

Mr. Vidar Helgesen
Secretary-General, International IDEA

Opening remarks at International Conference on Youth and Democratization in Africa: Lessons learnt and comparative experiences
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H.E Ato Redwan Hussien, Advisor to the Prime Minister of Ethiopia on Public Mobilization and Participation

Mr. Mr. Carlos Lopes, Executive Secretary, UNECA,
Mr. Vitalie Muntean, Deputy Director of UNDP Ethiopia,
Excellencies, distinguished panelists and youth representatives,

Starting a speech like this - addressing all the notable personalities on stage - is quite a contrast with my first encounter with an African youth movement gathering. This was close to 25 years ago; I was in Tanzania as leader of a Norwegian youth campaign against apartheid. I attended a meeting of the ANC youth league in exile and the leader opened the meeting shouting: "Roar young lions, roar!" Needless to say it turned out to be a very lively gathering. Although we gather here today in a distinguished hall of the United Nations, I do hope that the meeting will produce "roaring" recommendations that we can take forward in the work of the UN and IDEA when it comes to youth and democracy.

Youth have always been at the forefront of political change. I learned that from my encounters with apartheid South Africa. I remember vividly how parents and grandparents were much more cautious, much more afraid to confront apartheid whereas the young people said: we have no choice - if we are to have a future we need to take risks. That was South Africa 25 years ago. Last year in North Africa we saw the same thing. Experts on the Arab region had often held that the youth there were too complacent and too cautious to really get politically active - but they proved the experts wrong.

We are even seeing it in Europe, in North America and other countries that much of the discontent following the financial and economic crisis is spearheaded by youth. Again, youth have always been at the forefront of political change. But what is different today

from 20 or 10 or even 5 years ago is the incredible global awareness and connectedness of youth and this brings something new. We have for the first time in human history a global political consciousness and youth are the forefront of that rapid evolution as well.

Everywhere in the world people are connected, everywhere in the world people know what is going on elsewhere in the world. We still do not know how this will affect politics in the longer term, but we can be quite sure that it will affect politics throughout the world. Hopefully it will add to democracy's promise. It is clear from global barometers and from seeing real politics at play in different parts of the world that young people are eager on democracy's promise. They want political equality, they want social and economic inclusion and opportunity - and they want accountable rulers.

But too often we also see youth frustrated by democracy's perils - by political polarization where political fist-fighting gets more important than producing results, by corruption and inequality, absence of opportunity and the abuse of power. These vices often make youth frustrated and disenfranchised.

We have seen some of this already in North Africa. Many young people that were at the forefront of revolutions in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, feel that while they owned the revolutions, they don't own its aftermath: they don't get to participate. Here lies a real challenge: How can young people make the leap from protest to participation, from revolt to representation? How can we make sure that not only do they get their voices heard, but also their votes count and their points of view influence the politics of governing?

Governments, on their part, need to be aware that if they do not reform, if they do not adapt, they may face restless and revolting youth. Therefore the issue of youth participation and youth representation needs to be taken seriously at the level of governments and at the level of international organizations. But the main responsibility still rests with young people themselves: to get organized, to attain the necessary skills, to tackle the adversity and the frustrations that will eventually come when moving from protest to participation, to not give up. To not give up - because the ultimate promise of youth participation in democratic processes is not only that youth can change governments but because they can be a powerful force for changing governance - - for modernizing and reinventing governance. They can be such a force exactly because

young people have a new global consciousness, because they communicate in new ways. We see all over the world how governments grapple with and are unable to communicate well with their citizens and therefore in the exercise of governance, young people can and should play a much bigger role.

Over these next days of the conference I do hope that we will get those “roaring recommendations” - at least on how in Africa we can promote the African Charter on Democracy, Governance Elections and the African Youth Charter. There is so much that needs to be done to domesticate and implement both these important instruments, and I hope this conference will identify ways forward for popularizing these instruments and making sure that the qualities and values they reflect are carried forward throughout this continent and to the inspiration of other regions of the world.

Thank you very much.