

Let's talk about you(th)

A study on youth engagement in
Kenya

Dr. Sara Kinsbergen
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Executive summary

The **objective** of this study is to increase understanding of the current state of youth engagement in Kenya, the main hindrances in this field, and its implications for the work of the Netherlands embassy in Kenya and its partners. The study takes a broad perspective by looking at the inclusion of young people (18-35yrs old) and/or recognition of young people's voices and perspectives in key decision-making processes in different spheres of society. The **research** consists of a review of studies, over 30 (individual or group) interviews, various focus group discussions and an analysis of program documents. The research was conducted by Dr. Sara Kinsbergen, in cooperation with local organisations and the Netherlands Embassy in Kenya, and took place in the period September-December 2022.

Currently, there is a worldwide agenda to improve the involvement of youth in various aspect of life. In Kenya, this results in a large number of national and international civil society organisations, government institutes and (social) enterprises are supporting or implementing programs focusing on youth and youth engagement. Increased youth engagement is considered **important** for its expected contribution to 1) improved lives of individual youth; 2) improved representation of youth as a group in policy and practice; 3) a more prosperous and equal society as a whole.

The **current state** of youth engagement in Kenya can be assessed on the basis of two key data: 1) the level of youth employment; and 2) the level of participation of young people in politics. Data shows that the current state of youth engagement in the world of work and politics is suboptimal in Kenya. Four important **barriers to youth employment** can be identified: 1) access to education; 2) a disconnect between education programs and the world of work; 3) rapid growth of the labor force; 4) the (perceived) lack of experience of young people and older professionals that fear competition by young professionals

Two important **barriers for youth participation in politics** can be identified: 1) lack of financial resources; 2) scepticism towards young political leaders among voters and older political leaders.

These barriers can be traced back to underlying **root causes** of limited youth engagement: 1) (gendered) age norms (*young people are not considered fit for the job*); 2) the (mal)functioning of systems (*older people are not willing or able to make space for younger people*).

Looking at the **interventions** being implemented, it is striking that most of the programs do not intentionally target these fundamental root causes underlying limited youth engagement. Moreover and interrelated, most programs have in common that they exclusively target youth (and no other age groups).

This results first of all in **backlash effects** against youth engagement programs, with people of older age feeling threatened by the strong focus on youth. Secondly, this approach risks to **hamper the effectiveness** of programs, and to, unintentionally, even foster resistance against youth and (increased) youth engagement. Adding to these risks, few organisations have an understanding of if and how their programs contribute to the (longer term) expected effects of increased youth engagement.

The report therefore makes three key **recommendations**: 1) give more recognition to and explicitly address root causes of youth exclusion; 2) to recognize backlash effects and find ways to mitigate these; and 3) to increase investment in monitoring, evaluation and learning. Exploring these avenues could help not only moving towards more effective and sustainable interventions to increase youth engagement, but also to prevent or mitigate the risks of selective or ambiguous targeting.

Preface

Kenya is a country with a very young population. That fact provides many opportunities, but also challenges. A large part of the population is of working age, thus a huge potential for production and service delivery. Kenya has been able to provide education to many of them, still existing gaps of access remain. The influx into the labour market is high, every year again. The challenge is to absorb all of them or to provide an ecosystem for self-employment that will enable all to gain a meaningful income. That is the economic view on youth bulge opportunities and challenges. But the place of youth in society is so much more than just the economic aspect of it. This study of Sara Kinsbergen addresses those wider aspects of youth engagement.

The assignment for this is the result of a process slowly recognizing those wider perspectives. We were struggling with the access of youth in the political arena during the election year of 2022. But discussing this, we recognized that youth participation was also an issue in access to land, access to decision making, access to credit, access to governance. Moreover, many youths find it difficult to settle into family life, to find a future in their habitat of origin and to find space to explore new avenues. This brought us to the understanding that studying the potential for youth in Kenya should address different questions such as the role of youth in society at large, their bottlenecks. We understood that youth use different modes of communication which often separates them from more traditional ways to communicate. Are those different modalities still connecting or do we see fragmentation and compartmentalization? We realized that talking to youth is important to understand their problems, but likewise is the discussions with elders. Compartmentalization would not help to change zero sum thinking into synergy thinking. Zero sum thinking puts the interest of youth in competition with that of other groups in society, but is the zero-sum game the right frame to look at the youth challenge?

In this study Sara takes this broader perspective and arrives at point of understanding better the barriers to youth, the privileges held by elders in society and thus the risks when those privileges are being challenged. How to move away from competition towards shared growth, shared development and synergy between different interests.

Just as the long fight for women rights and the promotion of gender equality thought us that more equal opportunities can only be achieved if men are part and parcel of the discussion and the change processes needed, also youth need elders to be part and parcel of their journey. This study tries to make that case and has brought us new insights that we hopefully can bring into practice when we work side by side with Kenya to strengthen its economy, its social fabric, and its long-term stability. No one should be left behind; all Kenyans matter to provide for an even better future.

