



GSJ: Volume 12, Issue 12, December 2024, Online: ISSN 2320-9186
www.globalscientificjournal.com

Contesting Youthhood: Reflections on Youth Realities in Kenya

Victor Onyango

Abstract

Youth, as a concept, has varied meanings and images. Youth represents the time between childhood dependence and adulthood's independence. Youthhood is a complex and multifaceted period of personal growth, self-discovery, and future-oriented planning. The youthhood debate arises from countries and development institutions using different definitions of youth. From a policy coherence perspective, it is less about the lower age limit than it is about the upper age limit. According to some United Nations definitions, the oldest youth can differ by as much as ten years from some national definitions. Additionally, youth are typically defined as individuals between the ages of 15 and 35, which raises the question: do 15-year-olds and 35-year-olds have enough in common to make coherent policy decisions? In addition, age-based definitions tend to create hard boundaries, which result in a compartmentalized policy, which leaves little room for the notion of transition, which is so crucial to understanding young people today.

Youth aspirations are a heterogeneous social category that requires an analytical framework. Its aim is twofold: both anthropological studies emphasizing African youth's heterogeneity and demographic understandings of youth based on their age groups are reconciled. Second, to expand the concept of youth so that future programs can be more context-sensitive and tailored according to the young people's needs. Despite youth being a significant demographic category, youths face a variety of opportunities and challenges regardless of their age.

It is critical to consider how youth perceive youthhood in relation to interpersonal interactions, institutional structures, social practices, and norms, as well as in relation to a sense of self, purpose, and future. This assessment is made more in-depth and complex by taking things into account in relation to the modern contexts of young ambitions and resilience. The framework underlines how it's important to comprehend youth if you want to comprehend a person's goals. The ability of young people to provide sophisticated, introspective, and nuanced insight into their current circumstances and potential futures must also be recognized and emphasized.

This publication is intended to serve as the framework for subsequent research examining and contextualizing youth aspirations. Three significant contributions from this journal to the literature on youth are made. First, it offers a conceptual framework and methodology for studying youths across the continent. Second, it highlights the characteristics that characterize a young Kenyan. Third, it offers crucial insights for a development industry that is becoming more and more interested in involving youths. This journal underlines the significance of knowing young people in context by adopting a critical perspective on youth and acknowledging their differences and commonalities.

Introduction

The social category of "youth" is ambiguous. Although it is thought of as a passing phase, the identity is situational, opportunistic, and transferable. How can the social mobility and transience of youth be reconciled despite the looming demographic crisis to comprehend and understand the current "youth bulge" in Africa?

Youth in Africa is studied from two perspectives: those who use a person's birth year to define youth, and those who examine youth as an environment-dependent social category. The first body of literature is largely influenced by the social sciences and concentrates on youth as a category clearly defined by age (such as economics, political science, and sociology). Youth are both "at risk" and a possible "threat," according to a lot of the research (Burton, 2007). They are, at best, a marginalized group of people. Particular focus is placed on the difficulties associated with both unemployment and underemployment (Baah-Boateng, 2016), as well as the link between a large proportion of unemployed young men and violence (Urdal, 2004).

As a result of anthropology and critical development studies, the second body of literature emphasizes that youth perform multiple functions depending on context (Christiansen et al., 2006; Blum, 2007; Aime & Pietropolli Charmet, 2014; Honwana & De Boeck, 2005). These academics, who mostly employ ethnographic approaches, view youth and adulthood as more than just chronological ages. The concept of "youth" has strong ties to context and social standing. Youth "is differently constituted and configured in different times and places," according to Christiansen et al. (2006: 10). It might be a significant social category in one setting, a minor one in another, and outmoded in still another.

This publication is intended to link these two sets of literature, and it provides a framework for an analysis of heterogeneities between youths. In the context of critical ethnographic studies on young people, youth is seen as a mixed and socially determined concept that evolves in different contexts and over time. But it also recognizes that, as a demographic factor, "youth" must be looked at systematically in theory and policy.

By 2050, Africa's population is projected to double, and its median age will be half that of EU countries (Landau, I.B. et al., 2019). Scholars and policymakers should know the needs and ambitions of this large, public community without overlooking the wide range of heterogeneities which exist within that growing demographic group.

