

**African youth as a source of hope and ingenuity:**

**The role of the United Nations in engaging young people to help  
overcome poverty in Africa**

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**Abstract**

The crisis of African youth is emblematic of the world's failure to address the multiple challenges of poverty in Africa. However, images of young Africans engaged in civil conflict, and as jobless on the streets of slum like cities only tell a small part of the story. This paper takes the position that African youth presents one of the biggest sources of hope and one of the most promising opportunities for addressing the challenge of poverty in Africa. It demonstrates some of the ways that the United Nations and its various agencies, in line with the principles of human development, can contribute to changing attitudes towards African youth, and to building their capacity to create long-term holistic solutions to poverty across the continent. There is extensive evidence of the way young people's ingenuity, energy and resilience can be harnessed to generate real and positive change. No one size fits all approach will work, but the United Nations is in a unique position to offer powerful ideals, and technical and material assistance that will allow African youth to realize their full potential and generate the kind of locally grounded solutions that should be the basis of any comprehensive challenge to poverty. Recent United Nations policy advances related to youth and development represent an important step forward, however more needs to be done to reflect the centrality of youth to effectively challenging poverty in the developing world.

The paper relies on two examples of the way United Nations and its agencies can contribute to empowering youth within the framework of human development in Africa. It first examines programs to deepen political participation and involve young people in decision making in post-conflict societies in West Africa, and then looks at strategies for building on youth entrepreneurship and creativity in urban sub-Saharan Africa. Following on from a number of specific recommendations, the conclusion drawn from these cases is that a policy of 'mainstreaming youth' across United Nations activities in Africa would represent a powerful recognition of the importance of the role of youth to all poverty related issues, including population, food security, environmental sustainability and resource management. As well as generating real practical outcomes, such an approach would also begin to shift the kind of negative attitudes towards youth that entrench existing problems. It would also help to recast youth as the symbol of Africa's future peace and prosperity.

“The world's young people are a major human resource for development. Young men and women everywhere are valuable and committed partners in the global efforts to achieve the Millennium Development Goals, including the overarching goal of cutting poverty and hunger in half by 2015. Young people remain at the forefront of the fight against HIV/AIDS. And they bring fresh thinking to longstanding development concerns.”

Ban Ki-moon, Secretary General of the United Nations<sup>1</sup>

The crisis facing African young people is emblematic of the world's failure to address the multiple challenges of poverty in Africa. The depth of this failure can often lead to feelings of hopelessness, especially when it appears in the global media that the continent seems to be tearing itself apart amid civil wars and conflict over resources. But Africa is of course gloriously diverse, and though experiences of poverty are widespread, they are also greatly varied. When we look past the simplistic characterisations of doom and gloom, there is much cause for optimism about the energy and ingenuity that results finding strategies to cope with poverty, particularly on the part of young people. Thus, while there is no universal solution for African poverty, I focus here on considering the role of youth in creating and embodying a more prosperous future for all African societies. The role of the United Nations (UN) in realising the possibilities of this energy is two fold. On the one hand, it can provide material support and technical advice, but perhaps more importantly, it represents powerful ideals about enlarging human opportunities and capabilities. These two aspects are brought together in the concept of human development and are based on an understanding that a combination of locally driven ideas and solutions, alongside support from the international community must form the basis of any recovery. By contributing to the education and training of Africa's youth and helping to create the political space for them to be active in their own societies, the UN can be instrumental in bringing forth these ideas and building the capacity for constructive change to occur.

