



Summary

The youth generation in Africa is booming, with one-third of the population aged between 15 and 35. At the same time, youth tend to be disengaged from the democratic process. Young people vote less frequently, stand as candidates less often and remain underrepresented in electoral managerial functions. Electoral management bodies (EMBs) in Africa play a critical role in promoting youth participation in electoral processes. EMBs should develop creative strategies for youth inclusion and engagement. The experiences of EMBs already pushing this agenda should be shared among the community of practitioners. For EMBs that have not yet fully engaged, these success stories may serve as an important source of inspiration for initiatives that fit their historical contexts.

About International IDEA

The International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA) is an intergovernmental organization with a mission to support sustainable democracy worldwide.

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Youth participation in electoral processes: new roles for African electoral management bodies

Background

Young people between the ages of 15 and 35 constitute one-third of Africa's population. However, youth's influence on national politics remains limited. There is a general sense that traditional politics and representative democracy—whereby voters determine the outcome of power struggles at the ballot box—fail to attract the attention of younger cohorts who feel alienated from political processes.

Recent events have shown that youth are critical in bringing about social and political transformation in Africa. From the dissolution of the apartheid regime in South Africa in the early 1990s and the Jasmine Revolution in Tunisia in 2011 to the 'Y'en a Marre!' ('Enough is enough!') and 'Ma Carte d'Electeur, Mon Arme' ('My voting card, my weapon') campaigns in Senegal in 2011–12 and the third-term revolution in Burkina Faso in 2014, young people remain at the forefront of democratic struggles on the continent.

When young people engage, authoritarian regimes may fall and countries' political trajectories may shift. Nevertheless, African youth have been less involved in the aftermath of such critical engagements. Perceptions of exclusion have resulted in young people seeking alternative ways to express their dissatisfaction. When frustration reaches high levels, especially in transitional and fragile states, youth may turn to civil disobedience and violence. Therefore, the inclusion of youth in political processes is crucial to longer-term stability and peace.

Furthermore, youth engagement in formulating tomorrow's politics is crucial because inclusive participation is a fundamental political and democratic right. However, actively promoting the inclusion of youth in political processes is not only about norms, values and rights, but also about practical politics. Younger cohorts find themselves in a different situation and their political and socioeconomic priorities differ from those of their older counterparts.

Having grown up in a period of transformation related to the increased use of information and communications technologies, young people bring new visions and ideas to the political sphere. They are, therefore, key democratic stakeholders, a sentiment expressed in the African Youth Charter: 'Africa's greatest resource is its youthful population and through their active and full participation, Africans can surmount the difficulties that lie ahead' (African Union Commission 2006: 1).

Box 1. South Africa

In the run-up to the 2014 elections, the Electoral Commission of South Africa (IEC) launched the 'IXSA' ('I Vote South Africa') campaign to encourage youth registration, participation and engagement. The campaign, which was rolled out on television, radio and the Internet, featured citizens and celebrities discussing their commitment to voting. The IEC recruited a team of three social media content creators to further engage with youth on Facebook, Mxit and Twitter. The number of users who liked the Commission's Facebook page increased from 1,400 to 10,000 during the first 24 hours of the campaign. Similarly, the first 10 days brought about 16,000 new followers to the Commission's Twitter account. By March 2015 the IEC had attracted 220,000 and 70,000 followers to its Facebook and Twitter accounts, respectively.

The role of electoral management bodies in promoting youth participation

Elections lie at the heart of democracy. Adequate participation in electoral processes is therefore an important way to secure youth's inclusion in and contribution to the democratic process. For decades, ensuring youth turnout on election day has been a key focus for electoral management bodies (EMBs). However, there is a need to implement more sophisticated multi-dimensional approaches to engage with youth.

The tasks of an EMB include determining voter eligibility; receiving and validating the nomination of electoral contestants (including political parties and candidates); conducting the actual polling; and counting and tabulating the votes. In addition, EMBs may also engage in activities related to voter registration, civic and voter education, and dispute resolution. In this context, EMBs have either a formal or an informal mandate to promote youth participation (International IDEA 2014a).

