

## Chapter One

# The Political Child

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## Introduction

The current generation of youth is the largest in the history of the world. Today, half of the 6.3 billion people on earth are under the age of 25. More than 1 billion are between the ages of ten and 19.<sup>1</sup> Half of the 500 million inhabitants of sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) are under the age of 15. The dominance of the youth is reinforced by the fact that only 5% of Africa's population is over the age of 60.<sup>2</sup> Those particularly under the age of 18 constitute a significant part of the population of most African countries.

At the same time as the proportion of young people is increasing rapidly, conditions in Africa are deteriorating for many of its inhabitants. In its fourth development decade, sub-Saharan Africa is lagging behind all other regions in recognised indicators such as per capita income, accessibility to potable water, life expectancy, nutritional status, literacy and mortality rates, and incidence of diseases. Living standards have declined to levels much lower than those at independence, and there is an absolute increase in the number of people living in abject poverty. Undoubtedly, Africa's youth bear the brunt of these worsening conditions. In 2002 the two worst places in the world to be a child were located in Africa: Angola and Sierra Leone, both recently affected by long-running conflicts.<sup>3</sup>

Their large numbers notwithstanding, youth in Africa are marginalised by political and social structures, and neglected and overlooked by both scholarly and policy-oriented writings. This is not only an arrogant error, but also a potentially dangerous one; it follows that a crisis of youth is in effect a crisis of the continent, and *vice versa*. Thus, attempts to exclude youth from political and social life by 'infantilising' them (as is evident in this statement of President Paul Biya of Cameroon - "*La politique aux politiciens, l'école aux écoliers*")<sup>4</sup> - is a denial of the problems facing the youth and the wider society, as well as a refusal to acknowledge not only the capabilities of young people, but also their absolute numerical dominance in the overall population. De Waal puts it well:

Children and youth represent the possibility of either an exit from Africa's current predicament, or an intensification of that predicament.<sup>5</sup>

Africa is a continent of the young and thus, any study of society, politics and economics in the region must acknowledge the characteristics and importance of this group. This chapter aims to examine children and youth as a constituency by looking at the participation of children, particularly in political life, in both Europe and Africa. The focus on Europe is justified as a result not only of

**Table 1.1**

<b>COUNTRY</b>	<b>Total Population (in 1000s)</b>	<b>Population of Under-18s (in 1000s)</b>	<b>% of Under-18s</b>
Angola	11,569,000	6,049,000	52
Burkina Faso	11,087,000	5,985,000	54
Burundi	6,398,000	3,373,000	53
Congo (DR)	48,040,000	25,934,000	54
Ethiopia	60,148,000	31,741,000	53
Ghana	18,338,000	9,340,000	51
Guinea	7,614,000	4,080,000	53
Liberia	2,467,000	1,224,000	50
Mali	11,480,000	6,820,000	54
Niger	9,880,000	5,382,000	55
Nigeria	118,369,000	61,393,000	52
Rwanda	5,883,000	3,115,000	53
Senegal	8,762,000	4,459,000	51
Sierra Leone	4,428,000	2,230,000	50
Somalia	10,217,000	5,533,000	54
South Africa	43,336,000	18,689,000	43
Togo	4,317,000	2,259,000	52
Uganda	20,791,000	11,566,000	56
Zambia	8,478,000	4,563,000	54
Zimbabwe	11,682,000	5,944,000	51

*(UNICEF, State of the world's children 1999, Oxford University Press, Oxford/New York, 1998)*

the historical link between the two regions, which has led many African societies to inherit (possibly on a superficial level) European conceptions of childhood, but also because the definition of childhood in the almost universally ratified Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) is based on the modern Western conception of childhood. This sets the scene for tracing youth agency across diverse pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial African societies to reveal the ways in which the agency of children and young people has been structured over the centuries. Three trends in particular emerge: the selective co-option / 'harnessing' of youth agency by adults for their own ends; youth agency in reaction to the power of adults (often as a direct result of adult exclusion/marginalisation); and, finally, youth agency alongside, or in collaboration with, adults, often in times of political unrest or conflict.

The first two of these trends have tended to dominate the structuring of youth agency. Thus, this chapter makes the case for the urgent need to collaborate with young people towards peace instead of 'harnessing' or manipulating their agency to incite political unrest or conflict or, alternatively, excluding them from political and social structures.

As a result of the CRC, child participation has now been divided into two categories: *positive* and *negative*. Whilst 'negative' participation includes the use of children in armed conflict, their involvement in peace initiatives can be categorised as 'positive' participation. Positive participation is defined as:

A situation where children think for themselves, express their views effectively, and interact in a positive way with other people. It means involving children in the decisions that affect their lives, the lives of their community and the larger society in which they live.<sup>6</sup>

This 'positive' participation is particularly cogent within the African context as both the 1981 African Charter on Human and People's Rights (also known as the Banjul Charter) and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC) emphasise the *duties* of children. The Banjul Charter stipulates that all individuals have responsibilities towards their family, society and the state. This provision is based on the idea that the concept of children possessing responsibilities helps educate others in the value of children's contribution to society, a potential contribution that is often overlooked.<sup>7</sup> Article 31 of the ACRWC imposes duties on children; every child has responsibilities towards his or her family and society and the state and other legally recognised communities, including the international community. Although the provision limits the duties according to the age and ability of the child, it requires the child to serve his or her national community – physically and intellectually. Leaving aside for a moment the concerns raised

by this provision,<sup>8</sup> the focus on duties requires the provision of space in which to do so.

