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Africa's challenges require the new thinking that only young people can bring. Dr Jacqueline Chimhanzi and Monique Atouguia of the African Leadership Institute explain why we need to pay more heed to the voice of youth and how we can make sure it is heard

Why Africa needs more young people in positions of power

It is undeniable that Africa's young people are not simply a demographic wave but in fact the entire ocean. They are, to quote Dr Wangui Kimari, "the demographic, creative, labour and political majority". Africa is, by far, the youngest continent on the globe and is set to remain so for the next 30 years. The average median age on the continent is estimated to be 19.7 years, in contrast to median ages of 30.6 in Asia and 41.7 in Europe.

Given the complexities and challenges the continent faces, there is a need to harness ideas from across the population divide – men, women and youth – to propel Africa forward. While inclusion and diversity policies have largely focused on gender, there have not been similar concerted efforts focused on the youth.

Leadership on the continent must strive to become increasingly more youth-led. Only about 3% of the continent's population are over the age of 65, yet the average age of African leaders is 77. This puts the average age gap between citizens and their leaders on the continent at about 48 years.

What this represents is a severe distortion of representation and leadership. Despite what many have referred to as a "demographic dividend", young Africans continue to be marginalised and evidence suggests that this demographic dividend is not being harnessed.

Business as usual isn't working

Therefore, it cannot be business as usual. The nature of the challenges that Africa faces require a new kind of responsiveness. The demand for new thinking and innovative solutions has seldom been greater and these solutions are necessarily created at the nexus of experience and new thinking which will necessarily be enabled by intergenerational efforts.

But those intergenerational dynamics can be challenging. Reflecting on his own experience, David Sengeh, chief innovation officer at the Directorate of Science, Technology and Innovation of Sierra Leone, says: "What was important was for me to learn how to engage with the age mates of my father and uncles – the societal and cultural dynamics can be very difficult to navigate. What helps with

the intergenerational dynamics are the technical contributions you make which make your presence invaluable at the table."

Theory into practice

The Africa Youth Charter, adopted in 2006 by African Union member states, is a political and legal framework which was intended to enshrine the rights, duties and freedoms of African youth. Specifically, the Charter seeks to ensure the constructive involvement of youth in the development agenda of Africa and their effective participation in decision-making processes.

Despite it being signed, ratified and deposited by the large majority of member states of the African Union, the operationalisation of it has been patchy and extremely slow. There has been a lack of earnest commitment to it and uptake by African Union member states. As we enter 2020, young Africans remain conspicuous by their absence at decision-making tables.

This situation is untenable for several reasons. Firstly, there is a lack of representation as Africa's key institutions continue to be governed by leaders who do not represent the largely young populations they serve. Generally, the governed want to see themselves reflected in the structures that govern them.

Secondly, current leaders are doing themselves a disservice by not drawing on the large talent pool to help them co-create solutions to Africa's most press-

"It is important for young people to occupy key leadership positions, but not just any young people. It is the young people who have the energy, focus, intensity, risk appetite, passion and single-minded drive to deliver well-articulated burning visions. The vision carriers who can efficiently and effectively translate visions into actions, implement and deliver on clear goals for a common objective. These are the young people who can build an impactful government, a thriving nation, and a prosperous continent."

ing challenges. And in some cases, the solutions can necessarily only be generated by young people in this technological era.

And lastly, from a sustainability perspective, this lack of inclusivity is actually dangerous. Young Africans do not understand the systems and institutions that define their futures. How then will they inherit structures and processes that they do not understand? How will they inherit Agenda 2063 and other defined priorities if they are so far removed from them?

Current leaders should actually have a vested interest in bringing in young leaders not least to ensure the sustainability of the good work they have started. Cesar Augusto Mba Abogo, the 39-year-old minis-

ter of finance, economy and planning of Equatorial Guinea, says that “working in government has given me the opportunity to learn more about the 51-year history of my country and witness, first-hand, the challenges our countries face daily.” No doubt he can only get that valuable experience, vital for continuity, from being within and at the centre of his country’s decision-making apparatus.

Young trailblazers

During our research, we identified a number of incredible young trailblazers who are already occupying senior government positions or positions of considerable influence. This opportunity, they acknowl-

“We still face serious barriers to having more young people enter positions of power and/or influence. Even when they exist, the entry points and processes for advancement that will attract talented and committed young people are sometimes not well structured.”

– *Mitoha Ondo’o Ayekaba*



Youth leadership



“The people whose future is being discussed, deserve to shape the future they are a part of. Putting young people in leadership positions helps to develop a pipeline of competent young people for even more important leadership roles. Young people need to be prepared for senior roles so getting them involved early is a critical factor in building this pipeline.”

– Akintunde Oyeboade

edge, comes from those in leadership positions, their “sponsors”, providing them with the opportunity to serve.

