

## **Youth Exclusion & Political Violence -- Oslo**

Panel: Challenges relating to urban & rural youth populations

Presentation: “Challenges Related Urban Youth Populations”  
Friday, 5 Dec., 2008

### **I. Prologue**

Q. Why does it seem that urban youth have to riot to get attention?

Liberia 2004

E. Timor 2006

Kenya 2007-08

Not everywhere – youth, for ex., have been virtually forgotten in Rwanda since the genocide.

Riots, unfortunately, trigger action. It probably also draws from fear of urban youth. Hard for urban youth to otherwise get much attn. to their situation.

### **II. Background**

presentation will draw from a recent UNICEF study on urban youth in Africa and research funded by the World Bank on youth in Rwanda.

A bit of background on the project:

- WB asked P. Uvin & I to carry out qualitative field research with rural and urban youth in Central Africa.
- Peter’s book due out next month; my manuscript will hopefully be done early next year.
- The methods & approach with marginalized youth that we developed for Central Africa is a featured component of a new initiative at the Fletcher School and the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in Washington.
- The concept is to feed research findings about youth views from different war-affected countries to inform roundtable discussions by policymakers.
- The Fletcher School will direct the research work while Woodrow Wilson will lead the roundtables.

### **III. Introduction**

I'll address 3 sets of issues in this presentation:

- First, to first examine some current challenges on international engagement with marginalized urban youth (mainly in Africa).
- Next, I'll share some challenges from the perspective of urban youth, drawing on the case of urban youth in Kigali, Rwanda.
- Finally, I'll end with a look ahead, with some thoughts on 3 issues that might be worth keeping in mind.

### **III. Some challenges relating to the starting point of national and international institutions relating to development, violence & Africa's urban youth**

The starting point is, in general, significant distance between institutions and youth:

Here's something I wrote that was deleted from a report for an agency I won't name:

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**[opening to] Beyond the Comfort Zone**

Imagine entering Sub-Saharan Africa for the first time. After arriving by plane in a capital city and emerging from the airport din, a car takes you downtown. En route, the surroundings may be exotic and different in a variety of ways, but one thing is clear: the sides of the roadways are clotted with male youth. While there may be schoolchildren in uniform, youngsters hawking wares at intersections, adults of all kinds, and even some female youth, mostly there are angular young men, walking.

If you work for an international agency, the world of hotels, restaurants, offices and meetings opens up. If you are invited for an evening meal at the house of an international living in the city, it probably has day and night security guards and is surrounded by high walls topped either with bits of broken glass stuck into cement or razor wire to ward off potential thieves. Most of the local people with whom you interact likely know at least one European language and are reasonably well educated. They are undoubtedly articulate and deeply concerned about their nation and its citizens. However, most Africans cannot speak European languages, and most have far lower levels of education than the local people with whom you're speaking. The upper class Africans you interact with may know precious little about the lives of most of their fellow urbanites, and much of what they think they know may be distorted. To skirt this apparent problem, you may pepper your driver and taximen for information about everyday life; an inexact and somewhat misleading means for understanding local realities perhaps, but at least it's easily available information.

While these conversations in cars are taking place, as you wend your way from one island of familiarity to the next, the youth on the roadways who see you have you pegged. They know you probably haven't come to assist or even interact with them. International agencies may be based in African capital cities, but their attentions are almost always directed at rural Africa. Urban Africa, and the young people who demographically dominate it, is something to endure and try to enjoy. But it's not at all where most programming is supposed to take place.

If this initial set of experiences creates a sense of African cities as, just perhaps, dangerous, intimidating, filthy and chaotic, you are most certainly not alone. African cities seem to have perplexed and dismayed a great many of its visitors.

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Distance, discomfort, unfamiliarity, and perhaps even fear – all of these adjectives may inform views of African urban male youth.

This appears to be based on limited knowledge about urban youth lives -- and an assumption, it would certainly appear, that urban male youth are threats to peace.

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**Overview:**

- African cities are frequently described as a mess.
- There's limited attn. paid to any potential connections between national and international policies and the dire situation of the urban poor, including poor urban youth.

Regarding violence, one point often comes up:

- That having too many unemployed male youth in cities is explosive.

**Let's try to take some of this apart by considering 3 points.**

**FIRST, a crucial background point:**

- Is there a connection between national and international economic policies and male youth violence in cities?

There's a body of evidence to suggest that the answer is 'yes.'

- A study in Kano, Nigeria speaks of 'adolescent banding' as a traditional way for male youth to gather socially, contribute to community life and help them pass into adulthood.
- But starting in 1986, the Yandaba groups became criminal organizations.

Why did this happen?

- The reason that's argued is that the collapse of social services and the inability of youth to find legitimate means of livelihood forced people to fend for themselves.
- Crime was the available option, and the adolescent groups went in that direction.

This analysis is illustrative of a larger dimension of change in African urban life.

**SECOND POINT:** The moral dimension that informs and justifies this behavior.

A profound shift took place in the organization and function of these groups after the Structural Adjustment Program was instituted in Nigeria in 1986.

It's been argued that SAP's emphasis on privatization and reduced government provision also informs current processes that international financial institutions support, such as PRSPs and HIPC's.

The point here is not to discuss macroeconomics but to consider what a reduced public sector, the privatization of basic services, and food scarcities have impacted urban social life in Africa.

I think it would be difficult to dispute that there are new interpretations of morality among urban youth in today's African cities.

- Governments and their supporting institutions are often seen as hypocritical, inherently unjust, corrupt
  - basically, that governments these days are out for themselves,
  - and that many international institutions enable this sort of selfishness (even if it's unintentional).

