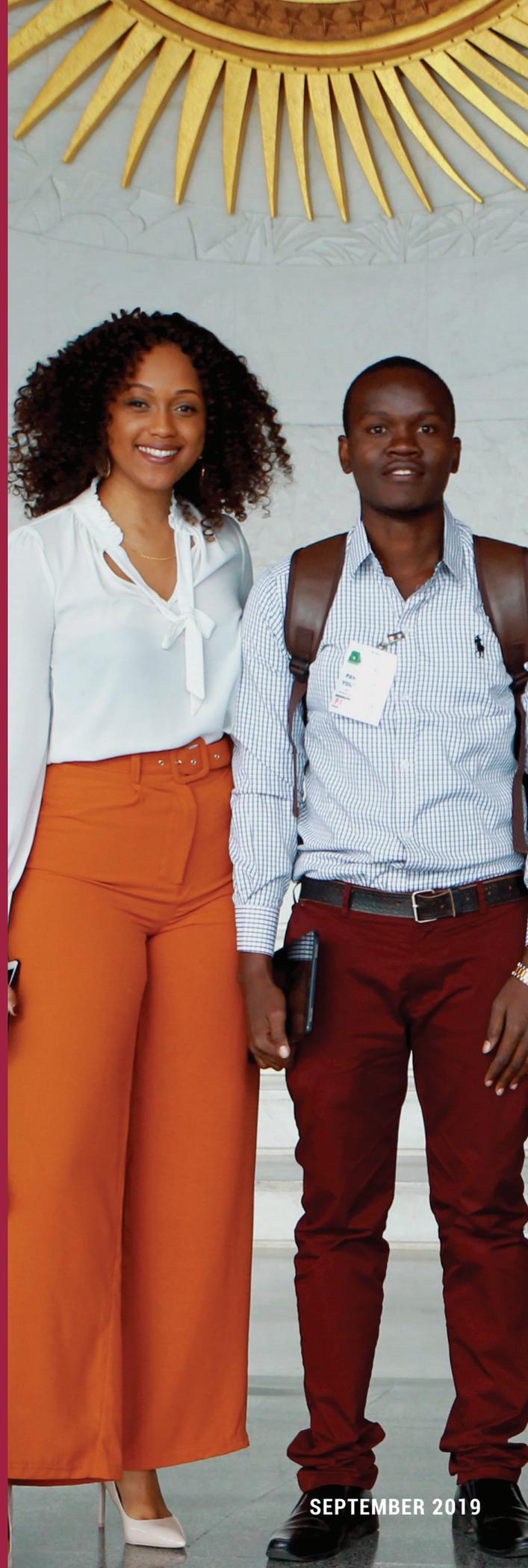# AFRICA'S FUTURE

Youth and the Data Defining Their Lives

This policy brief is distilled from the Status of African Youth Report (SoAYR) released in 2019 by the African Union Commission (AUC) and focuses on regional and continental findings from the report. For country-specific profiles and national-level analysis on African youth, please see the full report.
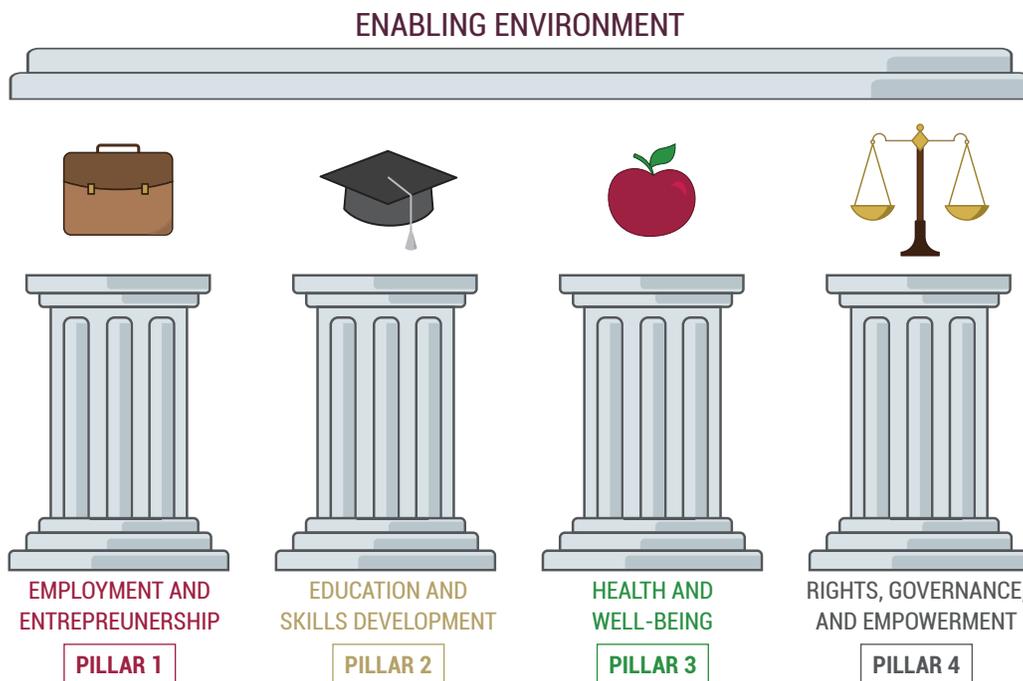
SEPTEMBER 2019