References are made here to several societies or countries across the continent, including pre-colonial northern Nigeria, post-independent Zanzibar, South Africa during the apartheid era, the contemporary state of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, contemporary Cameroon, and Sierra Leone, a country rebuilding itself after a decade-long civil war.

## **In Search of a Definition of Childhood**

Searching for definitions of 'childhood' is an exercise filled with pitfalls and complexity. At best, one can settle for a compromise definition, or an 'easy' option. The primary example of this is the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), which defines a child as "every human being below the age of eighteen years unless under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier".<sup>9</sup> This was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in November 1989, and it has now been ratified by all countries of the world except the USA, Somalia and Timor Leste.<sup>10</sup> This makes it the most widely ratified Convention in the history of the United Nations, and thus – on paper at least – the most universal. The African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC), adopted in July 1990, advances a similar definition of childhood – that a child is every human being below the age of 18.

This approach raises several debatable points. Firstly, the motivation of governments needs to be scrutinised. De Waal argues that some African states are likely to have acceded to the CRC without their leaders genuinely acknowledging the commitments they were making, or might have made them in bad faith, without any real intention to deliver on their commitments.<sup>11</sup> Secondly, the depth of the consensus underpinning the CRC is further thrown in doubt when the ACRWC is drawn into the analysis; while African states rushed to ratify the Convention (more than half of the early signatories were African), it took nearly ten years for the requisite 15 states to ratify the ACRWC, even though it was adopted only a year later and its provisions are broadly similar to those of the CRC. To date, only 28 member states of the African Union (formerly the Organisation of African Unity) have ratified the Charter; 25 have yet to accede. While some have signed the Charter, the following countries have neither signed nor ratified: Botswana, Burundi, Central African Republic, Comoros, Côte d'Ivoire, Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Equatorial Guinea, Ethiopia, Gambia, Guinea-Bissau, Mauritania,

Nigeria, Sao Tome and Principe and Sudan. What can be inferred from this selective ratification strategy? Is there a hierarchy of legal instruments? In addition, to what extent do African governments ratifying international treaties on childhood consult the views of their populace, let alone represent them? These questions surrounding the motivations and sincerity behind the ratification of the CRC, and the corresponding non-ratification of the ACRWC, cast doubt on the utility of the CRC's definition of the child.

## **Constructing Childhood in Modern Western Society**

In modern Western society (from 17<sup>th</sup> century onwards), 18, as reflected in the CRC, has become an arbitrary cut-off point for childhood. De Waal underscores the Western roots of this definition: "the idea of a single (gender neutral) age of legal maturity reflects the western juridical tradition and concepts of citizenship built around the universal franchise and eligibility for conscription into the army".<sup>12</sup> Not surprisingly, this arbitrary termination point has been criticised:

Needless to say that the notion that someone by some magical wand on the stroke of a pen turns into a fully competent mature, wise and autonomous individual upon attaining a certain arbitrary fixed age has no scientific empirical basis in fact and reality.<sup>13</sup>

Nevertheless, for those who fall under the age of 18, this period has been categorised as a special and precarious phase of life when one needs protection and care if complete and responsible adulthood is to be achieved. As Ncube states, "The perception of children as physically weak and mentally immature has far-reaching implications for the societal roles assigned to them and for the legal construction of childhood."<sup>14</sup> Owing to their perceived immaturity, children are denied legal capacity, and are placed under parental guardianship in order that they may not perform juristic acts, manage their own affairs or enter into contracts without parental assistance. This "seriously handicaps the child in the assertion and enforcement of his or her rights which may be recognised and granted both at the international human rights plane and the domestic law plane".<sup>15</sup> Even though international law has granted children rights (including participation rights), the prevailing conception of childhood as a phase lacking in maturity and judgement (hence justifying the denial of legal capacity) weakens and diminishes these rights for children.

## Constructing Childhood in Traditional African Societies

The traditional African context presents quite a different picture. In many African societies, as in other non-Western cultures, chronological age as an indicator of the termination of childhood is not a useful concept. The ending of childhood has little to do with achieving a particular age, and more to do with physical capacity to perform acts reserved for adults. Moreover, marriage and the establishment of a new homestead are traditionally two prime indications of adult male status. To be classified as a child means that a man has not achieved the level of economic importance that would permit him to acquire a wife, build his own compound and become an economically viable agent. Clearly, then, childhood refers more to a position in the social hierarchy than to biological age. In order to become an adult, it is necessary to ascend this hierarchy.<sup>16</sup> According to Last, in pre-colonial northern Nigeria, boys became adults by acquiring a dependent; that is, by 'taking a wife', whilst girls achieved adulthood on their entry into motherhood.<sup>17</sup> However, it is important to note that in numerous societies across the continent the majority of women (along with paupers and foreigners) would always be seen as minors, no matter their age.<sup>18</sup>