Three significant contributions from this journal to the literature on youth are made. First, it offers a conceptual framework and methodology for studying youths across the continent. Several significant sources of heterogeneity are suggested by the analytical framework that was created. These sources are likely to be significant outside of Kenya and can be evaluated and expanded upon in other contexts. By meticulously examining youths' heterogeneity, it is possible to bridge the scholarship on African youth and study "youth" as a (contested) social category without ignoring the complexity of identity among this big population.

Second, it highlights the characteristics that characterize a young Kenyan. Youth encompasses much more than just a single age range. According to the anthropological literature on youth (such as Sommers, 2015; Christiansen et al., 2006; Ungruhe, 2010), the transition from youth to adulthood is not age-restricted. The desire to pass from the social category of "youth" into maturity is another driver of youth aspirations. For young men, specifically, social membership in their ethnic group as men is connected with achieving "adult" status.

Third, it offers crucial insights for a development industry that is becoming more and more interested in involving young people. Even one's fundamental idea of what it means to be a "youth" can differ significantly from youth identity. Identity markers and differences are strongly related. Practitioners must be aware of these variations to create programs that successfully address the heterogeneities in this social category and prevent discrepancies between what various groups of youths require and what development policies and programs provide.

This journal also expounds on the intersectional nature of the social category of the youth. The youth tend to belong to various categories simultaneously, which consequently places them nowhere in particular hence lacking belonging. Because the youth are "everywhere", local community uses dominant categorization of children and adults to explain what the youth are. What falls outside these two dominant categories describes generally who the youth are. This is because the youth cannot entirely identify with any of the socially standardized categories with which they (youth) relate. For instance they are neither children nor adults yet they significantly contribute to both categories and have characteristic attributes of each category. Throughout this article, therefore, unless otherwise stated, I use the term youth to refer to persons who identify or who the community identifies as such, irrespective of their numeric age. This population is heterogeneous in terms of gender, location, marital status and so on, and therefore an approach to youthhood based on the notion of intersectionality is useful (Crenshaw 2006).

Defining Youthhood

Definitions of youthhood are embedded in constructions of power, authority, and social worth (Christiansen et al. 2006). While biological considerations are appreciated, these are accomplished by social constructions through performativity and functionality. Culturally in Kenya, youthhood is described as a time in passing from childhood to adulthood, which relies heavily on the body's ability and readiness to perform adult functions. Young people are termed youth when able to procreate and adults when they actualize the anticipated ability by procreating. Like childhood, youthhood is also applied differently for boys and girls. Gender also leads to differentiated impacts for both boys and girls. For instance, marriage and procreation were critical for women, while protection and provision mattered most for the men. Youthhood could thus be termed the "potentiality stage" while adulthood is the "actualization stage". If one's potential is not demonstrated, then that person's status and identity does not elevate to adulthood.

International law does not have a generally accepted definition of youth based on age. Different nations, regional groups, and international institutions, including the World Bank and several UN organizations, utilize various chronological categories to define youth. Instead of using a set cut-off age or a straightforward biological or psychological development demographic assumption to designate youth, the article acknowledges that youth is a socially constructed idea or category that is lived as a transient experience. Young people might be thought of as being in a transitional stage between childhood and maturity, marked by rites of passage that are influenced by their social, cultural, and political contexts rather than being predetermined by the passage of time alone. Achieving adult status is also marked by a variety of cultural, sociological, developmental, socioeconomic, and political milestones, all of which are dynamic, varied, and frequently unpredictable. Failure to achieve these adult milestones, whether they are related to socioeconomic standing, marriage or parenthood, political engagement, or religious rituals, may impede transitions into adulthood, frustrating youth in what has been referred to as a protracted period of "waithood," and challenging overly simplistic age-based definitions of youth.

The consequences of these factors may differ according to geography, gender, class, ethnicity, or caste, as well as the whole range of identities, cultures, and circumstances that span all of these boundaries and reflect the intersectionality of lived experience within the juvenile demographic. Both the commonality of young people's experience within and between contexts, as well as the varied nature of young populations as representing the extremely context-specific microcosms of their larger societies, must be considered in functional definitions of youth. Youthhood is viewed as a stage that exists between childhood and adulthood and cannot be primarily categorized by age.

Methodology

This study was a two-phase, youth-led investigation that consisted of a quantitative and qualitative inquiry. Qualitative data collection was conducted through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions to dig deeper into the survey responses. Independently, the research team randomly selected (18–34) year old from 17 counties (counties where survey respondents were sampled). The participants were identified through purposive sampling, leveraging national and local youth networks, universities, youth groups, and study participants' friends and family. Similarly, key informants (organizations, institutions, and individuals) were purposively identified for potential based on their knowledge, experiences, and perspectives.

