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Harnessing the Influence of Social Media for Youth Peacebuilding in Africa

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Introduction

The role of young people in peacebuilding processes has received considerable recognition and attention in the last couple of decades. Article 17 of the African Youth Charter requires state parties to, amongst other things, strengthen the capacity of young people and youth organisations in peacebuilding.[1] Following its adoption in December 2015, United Nations Security Council Resolution 2250 on Youth, Peace and Security,[2] provided further impetus through its recognition of young people and the place of youth leadership at all stages of conflict prevention, protection and peacebuilding.

The nature and significance of this role has since evolved with the ubiquitous influence of technology, and social media in particular. Estimates show that about 75 percent of Africa's 422 million social media users are aged 30 or younger.[3] This uniquely positions young people to leverage the potential of social media for organising, advocacy and communication around peacebuilding efforts in Africa.

Against this backdrop, this article explores the linkages between social media and the role of young people in peacebuilding processes across Africa. It demonstrates emerging pathways and approaches to managing conflict using social media, the inherent challenges in this area and provides policy recommendations for the African Union (AU) and other regional bodies to better integrate the role of young people in peacebuilding.

Conflict, Youth and Peacebuilding Efforts in Africa

Over the last couple of decades, the nature of conflicts in Africa has evolved from interstate wars in the immediate post-colonial period to intrastate battles such as civil wars and insurgencies, and the rise of non-state actors like militias and extremist groups. The continent is also beset by violence driven by conflicts over natural resources, exacerbated by climate change. This is in addition to new forms of unrest associated with urbanisation and cyber conflict.[4] This has contributed to making the conflict environment in Africa notably more complex, with significant impact on civilians, marked by widespread displacement, mass killings and human rights abuses.

These conflicts usually have a disproportionate impact on the youth population on the continent – defined as individuals between the ages of 15 and 35 by the African Youth Charter. Young people are most vulnerable to the

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[1] See https://africanlii.org/akn/aa-au/act/charter/2006/african-youth/eng@2006-07-02.
[2] This Resolution was followed by successor resolutions in 2018 (2419) and 2020 (2535).
[3] GeoPoll, "Social Media Usage Trends in Africa: Geopoll Report" < https://www.geopoll.com/blog/social-media-usage-trends-in-africa-geopoll-report/> accessed 5 October 2024.
[4] International Institute for Strategic Studies, 'The Armed Conflict Survey 2022: Sub-Saharan Africa Regional Analysis' (18 November 2022) https://www.iiss.org/sv/online-analysis/online-analysis/2022/11/acs-2022-sub-saharan-africa/#:~:text=Skyrocketing%20external%20interventions%20in%20civil%20wars&text=In%20sub%2DSaharan%20Africa%2C%20this,internal%20conflicts%20without%20external%20intervention accessed 21 August 2024.

direct and indirect consequences of conflict such as lack of access to education, unemployment due to disruption of economic activities, displacement, and recruitment into armed groups. For instance, a Save the Children report showed that there were 411 violent attacks on educational facilities, pupils and teachers in 2024 alone, up from 341 in 2022.[5] As well as serving as a grave violation of the right to education for numerous children on the continent, these attacks rob young people of their chance at a meaningful future. On displacement, data by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees show that more than half of the displaced population on the continent were young people.[6]

Addressing the challenge posed this complex conflict context and its impact requires the adoption of new approaches and deployment of new tools to effectively respond to these new types of conflict and their multifaceted impact. The continent's youth can be an invaluable asset in this respect, with over 60 percent of the continent's population under the age of 35.[7] Young Africans are also increasingly more informed and politically aware. This puts them in a unique position to contribute to conflict prevention and broader peacebuilding efforts.

By including youth in decision-making processes, governments and other stakeholders can leverage their creativity and passion in developing solutions to address conflict. Young people can also be key to promoting social cohesion and tolerance through their unique ability to mobilise communities and foster positive change across cultural, ethnic and political divides. In the bigger picture, the continent's youth can be instrumental to addressing the founding causes of conflict in the first place, such as poverty, unemployment and inequality.[8]

Despite this, young people face significant barriers to contributing to peacebuilding efforts. At a basic level there is a lack of opportunities to participate in decision-making processes. Formal peacebuilding engagements are primarily led by government and established civil society organisations, often leaving out the crucial role that youth can play in such engagements. This includes limited participation of youth groups in peace talks, peace support operations, post-conflict reconstruction programmes and other official peace and security programmes. Even in cases where young people are engaged, they are often included at the periphery or only included in the implementation of decisions downstream.