Maarten Brouwer
Netherlands Ambassador to Kenya

Background to the study

This report is the result of a study commissioned by the Netherlands Embassy in Kenya. The study was conducted as part of the 'Embassy Science Fellowships' program of the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Dutch Research Council (NWO). Dr. Sara Kinsbergen of Radboud University, the Netherlands, worked at the Netherlands Embassy in Kenya as research fellow from September until December 2022.

Objective and scope of the study

Through the study, the Embassy wants to increase its understanding of the current state of youth engagement in Kenya, the main hindrances in this field and its implications for the work of the Embassy and its partners. It has been a deliberate choice not to focus on a particular theme or sector (e.g. employment) but to look broadly at the "inclusion of young people (18-35yrs old) and/or recognition of young people's voices & perspectives in key decision making processes in different spheres of society". One can think for example of:

education:	integrating comprehensive sexual education in the curriculum of primary education
agriculture:	facilitating intergenerational transition of land
health:	providing youth friendly health services
employment:	enlarging job opportunities for young people
politics:	increasing the number of young people in political positions

Methodology

The study took place between September-December 2022 and was conducted by Dr. Sara Kinsbergen, in cooperation with the youth led and youth focused nongovernmental organisation (NGO) Siasa Place, the community based organisations (CBOs) Stretchers Youth Organisation and Community Mappers, and the political team of the Netherlands Embassy in Kenya.

The study started with a review of studies in the area of youth engagement in general and in particular in Kenya as a means to get an understanding of, amongst other:

- the history of youth engagement policy and programming in Kenya and beyond
- the underlying rationale and objectives of youth engagement policy and programming
- the key debates in academia and policy on youth engagement
- the current state of youth engagement in Kenya
- challenges experienced and progress made in this area
- the key actors operating in the field

Following this, over 30 interviews were conducted with:

- professionals working in the field of youth engagement, working in youth led/youth-oriented organisations, ranging from (I)NGOs and NGOs, CBOs, government institutions, social enterprises
- young people that vied unsuccessfully for political positions ranging from Member of County Assembly (MCA), senator and Member of Parliament (MPs)
- (young) political leaders ranging from chief, MCA, MP, (deputy) county governor
- academics

Four focus group discussions took place with individuals representing diversity in terms of gender, age, education, employment status, socio-economic background, religion, and (dis)ability. Two focus group discussions were conducted in the informal settlement Kibera by the CBO Community Mappers. Two were held in Kwale and Mombasa, organised by the CBO Stretchers Youth Organisation. In total, 60 participants joined the focus groups discussions.

Finally, program documents of strategic partnerships in the area of youth engagement that are supported by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs have been analysed and participation in events and field visits (in)directly related to the topic of youth engagement took place.

During primary data collection and analysis, the following questions were central:

- What are key hindrances for (increased) youth engagement?
- What are the dominant narratives surrounding younger and older people?
- What are the objectives of youth engagement interventions?
- What are the underlying assumptions of youth engagement interventions?
- What evidence is there to substantiate these assumptions?
- What different pathways for change are being present in youth engagement interventions?
- What is known on the impact of the interventions?

Although the study starts from the recognition that there is no age binary of 'old' and 'young' people, throughout the report the terms 'older' and 'younger people' are being used. With younger people in the Kenyan context referring to people below 35 and youth referring to people between 18-35 years old.

Youth at heart, the importance of youth engagement

In Kenya, "youth" means the "collectivity of all individuals in the Republic who have attained the age of eighteen years; but have not attained the age of thirty-five years" (Kenya Constitution, 2010). According to the latest Kenya Population and Housing Census report, in 2019, youth were 13,618,462 or 29 percent of the Kenya's population of 47.6 million. 75% of the Kenyan population is aged below 35 years old. Considering the high proportion of youth in the country, Kenya is facing a youth bulge. This youth bulge is considered both as "an opportunity and a threat: an opportunity to social and political development while at the same time presenting risk and threat to the country's social cohesion and stability if not adequately empowered and supported" (Kenya Youth Development Policy, 2019).

Generally, it can be said that it is based on these facts and this analysis, that Kenya is committing itself to the (increased) engagement of young people in society at large. This commitment is reflected in multiple government policies aiming to contribute to this goal, such as The National Youth Council Act, No. 10 of 2009, the National Youth Policy of 2007, and Kenya Vision 2030 and its Medium-Term Plans^{1,2}.

The focus on youth is not unique to Kenya. For about two decades, globally a push for youth inclusive policy making can be noted. In 2003, the UN General Assembly demonstrated its commitment to youth participation through Resolution No. 58/133, that "requires upon all Member States, United Nations bodies, Specialized Agencies, Regional Commissions and Intergovernmental and Nongovernmental Organizations concerned to make every possible effort to implement cross-sectoral policies relevant to the youth" (Mutuku, 2020, p.1).

¹ For a historical overview of youth governance in Kenya, see "State of Youth Governance in Kenya 2021", by Charles Wafula.

² Kenya Vision 2030 <http://vision2030.go.ke>.