I begin this essay by looking at the particular relevance of youth to addressing poverty in Africa. Centred on the concept of human development, I consider the current position of African youth, dominant representations and their role as a powerful engine of change, emphasising the advantages of looking at youth and poverty in holistic terms. Then, after a brief discussion of existing UN strategies for engaging youth, I show two examples of the way focusing on youth participation in different African contexts can lead to benefits for the entire community, with important implications for escaping impoverishment. Based on these examples, there are clear ways that the UN and its various agencies can play an expanded role in deepening the political participation and economic opportunities for young people in order to help them find their own ways out of poverty. I look closely at the involvement of youth in peace-building in post-conflict societies in West Africa, and then at the importance of shifting attitudes towards youth as a way of expanding opportunities for youth employment and entrepreneurship in urban sub-Saharan Africa. At the end of each discussion, I provide some general recommendations about the role that UN agencies should take in these areas. In both cases, youth had often been considered primarily as a source of problems and as a threat to future political and economic stability. As I wish to argue however, young people are in fact a source of hope for future transformation and an essential part of any holistic strategy to deal with poverty and its many symptoms. In order to tackle issues as diverse as population, food security, environmental sustainability and natural resource management, it is vital to have a politically engaged and aware youth population with the capacity to follow through with their ideas. Mainstreaming youth throughout UN policy and activities in Africa is an important step in this direction.

## **Human development and the relevance of youth for fighting poverty in Africa**

African youth in crisis?

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<sup>1</sup> United Nations Secretary-General's message to the Global Forum on Youth and ICT for Development, New York, 24 September 2007.

A cursory look at the demographics of contemporary Africa reveals the overwhelming size of the youth population. As is the case in many developing countries, where life expectancy is low and birth-rates comparatively high, Africa faces a demographic imbalance that is an important consideration for any strategy aimed at reducing poverty. Based on the UN definition of youth as those between the ages of 15 and 24 years old, in 2005 youth accounted for 20.4 percent of the total population of sub-Saharan Africa. Despite the huge impact of HIV/AIDS, this number is continuing to increase (United Nations 2007: 80). It is important to recognize when addressing issues of youth, that the concept is culturally determined. Accordingly, understandings of what constitutes the category of ‘youth’ vary between Africa societies. Moreover, youth is by no means a homogenous category, and the way that young people experience and cope with poverty is extremely diverse. This makes it all the more important to resist common stereotypes about African youth, particularly young men, as a dangerous source of instability that foretells a chaotic and nasty future for African societies. In this first section then, I want to argue that in addition to such generalizations being both incorrect and counter-productive, we should actually see the category of youth as a source of opportunity and the solution to many problems in African countries. In the context of post-conflict societies, in rapidly expanding cities, as well as in rural areas, there is powerful evidence to suggest that escaping poverty and violence depends on engaging young populations by harnessing their creative and productive energies.

Recent representations of youth in Africa have been dominated by negative images of young militants involved in civil conflict, and of threatening young men in overcrowded urban areas. These perceptions of the threat posed by youth are based on long entrenched misconceptions about Africa from outside the continent. Colonial representations of parts of Africa as a ‘Heart of Darkness’ have been carried over into contemporary tropes about African political and societal chaos. One of the most influential examples of such characterisations is Robert Kaplan’s (1994; 1997) description of ‘the coming anarchy’, which has had a notable influence on United States foreign policy across the continent.<sup>2</sup> Kaplan’s descriptions are typical of such negative images of Africa, which regularly rely on a perception of African youth in crisis, which is heading toward a darker and more brutal future. Similarly, ‘youth bulge theory’, holds that impoverished societies with disproportionately large youth populations are more prone to violence. As with Kaplan’s thesis however, it relies on some questionable evidence and tends to be coloured by emotionally charged images of angry young men from the global South.<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately, these images have come to dominate international media coverage. From reports of the savagery of young soldiers in various civil wars, to images of African cities with young men overflowing onto the streets without work, desperate and dangerously dissatisfied, young people are portrayed as victims, unable to choose their future paths and forced into behaviour that is damaging, both for society and for their own lives. Such reports, which shape the way we think about poverty in Africa, contribute to the sense of hopelessness in addressing its many challenges.

### Youth as an engine of change

While there is no doubt a strong link between poverty, youth delinquency and violence, we need to critically examine the perceptions held by the international public of African youth as victimized and as a threat to stability and development. In the era of decolonisation that followed the end of the Second World War, young people were held up as the future of many African societies. Amid the burgeoning nationalism of the 1950s and 1960s, youth were seen to have an important role in building prosperous new societies newly freed from the chains of colonialism. There were chances for young people to both challenge existing power structures and to develop their own visions for the future (Burgess 2005: xv). This role was often encouraged by the nationalist leaders of the time who saw a need to generate a powerful sense of community and shared destiny among their populations. These leaders, such as Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana and Jomo Kenyatta of Kenya, saw the need to harness the creative energies of young people as part of their new plans for economic, political and social transformation.

