Youth As Tactical Agents Of Peacebuilding And Development In The Sahel

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YOUTH AS TACTICAL AGENTS OF PEACEBUILDING AND DEVELOPMENT IN THE SAHEL

DANIEL EGIEGBA AGBIBOA

Abstract

One of the major lacunas in the field of youth studies is the lack of attention to, and thorough documentation of, the positive contributions of young people, especially in developing societies. The vast bulk of studies are skewed towards the view of youth as enfants terribles, without any attempt to understand and explain tactical ways in which youth have created and continue to create alternative lives for themselves under great adversity. Drawing on case studies from Northern Nigeria (youth as agents of counter-terrorism) and Northern Mali (youth as tactical agents of development), the burden of this article is to identify the multiple challenges facing youth in West Africa’s Sahel region and, especially, to show how Sahelian youth are coping with these everyday challenges in tactical, ingenious and creative ways that underscore both their considerable social agency and their inherent capacity to make telling contributions to peacebuilding and development in their local communities.

Keywords: youth, peacebuilding, Sahel, violent conflict, Northern Nigeria, Northern Mali

The remarkable thing to consider is not why some of Africa’s youth have embraced violence, but why so few of them have. (Argenti 2002, 151)

Introduction

Demographic statistics suggest that Africa is the youngest continent on earth. Yet while youth constitute the vast majority of Africa’s population, they remain largely excluded from ‘mainstream economic life, political acknowledgement, and civic responsibility’ (Comaroff & Comaroff 2005, 29). Youth exclusion from key decision-making that affects their lives exposes huge deficits in democratic governance, exacerbates generational tensions, and presents an enormous risk for sustainable peace and development. Preliminary research shows that poor, jobless and socially excluded youth are more likely to constitute the large share of foot soldiers in civil conflicts; they are also more likely to resort to crime or extreme measures as a survival strategy (Machel 1996). Moreover, disenchanted youth are most vulnerable to recruitment by extremist groups (Agbiboa 2013a), or illicit crime...
networks (Onuoha 2014). Faced with the cocktail of political, economic and social disenfranchisement, young people in Africa have begun to show their anger about being robbed of their own future (and present) with what Heribert Prantl (2011) calls ‘the sacred rage of the young’. Already, the ‘Arab Spring’ and the #bring back our girls campaign not only has renewed interest in a global youth culture, but also underscores the active role youth and social media (can) play in democratic uprisings and social change. This confirms Herbert Moller’s (1968, 237) point that youth has become ‘a modern force in the world’, for good or bad. I argue here that the unfolding situation demands a critical engagement with how youth reconfigure geographies of social exclusion in a context that affords them little opportunities to come of age, to become adults.

One of the major lacunas in the field of youth studies is the inattention to the positive contributions of youth in society (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP] 2005, 31; Obaje & Uzodike 2013). Although the view that youth should not be merely conceived as agents (or victims) of violence is belaboured in the literature, this view appears to be a mere addendum, or a sort of a priori disclaimer. Some authors have highlighted the important role youth can play in processes of peacebuilding. In Gettin’ My Word Out, for example, Leonisa Ardizzone examines how youth activists respond to injustice, counteract violence, practise social responsibility, and form collaborative networks of individuals and organisations (Ardizzone 2007). Similarly, in her book Youth Peacebuilding: Music, Gender and Change, Lesley Pruitt examines music as a tool for engaging youth in peacebuilding activities in Australia and Northern Ireland, countries that appear overtly peaceful, but where youth still face structural violence at the community level (Pruitt 2013). However, none of these authors have dealt with the role of youth regarding peacebuilding and development in the Sahel — a region hamstrung by economic fragility, pervasive corruption, bad governance, and persistent armed conflict.

Drawing on case studies from Northern Nigeria (youth as agents of counter-terrorism) and Northern Mali (youth as agents of development), this article identifies the multiple challenges facing youth in West Africa’s Sahel region. In so doing, the article seeks to help strengthen the literature by providing cases of positive contributions of youth to sustainable peace and development in their local communities. Along the way, homogenising narratives that portray Africa’s youth as hopeless troublemakers are challenged. The article argues that such popular narratives — while rooted in ideas of youth idleness and engagement in crime — are mute on the social agency and potential shown by Africa’s youth, as well as their legitimate grievances against alienating and corrupt governments that have dashed their promise of maturity.