Regionally, the African Union adopted the African Youth [Charter](#) in 2006 aiming for participation of young people in all spheres of society. In 2015, the United Nations Security Council adopted a [resolution](#) on Youth, Peace and Security, stating that "young people play an important and positive role in the maintenance and promotion of international peace and security". Since 2020, the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign affairs has a Youth at Heart [strategy](#) and in 2022, the European Union launched its first Youth Action [Plan](#) (YAP) in EU external action 2022 – 2027.



When analysing these policies and based on the interviews held, three key reasonings can be distinguished underlying these policies and resulting programmes³:

- 1) individual youth: engaging young people allows them to improve their individual lives
- 2) youth as a group: engaging young people will result in youth friendly policy & practice
- 3) society at large: engaging young people will contribute to a more prosperous, safe, and equal society at large

"How can you talk about the future of Africa when young people are not being represented?" (Interview director NGO)

³ The rationale underlying youth engagement interventions is discussed more elaborately later in the report in the section "Youth at heart interventions".

The Current State of Youth Engagement

Both the interviewees and the literature (see for example Mzalendo, 2016, 2019) on youth engagement refer to employment and politics as key thematic areas when it comes to youth engagement in Kenya. Therefore, in this section the current state of youth engagement in these two specific areas and key hindrances to increased participation are being discussed.

Youth employment:

Participation in society through employment is considered instrumental in contributing to improved social and economic circumstances of individual young people and society at large (Escudero and Lopéz Mourelo, 2013; Dalberg, 2019). In addition, by having young people in professional positions in government institutes, civil society organisations or companies, it is expected that young people voices will be increasingly heard and addressed. Consequently, the current high youth unemployment in Kenya is identified as one of the key challenges Kenya is facing (see for example Awiti and Scott, 2016). In 2020, the Kenya National Bureau of Statistics reported that “youth aged 20 to 29, had an unemployment rate of over 32.4 percent, with a long-time unemployment rate of 7.9 percent” (Awiti and Scott, 2016). The overall youth unemployment (18-35 years) in 2016 was estimated at 55%. Unemployment was highest among women (62%), and even higher among rural women (68%) (Awiti and Scott, 2016). Youth suffer disproportionately more from unemployment in the country. In 2021, 27,6% of the population aged between 20-24 was Not in Education and Not in Training (NEET) (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics, 2021). Those young people that do find employment often do so in the informal sector (60% of informal sector is made up by youth) and/or are often being underemployed. Not surprisingly, unemployment was the most urgent concern expressed by young people in the Kenya Youth Survey report, with 63% urging urgent action by the government (Awiti and Scott, 2016).

Four important barriers to youth employment are identified both by interviewees and the literature. First, **limited educational attainment** is considered an important factor in understanding youth unemployment (Dalberg, 2019). Access to education has increased significantly over the years, instigated by amongst other, the introduction of free primary education in 2003. However, for still nearly half of the population primary education is the highest educational attainment, see Table 1 (Statista). Lack of financial resources is referred to by participants of the study as a key factor for not being able to continue education.

Highest educational attainment (2019)	
Primary education	49%
Secondary education	24%
Technical & Vocational education	7.2%
University education	2.5%

Table 1. Highest educational attainment, total Kenya population, 2019. Source: [Statista](#)

In addition to inadequate educational attainment, secondly, the **disconnect between education programs and the world of work** is being referred to as an important hindrance to young people trying to enter the labor market upon finishing their education. This is especially apparent in the discussion on the growing number of unemployed university graduates, with long term unemployed university graduates reaching 50% (Munene, 2021). Strong focus on academic knowledge rather than employment needs; emphasis on government as the main source of employment; and nonexistent, or inadequate, career advisory services are considered as the main factors contributing to this mismatch (Munene, 2021, p.18).

In 2018, the Kenya Federation of Employers 'Skills mismatch survey' noted that according to employers, 64 percent of university graduates did not have the right skills to perform on their job (Kenya Federation of Employers, 2018).

A third hindrance to youth entering the labor market is the **rapid growth of the labor force**, stretching the absorptive capacity of the economy. According to estimations of the International Labor Office, "between 2011 and 2050, working-age population [in Kenya] will increase, on average, by more than 950,000 people per year" (Escudero and Lopéz Mourelo, 2013, p. 4).

Finally, the **(perceived) lack of experience** of young people and **older professionals that fear competition by young professionals** are being expressed as an

important barrier for young people to enter the labor market and/or to build their career once having a job. Some young people that participated in the focus group discussions explain how they feel that no matter how much experience they have, as long as they are considered 'young', they risk their experience not to be valued.

"Young people have more knowledge of technology, older professionals fear to lose their seatage" (Participant focus group discussion)

Participation in politics

Participation of young people in politics is considered conditional to reach increased youth participation in other spheres of life (Mzalendo, 2016, 2019). When analysing the state of youth participation in politics, studies look at voter registration, voting turn out, participation in public participation processes, youth vying for political positions and the number of young people being elected and ultimately, influence of young political leaders once being elected (see amongst others IEBC, 2017; Mzalendo, 2016, 2019, 2020; Shujaaz Inc, Youth Pulse, 2022a; Youth Agenda, 2017).