Unlike the Western viewpoint, childhood in the African context is not necessarily a stage of incompetence. On the contrary, children are viewed as being competent and capable. It has been suggested that this is probably because whereas in Western societies adulthood is the goal, in other societies it is a process, "a continued becoming, a never completed maturing".<sup>19</sup> Thus, although an individual can become more of an adult (but never a complete adult), he or she does not leave childhood altogether, even though its characteristics may decrease (or even increase) as one ages.<sup>20</sup> This may account for the responsibilities and duties that are assigned to the status of 'childhood.' Archard supports this point when he argues that, in non-Western societies, no clear distinctions are made between work and play; the two activities go hand in hand as children are seen as having a responsibility, like adults, to contribute to the subsistence of their families and wider communities.<sup>21</sup> However, it is essential to underscore that the tasks children will undertake will be compatible with their size and capabilities. In many societies children are required to undertake simple tasks such as caring for infants, fetching water and fuel, or cattle herding, depending on the gender of the child. Bennett, who argues that a particular type of economy may prove crucial in shortening or lengthening the duration of childhood, further elaborates on this conception of childhood. If people live at subsistence level,

capacities and responsibilities of adulthood begin early: "Because an average life span is short and survival is a struggle, a long period of dependency as a child is a luxury that families cannot afford."<sup>22</sup> However, at the same time it may be argued that childhood is shorter in various African communities, it can also be put forward that childhood is never-ending in these cultural contexts, as "childhood is not perceived and conceptualised in terms of age, but in terms of inter-generational obligations of support and reciprocity".<sup>23</sup> In these contexts, then, the African child is always a 'child' in relation to his or her parents who expect, and are traditionally entitled to, all forms of support in times of need and old age. Thus, it can be argued that in terms of this concept, childhood is not only of a relatively shorter duration, but it is also, in a sense, a never-ending status.

This worldview of childhood and its termination sharply contrasts with modern Western society's fixation on the age 18 as the entry into adulthood. Nevertheless, owing to colonial rule, mission education, social and economic development, globalisation (which is arguably a euphemism for 'westernisation') and the ratification of international treaties, the single age of maturity has found its way into the legislations and policies in countries across Africa.

## **Youth: An Ever-Shifting Definition**

Defining 'youth' is an even more problematic task than defining 'childhood' as it is often a political construction. 'Youth' is a fluid and rapidly shifting category that can be easily manipulated for one's own ends. Argenti describes the category of youth as "a moveable feast, a category used by different interest groups to define ever-shifting groups [of] people".<sup>24</sup> Broadly (and depending on the cultural context), the 'youth' can range from those in their early teens (i.e. minors who are covered in the CRC), to those in their 30s (who are not covered by any legislation of their own). For example, while Western European societies may define 'youth' as those between the ages of 15 and 21 or 25, communities in rural Kenya may argue that the status of 'youth' lasts until the age of 35, when one is eligible to be nominated for presidential elections. Some commentators argue that the term 'youth' excludes females simply on the basis of gender. They claim that it has primarily been used to refer to males, possibly because females have traditionally been publicly and politically invisible.<sup>25</sup>

Despite the cultural and political differences in defining 'youth', most

societies would agree on the fact that the youth are neither dependent children nor independent adults. They hang in a limbo, which has negative connotations, as De Waal shows:

‘Youths’ are not typically conceived of as productive and constructive social actors nor, as they often are in reality, as victims, but rather, as potential sources of political disruption, delinquency and criminality.<sup>26</sup>

This sums up the attitude of political authorities to this group: they are seen as a threat and are often excluded, marginalised, misused and misrepresented. As a result, studies of youth are too often studies of deviance, or of problems needing programmatic intervention rather than studies of opportunity.<sup>27</sup> This attitude to youth is not only evident in Africa today, but can be traced back to 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe and North America, when the term ‘juvenile delinquency’ was constructed as a response to the large numbers of ‘idle’ children and young people on the streets (incidentally, resulting from laws excluding them from work), a new and disturbing phenomenon for that rapidly modernising age.

## **Tracing the History of Child Participation**

Although the modern Western conception of childhood is largely represented as a period of play, training and innocence, and not of work and politics, the history of childhood and youth is, in fact, one of participation. Children and young people have always participated in the lives of their societies, not only on issues affecting them, but also on those affecting the entire society.

In Medieval Europe, ‘children’ were not only economic actors, beginning apprenticeships at the age of 12 or younger; they were also active political agents, often initiating resistance and uprisings. The Children’s Crusade, a peaceful movement of the poor, mainly farm workers and shepherds, began in the Spring of 1212 near Cologne, and was initiated by a 12-year-old boy, Nicholas, who led a crowd of approximately 20,000 children and adults over 700 miles across the Alps to Italy. In France, there was a similar movement led by another 12-year-old boy, Stephen, who ushered a crowd of 30,000 into Paris.

From the 17<sup>th</sup> century new ideas relating to children and childhood began to emerge in Western society, initially among the middle classes. The changes that took place can be attributed to two men: John Locke and Jean Jacques Rousseau. The latter has been particularly credited with pioneering the

ideology of the innocence of childhood on which the modern Western concept is based. In this new ideology, 'childhood' has its place in the order of human life, therefore, "the man must be considered in the man, and the child in the child".<sup>28</sup> As a result of Rousseau's influence, people began to concern themselves with their children's innocence, and to give more attention to child rearing. In this way, childhood was separated from adulthood, and became a world of its own, with special qualities requiring special protection. In due course, these ideas extended to the working classes as affluence spread. Special legislation introduced in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was central to the "determined efforts made to provide such a childhood for everyone, even if it meant squeezing them into the mould".<sup>29</sup> An example of this is the British 1870 Education Act, which made provision for compulsory education for all who could not afford it. By 1880, most children below the age of 13 were attending school. Laws were also passed in Britain banning children from public houses and forbidding them to gamble.