The methodological approach of the article is essentially qualitative, based on insights gained from three main sources: interactions (formal and informal) and focused group discussions with youth from West Africa’s Sahel region,1 content analysis of the secondary youth literature, and the author’s cumulative observation of Sahelian youth policy and development, coupled with his interpretations of situations and events.

The next section seeks to understand the meaning of youth, with particular reference to the African context. This is followed by a closer look at the dynamic role of Africa’s youth as agents of counter-terrorism and development, drawing on case studies from the Sahel region, specifically Northern Nigeria and Northern Mali. The conclusion provides some recommendations on the way forward for Africa’s youth. A key argument emerging from the analysis suggests that youth are not merely victims or perpetrators of violence, as many youth scholars have emphasised (Murphy 2003; Burgess & Burton
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...2010), but also tactical agents of peacebuilding and sustainable development in their local communities.

Who Is a Youth? Narratives and Counter-Narratives

‘Youth’ is a highly context-dependent and fluid signifier (Abbink & van Kessel 2005; Christiansen et al. 2006). Although there is a fluctuation surrounding youth age, the range ‘15–30’ years is generally taken as representing the category of youth in Africa (see Table 1). The idea of a single, gender-equal age of maturity ignores a critical gender dimension, in which youth is often the time when ‘the world expands for boys and contracts for girls’ (Mensch et al. 1998, 2). Although in Africa youth is often identified with a biological age group — one that is understood as a transitional phase when a person moves from a time of dependence (childhood) to interdependence (adulthood) (UNESCO 2010, 2) — it is never fully reducible to chronology. In fact, as Honwana (cited in UNECA 2012) argues, ‘the majority of young Africans are defined in terms of social expectations and responsibilities’. In Mali, Burkina Faso, Ivory Coast, Guinea-Conakry and Senegal, Abdullah (1998) observes that ‘adulthood’ is defined as the capacity to sustain a marriage. In Sierra Leone, the period of youthhood is over when one marries. Boys tend to marry later than girls because of the time it takes them to acquire the money and status required for marriage. The consequence is that boys remain youth for much longer than girls. Hence, it is

Table 1: Definitions of Youth Age, the Age of Majority, and the Age of the Right to Vote in Commonwealth Countries in Africa

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Majority Age</th>
<th>Voting Age</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Botswana</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>21</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ghana</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>18</td>
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<tr>
<td>Malawi</td>
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<td>18</td>
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<tr>
<td>Namibia</td>
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<td>18</td>
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<tr>
<td>Seychelles</td>
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<td>18</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sierra Leone</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tanzania</td>
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<td>18</td>
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<tr>
<td>Zambia</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>18</td>
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<tr>
<td>Uganda</td>
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<td>18</td>
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<tr>
<td>South Africa</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lesotho</td>
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<td>18</td>
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<tr>
<td>Zimbabwe</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nigeria</td>
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<tr>
<td>Swaziland</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>18</td>
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<tr>
<td>The Gambia</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>18</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kenya</td>
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<td>18</td>
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<td>Mozambique</td>
<td>18</td>
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<td>Mauritius</td>
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Source: Chigunta (2002, 3).

‘The age at which most civil rights are accorded to young people (UN 1999, cited in Chigunta 2002, 3).
not unusual to find a 12-year-old girl who, by virtue of being married, will be regarded as an ‘adult’, while an unmarried 40-year-old man will still be considered a ‘youth’ or ‘child’ (Chigunta 2002, 2). As such, Cruise O’Brien (1996, 58) argues that Africa’s (male) youth are increasingly in danger of an ‘indefinitely prolonged’ youth status, as their efforts to become adults are ‘thwarted’. This is the sense in which Honwana (2012, 19) uses the term ‘waiting for adulthood’ or ‘waithood’. Faced with shrinking space to ‘grow up’ in a traditional sense (that is, to secure a job, get married, start a family, buy or rent a house, support their relatives, and gain social recognition as adults), young men in many parts of Africa are left with violence as the most readily available way of ‘proving’ their manhood (UNDP 2007, 3). Already, research has shown that young men in Africa take up arms to gain power and power can act as a very strong motivator in situations where citizens feel powerless and are otherwise unable to acquire basic resources (see Machel 1996, 12). Thus, Smith (2011, 97) aptly contends that the African ‘youth crisis’ should be seen as ‘the upshot of the failure of capacious young cohorts to “accomplish” adulthood’.