Youth also face the challenge of lack of access to resources and funding and this constrains their ability to promote

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[5]   Save the Children, 'Education in Africa: Violent Attacks Against Schools Rose 20% in 2023' (16 February 2024) <https://www.savethechildren.net/news/education-africa-violent-attacks-against-schools-rose-20-2023> accessed 27 August 2024.

[6]   UNHCR, 'Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2020' (18 June 2021) <https://www.unhcr.org/uk/sites/uk/files/legacy-pdf/60b638e37.pdf> accessed 27 August 2024.

[7]   UNFCCC, 'Africa Youth Needs for Climate Action Report' (2023).

[8]   Skitter, W. Mbugua, "Youth' Role in Peacebuilding and Conflict Prevention" (LinkedIn, 24 March 2023) <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/youths-role-peacebuilding-conflict-prevention-m-ocharo-phd-hsc/>.

peace and prevent conflicts. This is a barrier that affects broader youth participation in development processes and becomes more challenging when considered against negative associations and perceptions young people face in the peace and security context.

Conversations at the intersection of young people and conflict often tilt towards negative stereotypes. Young people are often viewed as being prone to violence or apathetic to playing an active role in addressing conflict. A UNFPA Study on Youth, Peace and Security concluded that young people feel they are treated as a problem, instead of partners for peace, thereby contributing to an ongoing sense of injustice and anger.[9] This underscores the importance of debunking myths about role of youth in peacebuilding processes and the need to advance their inclusion in such processes.

Social Media and Youth Peacebuilding

Social media, as a demonstration of the increasing application of digital technologies in peacebuilding, has the potential of transforming efforts to prevent violence and promote peace across the African continent. It is well placed to address the barriers identified above and enable the realisation of the capability of the youth population in Africa for peacebuilding.

Buoyed by increasing mobile internet access and rising affordability of smartphones, there has been a substantial increase in social media usage in Africa over the last few years. From 2021 to 2024, the number of social media users on the continent grew by approximately 50 percent from 282 million to 422 million.[10] Of this, it is estimated that about 75 percent of users are aged 30 years or below.[11] Whilst this provides inherent challenges – some of which are discussed below – it also emphasises the blurring of lines between the nature and impacts of conflict taking place offline and the ramification online.

In similar vein, social media has transformed the tools available to stakeholders to engage and improve peacebuilding processes. Considering the relatively overwhelming high percentage of young people amongst social media users, its potential in the hands of young people creates new opportunities for fulfilling immediate and strategic objectives of peacebuilding on the continent. Using social media, young people can contribute to peacebuilding processes by leveraging the space it offers them to voice their opinions, connect across geographical and political divides, coordinate and organise.

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[9] Simpson, G. "The Missing Peace: Independent progress study on youth, peace and security". UNFPA 2018.

[10] DataReportal, 'Digital 2024: Global Overview Report' accessed 22 August 2024. It is worth noting that social media usage figures in Africa are relatively lower than other regions. Overall usage on the continent is 40 percent of the population, compared to 80 percent in Western Europe and 75 percent in East Asia.

[11] GeoPoll, "Social Media Usage Trends in Africa: GeoPoll Report" accessed 22 August 2024.

Social Media as a Tool for Mobilisation, Advocacy and Awareness Creation

In recent times, social media has proven to be a powerful tool for mobilising young people on various causes across the continent. Nigeria's youth used the platform X and Instagram to share stories, raise funds, and coordinate activities during the famous #EndSARS protests to end human rights abuses by security agencies in 2020. In South Africa, the #FeesMustFall movement relied on social media to mobilise students in protest against rising university fees. Through viral posts, hashtags and livestreams, students across the country were able to galvanise widespread support, ultimately forcing the government to respond to their demands. During recent elections in Senegal, young activists and influencers used their social media platforms to encourage electoral participation and monitor and report on electoral practices across the country. In what became a central insight and example on democratic consolidation on the African continent, the use of social media for advocacy and accountability campaigns played a central role in shaping the democratic process and outcome of the polls.[12]