<sup>2</sup> Kaplan’s apocalyptic prophecy was faxed by the White House to every US embassy (Dunn 2001: 48).

<sup>3</sup> For a sustained critique of the youth bulge theory see Hendrixson (2004).

Much of the positive momentum seen in the immediate post-colonial era was lost however, as the dreams of development began to crumble. The period of economic crisis in the 1970s and 1980s, and the regime of structural adjustment and economic austerity programs presided over by the International Monetary Fund saw dramatic cuts in government spending on public services like education, health and employment creation schemes. With political leaders unable to respond to the demands and needs of young people, the sense of youth as having a role to play in national projects began to dissipate. In addition to this loss of positive energy and the lack of practical opportunities, this period led in many cases to the beginning of a breakdown in the sense of youth as a meaningful transition period to adulthood. With fewer and fewer job opportunities, accompanied by other forms of economic failure and accelerating urbanisation, many young people were increasingly unable to find ways to support their own livelihoods. This led to what some scholars have termed a 'lost generation' and a growing sense of youth as a kind of 'enduring limbo' (UNDP 2006: 23). The spread of HIV/AIDS, as well as the continued prevalence of diseases such as tuberculosis and malaria, has only contributed to young people's sense of malaise and the difficulties of dealing with poverty on a day to day basis (United Nations 2007: 98-9).

Despite these recent challenges, youth remain an important engine of change. Indeed, youth are always at the forefront of social and political developments. Far from being passive victims subject to manipulation, young people are constantly recreating their societies through their participation in family, work, culture and ritual, and in finding new ways of coping with their economic situation. It is important to note however, that this creativity doesn't always play out in ways that can be deemed socially positive. Honwana and De Boeck (2005) describe youth in post-colonial Africa as both 'makers and breakers', simultaneously constructive and destructive in their interactions with wider society. They show that young people are always at the forefront of movements for social, political and economic change, through activities as diverse as popular cultural forms such as dance and music, participation new religious fundamentalisms, and flirtations with occult economies and millennial capitalist movements that often come with misleading promises of an easy escape from impoverishment. The important question to ask then, is how to maximize the youth energy that is directed towards positive social and economic activity – into 'making' rather than 'breaking'.

### Power and knowledge

At the beginning of the 21st century, young Africans find themselves in the midst of newly globalizing cultures, as they negotiate shifting forms of identity that traverse the modern and traditional. They also have to deal with the implications of the increasingly interconnected world of contemporary global capitalism. These include the way fluctuations in food and other commodity prices can have a drastic impact on their daily lives, as well as the opportunities and social and environmental threats posed by investment by foreign companies in search of natural resources and other development possibilities. Crucially for my argument here however, youth are also increasingly tuned in to emerging global discourses about positive futures. These include human rights and human development discourses as promoted by the United Nations. In this way, young people exist as a kind of meeting point for local and traditional knowledges, and new forms of thinking and doing. Bringing these different forms of knowledge together presents the best chance of meeting the multiple challenges of poverty. As well as material assistance, knowledge is central to fighting poverty. The UN brings technical expertise, powerful ideals, and its global legitimacy which while in themselves are not sufficient, aligned with local knowledge, culture and commitment, offer the possibility of holistic human development. As I argue in the next section, the role of the UN is to help shape the creative energy of young people in order to be a force for positive political and economic change that is generated locally, according to the needs and hopes of Africans themselves. Rather than youth being symbolic of Africa's poverty and social instability, the UN needs to recast youth as the symbol of regeneration and escape from poverty.