The field of youth studies is awash with narratives that are skewed towards criminalising ‘Africa’s restless youth’ (Gavin 2007), particularly their propensity to ‘violence’ (Austin 2011), ‘rebellion’ (Waller 2006), and ‘trouble’ (Ukeje & Iwilade 2012). In his controversial essay ‘The Coming Anarchy’, Robert Kaplan (1994) compares West Africa’s youth to ‘loose molecules in a very unstable social fluid … clearly on the verge of igniting’. Yet the mainstream image of youth as troublemakers need not merely be cast in the negative light (Butler 1990, viii); it can also imply ‘the productive unsettling of dominant epistemic regimes under the heat of desire, frustration, or anger’ (Comaroff & Comaroff 2006, 268). Contrast, for example, the child soldiers of Sierra Leone, the very symbol of civil disintegration (Honwana 1999), with the heroic ‘young lions’ of South Africa, who were harbingers of democracy and played a central role in ending the horrors of apartheid. Notably, post-war Sierra Leone has seen an upsurge in self-organised social networks, institutions and business cooperatives among youth, as the example of the motorbike taxi-riders illustrates. Through these creative ways, youth in Sierra Leone are assuming greater control over their lives, bringing about sustainable change to their situations, and contributing to broader nation-building (Denov 2010). The key point here is that youth can stand for many things at once: ‘for the terrors of the present, the errors of the past, the prospect of a future’ (Comaroff & Comaroff 2006, 269). This realisation challenges us to rethink dominant idioms of African youth which tend to overlook their remarkable enterprise and resilience at critical periods of social cohesion and nation-building (African Youth Charter 2006, 2).

While the popular discourse of ‘youth’ in Africa as a problematic period of transition, clearly demarcated from adulthood, tends to be defined by ‘fixed and consolidated power arrangements’ (Denov & Maclure 2006a, 75), the social theorist Foucault (1981, 71) reminds us that prevailing discourses are fluid and not impregnable: ‘We must make allowance for the complex and unstable process whereby discourse can be a stumbling block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy.’ This text has inspired a number of youth studies that have sought to show how the quest for ‘a sense of identity’ and ‘social attachment’ have often led Africa’s youth to actively resist adult authority (Maclure & Sotelo 2004). Such youth resistance tends to occur in hostile socio-economic environments where unemployment and poverty are rife. As Wyn and Dwyer (1999, 14) argue, ‘where structured pathway do not exist, or are rapidly being eroded, individual agency is increasingly important in establishing patterns … which give positive meaning to [youth] lives’.
Having looked at the dominant narratives and some counter-narratives on youth in Africa, the next section looks to provide an alternative narrative that views youth in Africa as tactical agents of peacebuilding and sustainable development.

The Dynamic Roles of Sahelian Youth as Tactical Agents of Peace and Development

The Sahel region is plagued by multiple challenges that deserve mention in contextualising this analysis. These range from environmental degradation, climate change, food insecurity and nutrition crisis, to porous frontiers, terrorism and organised crime (i.e. international trafficking of narcotics), proliferation of weapons, illicit trafficking and latent armed conflicts. The situation is compounded by the fallout of the Libyan crisis, specifically ‘the influx of hundreds of thousands of traumatized and impoverished returnees, as well as the inflow of unspecified and unquantifiable number of arms and ammunition (including surface-to-air-missiles and MANPADS) from the Libyan arsenal through a well-organised network of illicit traffickers, providing a source of armament to terrorist and criminal groups in the region’ (Joint AU–UN Assessment Mission 2012, 2). These include Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Ansar Dine (Defenders of the Faith or Jummu’a Ansar al-Din al Salafiya), the Unity Movement for Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO under its French acronym), and Boko Haram (‘Western education is a sin’).

Recent developments have highlighted the gravity of some of the conflicts writ large in the Sahel region, from the rise of Boko Haram in Northern Nigeria, to the violent clashes between the Malian government and the separatist Tuareg forces. Although the exact impact of the Sahelian crisis has varied from country to country, the overall sub-regional dynamics highlight that certain cross-cutting issues are shared by all of the countries. Already, more than 150,000 people have fled the fighting in Northern Mali, with half of them having crossed the borders to seek refuge in the neighbouring countries (Algeria, Burkina Faso, Mauritania and Niger) and beyond (Joint AU–UN Assessment Mission 2012, 8). Similarly, in the restive north of Nigeria, following an intensified state offensive against Boko Haram, thousands have fled into neighbouring countries (Agbiboa 2013b). The foregoing is complicated by popular distrust of the national state, which relies on intimidation for compliance rather than authority and effective service delivery. This has warranted the view that countering the pervasive insecurity in the Sahel requires not only rebuilding a healthier state–citizen relationship, but also addressing the political, social and economic marginalisation that has been driving it. So understood, it is critical to devise strategies that send reassuring messages to the beleaguered populations living in these Sahelian countries, especially the youth who constitute the vast majority of inhabitants.