From the 2017 to the 2022 national elections, there was a total increase of 12% of registered voters in Kenya in 2022.

At the same time, a decline was registered of 5% of registered youth voters in 2022 compared to 2017 (See Table 2). This decrease has been referred to as an expression of voter apathy by young people, resulting from their disbelief in politics in general and the role they can play in this in particular (International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, 2022; [The Conversation](#), 2022). When looking at the number of young people that vied for different political positions in 2013, 2017 and 2022 (see Table 2), an increase can be noted of 75% from 2013-2022 and 26% from 2017-2022, from 2.487 candidates in 2013 to 4,350 in 2022. The increase of women candidates is most pronounced, with 76% more young, female political candidates in 2022 (387) compared to 2017 (219). As can be seen from Table 2, both young men and women vied most for MCA positions.

Youth elected for political positions	2013			2017			2022		
Elective Position	Gender		Total	Gender		Total	Gender		Total
	Male	Female		Male	Female		Male	Female	
Presidential	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Senatorial	23	0	23	6	0	6	4	0	4
Member of National Assembly	198	7	205	14	3	17	7	1	8
Woman Member to the National Assembly	0	27	27	0	3	3	0	5	5
Gubernatorial	5	0	5	1	0	1	1	0	1
Member of County Assembly	2122	105	2227	274	13	287	303	14	317
Total	2348	139	2487	3209	219	3428	3963	387	4350

Table 2. Youth that vied for political positions 2017-2022 national elections. Source: data received by the Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission.

The number of young people being elected does not keep pace with the increasing number of young people vying for political positions.

Table 3 shows how, compared to 2017, there is an increase of 6,7% of young people being elected for political positions in 2022; 6,8% more young men and 5,3% more young women. As a result, over time, the chance to become elected as a young person, decreased from 11% in 2013 to nearly 10% in 2017 to 7,7% in 2022.

Youth elected for political positions	2013			2017			2022		
	Gender		Total	Gender		Total	Gender		Total
	Male	Female		Male	Female		Male	Female	
Elective Position									
Presidential	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Senatorial	3	0	3	6	0	6	4	0	4
Member of National Assembly	11	2	13	14	3	17	7	1	8
Woman Member to the National Assembly	0	2	2	0	3	3	0	5	5
Member of County Assembly	251	9	260	274	13	287	303	14	317
Total	265	13	278	294	19	313	314	20	334

Table 3. Youth elected for political positions 2017-2022 national elections. Source: data received by the Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission.

Despite some improvements in the representation of young people in political positions, several important hindrances are there that limit political participation of young people. Table 3 presents an overview of some of the impediments young people experience.

Hindrances for political participation experienced by young people
Not meeting educational requirements
Limited financial resources to register, to vote, to vie
Having no identity card
Feelings of insecurity
No/limited understanding of political processes
Cultural barriers: speaking up in arenas with majority being older
Fatigue or disbelief in politics
Lack of knowledge on processes
Active hindering of participation by political parties

Table 4. Source 'Youth and women's consultations on political participation in Kenya: findings and recommendations', the Carter Center, 2018 and 'Breaking the Cycle: Young people's perspectives on the 2022 election', Shujaz Inc, Youth Pulse, 2022b.

From the interviews and the focus groups discussions, two main barriers for young people both to enter the political arena and to take position once being elected arise. First, for young people that vie, **lack of financial resources** is identified as the most important impediment to succeed. In 2022, it was estimated that vying for MCA, the most common position for young people to vie for, costs US\$31,000 (Kanyinga & Mboya, 2021). This same study also confirmed that the more a candidate spends on her/his campaign, the higher the chance to become elected (Ibid.). Participants of the stand at hand, explain how that the electorate is being used to receiving hand-outs of candidates. This results in a gap between candidate's more longer-term vision and political agenda and the more short-term outlook of many voters.

Those that are being elected explain how finance plays again a key role once in position. Kanyinga & Mboya (2021) confirm that “the costs do not stop when in

“In Kenya, everything depends on money, people think: every problem can be solved by a leader. To meet these expectations [as a leader], you need money. When somebody lacks school fee, they run to you.” (Interview with re-elected young MCA)

office”. Those that paid for your political campaign or those that voted for you, expect something in return. Young political leaders explain how it is a burden to them and their families to meet these expectations. Second, they mention how

the **scepticism towards young political leaders**, adds to the burden. Older people have their eyes on them to see how they perform, and younger people have high expectations in terms of young political leaders meeting the needs of the youth. Female political leaders explain how to them there is even the

“They [older voters] tell me: ‘We cannot be led by a skirt; you could be my daughter.’” (Interview young, female political leader)

additional weight on their shoulders to prove that they, as young, female political leaders, can perform (see also Mzalendo, 2020).