Data-driven policies and programmes that support **inclusive youth development** across Africa are key to harnessing the **demographic dividend** and expanding opportunities for young people—for the benefit of all Africans. Investments in today's youth will determine Africa's development tomorrow—defining the continent's trajectory, positioning it as a global leader, and creating a thriving, united, and peaceful Africa.

INCLUSIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT
means recognizing the inherent worth and dignity of young people and identifying, understanding, and actively removing barriers that exist for certain groups of young people.

The **DEMOGRAPHIC DIVIDEND**
is the accelerated economic growth that may result from a decline in a country's birth and death rates and the subsequent change in the age structure of the population.

Strategic Investments in African Youth are Critical to Achieve a Demographic Dividend

ENABLING ENVIRONMENT

EMPLOYMENT AND ENTREPREUNERSHIP	EDUCATION AND SKILLS DEVELOPMENT	HEALTH AND WELL-BEING	RIGHTS, GOVERNANCE, AND EMPOWERMENT
PILLAR 1	PILLAR 2	PILLAR 3	PILLAR 4

Scaling up and sustaining support for the future of African youth begins with comprehensive data and evidence. Young Africans represent the diversity of the African continent; addressing the challenges they face and unleashing their potential requires an understanding of their diverse life experiences. Building an evidence base of youth-specific data across a wide range of sectors assists policymakers in making targeted investments and designing effective policies and programmes for youth.

To accelerate inclusive youth development, the AUC developed the African Union Demographic Dividend (AUDD) Roadmap to identify key pillars for increasing investments in youth, driving policy change, and setting member countries on a path towards a prosperous future.[1] The four AUDD pillars are:

PILLAR 1: Employment and entrepreneurship
PILLAR 2: Education and skills development
PILLAR 3: Health and well-being
PILLAR 4: Rights, governance, and empowerment

Given that the experiences of youth within these four pillars are interconnected, the AUDD also recognizes an overarching framework, known as **the enabling environment**. The enabling environment helps African countries holistically address youth development by evaluating cross-cutting policies and programmes.

Broadening opportunities for African youth and mobilizing the demographic dividend for all of Africa rely on evidence-based solutions that address both individual AUDD pillars and the enabling environment. The 2019 SoAYR assigns and outlines indicators for these five AUDD elements to measure progress and identify challenges at national, regional, and continental levels. Derived from the SoAYR, this policy brief:

- Examines the current state of African youth, using regional data for indicators associated with the four AUDD pillars and the enabling environment to establish a baseline for assessing regional progress.
- Highlights the importance of key areas for youth development within and across pillars to make the case for investing in young people and guiding resource allocation.
- Shares recommendations for African policymakers, youth leaders, nongovernmental organizations, and researchers to improve the quality and quantity of data and evidence on African youth development.
- Provides a starting point for discussion of evidence-based policymaking and monitoring youth development across regions in Africa.