Their achievements in office speak for themselves and suggest the promise and potential of more young people in governance. Dr Jumoke Oduwole is the special adviser to the President of Nigeria on ease of doing business.

Her work is clearly already bearing fruit, as in 2019, Nigeria moved up 15 places on the World Bank’s Ease of Doing Business Index. Similarly, Clare Akamanzi in Rwanda is the CEO of the Rwanda Development Board, which has been credited with making it easy to do business in Rwanda as well as ushering in record levels of FDI and is fast becoming a benchmark organisation across the continent.

It is during this process of working in government that a new crop of leaders begins to understand how policy is formulated and implemented. These young leaders play an important role in debunking ageist misconceptions and developing more innovative and dynamic institutions and policies. When called to serve, they heeded the charge to help build, plan and steer the Africa of their future.

From outliers to critical mass

But these young leaders remain lone voices in their

various settings and what is actually required is a critical mass – a groundswell of new thinking and new ideas to propel the African continent forward. To that end, a number of things need to happen.

Firstly, getting young competent people into governance should not be dependent on mentors and sponsors – as important as they are. Getting to a critical mass will require deliberate actions which means structures and processes will need to be put into place.

On this, Nigeria offers some best practice for the rest of the continent regarding how to institutionalise such processes and reducing the barriers to entry. The positions of special adviser and special assistant to the minister were developed as pathways for getting technocrats into the government and can be readily replicated across the continent. Young competent Nigerians at national and state levels, such as Dr Jumoke Oduwole and Akintunde Oyeboade, respectively, have been the beneficiaries of these roles. Like others, they are appointable but not necessarily electable and have contributions to make in the policy realm without necessarily being politicians.

Secondly, as these young leaders enter the sphere of government and public office – often leaving a thriving opportunity in the private sector – they need to be adequately supported and trained. Formal inductions are needed so that they are not being set up to fail.

Thirdly, for those young people who do not necessarily want to be in public service, there are ways for African governments to leverage their talents and know-how. Governments should set up sectoral advisory councils comprising the best young minds to make inputs into policy, leveraging their experiences at the coalface. If policy is not evidence-based, relevant or appropriate, we are not moving forward as a continent.

Fourthly, African governments need to seriously consider youth quota systems in light of Africa’s peculiar demographic profile. While quotas are controversial, as they raise questions about meritocracy and whether the right people will be appointed, there are ways to alleviate those concerns. The African Leadership Institute is currently developing a platform of young, competent leaders which could be drawn on to help formalise the process of identifying young African experts.

Fifthly, the young leaders themselves need to self-mobilise and support each other by setting up a network of young leaders in governments across the continent to share experiences and learnings. On this, David Sengeh says what has helped him has been the support from his peers, namely other young leaders in similar positions.

In closing, while the AU’s Youth Charter and the AU’s Agenda 2063 provide good policy frameworks, they, alone, are not sufficient. What is required above all is political will. It is up to each country’s leadership to demonstrate significant political will and open up spaces for young technocrats and leaders to move into positions of influence. It is, after all, a win-win. If young people can help governments deliver on their mandates to the people, everybody wins and the government looks good! ■

Ethiopia's young and dynamic prime minister, Abiy Ahmed, lauded in 2019 on the international stage for his remarkable leadership and governance, demonstrates the incredible impact young and dynamic leaders can have on the African continent. The young trailblazers we have chosen to highlight here are serving their countries with that same innovation and dynamism, through a broad range of expertise. We are inspired by their service and need to encourage more young people, as well as senior leaders, to take up this leadership mantle on the continent.

Trailblazers

1 **Houda Imane Faraoun**
Age: 40
Minister of Post, Information Technology & Communication, *Algeria*

2 **Kamissa Camara**
Age: 36
Minister of Digital Economy and Planning, *Mali*

3 **David Moinina Sengh**
Age: 32
Chief Innovation Officer of the Directorate of Science, Technology and Innovation, *Sierra Leone*

4 **Jumoke Oduwole**
Age: 46
Special Adviser to the President of Nigeria on Ease of Doing Business, *Nigeria*

4 **Akintunde Oyebo**
Age: 40
Special Adviser/Director-General Ekiti State Investment Promotion Agency, *Nigeria*

5 **Clare Akamanzi**
Age: 40
Executive Director and Chief Executive Officer of the Rwanda Development Board, *Rwanda*

6 **Cesar Augusto Mba Abogo**
Age: 40
Minister of Finance, Economy and Planning, *Equatorial Guinea*

6 **Mitoha Ondo'o Ayekaba**
Age: 37
Vice Minister of Health and Social Welfare, *Equatorial Guinea*

7 **Wandile Sihlobo**
Age: 29
Member of the Presidential Special Economic Advisory Council, *South Africa*