Notably, a major driver of instability in the Sahel is youth exclusion, unemployment and under-employment (Joint AU–UN Assessment Mission 2012). Not infrequently, this lack of gainful jobs pushes an increasing number of youth into a ‘criminal-political economy’ (Musili & Smith 2013, 1). The foregoing reinforces Murphy’s ‘revolutionary’ and ‘delinquent’ youth models — the former views youth as ‘rebelling against political and socio-economic marginalisation’, while the latter views youth not as ‘revolutionary idealists’ but as ‘alienated opportunists exploiting the economic spoils of social turmoil’ (Murphy...
Drawing on select case studies from Northern Nigeria and Northern Mali, this section looks to capture the dynamics of youth participation in the Sahel as perpetrators, victims and resisters of violent conflict. These two cases point to the increasing role of youth as tactical agents of peace and development in their own communities. In other words, the youth in the following case studies are using their marginality as a resource with which to construct meaning out of their lives which unfolds in violent, impoverished and uncertain contexts. The youth in the following case studies are using their marginality as a resource with which to construct meaning out of their lives which unfolds in violent, impoverished and uncertain contexts. The implication is that claiming the space of the marginal is often a social tactic with which Sahelian youth navigate complex situations.

**Northern Nigeria: youth as agents of counter-terrorism**

April 2015 marks one year since Boko Haram (‘Western education is a sin’), a militant Islamist group from northeastern Nigeria, abducted over 200 schoolgirls from Chibok, in Borno State. The girls, kidnapped on 14 April, have not been rescued yet. This is despite efforts by the US, the UK, France, China and Israel to support Nigeria’s efforts to turn the tide of the insurgency and rescue the Chibok girls. Since the kidnappings, many (young) people in Nigeria and elsewhere have turned to social media en masse (through the #bring back our girls campaign) in a concerted effort to mount pressure on the Nigerian government and the international community to do more in their efforts to rescue the Chibok girls. The #bring back our girls did not ‘bring back our girls’ and the hashtag campaign has since stopped trending. While media campaigns can be helpful in raising awareness and cultivating a sense of solidarity with the oppressed, ‘tweeting, posting, liking, uploading, etc. are no substitute for physical action’ (Bauer 2014). Boko Haram leader, Abubakar Shekau, mocked the #bring back our girls campaign and announced that he would free the girls only if outgoing President Jonathan released hundreds of the group’s imprisoned fighters. Meanwhile Boko Haram has intensified its inhumane campaign to the point of threatening the territorial sovereignty and integrity of the Nigerian state (Agbiboa 2014a). Boko Haram’s violent attacks, which have killed over 10,000 people since 2002 (Agbiboa 2013c), have twice compelled a declaration of a state of emergency in four states across Northern Nigeria. But such measures have failed woefully to stamp out terrorism; instead, they have strengthened the group’s resolve against the Nigerian state and its citizens.

For its membership recruitment, Boko Haram targets disaffected youth and destitute children from Northern Nigeria, as well as neighbouring Sahelian countries like Northern Cameroon, Chad and Niger. A recent analysis of 144 imprisoned Boko Haram members shows that the median age of the group’s members is 30 years (Onuoha 2014). This youthful membership is hardly surprising if we recall Pratten’s (n.d.) point that ‘[i]n Nigeria, “youth” has come to occupy a category of risk, it labels a dangerous, insurgent and unpredictable force which threatens the social and political fabric’. Boko Haram’s foot soldiers are mainly drawn from unemployed youth and street children (*almajiri*) in Northern Nigeria. From Abdul Raufu Mustapha (2012) we learn that Boko Haram ‘provides education, basic services and informal-sector jobs to its supporters, most of whom are marginalized youth with little education, or lower middle-class elements with some education but with few prospects in the oppressive competition and corruption of Nigerian society’. Governor of Borno State, Kashim Shettima, made clear that despite its ‘misguided ideology’, members of Boko Haram remained loyal to their slain founder,
Mohammed Yusuf, because he fed them and empowered them through petty trading and wheelbarrow pushing. He also arranged cheap marriages between sect members, which enabled many of them to marry, which gave them personal dignity and self-worth (see Mustapha 2012). The United States Institute of Peace (USIP) recently commissioned a study to understand and explain why youth join Boko Haram. The results suggest a range of forces driving youth towards violence. These are: (1) ignorance of religious teaching opposed to violence among youth; (2) widespread unemployment and poverty which make youths vulnerable to radicalisation; (3) children with difficult upbringings, combined with widespread illiteracy, are more vulnerable to extremist views; and (4) the excesses of the Nigerian security forces, including unlawful killings, dragnet arrests, and intimidation, have often fuelled youth radicalisation in the region (Onuoha 2014, 1–10).