### **The role of the United Nations in engaging youth**

## The UN and youth policy

In recent years the UN has shown an increasing recognition of the role of youth across the world and of the importance in including young people in the development of programs and strategies to address poverty. Since beginning to publish the *World Youth Report* in 2003, the UN has increasingly emphasized the relevance of youth issues to development, based on the understanding that “young people can be dynamic agents of social change, taking an active role in combating problems ... [if] given the right tools to work with” (United Nations 2003: 2). The 2003 report stated emphatically that the participation of young people – politically, economically and socially – can have widespread and dramatic benefits for the whole of society. Other initiatives, most notably campaigns centred on the Convention on the Rights of the Child, have promoted protecting the rights and furthering the interests of young people. More recently, as part of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) campaign, there has been an effort to show the way that youth participation is central to the achievement of each of the 15 Goals, and to build the social capacity to ensure that gains can be maintained in the future by today’s youth (Youth and the MDGs 2004). The United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) (2004) has also emphasized the importance of developing national youth policies that incorporate consideration of youth at all national policy levels.

## The UN and African youth

The African Youth Charter, which is an initiative of the African Union and was adopted at a meeting in The Gambia in 2006, offers a valuable model for harnessing the commitment and abilities of African youth. The Charter affirms the MDGs and their relevance for youth, and takes its focus areas from the ten priorities previously established by the “United Nations World Programme of Action for Youth to the Year 2000 and beyond”. These areas cover education, employment, hunger and poverty, health, environment, drug abuse, juvenile delinquency, leisure-time activities, girls and young women and youth participating in decision-making (*African Youth Charter* 2005). Following this African Union example, UN programs should continue to recognize the necessity of the self determination of African young people as active members of their societies and to see foreign assistance as a way to support and enrich ideas for solutions that come from within the continent.

By looking at youth potential through a human development lens, UN agency activities can be relevant to issues facing Africa, ranging from food security, population issues, environmental protection and resource management. A human development approach recognizes that fighting poverty is not only about immediate physical security and fundamental human rights, but also about protecting political, social, economic and cultural rights, and expanding human capabilities by enhancing cooperation at the local, national, regional and international levels (UNDP 1994). Accordingly, emphasis should be placed on building capacity for future generations to manage their own political organization and economies. Of course, in this age of global integration African countries will need to rely on various forms of economic and social exchange with the outside world, but it is important that it occurs on local terms and benefits local people. The recent expansion of investment in Africa offers huge opportunities, but it also presents dangers for exploitation. Indeed, the imposition of inappropriate outside political and economic models has been the cause of some of Africa’s most crippling problems. By investing in the social and political capital of young people, the UN can help African societies develop their own long term solutions to poverty and give them the tools to negotiate with the outside world on their own terms. The following examples demonstrate the way a human development approach to youth offers a way forward for developing long term remedies to African poverty.

### **The role of the UN in stimulating youth political engagement in Africa**

The World Youth Reports, as well as the African Youth Charter, state the importance of young people participating in decision making. In Africa it offers a way of building stability and generating local solutions for

poverty. Social psychologists have also pointed to the importance of social and political engagement for the psychological well-being of young people, and the wide ranging detrimental effects of having an apathetic youth population. We can conclude that programs which help youth to grasp the dynamics of local power structures (Fleishman 2007: 816), to find meaningful roles to play and ways to contribute the community will lead not only to a greater sense of justice but also to psychological ‘wellness’ among young people (Evans and Prilleltensky 2007; Harré 2007). Involving them further in the democratic processes is one way that the positive effects of these shifts can be maximized. While youth may be a socially constructed category that varies in its definition from society to society, it is always a condition of ‘becoming’, of transition from childhood to adulthood, and therefore always retains an aspect of potential for wider transformative power.

#### The role of youth in peace building after civil conflict

Amid the tragic civil wars in places like Liberia, Sierra Leone, Darfur, and in the Congo Basin that have come to dominate international media coverage of Africa, the role of young people has received particular attention. From horrific stories on the use of child soldiers, to images of young men brandishing machine guns and terrorizing their communities, young people appear as either victims or perpetrators. Studies have shown that one of the major reasons young people get involved in conflict is because they want to become politically active, and fighting in civil conflict represents a path to perceived maturity where other options for political engagement are not available. Another reason is simply to escape poverty (IRIN 2007). But as well as being one of the most vulnerable groups, as both targets and participants in times of conflict and immediate post-conflict, young people also offer the greatest potential for reconciliation and for rebuilding societies that have suffered civil wars (MacIkemenjima 2008). If one of the greatest barriers to generating prosperity is political instability, then directing the enthusiasm and energy of youth into ensuring long term stable political environments and sustainable development is vital for combating poverty.