Youth Development Initiatives Should Be Guided by Evidence-Based Approaches

Young people in Africa deserve to live long, full lives that include quality education, good health, financial independence, and political participation. In 2015, 226 million youth ages 15 to 24 lived in Africa, representing almost 20 percent of the continent's population. Including all people younger than 35 years old dramatically increases this share to 75 percent of the total population.[2] With such a large population of young people, supportive policies and programmes for youth development are critical now more than ever. Investing in young people will not only transform their lives but also transform communities, nations, and the continent—helping to break intergenerational poverty, address inequalities, and create a stable, peaceful, and prosperous Africa.

AFRICA'S TOTAL POPULATION

75%
AGES 0-35

"The Status of Africa Youth Report is an important tool that speaks to Africa and the countries in Africa. I'd like to encourage everyone to use the data from the report to inform program development and policies that come about—to use evidence to inform what is done on the ground.

Prudence Nonkululeko Ngwenya, Head of the Youth Division, African Union Commission

# PILLAR 1
Youth Employment and Entrepreneurship

Gainfully employed and financially independent African youth will drive the economic futures of their families, communities, and nations. However, across the continent African youth face barriers to finding employment and entrepreneurship. In 2013, youth in Africa accounted for 37 percent of the working-age population but made up more than 60 percent of all unemployed African people.[3] With the number of young Africans projected to grow—making up 42 percent of the world's youth by 2030 and doubling the current numbers of African youth by 2055—policymakers must invest in youth economic opportunities for a more prosperous future for all.[4]

Young people in Africa experience specific vulnerabilities within the labour market due to their age. When first seeking employment, African youth may find it difficult to enter the workforce due to a lack of experience, professional networks, or market-desired skills that can be compounded by limited job opportunities in their communities. Even if youth obtain employment, the experience and skills they lack can make them more vulnerable to labour market dynamics such as job insecurity, minimal benefits, and limited skill-building opportunities. Inability to access credit can further prevent youth from economic independence, blocking them from entrepreneurial pursuits.[5] Over the long-term, unemployment or poor quality of employment prevents African youth from fully providing for themselves and their families.

The Youth Employment and Entrepreneurship pillar of the SoAYR uses data to clarify economic barriers by measuring whether youth are employed, identifying employment opportunities for youth, evaluating the quality of employment, and determining whether unemployed youth are engaged in education or training that could later lead to employment. Regionally, many indicators used to evaluate youth employment and entrepreneurship in Africa showed improvements from 2013 to 2017, suggesting economic opportunities are improving for young people.
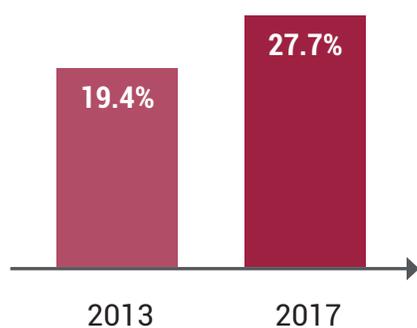
However, two indicators showed worsening trends: the rate of youth unemployment and the rate of youth not in education, employment, or training (NEET). These indicators are critical for intervention given the long-term negative impacts of unemployment and NEET on youth productivity and well-being. The poor performance of these indicators also reveals that labour markets and educational institutions may not be operating efficiently or that informal economic activity may not be fully captured.[6]

Continental trends indicate that youth unemployment and NEET should be concerns for all policymakers; looking at data for these two indicators provides a more complete picture of youth economic opportunity. From 2013 to 2017, the total rate of unemployed youth across Africa increased from 16.8 to 17.4 percent. Among youth NEET, the continental rate increased dramatically from 19.4 to 27.7 percent from 2013 to 2017. Regional data illuminate differences between regions and some complex facets of youth employment. For example, in 2017 West Africa had the lowest youth unemployment rate at just over 8 percent but the highest rate of youth working poor (42.6 percent). Furthermore, West Africa and Central Africa had the highest rates of child labour in 2017, at more than 30 percent. In contrast, Southern Africa and North Africa had the highest rates of youth unemployment in 2017, at 32.3 percent and 30.5 percent, respectively. In 2017, Southern Africa had the highest rate of NEET youth (35.6 percent), and North Africa had the highest rate of long-term youth unemployment (64.0 percent). As represented by these two regions, interventions to reduce employment vulnerability for youth need to address both quantity and quality of employment opportunities.