The imposition of this new concept of childhood met with resistance from children themselves; for example, the 'infantilisation' of the school environment led to rioting in British public schools in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, including Winchester, Eton and Rugby. At Rugby, pupils set fire to their books and desks and withdrew to an island, which had to be taken in an assault by the army.<sup>30</sup> Some commentators have viewed these changes as negative as they showed a growing disrespect for children, underestimated their abilities, bestowed a "weakness and innocence" that did not previously exist, and made them dependent on adults and subject to their discipline.<sup>31</sup> Nevertheless, these new ideas were consolidated and gradually standardised, extending to all classes and both genders in Europe and North America and, gradually, to other societies through colonialism and globalisation. As a result of this emerging concept of childhood, the rights of children began to gain currency during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Importantly, the focus of attention at this time was on children's welfare and protection rather than on the child as an individual.

## **The Persistence of Children's Participation**

Despite these changes, children continued to participate economically and politically. Not only did many continue to contribute to the income of their families, but they were also political actors, sometimes alongside their parents and sometimes independently. Children and young people in Britain were particularly noticeable in strikes and demonstrations in the 1900s and 1970s. Many of the school strikes that took place show that these children

were frustrated at their loss of participation in society; demands of strikers often included payment for attending school, the lowering of the school-leaving age and the need for work experience.<sup>32</sup>

All over the world, children and young people have made history demonstrating against injustice, alongside 'adults' or independently. The 20<sup>th</sup> century yields noteworthy examples. Children and young people were instrumental in the civil rights movement in the USA, where some as young as six marched against segregation; many, indeed, dying before laws were passed. (Children, however, were not only active participants. They also had a passive role, with civil rights leaders using sentimental images of children and childhood to mobilise support from all races.)<sup>33</sup> In the 1960s, children and youth protested against the Vietnam War, and for this they faced harassment from the authorities, including expulsion from school. In China, the death of pro-democracy protesters, mainly students, in and around Tiananmen Square on 4 June 1989 is another notable example of the agency of youth. Even in our modern age of so-called political apathy and mass consumerism among the youth, young people all over the world recently demonstrated their political agency by protesting against the US and British invasion of Iraq in March 2003. In cities culturally and racially disparate, they walked out of schools and colleges and thronged the streets, determined to make their voice heard.

## **History of Child and Youth Participation in Africa**

When the history of child and youth agency in Africa is taken into consideration, two particular trends can be identified: the denial of the capacity of young people by adults and their consequent subordination, leading the young to react economically or politically in order to assert their freedom and independence, and demonstrate their capabilities; and the 'harnessing' of the agency of youth in post-independent liberation movements, whilst at the same time marginalising or excluding this 'agency'.

Although there are numerous societies in Africa with different and conflicting beliefs and practices, it can be argued that in many pre-colonial societies, young men and women were subordinate to the power of male elders, which was expressed at the local level by treating all social subordinates as children. In northern Nigeria, a traditional gerontocratic society, wealth, authority and legal control were vested in the senior man of the household and his senior wife.<sup>34</sup> In Hausa society, which was broadly

divided into *yara* (the young) and *dattijai* (the elders), a division based partly on age and partly on behaviour and character, the *dattijai* made the decisions and the young carried them out. Thus, if the young made decisions on their own or rejected the advice of their elders, it was viewed as a rebellion (*fitna*).

Despite this, the youth have managed to accede to power in northern Nigeria quite dramatically on at least four occasions over the last 200 years. One of these was during the pre-colonial era: the Sokoto *jihad* (1804 – 8), which consisted of two distinct sets of young men: those around the spiritual leadership of a Shaikh, i.e. his students and young converts to Islam; and independent youths from Fulani pastoralist families who had lost their cattle.

As the war progressed, the *jihad* army came to be dominated by the latter, more undisciplined group.<sup>35</sup> The senior shaikhs and older scholars eventually resigned, leaving men in their late 20s and early 30s in charge. The new state that was formed afterwards (*circa* 1812) was ruled by these young commanders who governed the Emirates for the next 30 years. Thus, as Last argues, in time, the caliphate came once again to be ruled by ‘elders’ as political control passed back from the young to the old.<sup>36</sup>

With the advent of colonialism (itself enforced by young men) opportunities for young people quickly emerged. The need for skilled labour was particularly advantageous for the youth who rushed to fill the vacancies for literate clerks, secretaries and low-ranking officials in the government machinery. As a result, ‘Western’ education became highly coveted as it was seen “as a ticket to freedom from the protracted subordination to one’s elders”.<sup>37</sup> Bayart puts it succinctly, for the elders, “the era of the Whites became the era of insolence”, when children, “their mouths on fire ... came out of their silence”.<sup>38</sup> For the first time, young men did not need to wait too long before gaining entry into privileged society. A ‘short-cut’ was provided through salaried employment; in this way some were able to wield power over traditional elders.<sup>39</sup> Again, in northern Nigeria, Last illustrates how, in 1903, the conquest of the northern Emirates by the British-led forces deposed most of the ‘elderly’ emirs, and created a new world, which was essentially a “young man’s world”.<sup>40</sup> Early colonial rule is said to have empowered the young, giving them both new authority and new knowledge; and disempowered the old, except insofar as the old still carried the morality and integrity of the once independent Islamic state.<sup>41</sup> Once again, these young men who gained power clung to it, but gradually power returned to the old; that is, until the anti-colonial movement provided the next generation of youth with an opportunity to depose the old.

