

Angered and Empowered

Angered and empowered: Youth as agents of change across Africa

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Introduction:

In a continent where youth represent the largest demographic yet experience unprecedented levels of unemployment, youth will be the driving force of change across Africa and the key to upholding democratic standards. In fact, youth have already been a driving force of change across the continent and will continue to drive change until they are satisfied with their available economic opportunities. In this paper, I explain that the main motivation for youth to demand change in Africa is a lack of professional opportunities. I argue that African youth will be able to create change due to their demographic dominance, as well as their ability to utilize new technologies to their advantage, specifically social media.

In order to do this, I first examine how youth have experienced significant economic hardship as a result of inadequate employment opportunities, despite recent economic growth in many African countries. I then present two case studies of youth mobilization in Africa that were a result of economic frustrations: The Occupy Nigeria movement, in which youth mobilized against the government's removal of fuel subsidies; and the #FeesMustFall student movement that swept across university campuses in South Africa. Finally, I demonstrate how youth strategically used social media in both of these cases, and how social media will continue to be a powerful tool for Africa's change-hungry and resourceful youth population.

Unemployment and youth in Africa:

Sub-Saharan Africa has seen tremendous economic growth over the past few decades, with gross domestic product (GDP) growing approximately 4.5% on average per year between 2000 and 2012 (Filmer & Fox, 2014). Additionally, several African countries are among the fastest growing economies in the world (Filmer & Fox, 2014). Fox et al. (2016) note that this economic growth in sub-Saharan Africa has led to an improved standard of living in many aspects, including improved health care, better education, better access to clean water, and declining infant mortality rates.

The declining infant mortality rates have in part contributed to rapid population growth in Africa, which has created a large youth demographic. In 2005, 62% of Africa's population was below the age of 25 (World Bank, 2009). With an estimated 296.9 million people aged 10-25 in sub-Saharan Africa, it is the youngest region in the world (Hilson & Osei, 2014). Partially due to improved infant survival rates, the region's youth population is only growing; it is estimated that sub-Saharan Africa will contain one quarter of the world's young people by 2025 (Hilson & Osei).

However, of youth aged 10-24 in sub-Saharan Africa, less than 50% are employed in the formal economy (Hilson & Osei, 2014). Some countries have youth unemployment rates as high as 80%, such as Mozambique and Ghana (Hilson & Osei, 2014). In Uganda, youth make up 83% of the total unemployed population (World Bank, 2009). The rapid economic growth that many African countries have seen over the past decade has clearly not translated into job opportunities for youth (Fox et al., 2016). A constantly growing youth population without the substantial

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creation of formal jobs means increasing unemployment and economic frustrations among young people.

Furthermore, there are a variety of types of unemployment that statistics do not usually take into account, such as the underemployed, those who are engaged in informal work, and the vulnerably employed (Ranis & Hino, 2013). Due to a lack of formal economic opportunities, many youth in Africa are forced to make ends meet by working in the informal sector, or through self-employment (Fox et al., 2016). Fox et al. (2016) note that while high youth unemployment is often associated with urban areas, underemployment is particularly common in the rural economy. Due to the weather dependent nature of agriculture, many farmers do not work for the full year. They must fill the gaps by engaging in informal employment or self-employment (Fox et al., 2016). In addition to offering poor prospects for professional growth, working informally usually results in unpredictable and precarious income.

In 1999, only 4.5% of young, unemployed men and 2.3% of young unemployed women had higher education. By 2011, these numbers grew to 28.5% and 18.8% respectively (Ranis & Hino, 2013). Furthermore, despite the fact that youth currently entering the employment sector are more educated than previous generations, they are finding that their opportunities and potential earnings are similar or worse to those of their parents (Filmer & Fox, 2014). Even youth that work in the formal sector often work long hours under poor conditions to earn very little (Ranis & Hino, 2013).

Additionally, African youth appear to “play only a marginal role in the political, economic, social and cultural processes of their societies” (Akor, 2017, p. 110). Akor (2017) notes that in comparison to Africans who grew up in the 60’s and 70’s right after independence and an

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economic boom, those growing up after the 80's have been described as part of a "lost generation." Indeed, the lack of professional opportunities coupled with increased living costs have caused many young Africans to experience economic hardship. However, a multitude of youth protests and movements have emerged over the past decade as a result of these grievances, many of which have led to concrete change. I will now look at two movements that demonstrate how African youth, angered by their economic situation but hopeful and ambitious in spirit, have stepped up to demand change and hold their democratically elected governments accountable.

Occupy Nigeria:

Youth were the driving force that sparked the January 2012 resistance against the abolition of fuel subsidies in Nigeria. This movement was the result of existing frustrations with the grim economic situation in the country coupled with the government's sudden announcement of increased fuel prices (Akor, 2017). In response, "a large section of youth felt the government was just trying to transfer to the people the cost of its inefficiencies and corruption-ravaged system" (Akor, 2017, p. 113).

