

Youth Under Lockdown: A Potential Turning Point in the State of Youth in Africa

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Africa is the youngest continent in the world, with over 250 million people aged between 15 and 24. Nowadays, the continents' youth-ness is considered as a great advantage. With the concerns, not to say nightmares, about the potential gravity of the COVID-19 outbreaks throughout Africa, having 60% of the continents' population under the age of 25 is a relief. Nevertheless, lockdowns have positioned youth in a precarious condition. From youths living in the streets to undergraduate students, young people are now deprived of basic structures and practices that sustain them. In this commentary, we address some of the pressing issues that youths in Africa have been facing in the last couple of weeks and contextualise them as a potential turning point in the macro-level state of youth. We are aware that our attempt to problematise 'the current state of youth' in a continent of 54 countries and 1.3 billion people generalises realities that are far more complex. However, we use this generalisation to suggest that the current crisis calls for focusing international, regional and national efforts in promoting youths' wellbeing, as well as their social, political and economic potential in the shifting global order.

Youth in Africa have been known to face multiple constraints in the last decades, particularly in countries that experience an imbalance between education systems and formal labour markets. Studies from North, West and Southern Africa point to an ongoing

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difficulty of youths in entering the formal labour market after completing secondary or tertiary education ([Finn and Oldfield 2015](#); [Honwana 2014, 2019](#); [Kovacheva et al. 2018](#)). A rise in secondary school and university graduates while facing economic stagnation often leads to youth unemployment. As [Kovacheva et al. \(2018\)](#) note, when labour markets do not expand as fast as the education systems and population growth, young people pay the price.

The state of youth in Africa has been framed by scholars as a state of Waithood, when young people find themselves practically stuck after graduating high school, college or university, and unable to secure a job, thus leading to a prolonged transition to adulthood ([Honwana 2014](#)). As youths are trying to navigate within struggling economies that have been shaped by colonial and neo-colonial power relations, and as they carry the burden of global north-south economic dynamics (e.g., [Honwana 2019](#); [Dobler 2019](#)), many rely more and more on the informal sector. Lockdown, curfews and bans, deprive the informal sector of its very core functions, situating youths in a survival risk.

Some current processes are, in our mind, worth paying attention to when focusing on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the continents' youth. Inequalities in the higher education in countries such as South Africa, Ghana and Kenya are already deepening as universities resort to online remote learning. While online remote learning seems to be an effective temporal solution in the global north, in some African countries, as well as the rest of the global south, students from rural areas or disadvantaged backgrounds find themselves unable to continue with their academic programs due to lack of access to computers, internet, and electricity. Students who cannot stay with relatives find themselves unable to pay their rent or buy food, let alone continue learning. If this situation continues, online remote learning may promote class-inequalities in systems that aspire to do the exact opposite.

A major concern for the wellbeing of youth comes from the streets. NGOs and governments addressed the immediate risks for youth living in the streets, as their sources of livelihoods have now disappeared. Youths living in the streets often have little information

about the virus, the ways it spreads, and its symptoms. Living in the streets makes it nearly impossible to take the necessary hygiene measures and maintain social distancing. As the streets are emptied, some youths find themselves intentionally causing trouble with hope of getting arrested, knowing they will be provided with food and soap. These alarming realities join the general implications of the lockdowns throughout the continent, and beyond. As large populations in Africa and the global south live hand to mouth, they have no reserves, no savings, and no stored groceries. In this setting, the state of youth is highly jeopardised.

The current challenges affect youth everywhere and are in no way ‘an African’ problem. Yet as African youths are already living under the oppressive global economic dynamics and national marginalization, they might face greater challenges than being stuck in a survival mode. The concept of Waithood criticises the prolonged waiting period youths face before they can enjoy the fruits of adulthood and assume adult responsibilities. Following the current crisis, if neglected, the state of youth in Africa might be more disabled than before. Nevertheless, we believe that if addressed wisely by communities, governments, and international institutions, this critical point in the world’s history may provide youths in Africa with new opportunities to shift power relations in their favour and take the lead in this unexpected global turbulence.