Overall, the data was collected from youth with different demographical characteristics including socio-cultural, economic, ethnic, religious, gender, disability and sexual orientations. The key concepts investigated in this research include; youthhood, youth aspirations, dignified employment, adaptability and resilience. The focus of this journal article is on youthhood.

Contextual Background: Defining a Youth

The concept of Youth lacks a precise and universally accepted definition worldwide. Youth is defined differently in different contexts based on social, economic, legal, political, and geographical factors (Arubayi, 2015). First and foremost, youth is viewed as a transitional stage between childhood and adulthood, the boundaries between which are not always clear. Secondly, the characteristics of Youth, such as physical, cognitive, and social development, vary widely within the age group, making it difficult to establish an exact age range for Youth. Thirdly, the diversity of experiences and challenges faced by young people in various parts of the world makes it difficult to develop a universal definition of Youth. Finally, subjective factors such as individual experiences, personal aspirations, and perceptions influence the concept of Youth. Consequently, the concept is fluid and open to interpretation, reflecting the dynamic nature of this significant life stage.

While it is commonly understood that youth is a transitional period between childhood and adulthood, there is no universal definition of the age range that constitutes youth. This is in contrast to the more explicit description of a child in international law, "every human being under eighteen years". For statistical purposes, the World Bank (WB) and the United Nations (UN) use an age-based definition of a 15-24-year-old cohort. International Labour

Organization (ILO) applies a wider measurement of 15-29. The African Union (AU) considers everyone between the age of 15-35. These examples illustrate the diversity of youth definitions. Conversely, Namuggala (2018) contradicts this categorical construction and argues that it is insufficient in comprehending the diverse and complex Youth experiences today. Similarly, young people unable to move into employment and economic independence are said to be living in a state of "waithood" or Generation in waiting because they have not yet attained the social markers of adulthood (Honwana, 2012; Kovacheva, Kabaivanov, & Roberts, 2018). These variations further complicate the definition of Youth.

Although defining an age bracket for youth can facilitate the development and coordination of policies, the absence of a common definition leads to inaccurate data collection when data is disaggregated. On the contrary, an aged-based definition disregards the contextual meaning of Youth (Samuel Hall, 2022). The experiences of being a young person are shaped by socio-economic, and political factors and the challenges and opportunities faced by young people can vary widely depending on these contextual factors. Similarly, Turolla and Swedlund (2022) argue that the common definition of "youth" in Africa which is based solely on age is inadequate and fails to capture the diversity and complexity of young people's experiences and identities. Instead, the authors propose an analytical framework that includes dimensions such as social status, gender, education, geographic location, and economic status to understand the heterogeneity of young people's experiences in Africa. Therefore, it is important to recognize that youthhood is inherently contextual rather than a period of linear transition. This highlights the need for nuanced and context-specific approaches to better define youth in research and policymaking.

According to the 2019 Kenya Youth Development Policy, the concept of Youth in Kenya has been operationalized in terms of the 18-34 age cohort. This research, therefore, explored Youthhood beyond the age factor. In so doing, it sought to understand how young women and men perceive their youth/youthhood. Against this background, youth emerged as a transition out of childhood and as a transformative process shaping an individual's identities, opportunities and challenges. We asked young people how they understand themselves, and why they considered themselves young. In so doing, the following quotations formed part of their conversations:

“Being young means that a person is energetic and has freedom in the sense that we have the opportunity to explore various things without fear of judgment because we are not yet mentally mature or are still young. Therefore, when one is young, one has the freedom to make mistakes. We are also able to explore different career paths and we still have time to figure out what we want in life.” [FGD: young Male, Kwale county]

“Being young it's all about a phase where I can explore in terms of career, I can choose as many relationships, but also it comes with a lot of pressure, to get married, to get money, to get a family and to start a life.” [FGD: young Female, Kwale county]

“These are people who take up opportunities but their numbers are far much greater than the opportunities available for them. These are people who come with a lot of hope but they find the reality on the ground is much different from what they expected. It is also characterized by a lot of frustrations for instance getting well-educated individuals with no job opportunities to absorb them immediately. They begin enterprises, and they are hopeful to succeed, but sometimes it doesn't. So, it's a fluid situation.”
[KII: Youth Enterprise Development Fund]