The Nigerian government initially announced that it would remove its subsidy on petrol, which would raise the price from N65 to N141 per litre, in late 2011 (Akor, 2017). After the initial protests in November 2011 were met with tough resistance by the police, future protests were planned for April 2012, when the subsidy was to take effect (Akor, 2017). However, when the government surprised citizens on January 1 by announcing that the subsidies would take

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effect immediately, youth were shocked and angered (Akor, 2017). With Facebook and Twitter monitored closely by the government, youth groups used BlackBerry Messenger (BBM) to communicate, and decided to start protesting the next day (Akor, 2017). Despite it being yuletide holidays in Nigeria at the time, the protests started on January 2 in Abuja, on January 3 in Lagos, and on January 4 in Kano (Akor, 2017). They blocked off major streets and occupied the space by singing chants and displaying posters—all with a clear demand for the return of the subsidy (Akor, 2017). Civil society organizations (CSOs) joined the youth groups to create the Occupy Nigeria movement, under which they consolidated their demands (Akor, 2017). A week after the initial protests, the Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC) and the Trade Union Congress (TUC) received approval to strike in protest of the removal of the subsidy, essentially shutting down the economy across the country (Akor, 2017).

Once the labour strike began, youth took control of the movement in major cities with support from CSOs and labour unions (Akor, 2017). In Lagos, for example, the crowd of mostly youth protesters were estimated to be about three million (Akor, 2017). Akor (2017) notes that the protests were so sophisticated, that the Nigerian government made accusations that they were sponsored by opposition politicians. The movement was able to attract popular Nigerian musicians, actors, and entertainers to perform at rallies and express their support. Humour was often used to make a point, both in online discussions and in public demonstrations by popular comedians. Akor (2017) asserts that “there is no doubt that the protest discourse was driven by popular youth culture” (p. 118).

The movement eventually became divided when CSOs and youth groups started calling for President Goodluck Jonathan’s resignation, while labour unions expressed that they simply

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wanted to restore the petrol subsidy. The labour unions eventually met with the President on January 15 and agreed to stop striking in exchange for a partial reduction of the price of petrol (to N97 per litre). The subsequent withdrawal of labor unions caused the protests to fall. Akor (2017) notes that the way in which the protests ended demonstrates the power of the Nigerian government, or the “neo-patrimonial networks in Nigerian politics” (p. 122). It shows how the government is able to use its power to stifle the voices of other sectors of Nigerian society (Akor, 2017). Akor (2017) concludes that the fact that Nigerian youth were easily immobilized shows that they still have a lot of work to do in order to break down power structures and establish a system of equal say.

Although this movement did not result in full restoration of the fuel subsidy, the partial reduction of the price of fuel was still a tangible result. Furthermore, what distinguishes the January 2012 resistance from previous protests in Nigeria relating to fuel prices is that it was commenced by youth, who were able to organize and take to the streets before the labour unions declared a strike and civil society joined in (Akor, 2017). Youth were able to effectively organize, articulate their demands to the government, gather support from CSOs and labour unions, and attract Nigerian celebrities to support their movement; this ultimately led to the partial reduction of the petrol prices. This nonviolent youth-driven movement resulted in concrete change and displayed the intelligent and creative ways in which youth in Africa are able to organize under pressure. The ability of youth to initiate and sustain such a successful movement demonstrates the power and resourcefulness of African youth, as well as their ability to act as agents of change.

#FeesMustFall in South Africa:

The #FeesMustFall movement is another case of youth mobilizing to demand better economic conditions for themselves. The movement spread rapidly across South African universities in the fall of 2015, after an announcement by the University of the Witwatersrand on October 4 that it would be raising student fees by 10.5 percent for the 2016 academic year (Booyesen, 2016). Anger spread among university campuses as other schools announced tuition raises. Students began to demand a halt in the increase of tuition, through both public demonstration and on social media with the hashtag #FeesMustFall (Booyesen, 2016).

Booyesen (2016) explains that the students who started this revolution were mainly first-generation students—those who are the first generation in their family to attend university. Many of them experienced poverty and socioeconomic exclusion; they not only struggled to pay fees, but they felt alienated on campus due to their economic standing (Booyesen, 2016). Although #FeesMustFall began primarily as a movement against the increase of tuition fees, students came to incorporate other demands, including the demand to decolonize the university system, ensure equality of staff composition with regard to race and gender, and insource general workers (Langa et al., 2017). They partnered with university workers who were displeased with the outsourcing of staff (Booyesen, 2016). They also were able to garner the support of academic staff, which provided the movement with credibility and legitimacy in the eyes of university administration (Langa et al., 2017).

The movement resulted in concrete policy change. The South African government announced in late October that there would be no tuition increases for the following academic year

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(Booyesen, 2016). The national budget reallocated funds to education and committed to working toward free higher education for the poor (Booyesen, 2016). The movement also caused university administration to prioritize the hiring of black-African faculty, make changes in their curriculums, alter their language policies, insource workers (Booyesen, 2016), and rename university buildings (Langa et al., 2017). Furthermore, it raised public awareness about issues that were important to youth in universities, such as racial and gender equality, cultural decolonization, and workers rights. In this case, a movement that began primarily out of economic frustrations created change in many other ways aside from just economic policy.