The activities of various UN agencies in West Africa show the very real and practical ways that opening channels for political engagement can allow young people in post-conflict societies to play this role of rebuilding community confidence and putting their countries on the path of meaningful development. In Liberia, for example, UNICEF has coordinated a youth parliament as a way of furthering youth political participation and dialogue for development. This was part of a broader West African regional program to create youth “Leadership for Human Security” which aims at promoting non-violent strategies for conflict resolution and ways of spreading human security messages among the wider population (UNDP 2006: 61). Similar emerging programs in East and Southern Africa also offer cause for hope and provide evidence that governments are beginning to realize the importance of including youth in decision making processes (United Nations 2007: 105-109).

The period immediately following the end of conflict can be particularly difficult for young people. Typically, a lack of educational or employment opportunities, leads to continued instability and further marginalisation of chances for economic betterment. An International Labour Organization (ILO) study has shown that in Liberia some of the biggest barriers facing youth in rebuilding their lives are the widely held “misleading” and often “shockingly negative” beliefs about youth, which result in a lack of opportunities extended to them (Munive and Lakovits 2006). There is evidence however, that UN programs can be successful in combating such social exclusion, such as in a United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) led project in the Mano River area, comprising Liberia, Sierra Leone and Guinea.

The Mano River Youth Conflict Resolution Forum, conducted from 2003 brought together a range of young people to discuss and formulate plans to enhance the participation of young people in the peace process and in rebuilding society. The project demonstrated the way that the energies of young people can be directed into the kind of political, social and economic regeneration so necessary in post conflict communities. The UNDP coordinators heard again and again from youth about their frustrations that they were never consulted and that political leaders rarely heard their concerns or addressed their needs. As the young people themselves recognized, failing to include them in the rebuilding process would see a continuation of insecurity and the perpetuation of

problems resulting from the desperation of people unable to find employment or other outlets for their creativity. The fact that conflict had “denied most of them the opportunity to develop viable skills for employment” (Ankomah 2005: 43) was seen by the participants as directly related to the present problems of criminality and other forms of social breakdown. Accordingly, the forum members worked to develop four cross border strategies for the region, which would allow for projects in the areas of “communication and networking, capacity building and enterprise development”. With initial capital provided by UNDP, the projects in agriculture, fisheries, services and housing were structured so as to be financially sustainable once established (Ankomah 2005: 40-43). While such projects are certainly small in contrast to the massive problems facing Mano River communities, they are in line with models of human development espoused by the UN, and are driven primarily by local energies. They are self sustaining, and are focused on strengthening human security from the bottom up. Moreover, they foster a confidence in political organisation and offer a way for young people to develop the skills necessary for democratic leadership.

### **Recommendations**

By encouraging expanding civil society opportunities for young people, the UN can help societies to move from a culture of exclusion to one of political inclusion. By recognizing youth as dynamic agents of change and as capable of finding diverse and creative responses to crises (Honwana and De Boeck 2005), UN agencies can help national governments to follow a central principle of human development – that a sense of individual security depends on a certain level of political participation and recognition. The UN should offer its expertise in providing models for youth consultation and direct participation in decision making at various levels, such as in the Mano River case. It can help facilitate improved intergenerational dialogue to allow for the sharing of locally relevant ideas and political capacity building for the future. In this way, young people will be able to contribute to finding long term sustainable solutions to poverty at all levels, from grassroots community power structures to national policy development.

