
WiseYouth: The Ideal Auxiliary Strategy?

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Introduction

The African Union (AU) Network of African Youth on Conflict Prevention and Mediation (WiseYouth) was officially launched during the 13th High-Level retreat of the AU Commission, which took place on 23 October 2022. The concept of WiseYouth is born out of the ongoing efforts, made domestically and internationally, to realise various normative frameworks on youth, peace and security (YPS). The YPS agenda was officially introduced in 2018 for the AU, making it a relatively new agenda. It requires the support of networks such as WiseYouth to establish itself within the broader African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA).^{1,2}

Although WiseYouth is in its teething phase and has not yet reached its total operating capacity, it is anticipated to bring a distinctive perspective and skill to the Peace and Security Council's (PSC's) conflict prevention and mediation mandate (African Union, 2023). During an interview aimed at discussing the relevance of the network, it was noted that the successful implementation of WiseYouth by the PSC was deemed necessary to achieve long-term peace on the continent. According to the respondent, WiseYouth can emphasise the importance of youth participation by highlighting the PSC's advocacy of youth inclusion in conflict prevention, mediation and resolution (Respondent 2, 2023). Young Africans constitute a demographic force that could influence the continent's future wealth and development if afforded the necessary resources and platforms. Since more than 60% of the

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- ¹ The African Peace and Security Architecture, ratified in 2002, encompasses frameworks, goals, principles, and values, along with decision-making procedures pertaining to the prevention, handling and resolution of crises and conflicts, as well as the reconstruction and development efforts following hostilities throughout Africa.
 - ² The Network was created as a subsidiary mechanism of the Panel of the Wise, following the decision [Assembly/AU/Dec.815(XXXV)] made during the 35th Ordinary Session of the Assembly of Heads of State and Government in February 2022.

population is under 25, the AU acknowledges the need to give youth empowerment, inclusion and participation a higher priority (African Union, 2006). In the context of peace and security, this commitment is made clear by the strategic efforts that the institution has undertaken since the establishment of the African Youth Charter (AYC) of 2006. In the context of YPS, these include the adoption of the Continental Framework of Youth, Peace and Security (2020). When viewed in this light, an African YPS activist asserts that the WiseYouth project is a holistic strategy committed to mainstreaming YPS in Africa, especially in policy spaces that will visibly increase the seats afforded to young people at decision-making tables (Respondent 4, 2023).

WiseYouth aligns with the larger mandate of the AU to invest in civic education, skills and leadership capacity. As with other networks such as the Network of African Women in Conflict Prevention and Mediation (FemWise-Africa), emphasis is placed on a vulnerable group's rights, responsibilities and ambitions. This network acknowledges the significant role that the youth play in governance, including in the process of peacebuilding at the local, regional and international levels. It underscores the need to involve young people in decision-making processes that are traditionally reserved for older individuals deemed to be more knowledgeable.

Notably, the WiseYouth platform manifests the AU's acknowledgement of the interconnection of governance, peace and security. By focusing on these interrelated pillars, the AU intends to provide young people with the resources and opportunities they need to drive economic growth, socio-political advancement and efforts to establish peace in member states. In addition, the network accords with the APSA, which indicates a commitment to including the perspectives and contributions of young people in creating stability and resilience across Africa.³

³ The African Peace and Security Architecture is a comprehensive and enduring framework that encompasses various elements such as structures, objectives, principles, values and decision-making processes. It is designed to address the prevention, management and resolution of crises and conflicts, as well as the post-conflict reconstruction and development in Africa.

This chapter examines the value-addition of youth-focused platforms such as WiseYouth to existing YPS initiatives and their role in addressing Africa's security challenges. It also explores how WiseYouth can leverage those existing mechanisms to ensure long-term sustainability and achievement.