Therefore, within the Kenyan context, youth is seen as a (an);

- § Period of significant personal growth and development. Young people are viewed as This includes gaining financial independence, learning to make independent decisions, building social connections (friendships, family bonds and romantic relationships) and learning how to navigate the challenges of adulthood.
- § Self-discovery and exploration stage: Young people are depicted by their adventurous capabilities to explore different possibilities without limitations. They are also seen as still figuring out who they are, and what they want. This, therefore, forms part of identity formation, where they are building on their values, beliefs, and sense of self. However, youthhood comes with challenges and the pressure of societal expectations to get married, make money, and start a family.
- § Futuristic orientation: Young people are judged by their futuristic orientation where individuals are actively engaged in shaping and building their own lives and future. This includes setting goals, planning for the future, and making decisions that will impact their long-term outcomes. This futuristic orientation is tied to a desire for success and fulfilment in their personal and professional lives.
- § Socioeconomic and political engagements: Youth are often seen as vulnerable and have a high unemployment rate, and they are also perceived as being more tech-savvy than other age groups. In terms of political engagement, affirmative actions speak of engaging young people in decision-making.

Youthhood is a critical period in the lives of young men and women in the Kenyan context. This period is characterized by personal growth, self-discovery, and future-oriented planning. These findings are consistent with existing literature on youth development where White and Wyn (2004) emphasized the role of social and cultural contexts in shaping the experiences of young people. This literature suggests that the experiences of young people during youthhood are influenced by a range of factors, including family dynamics, peer relationships, and societal norms. Young people in the Kenyan context, like their counterparts elsewhere in the world, are increasingly expected to plan for their futures and make decisions that will impact their long-term outcomes (Fortune, Ismail, & Stephen, 2015). Understanding youth requires a nuanced understanding of young people in their specific social, cultural, political, and economic contexts.

Why Youthhood?

Bourdieu (1993) said, "Youth is just a word," in relation to the rather arbitrary and contextual meanings of this social category. Since "youth" is a period that falls between childhood and adulthood, it is a liminal position that is both marginal and transient in nature. Despite the seeming marginalization of this social category, the concept of "youth" has recently assumed a very major part in discussions about development in Africa (Chacaltana & Dasgupta, 2021). This is not surprising given the demographic data.

The so-called 'youth bulge' in Africa has attracted extensive attention from both politicians and policymakers. In sub-Saharan Africa, roughly 42 per cent of the population is under 15, while in Europe, only 15 per cent are under 15. Kenya is an extreme case study for rapid demographic increase. Kenya, which has a population of more than 57 million, is experiencing a "youth bulge." Kenya's median age in 2020 was 20.1 years, significantly younger than the average for the continent of 19.7 years. Almost 43% of the population is under the age of fifteen. It only makes sense to anticipate variability among this group of people.

Youth in Kenya also have political clout, which is significant. Politicians and the international development field both target youth because they make up a sizable portion of the economically active population and the voters (Sumberg & Hunt, 2019).

In Kenya (and worldwide), youth are regularly mentioned in development plans as a statistical and demographic fact. These demographic realities have resulted in a wide range of development programs targeting youth. The problem is that such programs often lose sight of the vast heterogeneities amongst youths. They forget that the category of 'youth' is socially and context-dependent. 'Youthood' may be meaningful in some contexts and not in others. Instead, selection for such programs is commonly determined by whether or not someone meets an arbitrarily defined age range. However, "youth" also refers to young people who have a social identity that transcends their chronological age (Peatrik, 2020). No specific time in our life marks the transition from childhood to maturity. Instead, this transformation is influenced by culture inside our specific social environment, according to Aime and Pietropolli Charmet (2014). Christiansen et al. (2006) hold the view that historical, social, and cultural factors have shaped generational categories including "childhood," "youth," and "adulthood."

The idea of "youth" has evolved into one of transition, with little pride in the title of "young" and rivalry for limited resources frequently delaying entry into "adulthood." (Sommers, 2015). Youth struggle to find employment across the continent, and rising population pressure increases competition for resources and employment (Yeboah & Jayne, 2018). Many males on the continent, according to Sommers (2015: 13), are "youthmen" or in a "failed adulthood" state as a result of institutional marginalization. According to Honwana (2012), this condition is also known as a "waithood" and is defined as "a prolonged and uncertain stage between childhood and adulthood that is characterized by their inability to enter the labour market and attain the social markers of adulthood" (Honwana & De Boeck, 2005; Finn & Oldfield, 2015; Sommers, 2015).