Beyond advocacy and mobilisation, social media has also proven instrumental in raising awareness on conflict and peacebuilding-related issues. An example of this is the #CongoIsBleeding Campaign which continues to leverage the power of social media to draw global attention to the decades-long conflict over mineral resources in the Democratic Republic of Congo, and its impact on the citizens of the country.[13]

Social Media-Specific Roles in Youth Peacebuilding

Awareness creation is one of the most essential objectives that young people can use social media for peacebuilding processes. This is particularly the case in conflict contexts where messaging through traditional media such as radio, television and newspapers might not be easy or as effective due to the destruction of the infrastructure for traditional media which are often soft targets during conflicts. The displacement of people could also limit their ability to access information through such traditional means. Similarly, social media can also prove effective in enabling targeted messaging. Algorithms used by social media platforms such as X, Instagram and Facebook are effective in ensuring that posts and messages are directed at the right stakeholders and sections of the population. Whilst most conversations on the use of such algorithms have focused on their enablement of misinformation and disinformation, they can also prove effective in the right hands for countering information disorder. Corollary to this is the fact that such targeted messaging can help in challenging dominant conflict narratives and crystalise the right issues to promote informed dialogue.

Just as significant is the fact that social media can prove essential in the collection and analysis of data around

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12   The East African, 'How Youth Upended Politics in Senegal' (27 June 2024) accessed 27 August 2024.
13   Forbes Africa, "What is Trending in Africa in 2020" accessed 22 August 2024.

specific peacebuilding efforts. The tools available through social media platforms allow for easy collection and analysis of data that can demystify trends and streamline conversations. Young people have shown considerable adeptness in the use of these tools in other contexts, including those highlighted above. Applying these tools can contribute to enhancing peacebuilding efforts across the continent by providing useful understanding of the virtual environment and sentiments around specific conflicts and how best to respond.

Through the instrumentality of social media, young people are better able to share experiences and stories of ordinary people affected by conflict to a wider audience at little or no cost. Sharing such lived experiences can be powerful tools in peacebuilding processes and in helping to influence policy and action.

Finally, social media enables young people to organise, build solidarity and create online spaces for the exchange of ideas and meaningful dialogues. As documented in a report on Digital Peacebuilding by the Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict, such virtual spaces and networks often provide the building blocks that are then leveraged by governments, civil society organisation and other stakeholders for in-person engagements to progress peacebuilding processes.[14]

Concerns on the Use of Social Media Persist

In peacebuilding, as with other virtual spaces in society, the use of social media engenders concern steeped in obvious discrepancies in internet access, and gender and class imbalances across users and audiences. Instead of creating connections amongst communities for peacebuilding, social media risks creating new hierarchies and silos, with many users interacting predominantly with likeminded people, exacerbating polarisation of narratives and societal divisions. In extreme cases, social media can serve as a breeding ground for extremist views and hate speech, as well as providing a channel for their distribution at blistering speed.[15]

Despite the encouraging data on mobile internet penetration in Africa, there are still large sections of the population that are excluded from internet coverage and consequently the use of social media. In Western, Central and Eastern Africa, less than 50 percent of the population have access to and use the internet. There is also the added risk of language barriers preventing the meaningful participation of most persons affected by conflict or involved in peacebuilding processes, if conducted in a specific language over social media. It is therefore important that mediation and broader peacebuilding processes that take place online take into consideration the possibility of some stakeholders being excluded due to lack of access to internet and related barriers.

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[14] GPPAC, 'Best Practices Paper: Young People Harnessing the Power of Technology and Social Media for Peace' (February 2023) accessed 20 August 2024.

[15] Katrin Wittig and Sausan Ghosheh, 'The Role of Social Media in Early Peace-making: Help or Hindrance' (Pioneering Peace Pathways, September 2020).

Progressing the Role of Social Media in Youth Peacebuilding

The challenges notwithstanding, progressing the role of social media in peacebuilding processes in Africa holds enormous promise. It would empower the largest and most active demography on the continent to contribute meaningfully to addressing one of its most significant challenges. Realising this potential requires deliberate action by key institutions and stakeholders, especially at the continental and regional levels. The African Union, building on the foundations of the African Youth Charter, is strategically positioned to provide the needed policy direction to integrate the role of social media in peacebuilding processes.

