

## *A culture-sensitive youth policy for Kenya*

### **Summary**

Approximately 65% of Africa's total population is under the age of 35 (Tracey & Kahutia 2017), with youth constituting more than 50% of the populace in most African countries. This sizable youth demographic represents economic development opportunities under conditions of enabling policy and legislation regimes. However, the interrogation of the space in which youth on the continent function and the analysis of the problems they confront reveal misalignment between the policy environment and the realities of the young men and women who face the difficulties of coming of age in postcolonial Africa in a globalising world. In fact, determining who the youth are within this historically-embedded development context presents a challenge for policy-makers, who are largely concerned with biological age as the main characteristic of the group. Meanwhile, the socio-cultural context of the youth population, which is key to understanding the needs of young Africans, is not considered.

This policy brief analyses the National Youth Policy (NYP) of Kenya to see how the document incorporates the socio-cultural context within which it operates. Using discourse analysis as a lens to study the text of the policy, it interrogates Kenyan policy-makers' approach to the youth. It further critiques the tradition-modernity binary opposition used in the NYP

as Eurocentric and not relevant to the context of Kenya. Demonstrating the impact of the approach on the formulation and implementation of the youth policy, it is suggested that the NYP should be adapted to the cultural context of the youth, who live in a complex world with both 'traditional' and 'modern' features that are unequivocally intertwined. Aligning the policy with the lived experiences of the youth will help to attune pro-youth initiatives to the realities of young people and better focus government efforts and resources.

As a point of departure, the findings of the empirical research conducted in 2017/18 by the Africa Institute of South Africa (AISA) on the opportunities for youth in Kenya to actively participate in local and national socioeconomic development processes are used.<sup>1</sup> These findings are complemented with secondary data that speak to the cultural dimensions of 'being youth' in Kenya.

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1. The project, undertaken in Kenya, was part of a six-country research study entitled *Entry-points of utilizing the demographic dividend in sub-Saharan Africa: An examination of the dynamics of youth participation in local and national socioeconomic transformation processes*. It was conducted in 2017/18 in Botswana, Ghana, the Ivory Coast, Tanzania, Kenya and Zambia, and looked at the extent to which Africa's young people participate in the formulation and implementation of policies that have a bearing on youth development.

## Introduction

The African Youth Charter defines youth as every person between the ages of 15 and 35 years (AUC 2006). The United Nations considers people of 15 to 24 years of age as youth (UN 2018). The Commonwealth Youth Programme has adopted 15 to 29 years as the youth age category.<sup>2</sup> In Kenya, the 2010 Constitution considers 'youth' to be between the ages of 18 and 35,<sup>3</sup> while the NYP applies the term to people between the ages of 15 and 30 years (GoK 2006). These discrepancies in the legislation and policy arenas are just one of the difficulties that hinder the implementation of pro-youth initiatives in the East African economic hub. Defining youth only by means of biological age presents its own problems, as cultural perceptions of age that have traditionally played a role in societal power relations subconsciously continue to be used as markers of exclusion in Kenyan society (Aguilar 1998).

As a situated social category defined by societal expectations and responsibilities rather than by years of life, youth is generally constructed as a period between childhood and adulthood (Honwana & De Boeck 2005). It is 'a time of growth, of searching for meanings and belonging; a stage of moulding characters, interests, and goals; a process of constructing and reconfiguring identities; a creative period with both risks and possibilities' (Honwana 2012: 11). Youth is largely seen as a state of becoming rather than a state of being. Socially and culturally constructed definitions of youth are not embraced in legal documents in Kenya, despite the fact that local norms and ways of maturation still mark the passing of age of young Kenyans. For example, among 'traditional

societies' which continue to follow gerontocratic models of governance (such as the Maasai, Samburu, Rendille, Gabbra, Borana and Turkana), ageing is concerned with gaining fertility and climbing the social ladder (Aguilar 1998). The authority of elders is not based purely on their biological age but rather on the traditional knowledge they have acquired over the years. In 'modern' Kenya, children can 'become adults' by gaining knowledge through Western-style education rather than by undergoing traditional rites of passage (Aguilar 1998). This 'new' type of knowledge can be disputed by elders as the basis for coming of age. Furthermore, the ritual rebellion of young Maasai and Samburu fuelling the 'intergenerational conflict' between them and the elders has been a tacit part of the traditional gerontocratic models (Spencer 2004, 1965). Yet, nowadays, youth rebelliousness is considered a sign of disrespect by older generations. Elders, in turn, are often accused of abusing their socio-cultural position in order to hold on to power. Youth complain about patronising attitudes towards them, believing that the elders feel threatened and fear competition from the younger generation (Bialostocka et al. 2019). The perceived hostile attitudes and intergenerational conflict may be remnants of traditional cultural models that continue to have a bearing on people's perception of age. Moreover, cultural understandings of age are not only specific to cultural groups or generations (Aguilar 1998) but are also gendered. Maasai women, for example, although not structurally integrated into the age-systems, traditionally 'get their age' from men by becoming wives and mothers (Talle 1998). In another instance, the status and role of Borana women (of northern Kenya) are reflected in the practice of referring to male elders past a certain age using female pronouns (Kassam 1995).