The anti-colonial movement was essentially led by men who were not

necessarily young biologically, but who identified themselves as 'youth' in order to distinguish themselves from their elders, who were supposedly content either to be loyal colonial servants or placid rural chiefs and smallholders;<sup>42</sup> which further supports the idea that the term 'youth' is a political construction. A number of nationalist movements identified themselves as 'youth'; for example, the Somali Youth League, which led the march towards independence in 1960. Turning to the example of northern Nigeria once more, Last claims that the anti-colonial movement was led by young men who were rebelling against their elders (i.e. those who had come to power as youths in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century assisted by colonial rule) as well as working to topple the colonial government. Independence was, therefore, not only a revolt of educated and ambitious young men against foreign-imposed rule, but also a rebellion against their fathers, and a demonstration of their desire to overturn the traditional gerontocratic socio-political order.<sup>43</sup>

## **The Fortunes of Young People after Independence**

Independence itself brought mixed blessings to young people. On one hand, the socio-economic changes that have taken place have resulted in the creation of a new generation of educated young people who work and have access to better resources than their parents did, particularly those remaining in the rural areas. Consequently, this has transformed power relations in the family in favour of the youth and against the elders, who hitherto relied on their control of land for the power they wielded over their children. In this new relationship the youth have gradually become more powerful within the framework of the family. Although it is maintained that traditional notions of childhood and expectations of children still exist, the views of the youth within the family decision-making framework now carry greater weight owing to their economic power, on which many family members depend for survival.<sup>44</sup>

While economic changes and urbanisation have created avenues for the youth to escape the 'stranglehold' of elders in the villages, disadvantages are also evident. Economic niches in the cities, predominantly in the informal sector, often result in low incomes and high levels of insecurity.<sup>45</sup> Many young people have been forced into the informal sector, possibly even into crime or prostitution. In Senegal, for instance, where the public sector has been in a process of streamlining since the imposition of Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) in the mid 1980s, only 5% of young people

entering the employment market after completing education find jobs in the formal sector. The rest are required to enter the informal sector, sometimes on the fringes of criminal activity. In Mali the route to economic independence is also blocked for the young, leading to further tension within families.<sup>46</sup> Students, traditionally considered the privileged among the youth, have also been affected. Compared to the varied and numerous prospects for young graduates in the years immediately following independence, recent generations have been faced with deteriorating conditions on campuses and bleak prospects after graduating because of a potentially explosive combination of SAPs, national economic crises, increasing withdrawal of state support, imposition of tuition fees and the streamlining of the civil service.<sup>48</sup> As a result, graduates are obliged to defer their entry into adulthood indefinitely as they are unable to achieve the economic independence necessary for marriage and family, arguably key markers of adulthood.<sup>48</sup>

## **Youth in the Post-Independence Period**

Politically, Africa's youth were the key to the various liberation movements in the early years of independence. In 1964 Khartoum University students in Sudan were instrumental in the uprising that deposed the military government of General Ibrahim Abboud. Similarly, radical students in Ethiopia initiated the revolution that led to the overthrowing of Emperor Haile Selassie in 1974. Zanzibar presents an interesting case study illustrating the importance of young people to politics. Not only were the youth instrumental in ending British colonial rule in 1963, but they were also key actors in the 1964 revolution, which brought a permanent end to Arab political and economic hegemony in the islands. The two leading parties involved in the revolution (the Zanzibar Nationalist Party and the Afro-Shirazi Party) regarded young men as necessary for the success of any political coalition, and so especially targeted them for recruitment. In fact, the Zanzibar Nationalist Party (ZNP) established the Youth's Own Union (YOU) as the party's semi-independent youth wing, which quickly emerged as a powerful body owing to its visibility. The Afro-Shirazi Party (ASP), a party claiming to represent the large majority of Zanzibaris of African descent, also established its Youth League (ASPYL) in May 1959, which was intended as a recruiting organism, although with a focus on a different class of youth. Despite the inclusiveness of youth in politics at this time, there still remained an exclusive element. According to Burgess:

The state recruited, celebrated, and foregrounded the vitality of youth on the public stage, and granted a measure of local power to its most committed cadres...And yet the state also excluded from its notions of citizenship images of youth that appeared to conflict with the nationalist imperative of building the nation and its selective invocation of African traditions...Youth were supposed to serve as the vigilant defenders and enforcers of the new order, yet they were also accused of some of its most flagrant transgressions.<sup>49</sup>

The struggle against apartheid in South Africa during this period must not be overlooked. In June 1976, demonstrations and strikes took place all over the country against apartheid, which began as a protest by school children in Soweto, a Johannesburg township, against the insistence of the government that Afrikaans be used as the medium of instruction in schools. The revolt soon extended beyond Soweto, and hundreds of people were killed before it was brutally suppressed by security forces. In a statement issued after the uprising, Nelson Mandela, who was in prison at the time, paid tribute to the young people:

At the forefront of this 1976/77 wave of unrest were our students and youth. They come from the universities, high schools and even primary schools. They are a generation whose whole education has been under the diabolical design of the racists to poison the minds and brainwash our children into docile subjects of apartheid rule. But after more than twenty years of Bantu Education the circle is closed and nothing demonstrates the utter bankruptcy of apartheid as the revolt of our youth.<sup>50</sup>

In the 1980s, the violence became more widespread. In 1984 South African children and youth were once again visibly at the forefront of further demonstrations, staging widespread school boycotts. The following year, schools ground to a virtual halt in black townships, as pupils were particularly angry at the banning of the Congress of South African Schools. During this period of struggle, the South African regime imprisoned thousands of children precisely because of their prominent role in initiating resistance. That children were initiators and leaders, and not merely followers, is evident in the following statements:

We cannot take it any longer. It is our parents who have let things go on far too long without doing anything. They have failed. We have been forced to fight to the bitter end.<sup>51</sup>

Go to work and disregard the groups of young intimidators telling people not to go to work. People must go to work and just thrash the children stopping them.<sup>52</sup>

The South African example illustrates the collaboration between adults and the youth, which was vital to the ending of apartheid. Undoubtedly children and young people were active participants in the struggle to end apartheid. They were crucial to its collapse.

## Young People and the Contemporary State

Although the marginalisation of Africa's youth has intensified, even in the new politically liberal states, they have continued to find ways of reacting to the conditions working to exclude them from society, both economically and politically. In Cameroon, angry Anglophone students who feel even more marginalised than their Francophone peers have long been voicing their grievances, which not only include academic concerns, but also the wider issue of Anglophone subordination to a Francophone-dominated state. In 1985, they wrote an open letter, appealing to their parents "to assume squarely their responsibilities before history concerning the grave [Anglophone] identity situation and help solve the problem". Should their parents fail to take immediate action, the students threatened to resort to violence in the future.<sup>53</sup> Relations between the Anglophone students and the government and university authorities have deteriorated rapidly since the early 1990s. In May 1995 the Southern Cameroons Youth League (SCYL) was founded to reinforce the role of the educated Anglophone youth in the struggle. It vowed to "revive, defend, protect and preserve the independence and sovereignty of the once nation, the Southern Cameroons and to serve as the militant youth wing of the Southern Cameroon National Council (SCNC)".<sup>54</sup> Its membership is largely composed of young disaffected people who would prefer to die fighting than continue "to submit to the fate imposed on Southern Cameroons by *La Republique du Cameroon*".<sup>55</sup>

The Cameroonian government, which still sees the SCYL as the most dangerous Anglophone movement, has responded with its own youth militia – PRESBY (President Biya's Youth), formed in Yaoundé in 1996 (interestingly only a year after the formation of the SCYL). In 2001 it was estimated that there were 120,000 members and 7000 officials in the group.<sup>56</sup> Though PRESBY claims to be apolitical, its links to the government are evident. Members obtain CPDM (Cameroon People's Democratic Movement)

membership cards, and it enjoys widespread support and patronage from CPDM elites. Furthermore, PRESBY, whose members are armed and receive active support from the security forces, has regularly been used by the state to terrorise and counteract the activities of Anglophone groups, particularly the SCYL.<sup>57</sup>

In Nigeria, the current political landscape is dominated by discourses on the legitimacy of the state, rising partly from state economic mismanagement, state regional marginalisation and the state's inability to effectively tackle high crime rates. This situation has enabled various local groups, in disaffected areas in particular, to challenge the very idea of the Nigerian state. Despite efforts to marginalise them, the youth have been key players in this discourse since the late 1980s and early 1990s, when the beginning of economic reforms led to the extension of the duration of 'youth' as a phase of life. As in Cameroon, the reduction of public sector opportunities has left a large number of the population 'stuck' in the youth category, not because of age, but rather because of economic and social circumstances, with little hope of advancement in the near future. Therefore, localised collective identities have become crucial in order to gain access to resources and economic transitions. In urban areas, where there is intense competition over land and economic opportunities, the distinction between 'sons of the soil' and 'strangers' has become important. This has led to the emergence of 'area boys', a collective grouping that comprises local, young individuals with a close social and spatial identification with a particular area. By identifying themselves with particular areas and communities, area boys are able to claim the right to access those local resources from which they are normally excluded. Importantly, area boys gain their legitimacy from the wider community by acting as vigilantes; should they fail in this role, they themselves become accused of criminal activities by the community.<sup>58</sup> Although they have emerged all over the country, they share certain characteristics: they draw upon pre-colonial idioms of organisation in which young men were enforcers of community rights, morals and laws; they have emerged under the combined effects of the introduction of SAPs and post-Cold War privatisation (in fact, area boys in Lagos joined forces with students from the University of Lagos to protest against the SAPs); and they have been criminalised because of their role in the drugs trade and their use as political thugs.<sup>59</sup>