To facilitate the comprehension of this chapter, information on YPS and its normative-based execution by the AU up to this point was gathered. Before conducting virtual semi-structured research interviews, the chapter conducted preliminary research on the topic and identified relevant stakeholders with whom to interact. This included young practitioners well versed in YPS in Africa and across the globe, individuals associated with AU member state governments whose work engages YPS, and members of the AU's Youth 4 Peace Africa (Y4P) programme. Furthermore, a comprehensive examination of the literature on the current debate on YPS was conducted. This entailed examining essential documents such as domestic and regional legal instruments and evaluating the enforcement progress.

Context: the contemporary African youth, peace and security landscape

Ajak (2021) asserts that Africa is now home to the world's most youthful population, with a median age of approximately 19.7 years as of 2020. The demographic situation emphasises the importance of tackling the distinct socio-economic and political difficulties and possibilities linked to peace and security.

As previously mentioned, research for the drafting of this chapter included semi-structured interviews with those working on youth development in AU member states. One such interview with an employee of the Kenyan State Department of Youth revealed that African youth (using Kenya as a sample) continually face many obstacles that affect their welfare, prospects and ambitions. These issues include education, employment, governance and conflict-affected areas (Respondent 5, 2023). Unemployment is a major barrier to youth empowerment on the continent, as it is on many others. For example, women and men under the age of 34 have a 45.5%

unemployment rate in sub-Saharan African nations such as South Africa (Statistics South Africa, 2024).

Moreover, a youth activist interviewed on the conundrum of youth in AU member states shared that deficiencies in governance, such as inefficient or discriminatory political systems, restricted opportunities for civic participation, and insufficient representation of young individuals, weaken the ability of youth to participate in decision-making and make constructive contributions to their society (Respondent 3, 2024). He stressed that young people in conflict-ridden African nations face a heightened risk of being enlisted by armed factions, experiencing forced displacement, and being subjected to acts of violence. These factors contribute to the continuation of cycles of insecurity and instability.

During the development of this chapter, respondents were asked to furnish and elucidate the variables that exert influence or give rise to conflict in their respective AU member states. The responses indicate potential variables in cases of intra-state conflict, some of which are more directly associated with socio-economic and political complaints mentioned earlier:

Table 1: Factors influencing/causing current conflict in AU member states

1.	Diversity: Religion, ethnicity and race
2.	Organised crime: Drug and human trafficking
3.	Resource governance and corruption
4.	Socio-political marginalisation

Source: Virtual interviews.

The list in Table 1 establishes the context of this chapter. It highlights the concerns that require the incorporation and immediacy of YPS within the AU system. These matters necessitate advocates of the YPS agenda to push for and guarantee the introduction and execution of comprehensive solutions. When questioned about whether the current situation of both YPS and wider youth grievances in Africa could be resolved in the AU Commission, a member of the Y4P programme explained that the programme was created to provide young people from affected communities with a platform to represent the authentic voice of their people. This allowed them to influence policies with a sense of first-hand experience and empathy (Respondent 2, 2023).

Mainstreaming youth: the AU's agenda

To address the concerns raised by the youth in member states, the AU outlined a strategic plan from 2004 to 2007 to empower young people. They achieved this by implementing the AYC. This framework facilitated a more significant discussion of the youth and their involvement and contributions to Africa's development, mainly when their rights were acknowledged and safeguarded.

The AU ratified the AYC in 2006 as a political and legal instrument that functions as the strategic blueprint for promoting and advancing youth empowerment and development across the continent at continental, regional and national scales. The document became operational in August 2009. The AYC has been signed by 42 member states of the AU and ratified by 38; three governments have not yet signed or ratified it. The integration of youth concerns into AU policies, however limited, is evident in several other normative frameworks that advocate human security, some of which were established before the implementation of the AYC. These encompass the AU Constitutive Act, the Protocol for establishing the PSC, and Africa's Agenda 2063.

After adopting the AYC, the heads of state of the AU proclaimed the period from 2009 to 2018 as the Decade of African Youth. This decade had a comprehensive Decade Plan of Action (DPoA). The DPoA functioned as a

comprehensive framework that involved all stakeholders from many sectors and dimensions in achieving the goals and objectives of the AYC.