A rapidly growing youth workforce in Africa needs targeted interventions for high-quality job growth and economic opportunities. High economic growth rates do not necessarily represent success for youth employment and entrepreneurship. Policies and programmes focused on creating economically resilient and dynamic job opportunities and training programmes for youth will drive an innovative and productive future for the continent. For example, nurturing youth-led start-ups or expanding internships and apprenticeship programmes help build skills and experience for youth in both traditional and entrepreneurial jobs. Expanding on these types of employment and entrepreneurship initiatives for African youth in the short term will reduce poverty, contribute to sustainable development, and foster social inclusion for all Africans in the long term.[7]

YOUTH NOT IN EDUCATION, EMPLOYMENT, OR TRAINING

19.4% — 2013
27.7% — 2017

PILLAR 2
Youth Education and Skills Development

Access to education and skills development opportunities form a critical foundation for the future success and productivity of African youth. Countries across the continent have realized the importance of education, investing significantly in expanding primary school enrolment and bringing it to 80 percent on average.[8] Despite this rapid expansion of primary education, huge disparities and inefficiencies persist within the education system at all levels.[9] For African youth to meaningfully contribute to their communities and nations, they need educational opportunities that are diverse, high-quality, and adaptable to the future labour market.

Across Africa, barriers and gaps within education systems hinder youth from building essential skills and knowledge. Many types factors can limit educational opportunities for youth—inhibiting them from accessing primary and secondary schooling; technical and vocational education and training; science, technology, engineering, and math education; or even classroom educational materials. In other instances, youth may have access to education but of low quality—limited by inadequate numbers of teachers, poor training, mismatch between curriculums and job market demands, or a lack of information and communication technology and other digital tools.[10] By focusing on improving curriculums and expanding the variety of offerings, decisionmakers can improve the quality, in addition to quantity, of educational opportunities for youth.

Data included within the Youth Education and Skills Development pillar of the SoAYR aim to measure trends in the education sector beyond primary education. Ultimately, a well-educated public with diverse skill sets drives economic development, particularly in the context of rapid population growth, urbanization, technological change, and globalization. Additional years of schooling in African countries generate the highest economic returns compared to the global average. Excluding North Africa, an individual in Africa can expect to earn 12.4 percent more on average annually for each additional year of schooling (primary, secondary, or tertiary) they complete—compared to the global average of 9.7 percent.[11] Additionally, investments in education help support a wide range of social benefits, such as child well-being, individual and family health, social capital, and many others.

Available indicators show that regions across Africa have made substantial improvements in offerings for youth education and skills development. Youth enrolment in technical and vocational education and training (TVET) increased from 2012 to 2017, rising from 1.4 to 2.4 percent. Across regions, Central Africa attained the highest combined rate of young people enrolled in TVET programmes over time, averaging 3.8 percent from 2012 to 2017. For primary school completion rates, enrolment is rising slowly.[12] Additionally, even with improving school enrolment and completion in recent years, upper secondary school completion rates remain low, with fewer than one-third of youth across the continent having completed upper secondary school.[13]

As increasing numbers of African youth gain access to primary education, future policies and programmes must strengthen the quality and variety of educational and skill-building opportunities at all levels. Education should be inclusive, ensuring that specific populations, such as girls and young women, rural youth, and young people with disabilities, are not left behind.[14] Some interventions—such as alternative forms of education and preparing youth to be skilled teachers themselves—can dramatically change the current educational landscape. Investing in wider access to quality, inclusive education opportunities will demonstrate Africa's commitment to and recognition of education as a human right, tool for empowerment, and key to the future for its young people.

PILLAR 3
Youth Health and Well-Being
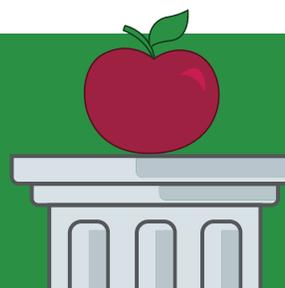
Fostering the health and well-being of young Africans creates a future characterized by healthy communities, productive nations, and a prosperous continent.[15] Today's African youth face unprecedented social, economic, and cultural changes that are affecting their future in new ways. Having improved health services and reduced mortality rates, African policymakers now need to invest in holistic health interventions that no longer focus solely on the physical health of young people but also their psychological, behavioural, and environmental needs.