Within this context, Nigerian politicians have also used the youth for their own, often dubious, ends. Firstly, the category of 'youth' has been appropriated by a range of protagonists in order to identify with young people and

co-opt them in challenging the federal government over, for example, the national oil allocation to the various states. They have formed a grouping as the self-promoted 'young' politicians in order to form a common base for action to gain control of oil revenues through the courts and, informally, through personal political networks. Gore and Pratten have put forward the case that certain southern governors have aligned themselves as part of the youth category in order to engage with and hold accountable the nation state.<sup>60</sup> More blatantly, politicians have used the youth as instruments of disorder. Area boys in Lagos were recruited as political thugs in the Babaginda transition period. Members of the Hausa Yandaba, a youth group, have been used as henchmen by rival politicians during elections. The problem has become of such concern in the South that the Delta state governor, Chief James Ibori, recently warned youths of the state to resist attempts to use them as "retrogressive agents". He argued that, as future leaders, young people should rather devote their time and energy to activities geared towards the promotion of peace and tranquility in their communities.<sup>61</sup>

Where youths are used as instruments of violence, it is not always a simple case of manipulation and abuse. Area boys, for example, often have formal and informal patrons who support them financially, or sponsor special events in which they are involved. In return, the patrons are assured of extra security, political support and a means of effecting disorder.<sup>62</sup> The use of young men to inflict violence, particularly at crucial political moments, is not specific to Nigeria. As shown above, the Cameroonian government has used the youth as a key means of tackling their opponents and, in Zimbabwe, the fact that the ruling Zimbabwe African National Union Patriotic Front (Zanu PF) has relied heavily on the youth in its violent 'land-grabbing' policy has been widely publicised in recent years.

## Youth and Armed Conflict

Wherever there is a conflict in Africa, there are children and young people serving as soldiers. Argenti asks, "Where would war makers be without youth?"<sup>63</sup> The reality is that as long as weak political and economic structures exist and the continent remains dominated by young people, they will continue to become involved in conflicts. Thus, their large numbers and their estrangement from the formal social and political order will continue to be explosive combinations in times of political instability. It follows, then, that instead of advocating for the end of child soldiers, it would be more

worthwhile to spend our energies addressing the structural conditions that make it easy to militarise Africa's children and youth. As Rabwoni argues, if there are good reasons for young people to volunteer to fight, they will do so, and no number of special programmes and laws will be able to prevent them from taking up arms.<sup>64</sup> Therefore, the key is for all to work at removing those "good reasons".

The Sierra Leonean conflict, which was dominated by the youth to the extent that it was labelled a "youth crisis,"<sup>65</sup> presents a noteworthy case study for highlighting those so-called "good reasons". To understand the presence of large numbers of children and young people in all warring parties during the decade-long civil war, it is necessary to appreciate the pre-war context. The devastating effects of APC (All People's Congress) rule since 1968 had arguably destroyed the possibilities for young people to carve out a meaningful life for themselves in the cities. Corruption in all sectors was rife. It was also believed that health and sanitation services had deteriorated owing to government neglect and this, in turn, had led to an alleged life expectancy of 21 years by 1987. The education sector had also suffered because of both government action (and the lack thereof) and the impact of Structural Adjustment Programmes imposed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank. Abdullah and Muana further support this point:

Central to an understanding of war in Sierra Leone is the role of alienated youth, especially *lumpen* youth in the urban and rural areas, for whom combat appears to be a viable survival alternative in a country with high levels of urban unemployment, where the economy is dominated by a precious mineral sector in long-term decline.<sup>66</sup>

Furthermore, it has been argued that the war provided the youth an opportunity to overturn traditional gerontocratic socio-political orders and that some youth relished it, making it a point to target and humiliate elders during raids on villages.<sup>67</sup>

## **Agents of Peace, not of War**

Because of their prominent role in politics and conflict, either as independent agents or pawns used by older political actors, youth are often perceived as deviants. In fact, Argenti claims that the use of young people for the personal advancement of a few military elites in situations of political insecurity is the single greatest reason for the pejorative connotations associated with the category of 'youth' in Africa today.<sup>68</sup> This has implications for their role in

post-war societies and in the development of their societies, which is currently minimal. As Rabwoni observes:

Our political experience is that young people are forgotten except when politicians need to mobilise them for war or for electoral campaigns. It is very rare that young people are mobilised in pursuit of other ideals such as peace. If young people are provided with better education and skills and the prospects of a better future, they will be less likely to be cannon-fodder for war-makers.<sup>69</sup>

Indeed, the evidence shows that whilst political parties have been quick to use youths as instruments of violence, they have been slow to involve them in peace processes/initiatives. South African children and young people were a key to the ending of apartheid, but they are now invisible in the so-called 'peace,' where their marginalisation has arguably contributed to their political apathy. This apathy was underlined in the general elections of 1999 when less than half the country's 18-20 year olds registered to vote.<sup>70</sup> Since the ending of conflict in Sierra Leone the extent to which young people have been involved in the post-war process of peace building and reconstruction is questionable. The problems young activists raised before the war are being repeated by the youth of Sierra Leone today: lack of health care, educational opportunities, shelter, clothing, food and water, as well as the persistence of poverty and unemployment. They have repeatedly indicted the government, in particular, for dismissing their concerns and neglecting their capacities.<sup>71</sup> As rebels and the government currently negotiate peace in Liberia, it remains to be seen whether there will be a niche for the young people of Liberia on whose backs the sporadic 14-year conflict was fought.