For ex., in Nairobi, one scholar has said that the government has promoted a “perversion of the social order” and the “emergence of bandit economies.”

*At the same time*, survival in cities takes many forms, and there's a grey area concerning what's morally seen as good or correct in order to survive in town.

For example:

- Is it a bad thing to sell drugs or contraband to policemen, for example, if it keeps them from raiding your house when they periodically sweep through your neighborhood?
- Is prostitution, selling illegal liquor and so on really bad if the government charges bribes, fuels inequalities, and mainly looks after itself?

**THIRD POINT:** Too many unemployed male youth in cities is explosive.

Here are some questions arising from this:

- If poor urban youth are “hopeless youth,” as they are so often called in Rwanda, then why aren’t more of them violent?
- If you live a life without hope and with degradation, why don’t you rebel?
- Why did we not find any evidence of gangs in Kigali, and that the theft was mostly based on desperation?
- Why, for example, are we not studying youth *resistance* to violence?

Most wars in Africa are over, and a very small proportion of them started in cities.

Even when wars do break out, very few youth engage in warfare.

My sense is that we may be lead, to a significant degree, by our assumptions about urban male youth more than the evidence.

- My sense is that we are lead, to a significant degree, by our assumptions about urban male youth more than the evidence.
- Most aren’t violent and most aren’t in gangs, and urban male youth, as a rule, don’t initiate wars.

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**IV. Challenges from the perspective of urban youth**

Before turning to some findings about Rwandan youth, a framing comment:

- the fundamental irony of huge African cities: that urban youth demographically dominate them while acting as if they’re an outcast minority.

2 direct implications:

- what we think of as ‘mainstream’ urban society is actually very small.
- the assumption that elite youth leaders represent the views of all youth is probably false.

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What does this look like in Rwanda?

- First of all, Rwanda has the highest rate of urbanization in the world
- 2 in 3 Kigali residents are thought to be youth.

Here are 5 findings:

1. Many if not most poor urban youth endure conditions of desperate, extreme poverty and profound social isolation.
  2. The situation facing the poorest female youth is a high-risk emergency.
    - An illustration of this situation arose in the Kigali research sample, which revealed prostitution to be, by far, the most common poor female youth occupation.
  3. Few surveyed youth reported to be receiving development from government or non-government sources. This was particularly the case for urban youth.
  4. The thrust of Rwandan government responses to the immense challenges that their youth population represents is to try to organize them by changing their behavior in specific ways (such as joining associations or cooperatives, staying in school and obeying new government regulations).
    - Youth, in turn, want the government to help them solve particular problems (such as housing and livelihood concerns).
  5. The research suggests that the rate of HIV/AIDS prevalence in the Rwandan population may be considerably higher than what is reported, most particularly in Kigali.
    - There was little evidence in the visited areas that current approaches to HIV/AIDS control and awareness were making inroads with poor youth, largely because they did not effectively address three issues that lead to AIDS transmission: female youth desperation, extreme poverty – emasculation.
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## V. Looking ahead: Some important issues to keep in mind.

Some questions and potential answers:

1. Let's start with emasculation.

What may be the central youth development and violence question:

How do male and female youth become adults – and are they able to achieve it?

Or is the situation arising where most youth are failing at becoming socially recognized adults and instead stuck in 'waithood'?

The concept of 'youthmen' seems to be pervasive

- failed masculinity (and femininity) is widespread in Rwanda:
  - male youth in rural areas need to build houses before they can marry and become accepted as men.
  - Yet most of those we interviewed felt that they may never be able to build one.
- One of the reasons youth migrate to cities is to get away from these constraints.
  - This would include access to land, which may be very hard to do in rural areas.
  - There seems to be a sense that cities are easier places to be failures, and at least for male youth, create new identities for themselves.

2. A related question is: why do many female youth seem to be invisible to outsiders, particularly in cities?

3. what are institutions doing now to create conditions of instability, economic desperation and social distance?

often the answer is: a lot.

Are they contributing to the frustrations of youth to become adults?

often the answer is: yes.

All of this is unintentional. But development policies may run directly counter to youth priorities and requirements.

For example, there's a strong tendency to focus on private sector investment and rural development while more and more African youth are migrating to cities and working in the informal sector.

Another example:

- The tendency to seek to 'reintegrate' communities, suggests a return to the past and the continued predominance of elders and their traditions.
- The correct term, it would appear, is 'integration' into new societies where youth are demographically dominant and can figure out ways not to be seen as failed adults.

## **Gaps in Knowledge and Action for Youth**

### **I. Research**

What are we doing now that affects the situation of poor youth?

-- What are we doing, in particular, to make their situation worse?

-- In what ways are current policies undermining youth priorities?

- for ex., an emphasis on the private sector and rural development
  - While many youth may be focusing on land, housing and marriage.

How do youth become adults, and are they able to succeed?

If they fail, what are the outcomes?

What's the profile of potentially violent youth, and how is it similar or different in different contexts?

How does class intersect with youth violence?

What's happening to female youth, and why do they tend to be fairly invisible?

### **II. Policy**

2 points:

- there are far, far too many youth to included in programming, which raises the prominence of policies that impact youth-dominated populations.
- often, populations are generally youth-dominated while government and international agency policies, overall, are not.

### **III. Programming**

There appears to be a need for donor education about the difficulty of successfully working with marginalized male and female youth.

Quality evalaution, at some point??

The danger of exclusion;

You can have a successful program for youth in the program

-- and negatively impact youth not in programs.