Many behaviours and characteristics developed during adolescence impact the immediate health of youth, their health during adulthood, and the health of their children, the next generation. During this time of development, youth are susceptible to their social environment and can develop negative health behaviours, such as engaging in high-risk sex or abusing drugs and alcohol.[16] These negative behaviours in turn put youth at an increased risk for acquiring certain health problems or diseases. For example, youth engaging in high-risk sex are more likely to become infected with HIV/AIDS or other sexually transmitted infections.[17] During adolescence is also when mental health challenges, such as depression or anxiety, often emerge and can be a critical time for helping youth seek support for and manage new emotions.[18]

The Youth Health and Well-Being pillar of the SoAYR evaluates health risks and outcomes experienced by young Africans as well as the programme and service responses meant to improve their health and mitigate risks. Country health initiatives for youth were evaluated based on government health expenditures, youth health services access, and the number of skilled health professionals. Evaluation of risks and outcomes focused on well-studied health indicators, like malaria mortality and HIV/AIDS prevalence, and indicators for emerging issues, like noncommunicable diseases (NCDs) deaths and suicide rates. Recognizing a spectrum of health indicators, including identifying new ones, is important to reflect a shift in focus from physical health towards well-being over the life span. Understanding the full depth of youth well-being will require additional data collection and analysis, especially around mental health.

In many instances, data for youth heath were available for issues already at the forefront of policymaker agendas: youth mortality from diarrhoea, lower respiratory infections, malaria, and tuberculosis. In most regions, youth death rates from these conditions remained stable or improved slightly over time from 2013 to 2017. Across regions in 2017, North Africa performed the best, with the lowest rates of youth mortality for all four types of disease. In contrast, Southern Africa performed the worst, with the highest rates of youth deaths for three of the indicators: diarrhoea, lower respiratory infections, and tuberculosis. Malaria deaths, on the other hand, were highest for youth living in Central Africa and West Africa.

Improving youth well-being requires long-term prevention before it is too late, especially when it comes to mental health, sexual health, and chronic disease. If investment in these areas is limited, data for them are even more so. For example, the current SoAYR only measures mental health by proxy through youth suicide rates, an indicator that lacks enough data coverage for regional and continental-level analysis. Data are available for the prevalence of HIV/AIDS and high-risk sex among youth and indicates that these remain pervasive issues across regions. However, these two indicators alone do not provide a comprehensive picture of sexual and reproductive health, services, or information provided to youth. On average, youth NCD mortality rates are dropping across regions from 2013 to 2017, but no indicators exist for modifiable NCD risk behaviours. Given the slow, lifelong emergence of NCDs, more data focused on prevention are needed.

Access to good health care and knowledge of healthy practices are essential services for positively enhancing youth development and harnessing the demographic dividend. Focusing campaigns on youth well-being, rather than solely physical health, recognizes that psychological, social, and environmental health are equally important throughout youth development. Concerted efforts to destigmatize conversations around youth health—particularly when it comes to safe sex, suicide, and substance abuse—will be needed in order to generate buy-in from youth and policymakers alike.

NCD BEHAVIOURS

The NCD mortality rate is decreasing across Africa, but data on NCD risk behaviours during adolescence are limited.

ALCOHOL USE

TOBACCO USE

PHYSICAL INACTIVITY

UNHEALTHY DIET

Understanding unhealthy behaviors among youth now can help interventions to prevent NCD deaths later.

PILLAR 4

Youth Rights, Governance, and Empowerment

When youth are empowered, can fully exercise their rights, and live in an environment with good governance, they can purposefully participate in the development and decisionmaking processes that directly impact their lives. However, young people—particularly young women—in Africa are underrepresented and have limited opportunity for political participation. Even though youth make up more than 60 percent the continent's population, the median age of African political leaders is three times the median age of the African population.[19] To transform development initiatives and harness the demographic dividend, African leadership spaces must involve youth perspectives and ideas—on their rights, governance, and empowerment as well as their employment, education, and health.

