharan Africa is expected to increase by 19.4 million – assigning youth to 75% of the total population on the continent (ILO, 2010).

In post-conflict states, the increase of the youth population is even more apparent as significant numbers of youth are demobilised and reintegrated into civilian life. It is, therefore, imperative that in our dialogue on post-conflict states we ask ourselves: 'how have the youth been engaged?' Taking into account the massive numbers of young people and the reality of the poverty that characterises most of these post-conflict states, one is left to interrogate the place of youth in these weakly defined states. The responsibility of the sovereign is then tested by our investigation of the security of the youth population. The social contract prescribes a state in which the sovereign affords security, both in the sense of physical security and the opportunity to survive. In instances where the state is unable to ensure and fulfil this latter form of security, the international community bears the onus of ensuring livelihoods. The post-conflict community is a critical illustration of this argument: states emerging from war or extreme violence are often characterised by fragility and inability to fulfil their obligations in any social contract agreement. These states are, therefore, marked by a significant presence of the international community. The international community summarises its presence in these states as its international obligation to ensure security and overall development – which will, in turn, contribute to a safer globalised world.

The chapters in this monograph speak to the delicate challenges that face African countries when it comes to the dynamic of youth. The United Nations General Assembly defines youth as those persons between the ages of 15 and 24 years. The African Youth Charter defines youth as individuals aged 15 to 35 years, and this can be explained by the longer time it takes for people to become economically independent on the African continent. It is important to note here that whilst it might be easy to classify youth in one group and they are often referred to in this manner, youth are not a homogenous group. It cannot be overlooked that young people face different barriers based on their gender, race/ethnicity, disability, economic status, location and other challenges that create greater marginalisation. There are several barriers that can hinder even the best-planned policies and strategies if not taken into account. In sub-Saharan Africa, for instance, youth unemployment levels are amongst the world's highest – about 60%. Youth unemployment is very likely to pose a threat to durable peace, and will be a driver of conflict – through direct violence, protests, criminal activity and transnational vigilantism. The rise of protest politics among disenchanted youths has grown in the recent past, with varying responses from different governments. Youth in Africa face critical challenges that can be summarised into issues of marginalisation from social, economic and political life. This inhibits their ability to make fundamental decisions that can affect their lives positively and enable them to make a contribution to society as a whole.

The chapters in this monograph examine the dynamics of the youth population on the basis of underlying relationships and social structures. The chapters seek to interrogate whether conflict and subsequent post-conflict societies enable new opportunities to change structures, so as to effect constructive change that enhances both the participation and survival of youth – and which will consequently contribute to enhancing their place as a constituency of peace. The chapter contributions also aim to contribute to works on preventative action. The presumption here is that in instances of violent conflict, youth are often assimilated as instruments of war. To transform previously war-torn societies effectively, there is an urgent need to absorb the youth population in a meaningful way, to curtail their exploitation by forces that seek power through violence. Idle populations form easier targets for violent recruitments. Thus, there is a need to understand how post-conflict states and the international community cognisant of this fact are re-engaging large masses of youth

to ensure security. An analysis of youth in post-conflict settings is imperative if we are to avert future conflict, or talk of meaningful or sustainable peace.

Through the use of case studies, this monograph seeks to share the experiences of youth in four African states: Sierra Leone; Kenya; Liberia; and South Sudan, drawing on some of the commonalities that exist in terms of youth experiences. Whilst the chapters do not seek to affirm doom theories of youth existence and conversations around theories such as the youth bulge or youth crisis, the authors do point to the real threats of ignoring and marginalising this ever-increasing population. A critical challenge when it comes to the engagement of the youth population has to do with methodology: how do we mobilise the young and harness their energy to elevate societies? How do we ensure representation of the young so as to ensure a systemised society where every individual is contributing to the general whole? In communities where governments are overwhelmed with competing priorities, how then do we ensure the mainstreaming of a youth voice? Using practical examples from the case studies, it is evident that the youth population must not be ignored, as they will find ways and means by which to participate. The chapters in this work also make clear that youth cannot be regarded as children, or dismissed as those who should only be ruled. Spaces in which youth can participate must be created and elevated.

Recent events around the globe, such as the 'Arab Spring', or past events, such as the war in Sierra Leone, continue to show that the youth population has and will seek agency so as to be heard. The chapters here illustrate the dilemmas that continue to plague that involvement and participation by analysing the post-conflict nature of the different studies and the subsequent reconstruction of those societies. Overall, this monograph seeks to discuss holistically the problems that mire engagement when it comes to the youth population by looking at economic, social, psychosocial and political facets. The chapters examine how various contributions target the transformation of structures of conflict in society, and create infrastructures for durable peace.

Underlying all the chapters is the theme that youth on the African continent cannot continue to be ignored or marginalised. At present, there are initiatives to address their inclusion – but these are far from ideal when contextualised in the sheer numbers of young people. This monograph, therefore, contributes to the much-needed exploratory work that examines the engagement of youth.

References

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