An under-reported but key aspect of the ongoing Boko Haram insurgency is the way in which frustrated youth in affected parts of Northern Nigeria are exercising their agency amidst ongoing conflict. Armed with machetes and sticks, these youth in Northern Nigeria are mobilising themselves against Boko Haram elements in their communities, complementing the counter-terrorism efforts of the state’s Joint Task Force (JTF) (which has now been disbanded and replaced with the army’s 7th Infantry Division) and the Multinational Task Force (MJTF) through provision of combat support and intelligence gathering. Far from being lawless mobs, these volunteer youth groups function as community-based police forces. Interviewed members of the group say they were motivated to organise themselves because they had grown tired of being targeted by both Boko Haram and especially the state’s JTF. As one member of the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF) noted,

The army took us as the enemy … We didn’t see them as here to protect us. [If there was a Boko Haram attack] they don’t come on time, they arrest whoever they see, or open fire, or burn shops and houses in revenge … People were pressed to the wall, we needed to stand, to protect ourselves. (Cited in Integrated Regional Information Network [IRIN] 2014)

The pattern of CJTF is increasingly evident across northern states in Nigeria, but particularly in Maiduguri, the largest city of Borno state, where angry vigilante youth groups (comprising some 500 youths) — known as ‘Civilian Joint Task Force’ (CJTF) or yan boko — are tracking down Boko Haram members in their communities, whom they turn in to the state security forces or kill themselves.

Members of the CJTF operate a number of checkpoints in the state, inspect citizens and their residences, working as partners with the government’s security services (Warscapes 2014). According to the Integrated Regional Information Networks (IRIN), CJTF are the ‘eyes and ears of the security forces … they are often the first responders to trouble’ (IRIN 2014). While armed with only rudimentary weapons such as sticks, knives, and old rifles, the CJTF’s local knowledge, and in some cases personal knowledge of Boko Haram, has helped them identify Boko Haram members in their communities. At the risk of their own lives, these youth have used local knowledge to fish out lurking Boko Haram members in their various neighbourhoods. In the process, they have greatly helped in the improvement of civil–military relations. Notably, the CJTF has recorded some success against Boko Haram. In March 2014, members of...
the CJTF killed at least 207 Boko Haram militants who stormed a military barracks and a neighbourhood of Maiduguri. In particular, the CJTF’s cooperation with regular security forces has also helped deter attacks in Maiduguri, the capital of Borno State and biggest city in northeastern Nigeria, and push the militants out into more rural areas (Siollun 2014). However, the CJTF has, itself, become a major target of Boko Haram’s attacks. While the CJTF succeeded in Maiduguri, it was less successful in other insurgency-affected areas. Attempts by the CJTF to carry out operations in some of these areas resulted in heavy casualties. For example, Boko Haram killed at least 100 CJTF youths in 2013 and twice as many in 2014.

The state political leadership and residents in affected parts of Northern Nigeria have commended the efforts of CJTF to protect their communities from Boko Haram killings, with the Nigerian president describing them as ‘new heroes of the nation’. According to the Borno State Governor, Alhaji Kashim Shettima:

I have never been as proud of our youth in Borno State as much as I am today. The youth have since 2013 rose in firm defence of the good people of Borno State, and today, they have once again proved to all of us, that they have by playing complementary roles, taken our collective destiny in their hands and we are full of gratitude to them for their sacrifices that cannot be sufficiently rewarded. (Information Nigeria 2015)