It should be stated upfront that Kenyan cultures differ from one another in terms of languages, histories, traditional practices, beliefs and socioeconomic systems. Thus, one cannot speak about Kenyan cultures as a unity. This cultural diversity should be kept in mind when speaking about the socio-cultural realities of youth. Nevertheless, Kenyans have managed to construct a national cultural identity in which elements of their varied traditional cultures successfully appear next to features borrowed from the globalised Western culture. This national culture functions in addition to the many diverse ethnic cultures of Kenya, rather than in place of them (Olubayi 2007).

The abovementioned examples of different perceptions of age among the cultural communities of Kenya, rites of passage practiced and gender roles observed clearly demonstrate that ensuring the inclusion of youth in the governance and development processes is not just a matter of adjusting age across policies. The complex socio-cultural context in which these regulations are to be implemented needs to be taken into consideration in order for the pro-youth initiatives to be effective. Correlating traditional rites of passage with 'legal' and 'modern' ways of reaching adulthood (such as through formal education, marriage, giving birth, becoming taxpayers or gaining election rights) constitutes a challenge for policy-makers that needs to be addressed.

## Policy observations

Kenya's NYP was adopted in 2006. It is aimed at ensuring that the youth play their role in society and the development of the country. The policy outlines roles and responsibilities of the youth, and obligations of the actors who play a role in young people's lives (family, the state and the private sector). It suggests interventions, mechanisms and frameworks to address the challenges that the youth

2. <http://thecommonwealth.org/youth>  
3. <http://www.kenyalaw.org/lex/actview.xql?actid=Const2010>

face, and acknowledges the risks of excluding them from national affairs. The document envisages engaging the youth in decision-making processes; however, at the same time, it seems to view young people as recipients of interventions rather than agents of development. The policy speaks of youth in terms of their future value for society, seemingly not recognising the potential they already have while they are still young (Wyn & White 2008). It focuses particularly on the issues of youth employment, education, health, sports and recreation, the environment, and youth participation and empowerment. It treats youth with disability, street youth, youth living with HIV and AIDS, females, and unemployed and out-of-school young people as priority groups. With all these visions and suggestions, the policy acknowledges lack of adequate resources to support youth initiatives and programmes.

The NYP should be commended for acknowledging the importance of the cultural background of a person and advocating for greater recognition of Kenyan traditions, cultural values and local practices in the country's developmental trajectories. However, the authors of the document clearly struggled to correlate 'traditional' ways of living with 'modern' societal needs and challenges of the youth. Accordingly, in analysing the NYP from the point of view of socio-cultural factors that have a bearing on the situation on the ground, the following observations can be made.

### **Youth as a group**

Paragraph 1.1 of the NYP provides the following definition of youth: 'The youth are defined as persons resident in Kenya in the age bracket 15 to 30 years. This takes into account the physical, psychological, cultural, social, biological and political definitions of the term'. Despite acknowledging different variables that have a bearing

on the lives of youth, the NYP seems to look at all of them through the lens of biological age only in order to come up with one age group category that embraces all the age groups defined by physical, psychological and socio-cultural differences. Meanwhile, all these variables result in distinct needs of people, varying substantially depending on their age, status, locality or gender. The policy fails to distinguish between the experiences of a 15-year-old woman from a rural area and a 30-year-old male living in an industrial town in Kenya. Socio-cultural stages that youth within the 15 to 30 years age bracket go through are many and wide-ranging.

The NYP treats the youth as a homogenous group. The diverse identities of the youth are not considered, which makes the policy misaligned with the realities of many young people in the country. Although the document specifically targets youth from certain backgrounds or with specific challenges, these groups are also not homogenous internally. The NYP considers marginalisation of youth based on their economic situation and special needs, but seems to see the socio-cultural background of young people merely in terms of gender – and even that variable is treated superficially. The NYP is further unresponsive to the local realities of rural youth. In fact, the policy document alludes to the fact that government youth programmes are mostly urban based. The NYP does not differentiate between urban and rural youth needs, and males and females, even though these variables have a significant impact on the realities of youth. Young people in rural areas are under much more influence of cultural factors than their peers in towns because traditional values and norms, cultural practices or rites of passage are more closely observed by village communities.