At the forefront of such measures is the glaring need to recognise the importance of the role of social media in youth-led peacebuilding processes. The current policy framework for peacebuilding on the continent gives little recognition to the role of technology, and social media in particular, within the broader context of peacebuilding efforts. The Continental Framework for Youth, Peace and Security and the Implementation Plan for the framework makes negligible reference to the role of social media in peacebuilding processes. This demonstrates an obvious disconnect between the policy framework and the context within which it is designed to operate in present day.

There are admittedly a good number of positives points to be drawn from the comprehensive nature of the policy – encompassing the linkages between peacebuilding and the social, economic, cultural, political and governance spheres – yet the lack of focus on the intersection with social media is a glaring gap. With 2024 marking the midpoint of the framework's implementation, it is essential for the framework to be updated to provide a clear policy framework on the role of social media in youth peacebuilding as part of ongoing conversations to revise the policy.[16] The implementation of this needs to be complemented by concrete action to provide young people a seat at the table in strategic peacebuilding mechanisms such as the AU Peace and Security Council.[17]

In furtherance of the above recommendation, there is a need to develop useful Guides and Toolkits on the role of social media in peacebuilding processes for young people and youth-led organisations, to better inform their participation in peacebuilding processes. Such tools need to be complemented by deliberate programmes that promote digital literacy and critical thinking. The combination of both can enhance the role of young people in peacebuilding processes by equipping them with the skills needed to identify entry points for initiating dialogue, accessing online information to identify and counter misinformation, and to engage responsibly.

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[16] Emmaculate A. Liaga, 'Can Revised AU Policy Give Youth an Active Peacebuilding Role?' (Institute for Security Studies, 24 November 2023) accessed 22 August 2024.

[17] The Peace and Security Council of the AU was established by a Protocol on 9 July 2002. See https://africanlii.org/akn/aa-au/act/protocol/2002/establishment-of-peace-and-security-council/eng@2002-07-09.

The AU will also benefit from encouraging the integration of social media, and technology more broadly, in its peacebuilding efforts. As well as improving the effectiveness of such efforts through enhanced transparency, this would extend the reach of its communication mechanisms especially for young people and provide the right opportunities for them to engage.

In the bigger picture, the AU needs to improve on its work with members states to protect and promote digital rights, including the right to access information, the right to privacy and freedom of expression. Data from organisations such as Access Now show that between 2021 and 2023, there were approximately 50 internet shutdowns across various countries in Africa.[18] These actions are in clear violation of Article 9 of the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights. More specifically internet shutdowns and ancillary state actions are a direct contraction of Principle 38 the AU's Principles on Freedom of Expression and Access to Information which dissuades states from engaging in or condoning any disruption of access to the internet and other digital technologies for segments of the public or an entire population.[19]

Unfortunately, such actions reflect a global trend of governments using digital control measures at times of political unrest or conflict and has a disproportionate impact on the ability of young people to engage at such critical times, including their contribution to peacebuilding efforts. In addition to its efforts to address specific such human rights violations arising from such shutdowns, the AU can leverage its extant instruments such as the Convention on Cyber Security and Personal Data Protection[20] to develop implementation guidelines that better recognise, protect and promote the role of young people in critical processes like peacebuilding on the continent.

Finally, the AU can promote the use of social media for peacebuilding by youth on the continent by improving the policy framework and advocating for investments that address the digital divide in Africa. This covers a wide range of actions starting with the expansion of internet access to rural and underserved communities. It also includes making digital technologies and internet usage more affordable. This will contribute to ensuring that young people, regardless of their background, socio-economic status or location can participate in peace initiatives online.

As much of every day live interactions continue to migrate online at an unprecedented pace, it is essential that the AU, other regional bodies on the continent and individual countries take the required action to bridge digital divides. This would play a significant role in ensuring that social media-driven peacebuilding efforts are inclusive,

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[18] See for instance, Access Now, 'Weapons of Control, Shields of Impunity: Internet Shutdowns in 2022' (24 May 2023) accessed 23 August 2024. In 2021 alone, there were 19 cases of restriction of internet access in 12 countries across Africa, including Nigeria, Ethiopia and Uganda.

[19] The Declaration of Principles of Freedom of Expression and Access to Information in Africa was adopted by the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights in Banjul, in 2019.

[20] The African Union Convention on Cyber Security and Personal Data Protection was adopted in Malabo in June 2014 and came into force in 2023.

representative and effective in responding to the diverse and increasingly complex conflict context on the continent.

END

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