

Beyond uprisings, real change requires youth participation in governance and politics – Expert

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Addis Ababa, 2 November 2012 (ECA) – In a continent marked by democratic transitions, youth should not be marginalized from critical political and decision-making processes in their societies, said author and professor, Alcinda Honwana, at the International Conference on Youth on the theme: "Youth and Democratization in Africa: Lessons Learned and Comparative Experiences" held from 1-3 November 2012 at the United Nations Conference Centre.

Prof. Honwana said that as fertility rates begin to decline in the coming decades, Africa would have the largest youth cohort in its history and as such, "it is imperative to directly involve the younger generations in state governance and politics."

Yet, as debated by the participants, the context – one where societies are struggling with economic decline, strained educational systems, high unemployment rates, and insecure livelihoods – compounds the way forward. New liberal prescriptions, such as Structural Adjustments Programmes have over the years, decimated the continent's education, health and industrial sectors, among others, she said, adding that young people face inescapable socio-economic vulnerability and expressed in terms of 'eking out living', 'making do' or 'just getting by'.

Drawing from her published research conducted in Mozambique, Senegal, South Africa and Tunisia between 2008 and 2011, Honwana's work zeroes in on the notion of youth in **'waithood'**, a portmanteau term that combines wait and -hood that means waiting for adulthood. Honwana made the connection to this idea with **'youthman'**, a popular expression in West Africa that refers to men 35 years of age and older who have yet to attain social adulthood. In her view, "the majority of young Africans are defined in terms of social expectations and responsibilities."

However, she said "this is not a lost generation." She stressed that young people are not passive or waiting for things to change; "they are deeply engaged through popular culture, such as music, theatre, graffiti and other art forms, as well as in debates on social networks and in political demonstrations and street protests".

"The lyrics in their songs, the verses in their poems, the scripts of their plays and the content of their discourses present a strong social critique to the status quo - they are questioning their **waithood** status," she stressed.

Honwana extrapolated on revolts in the north African region and the inspiration these offered to the rest of the world, including the Occupy Wall Street, as well as European and Latin American youth movements. She further spoke on the protests in Senegal under the *Y'en a Marre* (enough is enough) movement and similar expressions in Mozambique in 2008 and 2010 concluding that although the movements in Africa resulted in change, the fundamental issues are yet to be addressed and resolved. In Mozambique, explained the author, "poverty, unemployment, corruption and bad governance continue to affect the lives of Mozambicans, especially youth."

The protests have shed light on gaps in youth social movements aimed at political change. And, as argued by Honwana, while young people struggle to articulate what the 'new political' will look like, traditional political forces have occupied that political space. She questioned whether young people can push for fundamental, political and socio-economic change on the continent without entering the formal political arena.

The session noted that street protests and political activities outside formal party policies may not be enough to steer the direction of democratic change. As underscored by many of the experts at the forum, current social movements and forms of democratic participation are still unfolding, and they may not yet constitute the real meaning of the term 'revolution'.

The International Conference on Youth on the theme: "Youth and Democratization in Africa: Lessons Learned and Comparative Experiences" is a joint initiative of the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA), the United Nations Development Programme and the Institute for [Democracy and Electoral Assistance \(IDEA\)](#).

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