However, it is important to note that the #FeesMustFall movement was imperfect. Some downfalls that Langa et al. (2017) point out include gender imbalance in the movement, internal disagreement on certain demands, and conflict over leadership positions. In many aspects, the movement was not consolidated and consisted of internal battles and contradictions. However, Booyesen (2016) states that although student solidarity eventually weakened and the movement splintered, students' unified insistence on full implementation of a 0% tuition increase remained strong. Despite internal conflict, students were united in the desire for free and decolonised education (Langa et al., 2017).

In conclusion, #FeesMustFall in South Africa resulted in a 0% tuition increase for the 2016 academic year. This was not a compromise by the youth; it was a complete victory in the sense that it achieved the movement's initially stated purpose. The movement was also impactful in transforming university systems and challenging dominant ways of thinking. Not only did it force university administration to question their values, but it resulted in both the university and the national government changing policies in radical ways (Booyesen, 2016). Overall, students

were able to demonstrate their frustrations in an organized and clear way, and this allowed them to enact change. In doing so, “the revolt demonstrated how students, united through mass action and facilitated by social media, could, within a week, escalate issues of free higher education and insourcing of workers from university management level to national presidential level—and get the results” (Booyesen, 2016, p. 45).

Social Media as a tool for change:

In a continent where “youth play only a marginal role in the political, economic, social, and cultural processes of their societies” (Akor, 2017, p. 110), social media is an extremely useful tool for young people. It has played a crucial role in many youth-driven social movements in Africa over the past decade and will likely continue to propel the voices of youth forward in the future. The use of social media was integral to both the Occupy Nigeria and the #FeesMustFall movements.

Akor (2017) notes that the leaders of Occupy Nigeria were inspired by both the Occupy Wall Street and Arab Spring movements, not only in ideology but also by their use of social media to initiate and organize. These movements alerted Nigerian youth of their ability to use social media to challenge existing power structures and mobilize against them (Akor, 2017). When the Nigerian government initially announced the removal of the subsidy, youth across the country took to social media channels to express their anger (Akor, 2017). After the leader of the Nigerian Youth Council who declared a hunger strike in protest was arrested as a warning to halt

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any planned protests, youth were forced to “go underground” and use unmonitored platforms such as BBM as a tool to discuss and organize (Akor, 2017, p. 113). Following the government’s surprise announcement on January 1, these channels that young people had already begun using allowed them to mobilize quickly and take to the streets the following day. Arguably, protests could not have been organized for the next day without the use of social media platforms. With regard to logistics and planning, social media was integral to the Occupy Nigeria movement. Iwilade (2013) notes that Occupy Nigeria shows how social media can be used by youth to “challenge dominant discourses of state power and to protest perceived injustice in Africa” (p. 1062).

#FeesMustFall can be seen as a Twitter movement. Bosch (2016) notes that the hashtag played an integral role to the protest; it was emblematic of the movement and was widely referenced in national political discussion by both the media and general public. Bosch (2016) attributes much of the success of #FeesMustFall to social media, specifically to the fact that it was a viral campaign with a catchy slogan, quick growth, real-time participation, and celebrity endorsement. She notes that Twitter provided a platform for youth who were normally detached from traditional political discourse and encouraged them to participate in the movement. Students used Twitter to share their experiences of exclusion from post-secondary studies, discuss their grievances of economic hardship, and express their solidarity with their peers (Bosch, 2016). In addition to using social media as a forum for discussion and promotion, the #FeesMustFall movement also utilized social media as an organizing tool. Students used Twitter to coordinate meetings, plan public demonstrations, attract media attention, disperse information on police activity, and ask and answer questions about activities taking place on specific days

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(Bosch, 2016). Twitter allowed for rapid dissemination of information, which made quick organization of protest activity possible.

Overall, social media was utilized by both the Occupy Nigeria and the #FeesMustFall movements to discuss important issues, gather support and attention, and organize protest activities. Social media is important tool for youth in Africa because it provides a way to efficiently mobilize. It also upholds democratic principles by giving young people on the margins of society a platform to elevate their voices, which is a power that they would otherwise not have.

Conclusion:

In this paper, I have shown that despite the ample economic growth that many African countries have experienced over the past two decades, youth in Africa are growing up with minimal employment opportunities, which has led to economic hardship in this demographic. However, the social movements that I have examined in my paper show that youth are able to effectively channel these frustrations in productive ways. Akor (2017) notes that contrary to the “lost generation” stigma that is often associated with African youth, research shows that most African youth actually have a positive and hopeful attitude to life and their future. Unemployed African youth are not powerless, reckless, and mindlessly violent ticking time bombs as many narratives suggest, but rather intelligent, resourceful, and active agents of change in their country. This is evident in the examples of Occupy Nigeria and #FeesMustFall. Both movements

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demonstrate that youth in Africa are resourceful, clever, and more than capable of effectively organizing to enact the change they want to see.

African youth have already been a driving force of change and will continue to be as long as they experience economic hardships and high levels of unemployment. Equipped with demographic dominance and social media, youth are in a better position than any other group to create change in Africa. Economic hardship is the motive, and demographic dominance and social media are the means through which youth will be the driving force of change and democracy in Africa.

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