### **The role of the United Nations in encouraging entrepreneurship and generating youth employment in Africa**

#### Understanding the dynamics of urban unemployment

The experience of youth in Africa is increasingly one of city life and urbanization, and presenting a wide variety of poverty related challenges. Many of these are blamed on the large influx of young people moving to cities from the countryside. Further, the contraction of employment opportunities in the urban formal economy in recent decades has led many young Africans to look for other ways of sustaining their livelihoods. Problems include rises in petty crime, youth delinquency, and the spread of HIV/AIDS and other illnesses. While on the surface, this trend to urbanization and concentration of youth in cities can appear as a threat to stability, it also offers huge opportunities for the whole community. Urban youth, in the words of one expert, “constitute a largely untapped resource for ingenuity, stability, and economic growth” (Sommers 2003: 1).

The factors driving young people to live in the cities are multi-faceted and complex but it is a powerful and inevitable trend, and evidence shows programs which aim to reverse the trend by simply promoting investment in rural areas are destined to fail (Sommers 2003: 11). This is not to say that rural areas should be abandoned, or that they are not central to future sustainable development,<sup>4</sup> but any UN program to challenge poverty by harnessing the energies of youth needs to recognize the demographic trend to urbanization and the positive outcomes that can be fostered. Moreover, as the UN World Youth Report 2007 makes clear, unemployment in sub-Saharan Africa is more severe in urban areas and gender disparities are often more pronounced in the cities

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<sup>4</sup> Indeed there are important UN initiatives in Africa that focus on rural youth employment (see Munive and Lakovits, 2006).

(United Nations 2007: 96-8). While generating accurate statistical data is difficult, recent studies indicate that young people represent between forty and seventy-five percent of the urban unemployed in many African countries. These high proportions increase the chances of risky behaviour including the chance of contracting HIV/AIDS and engaging in violent behaviour (Chigunta et al. 2005: 2). The causes of unemployment are multiple, and include poor economic conditions, lack of relevant skills, poor education systems, and the breakdown of traditional mentoring youth structures (United Nations 2007: 5-6). This combination of factors make it difficult to conceive of the success of programs which focus solely on helping youth to gain employment in the formal economic sector.

### The promise of youth entrepreneurship

Emerging youth entrepreneurship is a result of the realities of the contemporary labour situation in many African cities. Humans always display resilience in the face of adversity and the experience of poverty forces young people to find new ways of coping with their situation. Moreover, they regularly have an intimate understanding of the way things work on the ground, which no economist or development expert could rival. A large informal economy has long been part of the reality of modern Africa, but as a study commissioned by the ILO has shown, in various parts of sub-Saharan Africa unemployed youth are increasingly learning to improvise in the informal sector, by establishing petty trading schemes and micro-enterprises among groups of young people who share similar circumstances. Numerous cases where young people have proven adept at developing small-scale enterprises based around information technology and mobile phones offer encouragement in this respect (Chigunta et al. 2005: 21). The ILO study also notes however, that the negative labelling of such young people by the government as socially 'undesirable' actually undermines any opportunity for such ingenuity to develop into more widespread and effective forms of entrepreneurship. Without gaining any social respect, youth remain in a kind of 'liminal stage', unable to receive the social and cultural validation necessary to progress to adulthood. This in turn has a variety of detrimental consequences for the whole of the community (Chigunta et al. 2005: 11). Just as a lack of political engagement can get in the way of a sense of social meaning and belonging, so can a lack of fulfilling economic activity.

The Youth Employment Network, which is coordinated through the UN Secretary General's office, has already made some moves towards helping to support a culture of entrepreneurship in Africa as one way of dealing with youth unemployment and poverty (Chigunta et al. 2005: 15). Such programs should be widely expanded because despite evidence of a genuine desire among many young Africans to generate their own economic activity, numerous barriers remain. For the majority of young people in Zambia for instance, the biggest causes of social exclusion and frustration are lack of education and employment opportunities, creating a mutually reinforcing relationship between negative attitudes towards youth and their continued exclusion (UNDP 2006: 23). Moreover, even when vocational education and training is available, it is often irrelevant or outdated, not reflecting shifts in economies and in demand (United Nations 2007: 98). UN agencies need therefore to work to build on local resilience and know how by finding ways to support relevant small-scale enterprise related skill building, thereby assisting in the gradual development of viable businesses and increased trade.