Paragraph 2.0.v of the NYP states that the youth have a low status due

to, among other reasons, prevailing attitudes which 'do not provide an enabling environment for youth participation in decision-making, planning and implementation processes'. The document does not explain on what these attitudes are based. However, it can be assumed that age and traditional hierarchy structures play a substantial role. Indeed, Paragraph 3.7 acknowledges that despite their numerical superiority, youth are the least represented group in the political and economic spheres due to factors such as socio-cultural barriers. Given the NYP's focus on females, it is critical to emphasise that young women are particularly disadvantaged in terms of political participation as a result of their cultural status. Culturally, they often do not have a youth identity because 'when we are unmarried, the community views us as children who cannot "address" elders and ask for votes. When we get married, young women "belong" to their husbands. We are no longer youth but adults. We therefore cannot vie for political seats on a youth ticket even when we are within that age bracket' (Siri-Njongo & Mwangda 2011: 36).

In Paragraph 3.6, the NYP raises the issue of abuse and exploitation to which the youth are exposed. It mentions, among other issues, the problem of child labour. Although it is not clearly explained what the document refers to directly, it should be noted that the line between childhood and adulthood in the said context can often be crossed by the youth depending on the conditions they face in life. What universalised definitions of childhood consider a clear social divide is indeed blurry, as '[many children and young people are] drawn into wars ... as soldiers, spies, bodyguards, and commandos ... [They assume] roles once reserved for adults' (Honwana & De Boeck 2005: 4). And while many children have assumed the adult responsibility of running a

household as a result of the HIV/AIDS pandemic, in line with the existing policies, they are still treated according to their biological age and not the role they play in the family and society.

### **Foundational principles of NYP**

Paragraph 5 lists five principles on which the policy is founded, namely: (i) respect of cultural belief systems and ethical values; (ii) equity and accessibility; (iii) gender inclusiveness; (iv) good governance; and (v) mainstreaming youth issues.

The NYP claims to respect the 'cultural, religious, customary and ethical backgrounds of the different communities and conforms to universally recognised human rights, without discrimination based on gender, race, origin, age, ethnicity, creed, political affiliation or social status'. However, the document does not explain what happens when cultural, religious and other backgrounds of people stand contradictory to those 'universally recognised rights' or how cultural beliefs are regarded when they create attitudes that disempower youth.

For example, referring to equity and gender inclusiveness, the NYP seeks to eliminate gender discrimination and violence. How it reconciles cultural beliefs with regard to gender roles and customary practices is not explained. Paragraph 7.0.iv refers to marriage at the legal age of consent as a right of youth. The policy is, however, silent on socio-cultural factors that lead to the occurrence of child marriages in the country.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, Paragraph 7.0.xi speaks of the youth's right to ownership and protection of property. Yet some customary laws do not recognise women's rights in this regard. The Matrimonial Property Act protects women's access to their property but

patriarchal traditions still mean that many women must fight for land even when it is legally theirs.<sup>5</sup>

In Paragraph 7.3, the policy deplors that 'the strong family ties inherited from our traditional societies, which called for mutual respect between the various age groups, have weakened. As a result, signs of rebellion are visible among a number of youth'. It is interesting to note that 'traditional societies' are praised here for their values and norms. However, the document does not seem to recognise that rebellion is part of the passage of youth into adulthood in those traditional communities (Spencer 2004, 1965). Thus, it seems that the NYP romanticises tradition while considering rebellion a violation of some 'modern' standard. Clearly, the concept of the youth as passive recipients of experience is used here. Developed in Western countries, it has been universalised in a way that portrays young people who do not follow the established path either as at risk or posing a risk to society (Honwana & De Boeck 2005: 3).

Paragraph 7.3.iii calls for equal opportunities and access to family wealth for youth, regardless of gender. The policy, however, fails to discuss customary rights of ownership in 'traditional societies' even though these affect the status quo of certain groups of society, particularly women, as already indicated. Parents are also encouraged by the NYP to offer room for youth participation at all levels (Paragraph 7.3.viii); that statement goes against cultural rules and hierarchies within a family, the loss of which the policy simultaneously laments. Family hierarchies in 'traditional societies' do not necessarily follow the rule of equal

participation. Instead, each age and gender group has its own rights and responsibilities (Aguilar 1998; Talle 1998; Kassam 1995), which are not differentiated in the NYP.

