

Youth Vulnerability and Exclusion (YOVEX) in West Africa: Synthesis Report

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The Youth Vulnerability and Exclusion (YOVEX) study was sponsored by the Department for International Development (DFID) in order to (1) stimulate debate on the security and development challenge posed by the demographic transition currently under way in West Africa; and (2) generate policy recommendations geared to the reduction of youth vulnerability and exclusion.

Towards these ends, the study interrogated the socio-economic, political and cultural plight of young people in selected West African countries and assessed the extent to which ongoing processes, initiatives and services meet the needs and aspirations of young people. The YOYEX study's pragmatic research approach mixed qualitative and quantitative methods, gave voice to young people, and led to practical policy recommendations.

Seven case studies were generated in countries selected to encompass both Anglophone and Francophone countries, including those recovering from armed conflicts and those that had not experienced intra-state warfare, but displayed state fragility characteristics (Ghana, Guinea, Liberia, Mali, Niger, Nigeria and Sierra Leone). The case studies confirmed the critical importance of local context for understanding the situation of youth, but also pointed towards common lessons relevant to the future design of youth programmes in West Africa.

First and foremost, the YOYEX study showed that African youth are resilient and resourceful and that there is no justification for the anxiety and panic often associated with policy debates about youth in Africa. YOYEX study investigations in all seven countries demonstrated that youth-based actions can create new dynamics, open up new opportunities, and mobilize scattered energies and skills to work towards security and development.

While the problems associated with the ongoing demographic transition are complex, the YOYEX study established that African youth offer a vast potential of energy, innovation and adaptability. By listening to them, promising entry points for public and voluntary initiatives were discovered. The study also found that the transforma-

tion that is sweeping Africa and opening up its economies, societies and politics is also opening space for African youth to assert themselves and participate in the decisions that affect their lives.

Secondly, the study highlighted that programmes aimed at addressing youth vulnerability and exclusion should take account of the ways in which the concept of youth is understood at the local level. Whereas prevailing international standards define youth as people aged 15–24 years, West African societies subscribe to a broader definition that takes account of the marital and employment status of individuals. Thus, people of up to 35 years of age may be included within the youth category. It follows that the continued adoption of international standards for youth programming assistance exacerbates social tensions and perpetuates the exclusion of vulnerable older youth.

Thirdly, the study reaffirmed the strong correlation among youth vulnerability, lack of access to education and massive youth unemployment. It demonstrated that stalled aspirations in education and skills training are major causes of unemployment and grievance among youth and that the lack of access to formal and vocational training excludes young people from mainstream institutions and diverts their energies towards illegitimate economic activities.

Fourthly, the seven case studies found that traditional structural impediments continue to limit the participation of youth in politics, inhibit their representation in local and national decision-making processes, and encourage their resort to unorthodox means of influence, including political violence, rebellion and thuggery. Thus, youth attitudes towards formal involvement in politics vary depending on the governance environment. But it is notable that except for Nigeria and Niger, youth are positive towards political participation (i.e. voting). They are especially keen to express themselves through formal political processes in post-conflict societies (Liberia, Sierra Leone).

Fifthly, the case studies unearthed strong perceptions of poor policy formulation, planning, programming and

implementation by state agencies. In too many instances, a genuine lack of state capacity and resources is combined with the politicization of youth initiatives (as tools of patronage); systematic under-funding; endemic corruption; and white elephant schemes that have no relevance to the genuine needs and aspirations of young people. A new policy stance that recognizes the human agency of Africa's youth, salutes their innovative survival strategies, and recognizes their potential contributions to Africa's security and development is urgently needed.

Sixthly, the diversity of conditions evinced by the YOVEX surveys definitely rules out a 'one-size-fits-all' approach to operational support. Instead, tailor-made assistance is needed to take account of stark differences among youth. In particular, the exceptionally severe constraints faced by female, rural and educationally deprived youth need focused attention.

Seventhly, the YOVEX study concluded that youth vulnerability and exclusion rarely translate into violent outcomes if social mediation is exercised by family and social networks, self-help associations, religious bodies, etc. In all seven countries, youth strongly identify with (and place unparalleled confidence in) one or more non-state institution – non-governmental organizations (NGOs), religious groups, community organizations, etc.