In addition to economic circumstances, Blum (2007) lists gender, educational attainment, and family structure as predictors of young people's identities. Youth are embedded in their sociocultural environment by these qualities. According to Van Dijk et al. (2011), "Not only when one is young, but also where one is young - the 'situational' exploration of youth has at least allowed for the possibility of looking at space and place as new modes of understanding." The conceptualization of youth is embedded when it is placed within a particular context and transcends generational boundaries.

We Are What We Are Not

Social understanding of the category of youth is simultaneously characterized by both vulnerabilities and potential. Youth are, for instance, actively involved in adult activities (locally associated with informed decision-making) although they cannot make independent decisions largely due to limited experience. The youth are thus expected to work under adult supervision, guidance, and mentoring. Unguided youth decisions account for the generational disagreements since they in most cases contradict elders' expectations. As I explore these dynamics, it is also crucial to assess how the youth maneuver and navigate through these social controls and related vulnerable situations. I argue that single categorical constructions and analysis is limiting in understanding the experiences of youth who simultaneously occupy multiple categories. Teenage/child/young mothers, for instance, cannot fully pass as adults if they are not married. They can neither fit in the children's category because they have children. From a gendered perspective, the social understanding of youth is locally constructed to refer to young men. Female youth in such cases belong everywhere yet they in actual sense belong nowhere hence missing out on assistance and relief services, which target concretized specified categories. Local communities find concepts like "child mothers" as belittling and constraining female youth full identity as "real" mothers. The local community explains that one cannot be both a mother and a child as the child mother notion seems to suggest. Rather one can be either a mother or a child and not both. This, however, depends on the circumstances under which one finds herself. While such young mothers deserve special attention, as humanitarian agencies run programs targeting them, it is culturally limited. Such externally constructed identity markers unintentionally exclude some young women through self-exclusion. The young women have to decide whether to give up on communal belonging (by choosing not to fully embrace motherhood) but since status and belonging are crucial for social security, the majority choose to give up the externally awarded title of child mothers hence giving up on assistance. This highlights the issue of language in contextualizing experience as an important aspect. It is therefore important to use culturally appropriate language to bring out the lived realities in such communities.

Characteristics of a Kenyan Youth

Here I examine the characteristics that define Kenyan youth within the socio-cultural context of Kenya. Kenyan youth exhibit diverse characteristics influenced by factors such as education, employment, family dynamics, cultural norms, and socio-economic status. This will help contribute to a nuanced understanding of Kenyan youth and provides insights for policymakers and practitioners seeking to address the needs and aspirations of this demographic group.

Kenya, like many other countries, has a youthful population, with a significant proportion of its citizens falling within the youth demographic. Understanding the characteristics that define Kenyan youth is essential for designing effective policies and programs that cater to their needs and aspirations. The multifaceted characteristics of Kenyan youth within the socio-cultural context of the country are explored below:

1. **Resilience:** Despite facing various challenges such as unemployment and economic instability, Kenyan youth demonstrate resilience and adaptability in navigating their circumstances.
2. **Aspirations:** Kenyan youth are driven by aspirations for a better future, often seeking opportunities for education, employment, and socio-economic advancement.
3. **Cultural Identity:** Cultural identity plays a significant role in shaping the experiences and behaviors of Kenyan youth, with many expressing pride in their cultural heritage while also embracing elements of global youth culture.
4. **Social Networks:** Youth in Kenya rely heavily on social networks, including family, friends, and community associations, for support, guidance, and networking opportunities.

5. **Entrepreneurial Spirit:** A growing number of Kenyan youth are engaging in entrepreneurial activities, leveraging their creativity and resourcefulness to pursue business ventures and income-generating opportunities.

The complexity and diversity of characteristics that define Kenyan youth underscores the need for holistic approaches to youth development. Policies and programs should take into account the socio-cultural context and aspirations of Kenyan youth, fostering resilience, supporting education and entrepreneurship, and strengthening social networks to empower youth and promote their well-being.