These high expectations make the job for young political leaders very demanding but meeting these a requirement in order to become re-elected and to avoid disappointment that could reaffirm the conviction that ‘young people are not fit for the job’.

Once being elected, young political leaders explain how their is reluctance to welcome young political leaders in the political arena. This was especially brought up by young members of parliament (MPs). Parliament is said to act ‘as a club’: a club with certain codes and processes of inclusion and exclusion, difficult to enter and once entered, difficult to uphold or realize your plans.

“Young people are being absorbed in the club, start using the language. Few will try to fight for their vision, purpose” (Interview director NGO)

“It [parliament] is like a bouncing castle: Parents [senior parliamentarians] are sitting at a table next to the bouncing castle, where the kids [young parliamentarians] are jumping. Parents and kids are getting different food and drinks.” (Interview director NGO)

One interviewee explains how, for example, it is difficult for young people and women in particular to catch the speaker’s eye⁴. The speaker would tend to go for older, more experienced MPs, making it complicated for young MPs to become even heard.

Intersectionality

Both the focus group discussions and interviews highlight the intersectional nature of exclusion of young people, both in the area of employment and in politics. While young people confirm that their age strongly defines their role, position and opportunities in society, at the same time they mention that this coincides with other markers of their identity, such as their gender, ethnicity, (dis)ability, rural-urban location of living, sexual orientation, and religion.

⁴ The speaker is the chair of the Kenyan National Assembly.

Root causes of limited youth engagement

In addition to some field specific hindrances to youth engagement as discussed above, the interviews highlight two key root causes that hamper (increased) youth engagement across different spheres of society.

The role of (gendered) age norms

First of all, **age norms** are referred to as a key factor explaining why it is challenging for young people to take position. The work of sociologist Harris (2005) is helpful in understanding what age norms refer to and how these are embedded in culture. Harris describes that culture defines what is proper and improper behavior. It are these standards or rules, she refers to as norms. These norms help us to predict the behaviour of others but also to know what others expect from us. In addition to often described gender norms, Harris describes age norms as what is considered proper behaviour at different ages (Harris, 2005).

The findings of the current study show that, similar to gender norms or rules (Fiske & Stevens, 1993; Rudman and Phelan 2008; Rudman et.al, 2012), age norms consist of both descriptive and prescriptive components:

- Descriptive component: How younger and older people are typically being perceived
- Prescriptive component: How younger and older people men and women “should (not) be”

The interviews eluded both strong descriptive and prescriptive elements that instruct how people of younger and older age should (not) be (pro and prescriptions) and how they are perceived.

“From when we are very young, we are thought at home, in school and in church: never talk in front of elders.” (Staff member CBO)

Interviewees explain how the 2007 post-election violence up to today strongly impacts the negative narrative surrounding young people. With part of the violence being youth-led (whether or not being instigated and paid for by political candidates), this resonates in the narrative of young people as warriors’ (Gebrehana, 2021)⁵.

As can be seen from Table 5, the narratives on younger and older people compose of a mixture of positive and negative markers. Important to note is that both the positive and negative narrative on younger and older people are being shared by people of different age groups.

Older people	Younger People
Rigid	Warriors
Experienced	Idle
Greedy	Innovative
Responsbile	Energetic
Wise	Troublemakers
Tired	Potential
Stubborn	Inexperienced
Influentia	Flexible

Table 5. Perceptions on younger and older people, expressed by both younger and older people during focus group discussions and interviews

Whereas during focus group discussion young people sometimes heavily resisted the negative picture of young people shed by older people, there were also young people confirming the narrative of, for example, young people being idle.

⁵ It is not to be said that the image of ‘young people as warriors’ originates from the 2007 elections, however, interviewees explain how this narrative seems to be reaffirmed as a result of the post-election violence.

However, the overall perceptions on older and younger people shared by participants to the study, entails mechanisms that could be referred to as 'ageism'. Ageism refers to "the stereotypes (how we think), prejudice (how we feel) and discrimination (how we act) directed towards people on the basis of their age" (WHO, 2021). The academic debate on ageism predominantly studies discrimination of older people based on their age (e.g. discrimination of older workers) (see for example Palmore, 2001; Iversen et al, 2009; Hiu & Rabinovich, 2020). In this underlying study, it is interesting and important to note that participants especially express sentiments that refer to exclusion of younger people from certain positions or not being heard when in certain roles

"We do not put them in position, because we will overstretch them, they will drive a big car." (Interview older political leader)

"Even if a young person climbs a mountain, he or she will never see or experience what the elderly has gone through." (Participant Focus Group Discussion)

based on their age. The combination of negative markers assigned to young people results in an overall strong distrust in young people's ability to, for example, take up certain positions. Especially the (professional or life) experience of people of older age compared to that of younger people is said to be at the heart of this exclusion.

In addition to this, the strength of this narrative is very apparent. Interviewees of different age and participants of focus group discussions in different locations all shared more or less similar perceptions using similar wordings. One of the interviewees reflected on this and mentioned how the strong narrative on youth is part of the problem of exclusion, the (repetition of the) narrative in itself contributes to limited youth engagement.