However, in spite of the CJTF’s success, many residents have expressed concerns that these youth vigilante groups are ‘hapless victims’ and ‘brewing trouble’ which could transform into new militias or semi-criminal outfits if their activities are not regulated by the state. Some also fear that the actions of the CJTF are inciting Boko Haram to target civilians even more. The images surrounding the CJTF as ‘heroes’, ‘hapless victims’ and ‘brewing trouble’ reveal the logic of opposite extremes and ideological norms of youthhood which combine to deny youth agency, as well as to exoticise, decontextualise and essentialise youth experiences. In this way, the complexity of the lived realities and actions of youth are lost (Denov 2010, 13). Although the apprehensions over the possible hijack of the CJTF by politicians are real, they should not detract from the current fact that concerned youth in Northern Nigeria are taking the initiative to organise themselves and risk their lives daily to protect members of their communities from the menace of Boko Haram and to support state security forces in their counter-insurgency efforts. According to one member of the CJTF:

We are aware of the security situation in the Northeastern states of Borno, Yobe and Adamawa, and it is our duty to ensure that our communities are safe and secure ... We are not going to be weary; we will intensify our efforts by ensuring that our communities are peaceful and the residents are free from attacks and molestation by the misguided insurgents. (Punch 2015)

In an effort to sanitise the operation of the CJTF and instil patriotism and discipline in them, a reorientation course — known as the ‘Bornu Youth Empowerment Scheme’ (BOYES) — was introduced for members of the CJTF by the Bornu State Governor Kashim Shettima. Shettima regarded the first batch of 800 BOYES youth volunteers as the greatest assets of Borno because of their zeal and commitment toward ensuring the immediate return of peace in the state. In his words, ‘[BOYES aims to] ensure our youths discover or rediscover their potentials, enhance these potentials with necessary skills, indoctrinate them into having a better organised love for their fatherland, make them conscious of
what goes within and around them, train them to be conscious of the security of wider civilian population without taking laws into their hands so that they can lawfully help in policing their own communities’ (Nairaland Forum 2013). In Borno State, most CJTF members now receive $100 per month from the government (Agbiboa 2014a; IRIN 2014). However, the government has baulked at the idea of arming youth. The government’s investment in, and focus on, youth sensitisation and education may be seen as key to regenerating Northern Nigeria and turning the tide of the Boko Haram insurgency which is largely made up of unemployed young foot soldiers. In this respect, Funmi Olonisakin (2013) makes an important call for ‘deliberate forms of youth cantonment, census-based building, community-based programs, and innovative education schemes to kick start regeneration’.

Beyond cooperating with state security forces as agents of counter-terrorism in their local communities, youth have also been engaged in multiple modes of survival within uncertain socio-economic and political situations that offer them few opportunities to become adults. The case of Northern Mali illuminates tactical ways in which Africa’s youth have created and continue to create, within a climate of uncertainty and economic stagnation, peaceful and alternative lives for themselves with immense ingenuity and creativity.

**Northern Mali: youth as tactical agents of development**

According to Mali’s Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP), 300,000 youths approach the labour market annually and the vast bulk of them seek employment in vain. This leads to increases in poverty, especially in urban areas and may lead, over time, to stresses in society (European Parliament 2014). Given that youth in Mali (between 15 and 40 years old) constitute up to 70% of the country’s 14 million population (Ismail et al. 2009, 32), and have been heavily implicated in most of its violent conflict, the link between youth and conflict has featured prominently in Mali’s policy agenda. Security in Northern Mali, particularly in Kidal region, has deteriorated as evidenced by recent deplorable acts of violence perpetrated by separatist and terrorist groups, most notably the Tuareg uprising led by young rebels. In May 2014, for example, the city of Kidal and adjoining towns were hard hit by hostage-taking and seizing of administrative buildings, as well as the assassination of defenceless civil servants in the performance of their duties (ECOWAS 2014). Central to the Tuareg uprising in late 2007 was the neglect of youth in Northern Mali — a region of immense poverty, lack of resources, and little government presence (N’Diaye 2009). Key issues in the Tuareg rebellion include ‘charges of exclusion; discrimination; and the lack of opportunities, resources and infrastructures in the north’ (Ismail et al. 2009, 46). A prime example is the funding of small businesses established by youth and access to government-insured micro-finance schemes. While this governmental funding is accessible in a number of cities like Bamako, it is virtually absent in Northern Mali. Subsequently, youths from the far north describe experiencing huge discrimination and many difficulties in Bamako in their attempts to gain access to state services directed at the youth (Ismail et al. 2009, 46).