Embracing Heterogeneity: Anthropological Insights into the Diverse Experiences of African Youth Across Age Groups

Anthropological studies have long emphasized the heterogeneity of African youth, recognizing that their experiences, identities, and aspirations are shaped by a complex interplay of factors such as socio-economic status, cultural background, geographical location, and historical context. However, one aspect that has received less attention is the role of age in shaping youth experiences and perceptions. Here I explore how demographic understandings of youth based on age groups can be reconciled within the broader framework of anthropological research. Drawing on ethnographic data from diverse African contexts, I highlight the multifaceted nature of youth identities and the significance of age as a dynamic and context-specific marker of social transition. By integrating demographic perspectives with anthropological insights, this article seeks to enrich our understanding of African youth and contribute to more nuanced and contextually grounded approaches to youth studies.

Anthropological research on African youth has long emphasized their heterogeneity, recognizing the diverse socio-cultural, economic, and political contexts in which they live. However, the role of age in shaping youth experiences and identities has received relatively less attention within the discipline. This article seeks to bridge this gap by exploring how demographic understandings of youth based on age groups can be reconciled within the broader framework of anthropological studies.

Understanding African Youth Heterogeneity:

Anthropological studies have highlighted the diverse experiences and identities of African youth, challenging monolithic portrayals of youth as a homogeneous group. Factors such as urban-rural divides, educational opportunities, access to resources, and exposure to globalization contribute to the heterogeneity of youth experiences across the continent.

The Role of Age in Shaping Youth Experiences:

Age serves as a significant marker of social transition and identity formation among African youth. Different age groups, such as adolescents, young adults, and emerging adults, navigate distinct challenges and opportunities as they transition from childhood to adulthood. These transitions are influenced by cultural norms, rites of passage, and socio-economic factors, highlighting the importance of age in understanding youth trajectories.

Reconciling Demographic Perspectives with Anthropological Insights:

Demographic understandings of youth based on age groups provide valuable insights into population trends and policy planning. However, they often overlook the cultural, social, and historical specificities that shape youth experiences. Anthropological approaches offer a more nuanced understanding of youth heterogeneity, emphasizing the importance of context and lived experiences.

Contestations

Even while the temporal lines that separate infancy from adolescence or youth from maturity are disputed and inconsistent, they seem to have formed a recognizable lack of attention to individual objectives.

Youth is a transitional stage that can be redefined, reversed, and contextually (re)negotiated, claim Van Dijk et al. (2011) and Christiansen et al. (2006). If youth is used broadly to describe (contested) age ranges, its explanatory ability may be constrained given how differently it is understood in various settings.

Differentiation between a child and adult seems to be clear though in various ways different. However, the differences between a child and a youth, and a youth and an adult are blurred. This is because many of the characteristics youth have are used in descriptions of both childhood and adulthood. Youthhood is the intermediate stage where individuals have specific features implicating all the three critical stages of human growth and development. As such a youth can bear both childhood and adulthood identifiers simultaneously. Even though the adolescents have certain development competencies that distinguish them from the children, they, at the same time lack the social, cultural, and personal attributes that define adulthood (Morrow 2013).

Age as a criterion for adulthood.

On the one hand, in the past, transitional events (such as marriage, land inheritance, and circumcision) took place between the ages of eighteen and twenty. They undergo circumcision around the ages of 17, 18, and 20 to transition from childhood to adulthood. Following their circumcision, they receive various instructions that help them become true men. Compared to rites held around the customary age of 18, circumcision is now more frequently performed in hospitals and at a younger age (or even at birth), therefore this is not always the case. Furthermore, there is evidence that some individuals utilise the term "youth" for personal and political ends.

Youth understanding of cultural and experienced realities

In contrast to age-based definitions from the legal and policy realm, youth understandings of cultural and experienced reality are more flexible and include indicators like independence and interdependence. This might be the most significant point that was brought up during the discussion.

There will always be a need for those classifications as long as young individuals are identified by clear-cut ages. However, policies affecting young people and jobs should no longer be governed by arbitrary and unduly broad categories. It's crucial to understand that youth is a time of transition and that young people are still experiencing physical growth.

Rethinking Youth: Towards Context-Sensitive Programs Tailored to Young People's Needs

The concept of "youth" is often narrowly defined, overlooking the diverse experiences, identities, and aspirations of young people across different contexts. This article advocates for an expanded understanding of youth that acknowledges their heterogeneity and recognizes the influence of socio-cultural, economic, and environmental factors on their lives. By adopting a more nuanced perspective, development programs can be better tailored to meet the diverse needs of young people and promote their well-being and empowerment. Drawing on insights from anthropology, sociology, and youth studies, this article explores key dimensions of youth diversity and offers recommendations for designing context-sensitive programs that address the complex realities faced by young people worldwide.