During the Decade of African Youth, the global YPS initiative entered a preliminary stage with the adoption of United Nations Security Council (UNSC) Resolution 2250, which was the first thematic resolution specifically addressing YPS. The significance of this 2015 historic document lies in its recognition of the endeavours made by young peacebuilders globally in their pursuit of peace. Resolution 2282, adopted in 2016, acknowledged that the magnitude and difficulties of maintaining peace required strong collaboration among all relevant players. It also confirmed the significant role that young people play in preventing and resolving conflicts and that they are crucial participants in guaranteeing the success of peacekeeping and peacebuilding endeavours.

Shortly after that, UNSC Resolution 2419 was passed in 2018. It acknowledged the constructive influence that young individuals have in mediating and executing peace accords and preventing conflicts. The resolution calls upon stakeholders to consider young individuals' perspectives and to enable their equitable and comprehensive involvement in peace and decision-making processes at all levels. UNSC Resolution 2535, a resolution again aimed at the youth, was unanimously adopted by the UNSC in July 2020. The resolution urges all pertinent stakeholders to explore methods for enhancing the comprehensive participation of young people in conflict prevention, conflict resolution, and peacebuilding efforts, in particular during peace agreement negotiations and implementation.

The AU and its organs have spearheaded the formulation of normative policy and institutional frameworks in peace and security affairs for mainstream youth. Below (Table 2) are examples of these:

Table 2: AU instruments related to youth, peace and security

Instrument	Leading Organ	Mandate
AU Constitutive Act	–	Member states are called on to promote youth empowerment in all spheres of development, including non-discrimination against young men and women.
AU Peace and Security Council Protocol	Political Affairs, Peace and Security	Article 20 mandates the PSC to encourage non-governmental organisations, community-based groups and other civil society organisations to actively participate in the efforts at promoting peace, security and stability in Africa.
African Youth Charter	Women, Gender and Youth Directorate	Article 17 highlights the substantial role that young individuals play in advancing peace and security. This is accomplished by augmenting the capacities of young individuals and youth-led organisations in endeavours associated with peacebuilding and conflict prevention.
Youth Division Programming	Women, Gender and Youth Directorate	The youth division continues to use the AYC to be guided in contributing to peace and security in Africa. Various programmes feed into the capacitation of youth for the YPS agenda. These programmes include the deployment of youth volunteers to the Political Affairs, Peace and Security Departments as well as the pitching of skills development programmes for unemployed and un/under-skilled youth, including those in conflict-affected regions.
African Governance Architecture Youth Engagement Strategy	Political Affairs, Peace and Security/ African Governance Architecture (AGA) Platform	In 2015, the AGA Platform implemented a five-year Youth Engagement Strategy (AGA-YES) 2016–2020 to facilitate active involvement of young people in democratic governance processes. The strategy also aimed to encourage youth engagement in the AU shared-values agenda and strengthen the capabilities of youth and youth-led organisations/networks to effectively participate in democratic governance processes at various levels.
AU iDove	Citizens and Diaspora Directorate	This initiative aims to show how religion can be used to stop catastrophic extremism in Africa. It aims to promote dialogue and mutual respect within and between faiths, use digital tools to stop young people from joining violent extremism, and build a movement against violent extremism.
Youth 4 Peace Africa programming	Political Affairs, Peace and Security	The AU Commission developed the Y4P Africa initiative in September 2018. Its main goal is to make it easier for youth to take part in all areas of peace and security. This is in line with Article 17 of the AYC and UNSC Resolutions 2250 of December 2015 and 2419 of June 2018.

Source: Compiled by the author.

The selection of a special envoy on youth at the AU in November 2018 by the Commission Chairperson Moussa Faki Mahamat was a symbolic move towards mainstreaming youth in the AU's affairs. The appointment of this envoy prioritises the elevation of young individuals as a focus of the AU's endeavours to accomplish the objectives of Agenda 2063. Significant progress has been made in creating new institutional infrastructure focused on youth in policy leadership, including forming the Office of the Youth Envoy. Youth engagement on significant issues, such as YPS, is coordinated by the office.