While some youth in Northern Mali have taken to armed rebellion as a means of protesting against their social exclusion, many young Malians reject these violent options and remarkably remain confident about the future of the country. This reinforces Argenti’s (2002) cogent observation:
The remarkable thing to consider is not why some of Africa’s youth have embraced violence, but why so few of them have. The great majority — even amongst those subjected to military violence themselves — are proving to be extremely skilled and inventive in responding to the successive crises piled upon them by local communities, national governments and the adverse effects of free market capitalism … [I]t is young people who are increasingly taking the helm and, against all odds, peacefully constructing alternative social orders … Despite the disillusionment and criminalisation of the young … the fact should also be underlined that young people do not simply reproduce state violence … but rather find ways of appropriating it and subverting it. (Argenti 2002, 151, 146; emphasis in original)

To cope with the precarious conditions in which their everyday lives unfold, Malian youth have ‘tapped into their cultural resources and a sense of loyalty to their society and state, as well as into the relevant social structures and networks’ (N’Diaye 2009, 7). They have done this by embracing the democratic process (i.e. voting) as ‘a matter of civil and patriotic duty’ (N’Diaye 2009, 7). Furthermore, young Malians are using their creativity and immense ingenuity to find solutions to everyday challenges through involving themselves in a range of activities that have sustained them, ‘ranging from studying to engaging in agriculture and commerce in the informal sector, to any activity that will ensure that they will overcome hardship’ (N’Diaye 2009, 7). In this way, young Malians are able to ‘subvert authority, bypass the encumbrances created by the formal system and fashion new ways of functioning and manoeuvring on their own’ (Honwana 2012, 23–24; see also Maira & Soep 2005). One of the conclusions of the Youth Vulnerability and Exclusion (YOVEX) report in Mali is that while there is a lot of frustration among Malian youth about their unjust exclusion and vulnerability due to elite corruption, lack of gainful jobs and wealth creation, these youth have nonetheless made a deliberate choice to adopt a ‘strategy of loyalty and voice’ in lieu of an ‘outright exit’ (N’Diaye 2009, 7).

In this regard, the concept of ‘Systeme D’ is frequently used by young Malians to capture their response to their uneasy situation, with the ‘D’ representing *debrouillardise*, a French term which can be translated as the ability to successfully negotiate difficult conditions and come out successfully; in other words, a conscious effort to assess challenges and possibilities and plot scenarios conducive to the achievement of specific goals (Vigh 2009; Honwana 1999; N’Diaye 2009). Thus, these youth are similar to Lévi-Strauss’s (1966) *bricoleur*, a ‘jack-of-all-trades’ who manipulates and takes advantage of situations whenever possible to achieve his/her own goals. The everyday activities of Malian youth also resonate with Michel de Certeau’s (1984) *tactics*, or daily struggles that respond to immediate needs rather than longer-term strategies designed to achieve broader ends. This experience and orientation is shared by youth who engage in street vending, touting at motor parks, cross-border trading and smuggling; those who plan and plot to migrate illegally abroad in search of greener pastures; and those whose everyday lives unfold in criminal networks as swindlers, traffickers, and gangsters (Honwana 2013). In an effort to *get by* or *make do*, some youth increasingly use their sexuality by having regular affairs with ‘sugardaddies’ and ‘sugarmamas’ who provide them with much-needed access to money, gifts, and fashionable goods. While some young men and women have become successful entrepreneurs by ‘repairing electronic devices; making and marketing clothing and jewellery; and doing hair and nails’, others are ‘creating new artistic, musical, and performance forms, making graffiti, painting murals; writing blogs, and becoming savvy internet users’ (Honwana 2013). The resilience and social agency of youth, particularly the emergence of motivated and ingenious youthful entrepreneurs, is one that is becoming increasingly evident across West Africa and the Sahel. In their paper entitled
‘Reflections of Youth: From the Past to the Postcolony’, Comaroff and Comaroff (2006) consider ways in which youthful entrepreneurs in the Sahel are bypassing or transcending modernist modes of production. Drawing on examples from the Sahel, Comaroff and Comaroff invite readers to consider:

The burgeoning ‘bush economies’ of Cameroon and Chad where ‘market boys’ cross borders, change passports, trade currencies, and traffic in high-risk cargo like guns and drugs; in so doing, they invent fresh ways of getting rich on the margins of global markets. Or consider the ferociously escalating teenage diamond trade — another amalgam of danger, desire and deregulation — that provisions armies in West and Central Africa, setting up innovative configurations of libertarian commerce, and profit. Or observe the young Mouride men from Senegal who have taken to translocal enterprise with such energy that they talk of New York as ‘a suburb of Dakar’; their remittances finance reconstruction of urban neighbourhoods at home, transform local power relations, and, concomitantly, highlight the dwindling capacity of the nation-state to sustain its infrastructure. (Comaroff & Comaroff 2011, 277).