Youth perceive such collective endeavours as legitimate and effective sources of moral, socio-economic, political and even physical security. Not unexpectedly, such private and voluntary initiatives deliver much needed socio-economic, political and moral services to youth by tapping into a vast reservoir of workable ideas, resources and strategies fed by domestic and international sources. Unfortunately, more often than not, state-led initiatives and policies throughout West Africa supposedly aimed at the youth have yet to connect with these initiatives or even acknowledge them.

Eighthly, the seven case studies explored specific areas of policy emphasis that offer major potential for the upscaling of youth-based initiatives drawing on a booming culture of resilience that include social entrepreneurship and 'talent usage' in sports, entertainment (music, acting and show business) and private small-scale enterprises (trading, commercial motorcycle transport, video rental clubs, etc.). Effective support to productive endeavours would help reverse the pull of illegal activities (e.g. smuggling, theft, etc.) and would also redefine the cultural landscape of society by reducing the demands on the state and encouraging self-help and creativity.

Based on these findings, the YOVEX study puts forward the following key propositions as being central to its analysis:

Proposition 1: Youth in West Africa should be defined by local realities, as opposed to international standards

The YOVEX study found that the United Nations (UN)-derived notion of youth (especially its anchoring in the age bracket 15–24 years) is exclusionary. While age is an easily verifiable criterion for defining youth, it is not sufficient as a sole determinant, because it does not take into account the marginal socio-economic circumstances in which West Africans struggle to survive.

Proposition 2: Youth exclusion and vulnerability are functions of a country's context and governance

The YOVEX study found that the nature of the enabling governance environment at any point in time is a strong predictor of the extent of youth exclusion and vulnerability in the countries of West Africa. Where the socio-economic disempowerment of youth is linked to the level of economic endowment and underdevelopment, governance structures embody potentials to either moderate or aggravate youth exclusion and vulnerability.

Proposition 3: Current state-led youth programmes are supply driven, unresponsive and short lived, and do not target, leverage or upscale the successful and durable initiatives of the private and voluntary sectors

A majority of government-led initiatives on youth are largely non-functional, non-participatory, short lived or driven by the calculation of immediate political gains. Where they appear to reflect the needs and aspirations of youth (e.g. unemployment), they become easily politicized, or desperately inadequate (relative to the scale of the problem at hand), and tend to have minimal impact on youth. Conversely, many initiatives undertaken by non-governmental actors and institutions, especially religious groups and youth associations, appear to be more responsive and effective in meeting the needs and aspirations of young people. The programme conception is less politicized, more participatory and grounded in local practices and priorities.

Proposition 4: Youth exclusion and vulnerability do not lead to violent outcomes where mediating institutions channel youth energies into collaborative and productive activities

Only in relatively few cases do youth vulnerability and exclusion lead to extensive violent outcomes. Even in such cases, violence is often a means (as opposed to an end) whereby youth seek to tap into the instrumentality of violence to create or defend socio-economic and political privileges, and insert themselves into power structures controlled by political elites. The scope, reach and depth of informal structures and institutions in providing and delivering services to young people are immense. The range of services delivered include education, financial and medical assistance, acting as providers and finders of employment, and creating parallel structures for reintegrating or reconnecting with formal structures of the state. Also, the emphasis of some of these structures and pre-existing cultural constructs regarding non-violence and resilience reduce the prospect of violent outcomes from exclusion and vulnerability.

Proposition 5: A wide range of opportunities exist for unleashing the agency and creativity of African youth in coping with their exclusion and vulnerability (sports/music, religion/faith, armed groups and informal economic activities).

Youth possess immense creativity and resilience in coping with exclusion and vulnerability. Some involve legitimate/legal initiatives (commerce, informal economic activities and self-advocacy), while others are illegal or border on grey areas of the law (Internet fraud, cross-border smuggling, etc.). This creativity and resilience are underlined by young people's search for and creation of opportunities and resources to meet needs and aspirations like education, employment and subsistence living; to cater for parents and extended families; and to position themselves to set up independent households in the future. Youth coping mechanisms are frequently rooted in activities outside the realm of the state that generally facilitate social inclusion and enhance youth participation in productive activities.