YPS became a regular topic of discussion within the PSC after the launch of the Y4P programme in September 2018. The programme was initiated to fulfil the objectives outlined in the fourth and sixth ambitions of Agenda 2063 and the Silencing the Guns initiative. It was established to actively engage, involve and collaborate with young individuals and organised groups to promote peace and security in all five geographical regions of the continent and the diaspora. Y4P Africa aims to effectively carry out the provisions stated in Article 17 of the AU Youth Charter and the UNSC Resolutions 2250, 2419 and 2535.

The Y4P programme effectively advocated establishing an annual open session on YPS by the PSC in November, this coinciding with the celebration of African Youth Month. So far, the PSC has made important decisions regarding YPS. These decisions include requesting the AU Commission, through the Y4P programme, to select five regional African Youth Peace Ambassadors. These ambassadors collaborate with the AU Youth Envoy to promote African peace and security. In addition, the programme worked to ensure that the PSC endorsed the Continental Framework on YPS, as well as a study on the roles and contributions of youth to peace and security in Africa in 2020.

The AU continental framework on YPS establishes the agenda as a pressing policy concern. Based on pre-existing frameworks and policies, the document offers normative guidelines for interacting with the Commission, Regional Economic Communities/Regional Mechanisms (RECs/RMs), member states, and young Africans. The basis for this is in Articles 11 and

17 of the AYC and the UNSC Resolution 2250 of December 2015. The framework offers a comprehensive overview of the normative frameworks on youth participation, encompassing continental, regional and national levels. The text outlines the main goals it aims to accomplish, analyses the obstacles and difficulties young people face in their participation in peace and security efforts, lists the key priorities, and suggests efficient strategies for YPS programmes. The framework's 10-year action plan is anticipated to guide the creation of continental and regional strategic plans and the crucial formulation and implementation of national action plans on YPS.

WiseYouth: the ideal auxiliary strategy?

Against the backdrop of previous progress in establishing an integrated AU-led YPS agenda, WiseYouth was created. The WiseYouth network reflects a multifaceted strategy designed to address African youth's multifarious challenges. It reinforces the AU's broader youth agenda and underscores the importance of investing in youth as a strategic imperative for sustainable development and socio-economic progress on a peaceful continent.

For several reasons, the network will hold significant promise as an auxiliary strategy for the AU. First, it aligns with the AU's mandate to harness the demographic dividend by investing in the leadership potential of Africa's youth. It resonates with the spirit of inclusion and empowerment espoused by the AU's frameworks, such as the AYC. Moreover, the WiseYouth framework exemplifies the AU's commitment to nurturing a new generation of capable and visionary leaders. By focusing on leadership development, the framework aims to cultivate a cadre of young leaders equipped with the skills and ethical grounding to spearhead positive change and advance the AU's vision of a prosperous, integrated and peaceful Africa. Table 3 highlights WiseYouth's composition and mandate:

Table 3: Composition and Mandate of WiseYouth (African Union, 2023)

Composition	Mandate
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In accordance with the principle of gender parity, the WiseYouth Network will consist of 26 members, with 2 members being nominated from each of the RECs, RMs, the Lake Chad Basin Commission and the G5-Sahel. • To create greater ownership and to develop direct ties with both regional and continental-led peace process efforts, WiseYouth members will be drawn from regional YPS networks. • The five (5) African Youth Ambassadors will also be a part of the WiseYouth Network, and it is recommended that attention be given to the submission of nominations from members of civil society organisations that are led by young people. • The Panel of the Wise has mandated that each cohort of the network will have a tenure of three (3) years; this duration will be in accordance with the mandate. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To enhance the ability of young people to participate in conflict prevention, mediation and peace processes, WiseYouth aims to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ foster regular intergenerational dialogue with mediation experts, including the Panel of the Wise and the Pan-African Network of the Wise (PanWise). ◦ establish valuable partnerships to advance youth-led conflict prevention and peace initiatives, especially at regional and national levels. ◦ provide opportunities for network members to contribute as leaders and partners in regional and continental mediation, dialogue and peace efforts.