Interviewees explain how age norms are intertwined with strong gender norms. They describe Kenya as a still overly patriarchal society, with powerful positions being considered more obvious to be taken up by older men or with decisive voices being reserved for older men being.

In the academic literature, this is being explained as 'gendered ageism' (Itzin and Phillipson, 1993 & 1995), referring to "a double jeopardy, where two interacting power systems lead to an increased vulnerability" (Krekula et al., 2018, p. 34). More precisely, it is the dominance of patriarchal norms combined with a preoccupation with, in the Kenyan context, older people, that results in a more vulnerable position of younger women (Krekula et al., 2018).

The role of systems

In addition to the role of these age norms, both the focus group discussions and the interviews refer to the (mal)functioning of public service systems as a key hindrance to (increased) youth engagement. People explain how, for example, inadequate retirement care, makes it challenging for people of older age to 'make space' for younger professionals. "We are creating spaces for young people, but no place for older people to go" (Interview staff member NGO). Interviewees explain how, in companies or government institutes, older people are kept in position, because it is too expensive to send them for pension and cheaper to keep them on board than replacing them by young people.

"Older people are saying: if you want us to exit, where do you want us to go?" (Interview director NGO)

"Older people had to wait very long before they could take position. As a result, they stay in their seat." (Interview country director NGO)

In addition, participants explain how lengthy and costly procedures to, for example, become a political leader (see also Kanyinga and Mboya, 2021) obstruct intergenerational transitioning, both in public and private sectors.

"Those who have been in the graveyards think: why should I make life easy for you?" (Interview staff member NGO)

Youth at heart interventions

In response to the international and national agenda on youth engagement and the challenges described above when it comes to youth engagement, a large number of, national and international, civil society organisations, government institutes and (social) enterprises are supporting or implementing programs focusing on youth and youth engagement in Kenya. The programs range from capacity building of young parliamentarians, supporting youth led climate initiatives to youth employment programs. Whereas some of the programs focus on youth in general, other zoom in on, for example, a specific age bracket, rural or urban population or gender. Most programs have in common that they specifically target youth (no other age groups). In some cases a combination can be found between gender and age, with girls and women being targeted by the program. In addition to these programs, an increasing number of organisations installs a youth advisory committee as a means to make young peoples' voices heard in their work.

Leading up to the 2022 national elections in Kenya, a large number of programs has been focussing on strengthening young people's understanding of political processes and their role in this (how to register as a voter, what is the role of political parties and their youth leagues, how to vie for a political position) and, for the post-election phase, increasing young people's understanding of devolution and its belonging legal framework for public participation and their skills to participate in these processes. All this is reflected in an extensive offer of workshops, trainings and mentoring programs. In addition to these programs in governance in general and political participation in particular, there is a number of youth-oriented programmes in the area of employment, ranging from supporting companies to employ young people to improving the preparedness of young people for the job market via training, education and/or traineeships.

Looking at the reasoning underlying youth engagement programmes, it can be first of all noted that, from a democratic perspective, youth engagement is considered a **goal in itself** (*youth being part of society should be represented and heard*). While most participants recognize the value of including young people in governance processes from a democratic perspective, others stress the risk that this could result in it being nothing more than mere representation, ticking (legal) boxes or meeting the (inter)national debate on youth engagement. This risk is also being reflected in most organisations deliberately talking about 'meaningful youth participation', as a way to stress the importance to go beyond 'youth washing'.

In addition to the democratic conviction, there is as well a strong underlying assumption stating that youth engagement is **a means to come to sustainable (economic) development** for young people as a demographic group and society at large. Including young people in decision making processes, so it is expected, will allow for young people's needs being expressed and included in policy and practice. As part of this reasoning, participation of young people in governance in general and in politics in particular is considered conditional for participation of youth and recognition of their needs in other areas of society ('spillover effect'). It is expected that young people in political positions consider young people as (part of) their constituency and hence stand for youth friendly policy and practice in various areas of life.

Looking at the interventions being implemented; it is striking that most of the programmes do not intentionally target the fundamental root causes of limited youth engagement as described above.

"The rightholders in the target countries identified 'adultcentrism' as a main obstacle to their civic engagement" (Extract of problem analysis of program focusing on the empowerment of young women)

While they are being recognized in the problem analysis underlying the programs, the interventions themselves mainly aim at tackling the consequences (e.g. trying to increase the number of young people in political position). As a result, many of the programs opt for a targeted (versus an integrated) approach: they identify young people as key primary target group of their programs.

Youth at heart, a risk analysis

This section discusses several risks resulting from the large number of interventions that (mostly exclusively) target young people. These risks have been expressed by interviewees and participants of focus groups discussions.

Backlash effects

During interviews, attendance of events and focus group discussions, numerous people expressed their concerns and resistance with regard to (the large number of) youth engagement programs.