The concept of "youth" is often treated as a homogeneous category, overlooking the diverse experiences, identities, and needs of young people. This article argues for an expanded understanding of youth that takes into account their heterogeneity and the contextual factors that shape their lives. By adopting a more nuanced perspective, development programs can better address the complex realities faced by young people and promote their empowerment and well-being.

Understanding Youth Diversity:

Youth diversity encompasses a wide range of factors, including but not limited to:

- **Socio-economic status:** Young people from different socio-economic backgrounds face distinct challenges and opportunities.
- **Cultural and ethnic identity:** Cultural norms and values influence young people's experiences and aspirations.
- **Gender and sexuality:** Gender norms and inequalities intersect with other dimensions of identity to shape young people's lives.
- **Geographical location:** Rural, urban, and peri-urban youth experience different social and economic dynamics.
- **Education and employment:** Access to education and economic opportunities varies widely among young people.

Challenges of One-Size-Fits-All Approaches:

Traditional development programs often adopt a "one-size-fits-all" approach that fails to account for the diversity of youth experiences. As a result, these programs may overlook the specific needs and aspirations of young people, leading to ineffective outcomes and missed opportunities for positive change.

Towards Context-Sensitive Programs:

To address the diverse needs of young people, development programs should:

1. **Conduct thorough needs assessments:** Prioritize participatory approaches that engage young people in identifying their own needs and priorities.
2. **Tailor interventions to specific contexts:** Design programs that are sensitive to the socio-cultural, economic, and environmental realities of the communities they serve.
3. **Foster youth leadership and participation:** Empower young people to take an active role in program design, implementation, and evaluation.
4. **Provide holistic support:** Address the interconnected challenges faced by young people, including education, employment, health, and social inclusion.
5. **Build partnerships and networks:** Collaborate with local organizations, government agencies, and other stakeholders to leverage resources and expertise.

Conclusion: Redefining Youth Beyond Age

Youth is an important category demographically, but the opportunities and challenges faced by those labelled as 'youth' are often not related to age. Youth as a label is meaningful at certain times but not in others. Youthhood is a complex and multifaceted period of personal growth, self-discovery, and future-oriented planning. Young men and women in the Kenyan context face significant challenges and pressures, including societal expectations to conform to certain norms, which can cause stress and anxiety. However, with the right support and resources, youthhood can also be a time of great opportunity and potential for individual fulfilment and success. Therefore, it is important to recognize that youthhood is inherently contextual rather than a period of linear transition. This highlights the need for nuanced and context-specific approaches to better define youth in research and policymaking.

Understanding how African youth create their identities is urgently needed on a theoretical and social level, given the continent's ongoing and fast demographic expansion. This journal

provides a framework that can be utilized in analysis and policy to take into consideration the complexity and diversity among Kenyan youth due to the statistical reality of (and interest in) this increasing population group. Africa's youth will continue to draw increasing amounts of attention. The analysis in this paper demonstrates both the potential for a more nuanced and comprehensive approach to this significant group, as well as the contentious nature of this social category. Despite being a significant demographic group, "youth" has possibilities and challenges that are frequently unrelated to age at all.

This article provides valuable insights into the characteristics of Kenyan youth, shedding light on their experiences, aspirations, and socio-cultural context. By understanding these characteristics, policymakers and practitioners can better tailor interventions to meet the diverse needs of Kenyan youth and support their positive development. Further research is warranted to explore how these characteristics intersect with broader societal trends and to assess the long-term impact of youth-focused initiatives in Kenya.

By integrating demographic perspectives with anthropological insights, this article emphasizes the importance of recognizing the heterogeneity of African youth across age groups. Understanding the diverse experiences and identities of youth is crucial for developing contextually grounded policies and programs that address their needs and aspirations. Moving forward, anthropological studies should continue to explore the complex intersections of age, culture, and social change in shaping youth trajectories across Africa.

By expanding the concept of youth and adopting a more context-sensitive approach to programming, development organizations can better meet the needs of young people and promote their empowerment and well-being. Moving forward, it is essential to continue advocating for policies and programs that recognize the diversity of youth experiences and prioritize their voices and agency in decision-making processes.

In research and policy, it is necessary to account for the diversity of experiences grouped under the broad label of youth. Youth is more than just an age range. Academics and practitioners should understand the vast differences across this growing segment of the African population.