In May 2024, the AU initiated a recruitment process for the first cohort of WiseYouth members. Twenty young people, with an equal number of male and female representatives from each of the five regions, are anticipated to make up the WiseYouth Network (African Union, 2024). They are expected to serve for a non-renewable term of three years.

Implementing the WiseYouth network has at least three major advantages for the YPS agenda. First, it will allow the agenda to have a permanent structure in the PSC that would guarantee youth voices in tabled issues in the future. Second, the network opens the door for much-needed mentorship and intergenerational exchanges between WiseYouth members and other similar networks such as FemWise-Africa. These networks will have increased opportunities to co-influence and experience peer learning.

Third, there is the potential to have a more diverse group of WiseYouth members pushing for the implementation of YPS-related normative frameworks. This will be a mandate of the network that will help with further dissemination and enhanced understanding of the place of youth in the peace and security of member states.

While the framework holds immense potential, several operational challenges must be addressed to maximise its impact as an auxiliary strategy for the AU. Resource constraints significantly impede the full implementation of WiseYouth programmes, including funding for YPS infrastructure and leadership development initiatives.

Nevertheless, significant opportunities remain for the growth and enhancement of WiseYouth. Institutional coordination and capacity-building are pivotal for ensuring the effective and efficient rollout of WiseYouth across AU member states. Strengthening the coordination mechanisms between the AU, RECs, national governments and relevant stakeholders is essential for achieving coherence in programme implementation and maximising the network's impact.

Leveraging strategic partnerships with international organisations, private-sector entities and philanthropic foundations can provide additional resources and expertise to augment the implementation of WiseYouth initiatives.

Integrating the WiseYouth framework into the broader Pan-African agenda and aligning it with global goals is essential to drive holistic development and amplify its impact. By mainstreaming the framework's objectives within Agenda 2063 and the Sustainable Development Goals, the AU can ensure that WiseYouth dovetails seamlessly with continental and international development priorities.

Furthermore, aligning WiseYouth with the Pan-African agenda is an opportunity to leverage synergies across different AU initiatives, such as those from the Office of the Youth Envoy and Youth Division, so fostering coherence and complementarity in advancing the continent's development objectives. This integration can enable the AU to mobilise broader support, resources and expertise to support the WiseYouth framework, therefore consolidating its position as a pivotal auxiliary strategy.

To enhance the efficacy and sustainability of the WiseYouth network, several strategic recommendations can be considered:

1. *Upscaling Successful Initiatives:* Identifying and replicating successful YPS programmes and initiatives across AU member states can help amplify the framework's impact and reach. This includes work done by RECs such as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the East African Community (EAC) and the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD). For example, IGAD has had a Youth Forum for Peace since 2021 that has been used by the organisation to harness peacebuilding ideas from young men and women in the region. The platform has also helped equip young peacebuilders with enhanced skills to capacitate other youth in their communities to help prevent violent extremism.
2. *Identifying Policy Priorities:* Addressing policy gaps and prioritising key areas such as civic education and leadership development can strengthen the focus and efficacy of WiseYouth initiatives. Moreover, the network can spearhead the amending of existing policies to make them 'youth sensitive.' It would be the role of such a platform to ensure that young people have a policy-backed quota to guarantee participation in peace processes such as dialogue and mediation.
3. *Strengthening Partnerships:* Use existing instruments in the AU, such as the AGA platform, to forge strategic partnerships with governments, international organisations, civil society and the private sector to maximise resources and expertise for implementing the YPS agenda.

Way forward for the PSC

By activating WiseYouth, an intergenerational experience can be created, and a more inclusive peace agenda can be established. The AU has pursued direct engagement by introducing the Africa Youth Ambassadors for Peace and the AU Special Envoy for Youth and involving the youth in the organisation's customary political processes. The decade of youth concluded by producing a framework for a course of action. Additional endeavours implemented thus far encompass the African Governance Architecture Youth Engagement Strategy (2016–2020) that promoted an

understanding of good governance and democracy among and for young people.⁴

It is vital that the PSC makes dialogue-centred conflict prevention a top priority. WiseYouth facilitates the commitment and participation of African youth in peacebuilding by using a multi-stakeholder approach and strategic advocacy. Its primary purpose as a PanWise member should be to provide advice and assistance to the PSC and the AU Commission on continental peace and security initiatives, but through a youth lens.