They explained this by a fear of competition

"It took us so long to take position, we have to come on national tv to get attention. Young people use social media, more easy." (Veteran politician)

by young people, a disbelief in their competences and a concern that the strong focus on young people would take away resources from other age groups ("what about us?") They clarified that their resentment is being

"Is it a crime to be older?"
(Participant of older age during launch of youth employment program)

strengthened by the large number of programs that exclusively target young people. Older people explain how they fear the upsurge and associated support for younger people and to consider this to be a threat to their own position. Especially young people being more knowledgeable and experienced when it comes to technology and social media is mentioned as reasons why older people feel threatened by young people and, following this, fear youth being at the heart of many interventions. Knowing what is required to take position as a professional or a politician, younger people express understanding towards this fear.

"Even me, I would not like to leave my position. It's normal to resist, not only towards young people but anyone that wants to take your seat."
(Interview political leader)

"Boy child neglected, it's all about girl child : (Headline of The Star, March 16, 2021)

In response to these expressed concerns, a comparison between gender and youth interventions can be made. Similar to youth engagement programs, it can be said that gender interventions find their

origins in the analysis that strong gender norms contribute to disempowerment of women (see for example Flood et al. 2021). In response to the effects of this, between 1970-1980, a worldwide movement came about aiming for bettering the position of women in different spheres of life through prioritising gender mainstreaming, reflected in the signing of the Beijing Platform for Action in 1995 (Brouwers, 2013). Also here, a ripple effect of interventions is expected: investments in women are not only expected to contribute to improved living conditions of the individual women or women as a group, but also of their families, communities and society at large (see for example OECD, 2010; Bloom et al., 2017). Although not unambiguously, a number of studies substantiate these assumptions with evidence of evaluations (see for example Bloom et al., 2017).

However, at the same time multiple studies describe resistance or backlash effects in response to policy and programs targeting women (Flood et al., 2021; Rudman & Phelan, 2008). Resistance is described as 'an active pushing back against progressive programs, policies and perspectives and its purpose is the maintenance of or reinforcement of [in this case] gender inequalities' (Flood et al., 2021, p. 8). Backlash effects are defined as "social and economic reprisals for behaving counter stereotypically" (Rudman, 1998). Backlash effects in response to women empowerment programs manifest themselves through, for example, verbal opposition against empowerment programs or (increased) physical violence against women taking part in these programs (Flood et al., 2021; Whaley & Messner, 2002).

Similar to gender norms, it can be reasoned that those individuals that do not respect prescriptive and descriptive age norms and those organisations that strengthen young people to act in ways that deviate from these age norms, can experience repercussions. A large majority of all the organisations involved in the area of youth engagement that participated in the study came up with their own examples of experienced backlash effects:

- Gatekeeping: youth or youth led organisations that are getting no, limited or delayed access to funding, information or (decision-making) spaces
- Meeting the law, but not stretching it by, for example, 'limiting number of seats' for young people
- Not appearing at youth led – youth-oriented events
- Youth being used as tokens: appearing at events, in media with young people, talk the talk, but limited walk the walk
- Ushering voices, ridiculing, stupefying of young people in meetings or media
- Actively resist pro youth policy (e.g., see for example [response](#) to Youth Employment Authority bill)

"When we were looking for an office, we agreed with the landlord on everything, till the neighbors and the owner heard we are a youth organisation. Then they said no."
(Interview director NGO)

"I am happy that I did not bring my country director, it was supposed to be a high-level meeting" (Senior participant at Youth Engagement event, in reflection on the fact that no high-level participants turned out)

While backlash is considered a 'common, perhaps inevitable response to progressive social change' (Flood et al., 2019), the interviews with directors and staff members of organisations involved in youth engagement interventions, mentioned how discussing the presence of backlash effects and how to address these is a topic left largely untouched so far.

Academics in the field confirmed this as well. Some questioned whether the comparison to backlash effects in response to gender programs holds. They consider gender norms to be stronger compared to age norms and therefore expect less resistance to programs that go against these norms. Although the findings of this study do not intend nor allow to weigh age and gender norms against one another, the conversations with participants in this study show similar patterns.

Amplifiers of backlash effects

Building on the interviews and the focus group discussions, the study identifies certain elements that add to the risks of backlash effects against youth engagement interventions:

- Targeting in a context with widespread vulnerabilities, risks to ignite resistance ('what about us?')
- Multiple targeting is taking place: targeting of women, people with disability, young people
- (international) donor pressure on the youth agenda, with some people considering it as a 'Western agenda'
- Little room among donors for more longer term (systemic) change, this limits the ability to design programs that aim to tackle root causes underlying limited youth engagement and encourage a targeted approach with results on short term.

"When you are a man, older and not disabled, no one is taking care of you" Conversation with waiter at a hotel

Other risks of targeting

In addition to the risk of backlash effects, participants in the study shared other risks of the omnipresent targeting on young people.