If youth are not politically engaged, they are more likely to feel disenfranchised and frustrated. Long-term disengagement of youth can negatively impact the social cohesion of communities as well as their peace and security.[20] However, efforts to effectively engage youth should acknowledge that individuals experience different obstacles and opportunities that uniquely affect their civil, political, and socioeconomic rights. For example, early marriage and female genital mutilation are specific rights-based challenges affecting young women. As such, state institutions must not only include youth but be responsive to specific challenges faced by certain groups of youth. Seeking out and including marginalized youth

that are most affected by the issue at hand are essential for devising and implementing effective, sustainable solutions.[21]

The Youth Rights, Governance, and Empowerment pillar of the SoAYR evaluates opportunities to include African youth in political and public life, especially as the continent works towards deepening a culture of good governance, democratic values, gender equality, and respect for human rights, justice, and the rule of law.[22] Youth represent a huge resource for carrying these values forward, and thus their meaningful participation and representation, and recognition of their rights will underpin successful initiatives across all areas. Investments in youth engagement should not only involve traditional decisionmaking spaces but also adapt to new ones, such as the online world. Supporting youth in leadership positions helps unleash their creative potential as an increasingly educated, cosmopolitan, and tech-savvy force for change.

Indicators of youth rights, governance, and empowerment demonstrate that existing leadership and decisionmaking processes do not adequately engage young people. Available data collected for the SoAYR show low participation of youth in governance as well as few policies that directly enable youth civic participation. For most regions over time, youth had very little participation in the lower house of parliament, with a peak of 1.8 percent for North Africa in 2015. Without youth representatives, the creation of youth-focused policy agendas falls into the hands of those not directly affected. As of 2019, 16 African countries still need to ratify the African Youth Charter, and many more have not created national-level youth charters.[23] Greater youth representation is crucial for protecting youth rights and empowering them to be the leaders of today—rather than tomorrow.

It is not enough for African leaders to create policies and programmes to address youth needs—youth must be included and represented in the decisionmaking that directly impacts their lives. Engaging youth through good governance and political voice represents an opportunity to creatively deal with ongoing issues across the region. Youth leaders can bring unique perspectives and skills to problem-solving, such as through using new technologies or communication platforms. Leadership programmes and youth consultation forums can elevate youth voices and build their skills through mentorship, training, and dialogue, fostering collaboration and innovation across generations to build an empowered and active citizenry.

RATIFICATION OF YOUTH CHARTER STATUS

HAS RATIFIED CHARTER

HAS NOT RATIFIED CHARTER

ENABLING ENVIRONMENT

The Key to Inclusive Youth Development

Across the continent, African youth lead dynamic and diverse lives. As policymakers and other key stakeholders look to support young people, they must remember that issues affecting youth do not exist nor can be addressed in silos. Instead, African youth need innovative, multisectoral approaches that holistically address their experiences—across the employment, education, health, and governance sectors. The **enabling environment** of the SoAYR aims to capture and evaluate cross-cutting policies and programmes African countries have put in place to comprehensively enhance youth development across all four pillars.

Recognizing that many of the issues—and solutions—of the SoAYR pillars are interconnected, the enabling environment examines youth development through a lens that calls for the following:

- Principles of transparency, democracy, good governance, anti-corruption, and rule of law.
- Accountability in service delivery as well as the effective performance of monitoring institutions, particularly parliaments, the judiciary, and civil society organizations.
- Women and youth participation in decisionmaking at all levels.
- Equity and accessibility—leaving no one behind.
- Multisectoral approach to development.
- Human rights for all.[24]

Despite its overarching importance, the enabling environment of the SoAYR was the most difficult area to quantify. Many indicators for the enabling environment were not measured due to lack of data or because no appropriate indicator could be identified. Ultimately, only two indicators had enough data for analysis and inclusion: the existence of a national youth policy and the legal voting age for youth.

Data on national youth policies and youth voter eligibility provide a starting point for understanding country commitments to youth inclusion. National youth policies demonstrate that countries recognise youth as valuable citizens and have publicly declared their commitment to fostering an environment for youth development. Youth voter eligibility, on the other hand, is a mechanism to support youth in actively voicing their perspectives on national issues. Currently, only 31 AUC Member States have national youth policies in place even though all 55 Member States have established a voting age for youth. Even among the countries that have policies in place, many were developed prior to 2010 and may not reflect the current realities of youth. This disparity indicates that even if policymakers allow youth to vote on issues affecting their lives, they may not be fully committed to policies, frameworks, or funding to support youth development in their countries.