Proposition 6: More than national conditions, the local enabling environment determines whether the scattered energies of Africa's youth are channelled towards peaceful or violent pursuits

The conditions of and differences between societies where youth exclusion and vulnerability lead to violent and non-violent outcomes relate more to local dynamics. Such dynamics include the capacity, scope and social space for invention and creativity; the connections between informal structures and state/formal institutions and actors; and the depth of services and activities of NGOs.

In the light of this, the YOVEX study makes the following recommendations:

To national governments:

- Revise or prepare national youth policies that set out the reciprocal obligations of the state and youth, renew commitments, and provide viable platforms for collaboration and broad stakeholding between state and non-state institutions in youth development.
- Engage non-state actors – NGOs, religious groups and youth associations – in the design and delivery of youth services.
- Ensure that various state institutions demonstrate greater commitment to the implementation of a new or revised national youth policy through the creation of time-bound targets (in the form of **youth development goals**) and resource allocation.
- Adopt measures, mechanisms and benchmarks to track and monitor the extent to which youth interests are integrated into the priorities, policies and programmes of the key government ministries, departments and agencies that execute national youth policies.
- Create national platforms to recognize and support the development of organic youth leadership and active youth participation in the civic life of their communities and national politics as forums for the articulation, co-ordination and organization of different youth voices and interests across the country.
- Set up **national youth development funds** with contributions from state and non-state institutions (religious bodies, NGOs, youth groups, etc.).
- Remove structural impediments that restrict the participation and representation of youth in formal politics, especially decision-making processes (parliament, the cabinet, etc.).

To voluntary sector groups (including youth associations):

- Increase co-operation and co-ordination among existing voluntary sector organizations involved in youth services.
- Develop the capacity to access, influence and monitor public office holders and government institutions in order to ensure their sustained attention, transparency and action regarding national youth development agendas.

- Ensure that the programmes developed and implemented by national and international NGOs are both relevant, effective and beneficial to youth, and tap into local capacity.
- Leverage the skills and resources of national NGOs' members and partner organizations into long-term, self-sustaining programmes, and develop their capacity to define independent agendas rather than just seeking to implement the agendas of governments and international development agencies.
- Increase internal democracy, accountability and transparency in the raising and use of funds and in the treatment of all youth, particularly marginalized youth.
- Establish or upscale existing sub-regional coalitions and interactions to share ideas and resources, forge common objectives and co-ordinate strategies for seeking sub-regional approaches and interventions in order to augment national-level initiatives on youth development.

To the private sector:

- Increase support for state and non-state youth initiatives through greater financial intervention and policy alignment.
- Integrate youth development into corporate social responsibility strategies.
- Deepen and extend youth development initiatives beyond educated and urban youth.
- Develop youth-specific products and services.
- Partner with state and youth groups to develop more efficient strategies for bringing youth informal sector activities into official purview.

To the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS):

- Refine and align the ECOWAS Youth Policy and the ECOWAS Conflict Prevention Framework (ECPF) to reflect the priority concerns of youth across the region.
- Facilitate legislation-led initiatives that reflect the priority concerns of youth in member states.

- Provide a platform for interaction between state-led and non-state processes aimed at regionwide youth empowerment.
- Partner with governments and youth associations to develop youth programmes and initiatives across national boundaries.
- Support a **regional voice of youth conference** or **festival** designed to build the capacity and connectivity of youth groups in specific areas of activity and to acknowledge and celebrate the creativity, innovation and resilience of young people.

To DFID and other international development agencies:

- Use a nuanced and flexible definition of youth, as opposed to the current use of the 15–24 years criterion of the UN.
- Design programmes that selectively target priority youth issues and cohorts based on the case-by-case identification of promising initiatives ripe for upscaling.
- Encourage the design or updating of **national youth policies**, the creation of **national youth development funds** and the setting up of independent **national youth commissions** as vehicles for co-ordinated strategies for youth empowerment that leverage non-state actors rather than substitute for them.
- Provide targeted assistance to selected youth groups and associations so as to build their capacity for broad-based youth empowerment geared to the articulation and advocacy of youth interests through service delivery, lobbying and engagement with many different channels of influence.
- Support youth-focused research and data collection to improve policy formulation, planning, implementation and evaluation at the national, regional and international levels.
- Partner with regional bodies, especially ECOWAS, to develop youth programmes and initiatives across national boundaries.