- **Oversupply:** people refer to the phenomenon of 'serial workshop attendees'; young people going from one workshop to the other, piling up notebooks, certificates and sitting or transport allowances but questioning the impact. In addition to the risk of duplication and inefficient spending of funding, the oversupply of, for example, trainings, also contributes to fatigue among young people ('yet another training') and disillusionment ('for what use?').
- **Hampering impact:** people explain how targeting exclusively young people limit programs' ability to address root causes underlying exclusion of young people and therewith their impact. A more integrated approach (in this case: including different age groups) is said to be supportive if not conditional to this.
- **Burden & disappointment:** strongly targeting young people, unintentionally puts the burden to solve 'the problem' of youth exclusion on young people, risking frustration among young people and high expectations and disappointments among supporters when they do not meet expectations
- **Exclusion:** civil organisations that focus on, for example, older people explain how the current leading 'youth at heart' agenda, leaves little room for them to bring to the fore their worries on the position of older people and, consequently, to access funding. They also express their concerns that strong targeting on a specific part of the population, leaves society unprepared for future changes in the demographics of the country.

"You get a lot of training, by government or by NGOs. But when you apply for a job, they say: 'you need 5 years of experience.'" (Participant focus group discussion)

Monitoring, evaluation and knowledge management

It is interesting to note that most organisations implementing these programs have difficulties in substantiating both the overall assumption(s) underlying their interventions as to provide evidence for the expected (spillover) effects of their programs. However, the narrative surrounding the importance of youth engagement seems strong, frequently repeated in (international) policies and in youth engagement programmes, and little disposed to critical questioning. In addition, most of the CBOs and NGOs talked to during the study explain how they have difficulties in assessing the impact of their work. Most of their evidence is of anecdotal nature: examples of individuals that went through a training program and now run their own business or take up a political position. Without undervaluing the role of anecdotal evidence, it is of limited force when it comes to substantiating programs' assumptions or their impact. In addition, those organisations confronted with resistance, have difficulties in explaining to their critics the value of their programs and rebutting the critique.

"We see instances that are the fruit of our work"
(Interview director NGO)

Staff members explain how they feel monitoring, evaluation and learning cannot be given enough priority because of a lack of financial or human resources. If investments are being done in evaluations, the work is often being done by external researchers, focusing on output and initial outcome level, leaving the organisations with reports that are mainly used for accountability. Especially CBOs working at county level that are part of partnerships with national and international NGOs explain how evaluations of the programs they are involved in, are not always being shared with them, hampering them in their learning and positioning.

"That is our biggest gap, where the investments are lowest."

"That is in the world of NGOs always difficult. To quantify and qualify our results."
(Interviews directors NGOs)

While the challenge of monitoring, evaluation and learning is not unique to the area of youth engagement, the fact that a large number of organisations in this field is relatively young and/or youth led is a contributing factor to this. Founders of the organisations explain how they are still building capacity of their organisation in various fields and how their young/youthful identity is often a challenge in their search for funding since their trustworthiness is being questioned.

Overall, one could conclude that the current approach to youth engagement programs entails an (unintended) risk that youth engagement becomes a goal in itself (e.g. increasing youth in political positions) instead of a means to enhance youth empowerment (see similar to gender programs Brouwer p. 29).

Future avenues

The findings of the study highlight three main areas of attention that are of relevance both to donor and implementing organisations.

First, the results call for **increased recognition and more explicitly addressing of root causes** underlying the structural impediments for (increased) youth engagement. Currently, most programs with a youth at heart strategy exclusively target young people. Whereas this sounds logical, by doing so, organisations limit opportunities to address age norms, one of the key

hindrances to youth exclusion.

Unintentionally, through this youth targeted approach, organisations even foster resistance complicating the process of (increased) youth engagement. Participants of the study that experience(d) resistance to their work or role, explain how a more integrated approach allows to, for example, foster intergenerational dialogues on fear and threat resulting from

youth at heart programs and policies. While these organisations aim to tackle root causes, this approach also allows them to provide a more fertile breeding ground for the meaningful engagement of young people they envision with their programs. To reach this more integrated approach, it can be helpful build partnerships with other actors that work with different demographic groups of society or entail a different approach to youth engagement can be supportive to this intention.

Second, the findings stress the importance to **recognize backlash effects** in response to youth engagement interventions and to build an increased understanding of these (what, how they come about, effects) and to formulate an approach on how to mitigate these.

Third, the findings call for **an increased evidence base** for youth programming. This would allow to better substantiate the assumptions underlying youth engagement policy and programs. Considering the limited resources many organisations mentioned as a hindrance to this, incentivising mutual learning among actors working in the field of youth engagement is recommendable. At the same time donors of youth engagement programs could consider increasing their investments in learning. While an increased evidence base is instrumental in order to design impactful programs, it can as well help in responding to resistance. When evidence shows that youth engagement programs indeed contribute to, for example, improvements for society at large, this enables critics to come to a changed understanding of youth at heart policies and programs and might, in the end, contribute as well to a changed narrative surrounding youth.

"Our training program for young professionals, raised tensions between the participants and their supervisors. Supervisors were afraid that they would lose their job. In response, we started to include them in the program. As a result of this experience, we increasingly opt for a more systemic approach." (Interview staff member NGO)

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