References

- Aime, M., & Pietropolli Charmet, G. (2014). *La fatica di diventare grandi. La scomparsa dei riti di passaggio*. Torino: Einaudi.
- Arubayi, D. O. (2015). *GLOBAL DEMANDS, REGIONAL CONFORMITY: UNDERSTANDING THE CONTESTATIONS IN YOUTH POLICY CONSTRUCTION IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA (SSA)*.
- Baah-Boateng, W. (2016). The youth unemployment challenge in Africa: What are the drivers?. *The Economic and Labour Relations Review*, 27(4), 413-431.
- Blum, R. W. (2007). Youth in sub-Saharan Africa. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 41(3), 230-238.
- Bourdieu, P. (1993). Youth is just a word. *Sociology in question*, 1993(1978), 94-102.
- Burton, P. (Ed.). (2007). *Someone stole my smile: An exploration into the causes of youth violence in South Africa*. Centre for Justice and Crime Prevention.
- Chacaltana, J., & Dasgupta, S. (Eds.). (2021). *Is the future ready for youth?: youth employment policies for evolving labour markets*. International Labour Office.
- Christiansen, C., Utas, M., & Vigh, H. E. (2006). *Navigating Youth, Generating Adulthood: social becoming in an African context*. Nordiska Afrikainstitutet.

- European Union (2019) The population of African and sub-Saharan African countries in 2050, migration flows and the EU's urgent need to draw up a Marshall plan for Africa. Parliamentary Questions, 22 July 2019. Available at: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/E-9-2019-002337_EN.html (accessed 15 July 2023).
- Finn, B., & Oldfield, S. (2015). Straining: young men working through waithood in Freetown, Sierra Leone. *Africa Spectrum*, 50(3), 29-48.
- Fortune, F., Ismail, O., & Stephen, M. (2015). Rethinking Youth, Livelihoods, and Fragility in West Africa.
- Honwana, A. M. (2012). *The time of youth: Work, social change, and politics in Africa*. Sterling, VA: Kumarian Press.
- Honwana, A. M. (2012). *The time of youth: Work, social change, and politics in Africa*: Kumarian Press Sterling.
- Honwana, A., & De Boeck, F. (2005). *Makers & breakers: Children and youth in postcolonial Africa*. James Currey.
- Kovacheva, S., Kabaivanov, S., & Roberts, K. (2018). Interrogating waithood: family and housing life stage transitions among young adults in North-West Africa countries. *International Journal of Adolescence and Youth*, 23(4), 441-456.
- Landau, L. B., Kihato, C. W., & Postel, H. (2019). The future of mobility and migration within and from Sub-Saharan Africa.
- Namuggala, V. F. (2018). We Are What We Are Not. *Childhood, Youth Identity, and Violence in Formerly Displaced Communities in Uganda*, 81-105.
- Peatrik, A. M. (2020). Towards an anthropology of youth in Africa. *Ateliers d'anthropologie. Revue éditée par le Laboratoire d'ethnologie et de sociologie comparative*, (47).
- Samuel Hall. (2022). *Youth, Migration and Development: A New Lens for Critical Times*.
- Sommers, M. (2015). *The outcast majority: War, development, and youth in Africa*. University of Georgia Press.
- Sumberg, J., & Hunt, S. (2019). Are African rural youth innovative? Claims, evidence and implications. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 69, 130-136.
- Swartz, S., Cooper, A., Batan, C., & Causa, L. K. (Eds.). (2021). *The Oxford handbook of global south youth studies*. Oxford University Press.
- Turolla, M., & Swedlund, H. J. (2022). Understanding youth in Africa beyond age. *Africa at LSE*.
- Ungruhe, C. (2010). Symbols of success: Youth, peer pressure and the role of adulthood among juvenile male return migrants in Ghana. *Childhood*, 17(2), 259-271.
- Urdal, H. (2004). The devil in the demographics: the effect of youth bulges on domestic armed conflict, 1950-2000. *Social development papers*, 14, 1-25.
- Van Dijk, R., De Bruijn, M., Cardoso, C., & Butter, I. (2011). Introduction: Ideologies of youth. *Africa Development*, 36(3-4), 1-18.
- White, R., & Wyn, J. (2004). Youth and society: Exploring the social dynamics of youth experience. *Australian Journal of Social Issues*, 39(4), 479.
- Yeboah, F. K., & Jayne, T. S. (2018). Africa's evolving employment trends. *The Journal of Development Studies*, 54(5), 803-832.