Lack of available information and data around the enabling environment of the SoAYR demonstrates that policymakers and other key stakeholders need to step up their commitments for sound, evidence-based policies and programmes aimed at empowering young people. With more and better data, the overarching drivers of youth development and the demographic dividend—policies, frameworks, funding, capacity building, and partnerships—can be effectively harnessed to support youth empowerment and growth.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To Improve Data on the Status of African Youth

This policy brief is intended as a resource to provide a regional overview of the status of African youth and prompt conversations around inclusive youth development across Africa. Good policies and programmes supporting young people in Africa depend on good data and evidence. Given that many information gaps around the experiences of youth persist, African policymakers, youth leaders, nongovernmental organizations, and researchers can work together to improve the quality and quantity of data and evidence around African youth development in the following ways:

DEVELOP AND IMPLEMENT THE AFRICAN YOUTH DEVELOPMENT INDEX to allow for more accessible monitoring of the achievements and areas needing a focus on youth development across the continent.

EXPAND DISSEMINATION OF EXISTING DATA DISAGGREGATED AT COUNTRY LEVELS to allow researchers, policymakers, and advocates to better understand the lives of youth. Expanded dissemination and disaggregation efforts should include encouraging National Statistics Offices to collect and publish data widely at the 15-to-35-year-old level, disaggregated by gender and geography.

PRIORITIZE DATA COLLECTION ON RELEVANT AND IMPORTANT ASPECTS OF YOUTH DEVELOPMENT— such as entrepreneurship, technical education, mental health, and youth leadership—in order to fill in existing data gaps.

EXAMINE EXISTING NATIONAL POLICIES AND PROGRAMMES USING COUNTRY-LEVEL DATA to identify best practices for sharing and adoption at the local level.

CREATE NEW YOUTH POLICIES AND PROGRAMMES AT REGIONAL, NATIONAL, AND LOCAL LEVELS using findings from the SoAYR. These policies and programmes should extend to disadvantaged and marginalized youth, including but not limited to, girls and young women, young persons with disabilities, migrants, refugees, and the long-term unemployed. The regional trends covered in this report are important for developing harmonized policies and programmes, but the best way forward for positively benefitting youth across Africa must be at the national and local levels.

Methodology

Indicators for each of the four pillars and the enabling environment of the SoAYR were developed by a reference group of experts. A team of youth researchers conducted data collection, calculations, and analysis. The role youth researchers played in synthesizing and analysing the evidence included in the SoAYR demonstrates the importance of an analysis led by youth, for youth.

Data included in the SoAYR and this policy brief were selected and refined through a process aligned with the Commonwealth National and Regional Youth Development Index (YDI) toolkit. The process involved close consultation with National Statistics Offices (NSO) to collect, calculate, and disaggregate data for youth, identified by the AUC as ages 15 to 35. Due to limited availability, in some instances data were used for ages 15 to 24, the range the United Nations defines for youth. Priority was given to NSO data over secondary sources. In some cases, data provided by NSOs were not used due to lack of consistency across countries or regions.

This policy brief focuses on SoAYR indicators across five regions in Africa. At the regional level, results were calculated by averaging country data when periodic data were available. In some instances, these results differed over time across regions, were calculated differently due to limited data, or did not include results for all countries. As such, regional analysis should serve as a guide for identifying critical areas for intervention that can be rigorously measured and assessed at the country level.

Endnotes

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Source for graphics: AUC, *Status of African Youth Report 2019*, forthcoming 2019.

Source for NCD graphic: Toshiko Kaneda and Michael Orcutt, "Focusing on Youth to Curb the Epidemic of Noncommunicable Diseases," accessed at https://www.youthandncds.org/home/.

> "Young people should use the Status of African Youth Report to see where the gaps are for youth development. They can use the report to make noise and advocate for an environment that is better for them: an environment that allows them to go to school, to get a job when they graduate, to go to the hospital when they are sick, to stand as a member of parliament, and to have a support system around them."

Frank Chidampamba, African Youth Researcher, Malawi

Acknowledgments

African Union