Formally, international obligations and commitments or national legislation may entrust EMBs with a responsibility to ensure equal opportunities for participation in electoral processes. Informally, such commitments might bestow on EMBs an implicit role in removing existing barriers to effective youth participation. EMBs' strategies and policies may also outline key objectives, programmes and activities as well as stakeholder partnerships, or set out strategies for the promotion of youth participation.

In Zanzibar, for example, the EMB adopted a Gender and Social Inclusion Policy (Zanzibar Electoral Commission 2015) which targets women, youth and people with disabilities. The policy focuses on equal opportunities in decision-making and staffing structures, and equal participation in the management of electoral processes. It outlines the EMB's commitment to equal access to voter registration processes, voter and civic education and election observation; and to the prevention and mitigation of election-related violence against women, youth and people with disabilities.

National, regional and international interlocutors—including EMBs but also other actors—should likewise tailor their programming strategies for increasing youth participation by considering youth as (a) voters, (b) electoral contestants and (c) electoral administrators. These potential roles are explained in the following subsections.

Youth as voters

EMBs have traditionally focused on programmes and activities encouraging youth to vote in elections. However, civic and voter education programmes also increase young people's commitment to democratic values and principles, their interest in political affairs and awareness of opportunities to engage, and their knowledge of how elections work in practice. The use of language and images that appeal to the youth constituency has been central to this line of work.

Civic and education programmes implemented by EMBs can take several forms. First, EMBs may work with ministries and authorities responsible for education to develop school curricula and materials on democracy and elections. In doing so, EMBs help build a foundation for responsible, participatory and engaged citizenship and awareness of citizen–state relations, roles and responsibilities. EMBs in some countries have also been involved in the organization of 'democracy weeks' (e.g. in South Africa) and inter-school competitions whereby students compete with their peers on their knowledge on democracy issues (e.g. in Botswana).

Second, the need to communicate with youth on their own terms has also led EMBs to engage with youth on social media platforms. However, EMBs need to be aware of issues related to their social media presence, for example effective planning as well as recruitment and training of expert social media content developers (see Box 1). Moreover, EMBs might need to develop social media policies or guidelines and monitor mechanisms to avoid postings that could compromise their impartiality.

Third, EMB voter education activities can address young people's

Box 2. Nigeria

The Independent Electoral Commission of Nigeria (INEC) has partnered with the National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) to support the recruitment of ad hoc voter registration and polling station workers. Young people under the age of 30 serve for one year under the different service components and participation in the scheme is required for jobs in the public service. With the introduction of biometric voter registration in 2010, NYSC members facilitated the transition to the use of new technologies. The INEC now trains and deploys young people enrolled in the NYSC programme for its election day operations. While challenges remain and further improvements to the INEC–NYSC relationship are warranted, it is believed that the partnership has had a positive impact. It has opened up new opportunities for youth in hands-on participation beyond merely showing up on election day to cast their ballot, and restored confidence in youth competencies and capacities. Moreover, it is believed to have contributed to decreased election-related litigation and reduced the INEC's ad hoc staffing costs.

motivation and preparedness to participate constructively in elections. This may involve working with civil society and political parties (including their youth wings) to organize seminars and voter education campaigns. In Ghana, for example, the EMB has worked closely with political parties, religious leaders and youth-focused civil society to provide workshops and seminars on the steps required to take part in elections, and on election regulations (including unlawful actions and sanctions) in order to prevent election-related fraud and youth violence.

Youth as electoral contestants

EMBs can contribute to enhanced youth participation in political spheres by supporting youth candidates to contest elections. While statistics on youth presence in African parliaments are lacking, the number of young parliamentarians on the continent remains low. EMBs can help political parties and youth candidates to enhance generational representation by, for example, offering training to youth contestants. Providing these contestants with knowledge of the electoral environment and the legal framework governing elections (including rules and regulations linked to campaigning) may help them run more effectively. In Ghana, for example, the National Commission for Civic Education organizes training for youth candidates in the pre-election phase to clarify elected parliamentarians' legal mandates, roles and responsibilities.