### **Policy priority areas**

Employment creation is discussed as a priority area in Paragraph 8.1, which calls on the government to create awareness about labour laws and workers' rights through civic education. Socio-cultural factors (such as established gender roles, cultural perceptions of age, and the responsibilities associated with each gender and age group according to customary practices) that may impinge on equal access to paid employment are not flagged. Meanwhile, subconscious culture-dictated bias is a reality and certain jobs are still 'designed' with a specific gender in mind (Bialostocka et al. 2019).

Paragraph 8.2 of the NYP deals with health as a priority area. It tasks the government with encouraging parents to take a lead role in teaching and counselling their children regarding responsible sexual behaviour. The document is silent on the possible cultural norms that may regulate knowledge transfer in this sphere of life between family members. It also does not consider cultural taboos that would render such a recommendation ineffective (see Bialostocka 2017). Peer-to-peer counselling in faith-based institutions is also mentioned. It should be noted, however, that the teaching provided by these institutions may not necessarily correspond with the school programmes dealing with sexuality education and related health issues, and may actually contradict the traditional knowledge shared on matters of sexual behaviour within families. Confusion and disorientation may occur as a result of the youth receiving contradictory messages from varied sources (see Bialostocka 2017).

4. <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/child-marriage/kenya/>

5. <https://www.newsdeeply.com/womensadvancement/articles/2018/02/23/despite-new-laws-women-in-kenya-still-fight-for-land-rights>

In Paragraph 8.2.xii, the government is tasked with enhancing the youth's leadership capacity. Yet, in 'traditional societies', leadership has been a domain of elders (Aguilar 1998; Spencer 2004, 1965) believed to possess knowledge and maturity to lead their communities. The policy therefore seems to disregard traditional social structures, where male elders held the power while women and youth had other roles and obligations assigned to them.

Education as the next priority area is tackled in Paragraph 8.3. The policy indicates the need for gearing education to prepare students for market demands; a 'skills for employment' approach is thus proposed. Furthermore, in Paragraph 8.1.xvi, the government's hopes to instil a culture of hard work among Kenyan youth are revealed. Nonetheless, the Kenyan youth of today care more about being cashless than jobless; stable employment has become less important than 'hassling' for money, even if the latter is acquired through illegal means (Bialostocka et al. 2019). Thus, to instil a new work culture in young Kenyans, the government may need to rethink the model of education it currently promotes and consider the broader purpose of teaching ethics and cultural values that traditional African education had in Kenya (Maina 1998).

Paragraph 8.6 is concerned with art and culture. These concepts are defined as follows: 'Art is an expression of a people's beliefs, values, appreciation, beauty and culture. Culture, on the other hand, is a definition of a people – their lives, values, aspirations and beliefs. Culture reflects the livelihood of a people. It is by a culture that one can judge a community – their joy, pain, hope, beliefs and values. Culture does not exist in a vacuum. It has to spread among a people and it has to have acceptable standards. Culture is dynamic.' The use of the word 'judge' in relation to beliefs and values is surprising, considering the

policy's mentioned stance of 'respect for cultural and religious backgrounds of the communities'. It also requires a question as to who is to act as a judge and through whose mandate. The subsequent statement referring to the 'acceptable standards' that a culture should have raises similar questions about the nature of the entity evaluating the ideals of a culture, given the ultimate freedom of cultural expression amid the cultural diversity of Kenyans.

Despite the fact that culture is described broadly as a way of life, and as such can be said to permeate all priority areas selected for the NYP, the policy seems to focus mainly on cultural artefacts (Paragraphs 8.6.i–viii). For example, with regard to sports and recreation, it 'promotes traditional games ... as a way of preserving culture' (Paragraph 8.4.vi). It sees cultures and traditions as 'objects' in need of preservation, instead of supporting people in living and 'developing' their cultures (see Bialostocka 2018).

The policy further argues that 'the youth in Kenya find themselves at a crossroads between the Western culture and the remnants of traditional culture. Kenya, therefore, faces the challenge of preserving our culture to be passed on to future generations' (Paragraph 8.6). It is noteworthy that the NYP speaks of culture in the singular (referring probably to the national culture), rather than the diversity of cultures represented by the country's peoples. However, it describes this culture as 'traditional', alluding to it being 'handed down' or 'transmitted' from the past to the present. The policy further juxtaposes Western culture with this 'traditional culture', clearly considering them as enemies, rather than seeing Kenya's national culture as a combination of traditional African cultures and Western (and other) influences. The document shows a certain bias, presenting 'tradition' as

a rival to 'modern' (here equated with 'Western') culture. Meanwhile, since culture is dynamic, it is open to change and should be regarded as being in a continuous process of transformation and adaptation. Accordingly, youth should not be at a crossroads, having to choose either tradition or modernity. The two are not necessarily exclusive; to the contrary, they can be mutually enriching.