That young people want to be involved in achieving and maintaining peace in their societies and contributing to the development of their countries cannot be doubted. In Sierra Leone, young people are calling on the international community to place their concerns and their capacities at the centre of recovery efforts. They recognise that they were at the centre of the war, and thus now insist that they be placed at the centre of peacemaking and reconstruction. As the report of the Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children claims, "without better support and respect for their rights, young people will become more angry and disaffected, and are likely to become a major source of new unrest".<sup>72</sup>

Furthermore, whilst political and social structures continue to exclude the youth, they are finding alternative means to participate. Thus, no matter the obstacles blocking their path, young people are participating in society anyway – because the will to participate is innate in every human being.

Examples of alternative avenues open to them include organised religious movements such as Pentecostal movements and Muslim brotherhoods. Argenti has put forward the case that Pentecostal churches, some of which are almost entirely run by young people, provide opportunities for them to participate in civil society, something that political structures and established churches deny them.<sup>73</sup> In Nigeria, area boys are carving niches for themselves whilst they continue to be excluded by mainstream politics. In Cameroon, Anglophone students, who continue to be targeted and excluded by the Francophone-dominated government, are finding means to participate and voice their grievances. They have been so effective in this that the government regards them as being more dangerous than any other Anglophone group in the country. Thus, as Argenti argues:

While the authorities look the other way, young people are reaching a critical juncture in Africa, silently becoming key figures in the promotion of socio-historical change. The innumerable informal means by which they are doing so – desperately understudied though they are – make them crucial potential partners in the formulation of development programmes.<sup>74</sup>

## Conclusion

If African governments are serious about ending the use of children and young people in conflict, a first step should be to involve this group effectively in peace initiatives. If they continue to be excluded, the effects will resonate across the continent. It would undoubtedly be irresponsible leadership at its worst. Engaging with children and the youth constructively, building their capacity, providing them with opportunities to participate in the life of their societies economically, politically and socially will not only benefit them, but their entire communities as well. When the youth *do* accede to power, it is important that they not discriminate and exclude on the basis of age, gender, class or disability, and, crucially, that they be ready and willing to relinquish power to the next generation when the time comes. Failure to do so will lead to the persistence of ‘elder power’ and ‘youth rebellion’, which has been a central element in the vicious cycle of conflicts in Africa.

## Endnotes

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- 3 The worst places to grow up, *The Guardian*, Saturday 4 May 2002.
- 4 P Konings, *Anglophone university students and Anglophone nationalist struggles in Cameroon*, Paper presented at the conference on youth and the politics of inter-generational conflict in Africa, The African Studies Centre, University of Leiden, The Netherlands, 24-25 April 2003, p 2.
- 5 A De Waal, Realising child rights in Africa: Children, young people and leadership, in A de Waal and N Argenti (eds) *Young Africa: Realising the rights of children and youth*, World Press Inc, Trenton NJ & Asmara, 2002, p 9.
- 6 SCF UK, quoted in ECPAT International, *Standing up for ourselves: A study on the concepts and practices of young people's rights to participation*, ECPAT International & the International Young People's Action Against Sexual Exploitation, Manila, September 1999, p 45.
- 7 G Van Bueren, *The international law on the rights of the child*, Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, Dordrecht, Boston & London, 1995, p 24.
- 8 THE ACRWC provides that children have a responsibility to work for the cohesion of the family and to respect parents and elders at all times, assisting them in cases of need. This particular provision has caused some unease within human rights circles. UNICEF, for example, is uncomfortable with this supplement.
- 9 See Article 1 of the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.
- 10 The USA has not ratified the CRC because of its particular human rights liberal tradition, which treats rights as the legally enforceable obligations of a state towards its citizens; Somalia's non-ratification is due to the fact that the country has not had a recognised government for the last decade because of the civil war; and Timor Leste has not ratified as it only achieved its independence in March 2002.
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- 12 Ibid, p 14.
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- 14 Ibid.
- 15 Ibid, p 16.
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- 17 M Last, *Towards a political history of youth in Muslim northern Nigeria 1750-2000*, Paper presented at the conference on youth and the politics of - inter-generational conflict in Africa, the African Studies Centre, University of Leiden, the Netherlands, 24-25 April 2003, p 3.
- 18 De Waal, op cit, p 14.
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- 20 Ibid.
- 21 Ibid, p 30.
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- 23 Ncube, op cit, p 18.
- 24 Argenti, op cit, p 125.
- 25 De Waal, op cit, p 16; Last, op cit, p1.
- 26 De Waal, op cit, p 15.
- 27 Argenti, op cit, p 127.
- 28 Quoted in Archard, op cit, p 22.
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- 30 M Hoyles, *The politics of childhood*, The Journeyman Press Ltd, London, 1989, p 27.
- 31 See Firestone, op cit, p 94 & B Franklin, *The rights of children*, Basil Blackwell Ltd, Oxford, 1986, p 10.
- 32 See Hoyles, op cit, p 77.
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38 Quoted in Ibid.

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41 Ibid. p 6.

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43 Ibid, p 15.

44 Ncube, op cit, pp 23-24.

45 C Gore & D Pratten, The politics of plunder : the rhetorics of order and disorder in Southern Nigeria', *African Affairs* 102, 407: 211-40, 2003.

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51 Soweto Student, quoted in Hoyles, op cit, p 115.

52 Colonel Visser, Head of South African CID, quoted in Ibid.

53 Konings, op cit, p 8.

54 Ibid, p10.

55 Ibid.

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- 74 Ibid, p 151.