EMBs can also engage with political parties to lower intra-party barriers which prevent youth from reaching electable positions. Such work could go beyond promoting non-discrimination in party codes of conduct. For example, parties could stipulate a certain percentage of youth on the list of candidates it submits to registration authorities. In countries where EMBs convene interparty dialogue platforms, this entity can facilitate agreement among political parties on such measures. Furthermore, where EMBs are also responsible for party registration, they can also track and report on candidate lists and on

compliance with agreed frameworks. Even where rules for youth inclusion are not in place, reports on candidate lists reflecting age composition can increase transparency and make the generational gap more visible.

EMBs are often key partners in electoral reform processes (International IDEA 2014b). When engaging in such activities, EMBs may help ensure that the youth perspective is brought into the wider policy debate. In countries where lower age limits exist for electable seats, EMBs can undertake comparative studies, engage with electoral stakeholders on the desirability of such regulations and provide recommendations for reform. The issue of legislated quotas or reserved seats for youth is also an issue that EMBs might want to explore when electoral reform is on the table.

Youth as electoral administrators

Beyond promoting youth participation as voters and electoral contestants, EMBs may also take a more proactive approach to integrating young persons within their own organizational structures. Young people have different, and largely untapped, skill sets. In particular, they are more tech-savvy than their older counterparts. At the same time, EMBs are increasingly resorting to technologies both in their daily work and in their management of election operations such as voter registration and results management. Young people who grew up with the Internet, email and social media as part of their daily life and working routine may hence bring added value to the work of EMBs.

EMBs should also consider mainstreaming and targeting youth in their human resources policies (see Box 2). Youth staff must be given opportunities for training and capacity enhancement in order to work more effectively, move up the EMB hierarchy and obtain more senior positions. Training could involve mentoring schemes or participation in seminars. Moreover, young qualified staff must be given a chance to take part in regional and international conferences and round tables. When more senior positions become available, EMBs

International IDEA's work with electoral management bodies (EMBs) in Africa

International IDEA takes a holistic approach to democracy-building in Africa, supporting electoral and constitution-building processes, political parties, citizen-led assessments of democracy, and democracy and development. Gender issues are mainstreamed in all of International IDEA's activities, ensuring a focus on women's participation and representation.

International IDEA works closely with EMBs across Africa. For example, in a partnership with the African Union, we offer workshops for EMB commissioners and staff, utilizing the Building Resources for Democracy, Governance and Elections (BRIDGE) curriculum. In addition, using the Electoral Risk Management Tool (ERMT), we support EMBs seeking to prevent and mitigate election-related violence. We also offer assistance to EMBs developing policies to improve women's participation in electoral processes.

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should consider promoting younger staff to help close intergenerational gaps. EMBs can also establish mutually engaging relationships with key partners to employ young people for voter registration and election day activities.

Recommendations

The youth constituency in Africa is too large to remain on the margins of the democratic process. EMBs must engage in multifaceted programmes and start thinking more creatively about how to bring youth on board. Specifically, EMBs need to start taking a more proactive approach to engaging with youth as voters, electoral candidates and electoral managers.

This, in turn, requires EMBs to engage more effectively with key partners on youth-related issues. Two actors of particular importance are political parties and civil society organizations. Political parties remain a significant barrier to youth participation in decision-making structures through their control over the submission of the lists of electoral candidates. EMBs should therefore consider facilitating interparty dialogue to foster broader agreements on the need for the advancement of youth as electoral contestants.

Furthermore, by working with youth-led or youth-focused civil society groups, EMBs are more likely to achieve their goals when it comes to promoting youth as voters. EMBs also need to look at their own internal structures and policies to promote youth participation in the management of electoral processes.

Regional organizations and networks can provide a good platform for promoting the work carried out by EMBs in this field. Building on existing platforms of exchange, EMBs should be given the space to share experiences and explore new and innovative ways of engaging younger cohorts. Through the documentation of these exchanges and the development of resources, the results may serve as an important source of inspiration for other EMBs in Africa and beyond.

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