

## Youth Vulnerability and Exclusion (YOVEX) in Guinea: Key Research Findings

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### The YOVEX Project

In 2006, the Conflict, Security and Development Group (CSDG) at King's College London began a study of youth vulnerability and exclusion in seven West African countries in order to better understand the socio-economic and political plight of young people in West Africa. The large-scale participation of youth in civil wars in the Mano River countries and in political instability (electoral violence and other inter-group clashes) across West Africa informed our interest in the region's youth.

Specifically, we were interested in understanding the impact of decades of economic decline, collapsed education, unemployment, poor governance, armed conflict and globalization on the young people of West Africa. Our initial conviction that young people are at the heart of both the region's challenges and its opportunities for sustainable development and security has been reinforced by the subsequent interest in young people displayed by international organizations such as ECOWAS, the World Bank and the United Nations. Although the comparative absence of youth-on-youth violent conflict enjoyed by Guinea is due to its particular political, socio-economic and cultural characteristics, this calm may be jeopardized by government failures to improve governance and state infrastructure. This is especially crucial in view of Guinea's recent military take-over following the death of the former president.

### What we found in Guinea

- Generally, young people in Guinea are key to maintaining social cohesion in a politically-volatile national and regional context.
- Many young people have entered informal areas of economic and progressive civic activity in an effort to sustain themselves and their communities as traditional routes to adulthood fail. This activity is largely unknown to donor agencies and beyond the current reach of state support.
- At this crucial time, clear opportunities exist to support youth initiative, enterprise and leadership in rural and urban contexts.

### The nature and needs of youth in Guinea

Dissatisfaction with and distrust of the state – particularly the police – rather than tensions among different youth groups characterize youthful unrest.

Youth-hood – particularly in rural areas – is regarded as a burdensome social rank affected by privilege, patronage, and economic and political exclusion. State support to young people is seen as captured by elites and well-placed individuals. Nevertheless, traditional and religious values – together with the national identity engendered by the country's socialist past – guide the civic consciousness and regard for family values adhered to by the majority of youth.

Education, employment and training are seen as unavailable luxuries, and self-help, self-employment, informal study groups and alleviating poverty by informal livelihoods are regarded as the norm.

### What the government is doing to assist youth (and the limitations of these efforts)

- Recent substantial cuts in resources and staffing within the Ministry of Youth mean that youth policies and programmes have been severely curtailed. Guinea's 1993 youth policy is currently under review.
- The limited initiatives being pursued focus on social and health issues (e.g. the SIDA project) and top-down training projects and national volunteer programmes that favour the few rather than providing grassroots support to struggling – but more realistically grounded – self-start youth groups, and entrepreneurial activity.
- The old system of local *maisons des jeunes*, staffed by dedicated individuals, still represents a viable supportive infrastructure of huge potential.

### What happens to vulnerable youth?

- The majority of young people do not turn to crime, anti-social behaviour or violence. Where these exist, they are a downside of an essentially positive move by youth to free themselves from a youth-hood that no longer leads to security.

- Where young people reach beyond available support and their traditional status as youth, they seek new cultural, economic and civic identities. This is a transition from youth's traditional subservience towards a more autonomous culture that is controversial, but not in itself anti-social.
- In seeking new survival strategies, young people align themselves with global developments featuring new technologies, international influences and contacts, and trade.
- Those that do not secure futures for themselves either formally or informally can fall into vagrancy, petty crime, prostitution, drug abuse, etc.
- State-run mass media exclude the voice of youth. Attention should be paid to the growth of news and comment mass media, music, other cultural industries, and accessible media and technology.
- State-sponsored justice is beyond the reach of young people and is not trusted. There is an urgent need for access to traditional and modern forms of reliable and affordable arbitration in order to minimize the escalation of land disputes and other problems as modernization progresses.
- The police are widely considered to be corrupt, ineffective, and often obstructive or dangerous. There is an urgent need for police reform.

## What sustains youth?

Young people generally remain wedded to traditional civic values, which they preserve through activities linked to self-expression and livelihoods. These include:

- music and media activities, and entertainment, mobile phone and Internet-based businesses;
- self-starting civic associations;
- commerce in urban areas and agriculture and crafts in rural areas;
- extensive social and family networks; and
- informal trading and manufacturing, and service industries such as hairdressing, taxi-motors and street hawking.

## What should the state do?

- National policy should build on the activities of youth that combine familial, ethnic, religious and civic sensibilities with opportunities for trade, the advantages of new technologies, and the mission-led ethos and transparent management styles copied from NGOs.
- The capture of resources by elites and well-placed networks must be tackled head on. The review of the 1993 youth policy must realistically plan for the resources and monitoring required to mainstream participatory, inclusive planning processes and a commitment to equal access for all youth.
- The *maisons des jeunes* should be revamped to provide local support to youth, with an emphasis on open access, equal opportunities and participatory working methods so as to move away from top-down paternalism.
- Informal farming and craft activities help slow urbanization. This should be protected and supported as pressures on youth to urbanize increase.

Voice and new loyalties emerging in the informal economy sometimes signal partial exit from the family, the state and the professions. State policy should reflect the need for work in each area:

- State social policy should address the need parents feel to marry off young women. Efforts to raise the childbearing age should continue.
- Participatory consultative youth groups should be developed across government departments.
- Professional associations should be strengthened with a view to broadening apprenticeship schemes – possibly in association with the current Guinea Volunteer project.

## What should ECOWAS do?

- Ensure that the national government adopts and implements up-dated youth policies.
- Carry out research into the informal sector, which is an essential component of life across the region. Without adequate data, state youth policies will not be truly responsive to the needs and potential of young populations.

## What should donor agencies do?

- Establish a young people's fund that offers small grants and works in conjunction with *maisons des jeunes*, NGOs, families and the private sector.
- Organize a regional voice of young Africa conference which should aim to place Guinea as a regional communicator on a par with Mali and Burkina Faso.
- Support further research that examines how NGOs in border areas work and the powerful role of traditional beliefs in the social economy in relation to conflict.