A similar sentiment about the West permeates Paragraph 8.7, which speaks to the youth and the media. It warns that the 'youth have been exposed to music and film that only serves to perpetrate the Western culture'. As a response, the policy calls for more local content in the media. Western culture is clearly considered 'a bad influence' that is able to kill off local ways. Surprisingly, Western education is not treated in the same manner; on the contrary, it is perceived as the standard to follow (Bialostocka et al. 2019) even though it does not serve the transmission of culture to the younger generations as the traditional education used to do. The policy seems to regard 'Western culture' merely as popular culture, instead of seeing its larger influence on people's thinking and ways of life.

Youth empowerment and participation in national life are discussed in Paragraph 8.8 as another priority area. The NYP argues that 'societal systems need to adopt open and flexible societal norms. Adults should change from working for the youth to working with the youth'. With this statement, the policy seems to acknowledge that culture as a way of life is dynamic, and its continuity includes social change. It is this change that brings about innovation, and shows that systems and values can adapt to the present realities. This claim, however, stands against the argument advanced elsewhere in the document about the need to preserve traditional culture unchanged.

## Tradition and modernity

The NYP clearly struggles to marry the notion of 'tradition' with 'modernity', seeing them as a binary opposition. Such an approach is a fallacy in the Kenyan context, as it is based on a Western linear theory of social change and development processes (Rostov 1960) which draws a stark dividing line between the pre-modern period (characterised by traditional cultures) and modernity. It is built on a Western ontology which positions traditional culture (a holistic way of doing things) against modern culture (focusing on specialisation and spatio-temporal universalism) (Giddens 1991), and sees traditional institutions and values as obstacles to modernisation. Meanwhile, 'from the point of view of a deep and fundamental conception of tradition, every society in our modern world is "traditional"' (Gyekye 1997: 217). After all, the past is part of the cultural creation of the present (Ton Kin 1992). The polarity of tradition and modernity is based on the assumption that tradition is resistant to change and innovation. In reality, the fluidity of cultures makes changing traditions possible. From an indigenous perspective, tradition is a process that involves cultural continuity and innovation (Smith 2008; Porsanger 2011); it is not just the transfer of beliefs, attitudes and practices but a cumulative process of change that is rooted in indigenous understandings of time, space and knowledge. Therefore, tradition and innovation are not in conflict (Gusfield 1967), for cultures are not static or ahistorical. They adjust to changing conditions, human needs and the environment. They innovate and improve, changing when needed to fit a new reality. Customs, practices and traditions can be changed, abandoned or reinvented when they no longer serve the purpose for which they existed, or when the purpose is no longer working for the people. However, these practices and traditions need to

be questioned from within rather than from outside. Hence, it is important to ask the question of who has the right and the mandate to judge a culture and introduce changes.

## Policy implications

The policy argues that 'the youth can no longer be termed as leaders of tomorrow. They must be seen as today's leaders' (Paragraph 11.0). This aspiration will remain unrealised if socio-cultural factors, which constitute serious policy implementation gridlocks, are not addressed. African modernity needs to draw on African people's experiences and their philosophical thoughts worked out in a specific cultural and historical context. It also means that it must be ready for some radical changes in terms of leaving behind those aspects of 'traditional' expressions that no longer serve their purpose (Gyekye 1997).

## Recommendations

The following recommendations are therefore made:

1. Use disaggregated data to inform the policy. Take into consideration different realities of youth, based on the many socio-cultural, economic, environmental and other variables. In the policy, address the needs of young people based on their varied circumstances instead of using one age bracket and treating the youth as a homogenous group.
2. Address socio-cultural perceptions of age and gender in the policy. Apart from biological age, consider the socio-cultural roles and responsibilities that young people play within a community, and their economic situation. Coordinate culturally defined ways of maturation with the established socio-political ways of reaching adulthood.
3. Make clear in the policy the standards and values it embraces, bearing in mind its non-

discriminatory stance with regard to the cultural, religious and other backgrounds of the youth. Align it with the legally binding customary laws and valid cultural practices.

4. Since culture is dynamic and changeable, promote ways of adapting traditions and re-embedding cultural expressions within contemporary (modern) societies in the policy, instead of treating tradition and modernity as opposites.
5. Given that the NYP emphasises the need to transmit cultural precepts and moral norms to the youth, revise the goal of formal education to encompass more than just preparation for future employment. As in 'traditional societies' of Kenya, education can serve the purpose of instilling values, transmitting moral and ethical precepts, and providing children with an appropriate cultural upbringing that will help them to become responsible citizens.

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