The above cases from the Sahel demonstrate, at the very least, that Africa’s youth are making positive contributions and asserting their agency in their local communities. Unfortunately, such youth engagement and agency often go unnoticed and are yet to penetrate mainstream literature, which is still dominated by narrow perspectives of Africa’s youth-as-trouble; or a rigid framework that views Africa’s youth as either makers or breakers.

Conclusion: Which Way Africa’s Youth?

A nation that does not take care of its youth has no future, nor does it deserve one. (Oliver Tambo, late president of the African National Congress [ANC]; cited in Dlamini [2012])

Drawing on current data and practical examples, this article has examined the challenges and positive contributions of Africa’s youth, with particular focus on West Africa’s Sahel region. While the acute security and humanitarian challenges facing the Sahel today require a robust regional and international response, short-term successes may prove fleeting if nothing is done to address the longstanding political and economic fragility that makes youths in the Sahel susceptible to persistent crisis and conflict. To this end and intent, there is need for an inclusive approach to tackle the issues facing the Sahel, particularly illegal proliferation of weapons, food insecurity, organised crime, terrorism, poverty, youth unemployment and under-employment, environmental degradation and climate change, poor governance and chronic under-development. These factors combine to foster instability and armed rebellion. In particular, there is need for renewed emphasis to be placed on inclusive growth and equity. This can be achieved by boosting the economic development and reconstruction efforts in Sahelian countries, through job creation and youth employment. While there has been much progress in economic and wider development terms, the challenge of ensuring secure access to food and to essential survival incomes, especially among millions of youth in the Sahel, is still far from being met. Household livelihoods are still mostly precarious, and vulnerable to economic and environmental threats. These threats continue to push a significant number of Sahelian youth into terrorist activities as a survival strategy (Agbiboa 2013a).
The cases in this paper have demonstrated that Africa’s youth are resourceful and have a lot of energy and potential that can be channelled in a constructive manner. However, the cases also demonstrate that exclusionary politics, poverty, under-employment and under-employment frequently expose youths to criminal ways of surviving and political manipulation. Granted that there cannot be peace without development and vice versa, there is need for a policy strategy that takes full advantage of the youth bulge in the Sahel by harnessing youth potential to foster responsible governance and economic development through active participation in politics and in the labour markets. One way of achieving the latter is through improving the investment climate by reducing the cost of doing business so as to create gainful employment for youth. Relatedly, national and regional youth policies should improve access to formal education and/training to increase the supply of skilled youth who are prepared for the job market. This is because gaps in the education system limit the ability of young workers to find decent jobs.

Considering their sheer number, creativity, and vital force, young people in the Sahel are a key stakeholder in development, democratic governance, and peacebuilding initiatives. So understood, if socio-economic reforms are to have a meaningful impact on the lives of marginalised youth in the Sahel, they should be based in part at least on ‘needs and goals that are articulated by youth themselves … youth must be engaged directly in the deliberations and decisions that affect their social development’ (Denov & Maclure 2006b, 132). Also, it is important to rethink the widespread perception of African youths not just as ‘a signifier of exclusion, of impossibility, of emasculation, denigration, and futility …’ but especially as ‘a constant source of creativity, ingenuity, possibility, [and] empowerment’ (Comaroff & Comaroff 2011, 280). The cases identified in this study are a crucial step in this new research direction. Finally, youth agency should be recognised not only as possessing the inherent power to release youth from the dominance of a paternalistic and patrimonial system but also as capable of positively reconfiguring the nature of power within the broader Sahel region.

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Endnotes

1 The article gained valuable insights from interactions (formal and informal) and focused group discussions with Sahelian youths at the Youth Pre-Forum Consultations to the Third High Level Dialogue on ‘Democracy, Human Rights and Governance in Africa’, organised by the African Union Commission (AUC) in Nairobi, Kenya (15–17 September). The author thanks participants at this Forum for their active participation and insightful comments.
The CJTF’s leadership presently reports to the general officer commanding the division.

A similar concept duriagem (‘getting by’) can be found among young people in Guinea-Bissau. In Mozambique, young people use the Portuguese expression desenrasca a vida (‘eke out a living’). In Nigeria, youth use the Pidgin expression ‘Body dey inside cloth’ (‘We are surviving’).

References


YOUTH AS TACTICAL AGENTS OF PEACEBUILDING


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