### Recommendations

Research still has many questions to answer about the role of formal education and other kinds of training, as well as the role of gender and regional variation in youth employment and education. Clearly however, the UN has a role to play both in supporting young people through education and training, and by helping to shift attitudes towards youth. By giving young people the tools to support their own livelihoods, they will naturally orient themselves towards attempting to deal with the problems that surround them, and the benefits will go to the whole community. To suggest that there is some kind of silver bullet is of course nonsensical, but by following the principle of encouraging positive attitudes to youth whilst working with governments, communities, the private sector and other development actors to increase locally relevant opportunities for employment, training and entrepreneurship, UN agencies would be working in line with the guiding principles of

human development and human security. The sense of security that results from young individuals who are able to support their own livelihoods is one crucial step in addressing poverty and the multitude of problems that come with it.

Aside from helping to change attitudes towards youth, one of the most important and immediately tangible roles for UN agencies, is to help national governments develop integrated policies that focus on the importance of youth education, training, employment and entrepreneurship. While different approaches will be necessary from country to country, the potential of youth as an untapped resource in fighting poverty is present throughout the continent (Haji 2007). The findings and recommendations of another ILO study of youth employment opportunities in Liberia points to the way a holistic approach might be conceived. It combines individual, community and national level recommendations, and aims to incorporate the skills and perseverance of young people, whilst identifying the skills and opportunities they lack, as well as ways to address those shortages. It recognizes the importance of fostering channels of intergenerational dialogue that have broken down to encourage mutual respect and mutual economic benefit. In the area of education and training it emphasizes the need to focus on skills directly relevant to future economic and market trends and for building on the entrepreneurial and life skills that young people already possess (Munive and Lakovits 2006: 51-4). Such a policy approach is based on the recognition that engaging youth in meaningful economic activity is something that requires the whole of government. Harnessing the expertise of UN agencies to advise governments and to work with individuals, community groups and the private sector in these youth related areas represents a important opportunity to create long term solutions for poverty in Africa.

### **Conclusions – Mainstreaming youth in United Nations work in Africa**

In the scope of this short essay it would be impossible to consider all of ways the UN could help better engage youth in Africa as a means for addressing poverty. I have however, attempted to show some of the ways that the UN can assist African youth to secure their own livelihoods and to develop the capacity to address all dimensions of poverty. The long term results of successful implementation would likely include the stabilisation of economies through lifting employment rates to prevent mass hunger, and young people who are better able to make decisions about employment and managing families, with more opportunities to have a say in how their environments and resources are used. There are indeed countless ways that empowering young Africans will impact positively on poverty. Africa is richly diverse, as are the multiple experiences of youth, but all across the continent the UN should continue to improve inter-agency cooperation by mainstreaming youth policy across its programs in Africa. This will ensure that programs for development will include young people in the holistic way envisaged by the UN's own concept of human development – something vital if we are to succeed in addressing the immense and often daunting challenges posed by African poverty.

It is up to the whole world to help Africa, and to assist in finding solutions to its problems by investing in its future, but the UN in particular is in a powerful position to help shift the attitude, both within and outside the continent, that Africa is a hopeless case. By promoting the political and economical participation of youth, it can begin to empower young people to have the confidence to shape their own more prosperous futures. Most importantly, the UN can help promote youth as a source hope for positive change in Africa. After all, the idea of human development is derived from a sense of hope – hope for a better, more secure, and prosperous future. It is therefore a case of helping to shape the creativity, energy and enthusiasm that already exists among African youth. For evidence that this passion for positive change exists in abundance, we need look no further than numerous examples of young Africans volunteering as part of UN and African Union programs to challenge poverty all over the continent. Ranging from health, environmental, agriculture, job creation and broad based development initiatives, the World Youth Report 2007 documents some of the many different ways young Africans participate as volunteers on a daily basis to challenge poverty and build stronger, more resilient communities (United Nations 2007: 105-118). Such commitment truly represents an enthusiasm for the values of the kind of human development that the UN will embody in helping Africans to challenge poverty at every level, in all its manifestations.

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