The PSC can facilitate activities aimed at averting the escalation of conflicts by cascading engagements to subnational and national forums. It can also facilitate correspondence between parties and aid fact-finding missions for conflict prevention, thus allowing WiseYouth to establish its niche.

WiseYouth, as a newer initiative, could benefit from insights gained from analogous networks such as FemWise-Africa and PanWise. Although these engagements and instruments promote inclusivity, there are urgent concerns regarding the effectiveness and value-add of youth initiatives in achieving their goals. Networks, including WiseYouth, necessitate proactive investment to enable a significant contribution. Promoting and popularising implementation must be executed with greater efficacy. Effective implementation and sustainability of WiseYouth requires a multifaceted strategy comprising capacity development, resource mobilisation, monitoring and evaluation, advocacy and awareness-raising, and partnership and collaboration.

Strategically, the network may encounter substantial obstacles from the long-standing traditions of inadequate attention to marginalised groups (including women, youth, and individuals with diverse abilities) in influential political spheres. To initially leverage the potential of WiseYouth, the PSC will require insights from analogous endeavours to induce political will from member states.

⁴ AGA-YES seeks to promote peer learning, enhance skills development, generate and share knowledge, and advocate increased participation of young men and women in democratic governance processes in Africa. This is done by engaging AU policy organs, member states, and youth-led and youth-oriented networks and organisations.

Youth peacemakers should be capacitated and deployed by the PSC. For example, election observer missions are valuable for educating WiseYouth about the urgency of peace, security and good governance. Assuring the success of forthcoming endeavours requires WiseYouth to advocate participation in peace processes led by the AU. A more unified strategy may reduce the gap between frameworks' development and implementation.

Incorporating gender sensitivity into WiseYouth programming is an additional benefit. The increased participation of young women in conflict prevention and mediation and the incorporation of their viewpoints into the formulation of policies and strategies can guarantee the representation and inclusion of every segment of society (Respondent 1, 2023).

An additional takeaway is the importance of enhancing the understanding and proficiency of young leaders concerning early warning systems and conflict prevention. FemWise-Africa's and PanWise's experiences can provide valuable insights for WiseYouth as it seeks to identify and cultivate young leaders with the necessary skills and expertise to contribute to peacebuilding and security initiatives. Furthermore, to ensure that resources, expertise and capacity are directed towards youth concerns, RECs must assist WiseYouth.

Advocating for youth as an integral component of its mission, means that the PSC must proactively invest in WiseYouth's capacity-building to bolster its impact. It is critical to allocate adequate financial and human resources to strengthen the network's conflict management capacity, including preventive diplomacy.

In addition, the establishment of a framework to regulate training and engagement should be endorsed by the PSC. By implementing this strategy, WiseYouth could enhance its ability to resolve the obstacles and constraints associated with stakeholder ownership and commitment, incorporate gender-sensitive programming, and harness technological advancements to optimise network efficiency. WiseYouth should be implemented in the Council's preventive diplomacy efforts. Collaboration and harmonisation

between the PSC and platforms like PanWise and FemWise-Africa would fortify the network via knowledge exchange and learning opportunities.

Conclusion

Given that the current generation of youth is proportionally the largest in history, African states must consider the demographic's desires and needs regarding harmony and security. This chapter captures the notion that youth are increasingly being acknowledged as critical in enhancing security and diminishing violence in their respective nations. It contributes to a growing understanding that continent-wide initiatives like WiseYouth have significant potential as progressive strategies for the AU to promote youth development and empowerment in peace and security. By adopting the AU's YPS agenda, effectively resolving significant obstacles and capitalising on prospects for expansion, WiseYouth could emerge as a catalyst for change in Africa and foster a fresh cohort of empowered and forward-thinking young individuals. 🌍

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