

# Youth in Africa: Participation of Youth as Partners in Peace and Development in Post-Conflict Countries

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## **Opening Remarks**

By

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Excellencies,  
Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,  
Friends and Colleagues,

On behalf of all my colleagues at the Office of the Special Adviser on Africa (OSAA), I would like to join our co-organizer, the Division for Social Policy and Development (DSPD) of the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN-DESA), in extending a warm welcome to all the participants. I would like to express my sincere gratitude to the Government of Namibia for graciously hosting this Expert Group Meeting. Our deep appreciation and profound thanks to you, Honourable Nahas Angula, and to your country, for the warm reception and hospitality.

As you are aware, the United Nations was centrally engaged in Namibia's struggle for independence, through, inter alia, the UN Transition Assistance Group in Namibia (UNTAG). I represented the UN Secretary-General as his deputy Special Representative during this period. I am here today as his Special Adviser on Africa, and I take this opportunity to salute the Government and people of Namibia on their many important achievements in the past sixteen years.

During those 16 years, Namibia has demonstrated that Namibians are capable of running their own affairs. Looking at the capital – Windhoek – and, I am sure, the country as a whole, you have given a good account of yourselves in running a democratic system of government. Not only have you established a vibrant, multiparty democratic culture; you have also shown a great deal of

finesse in running your economy. As one of those who helped you implement Security Council Resolution 435, I feel justifiably proud to have contributed to the beginning of your journey as a free and independent country.

At the United Nations we are paying increasing attention to youth issues in Africa. The Department of Economic and Social Affairs, through the Division for Social Policy and Development, has been working to enhance awareness of the global situation of youth and to increase the recognition of their rights and aspirations. Moreover, the Division promotes national youth policies, national youth coordinating mechanisms and national youth programmes of action as integral parts of social and economic development, in cooperation with both governmental and non-governmental organizations. The Division also strives to strengthen the participation of youth in decision-making processes at all levels in order to increase their impact on national development and international cooperation.

Just last month, the UN hosted a Global Youth Leadership Summit on 29-31 October, in New York, to strengthen the worldwide movement to engage young people in decisions about the future of their communities, regions, and our emerging global society. The Summit was a major success as youth representing all 192 Member States of the UN met to share ideas and to discuss action plans on ways to reduce poverty and accelerate the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals, as well as to build peace, with sport and culture as vehicles for reaching out to youth worldwide.

The Economic Commission for Africa (ECA), in collaboration with the African Union and other stakeholders in African development, is organizing the

Fifth African Development Forum (ADF-V), on Youth and Leadership in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, to be held in Addis Ababa, emanating from the acknowledgement by various stakeholders that political stability, social cohesion, and economic prosperity lie, *inter alia*, in harnessing the capacities of the youth.

The latest statistics show that nearly two-thirds (62 per cent, or 564 million) of Africa's 906 million people are under the age of 24. And yet, it is in this group that low rates of school enrollment, soaring unemployment rates and high rates of HIV/AIDS are most prevalent. In post-conflict societies, the situation is even worse. At 21 per cent, youth unemployment in Africa is much higher than the world average of 14.4 per cent and second only to the Middle East and North Africa's 25.6 per cent.

Thus, the high proportion of Africa's youth population contributing to the severity of these problems is of great concern for both the local and international communities. Moreover, with 55 percent of young persons between 15-24 living on less than \$2 a day, and approximately 1.3 million currently living as refugees, coupled with their high level of joblessness and the fact that youths account for half of all new HIV infections, the need for urgent measures to improve current conditions for African youth is evident.

Many youths are trapped in a vicious cycle of violence, fear and poverty generated by armed conflicts, and these erode their opportunities for development due to the absence of a secure environment. Unfortunately, youth policies often tend to be driven by negative stereotypes of young people, in the context of drug abuse, violence and delinquency. As a result, youth continue to be excluded from the decision-making processes at the national, regional and

local levels. The concerns of the youth population and their potential as development actors have so far failed to attract the full attention of policy makers and development partners.

There is an urgent need, therefore, to develop clear strategies and policies aimed at promoting the participation of young people as important stakeholders, actors and partners. Such strategies could include: setting the youth issue as a national priority; involving them in policy-making processes; exploring policy options; providing opportunities for policy dialogue with youth; and building institutional capacity to fill in the gaps.

It is in this connection that my Office felt the need to organize this Expert Group Meeting, with the aim of critically analyzing the complexity and gravity of the challenges facing youth in post-conflict situations in Africa – with the core objective of devising specific strategies and mechanisms to include youth as central stakeholders in rehabilitation, reconciliation, and rebuilding of war-torn communities, and contributing to sustainable development in their countries.

Ladies and gentlemen, without trying to pre-empt the discussions that will follow, I would like to take this opportunity to highlight the main objectives of this Expert Group Meeting. Our purpose in this meeting is to focus on three main themes:

- (i) Integration of youth, in particular, the reintegration of ex-combatants, into society;
- (ii) Creation of job/work opportunities and income-generating activities for youth; and

- (iii) Inclusion of youth in the rebuilding and rehabilitation efforts initiated by local governments and/or other stakeholders in their communities, with a focus on securing access to basic services.

Specifically, the Expert Group Meeting should examine the particular challenges that young people are facing in post-conflict societies and, based on lessons learned and interactive dialogue with youth representatives, it should develop a set of action-oriented recommendations that will be implemented by national, local and international policy makers, including civil society organizations (CSOs) and the private sector. In this regard, I am particularly pleased to see the encouraging turnout and participation by these groups. But we also recognize that a meaningful discussion requires the active participation of the Government. In this regard, I would like to recognize the high-level government representation here today.

Distinguished delegates, we tried to bring together practitioners, academia, government officials and civil society organizations so that we could have different perspectives. We want the meeting to be a platform for frank exchanges about how to promote partnerships between national and local governments, youth leaders, academia, the media and other experts to identify innovative and effective strategies for incorporating youth perspectives into policy design and implementation in post-conflict societies.

I wish you all successful deliberations.

Thank you.