

Urbanization, War, and Africa's Youth at Risk

Towards Understanding and Addressing Future Challenges

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Towards Understanding and Addressing Future Challenges

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INTRODUCTION

To many observers, Africa's ever-expanding urbanization makes little sense. For example, Kempe Ronald Hope (1998: 356) notes, "In general, African countries are substantially more urbanized than is probably justified by their degree of economic development." He adds that this is due in large part to the fact that "the supply of urban job seekers far exceeds demand" (Ibid: 353). Nelson Mandela, South Africa's former President, has noted that "Sub-Saharan Africa is the only region in the world where urbanization is associated with negative economic growth" (cited in Harsch 2001: 1). In addition to persistently pervasive urban unemployment in Africa, particularly among migrant youth who continue to pour into cities, there are a myriad of other problems. Many urban areas are wracked by water and housing shortages. School and health facilities may be nearing collapse. Parks, where they exist, may be filled with street children and thieves. HIV/AIDS and other illnesses usually run rampant. The industrial base—a cornerstone of urban economies in the North—is frequently limited. The municipal tax base, and city services in general, tend to be exceedingly insufficient, particularly in the peri-urban neighborhoods where unplanned urban growth has become a central component of urbanization. Crime seems to be a near-constant threat. Just why anyone—particularly the young and the poor who comprise most of Africa's urban residents—would choose to live in such a place seems fairly difficult for a great many observers to imagine.

The challenges confronting youth in urban Africa are further complicated and made considerably more serious by war's pervasive impact. As Gavin Williams (2002: 10) has noted, "No regions, and few countries, in Africa have been free of the ravages of civil wars, conflicts between African countries, dictatorial governments, and the intervention of outside powers and other African governments." These disruptions continue to drive an increasing number of Africans towards cities, often causing extraordinary increases in the size of cities and expanding the purposes, utility, and culture of urban life—sometimes in ways that are unanticipated, overlooked, or hidden.

This paper will argue that African cities not only make sense, but that their wealth of youthful residents constitute a largely untapped resource for ingenuity, stability, and economic growth. It will present some commonly held perspectives on Africa's cities, and the urban youth who have come to demographically dominate them. These views are overwhelmingly negative and do not recognize or appreciate the contributions of urban youth. The paper will then look at the lives of African urban youth, particularly those who have been affected by conflict, and why they are so attracted to city life. At the core of this analysis is the central irony surrounding urban youth: that they are a demographic majority that sees itself as an outcast minority. The implications of such alienation and distance from civil society are considerable, and are among the issues considered here. The final section will suggest ways in which programming for youth at risk in African cities might be improved to help transform how urban youth are perceived, engaged, and ultimately included in urban Africa's civil societies and economies.

AFRICA'S URBANIZATION AND WAR'S IMPACT

Africa's rapid urbanization stands out even in a world that is increasingly turning towards cities. Ogbu and Ikiara (1995: 53) have observed that Africa first surpassed all other regions of the world during the 1975-80 period, when African cities grew at an average annual rate of 4.9 percent. By 1985-90, the rate had increased to 5.0 percent, making Africa "the region with the highest urban population growth rate in the developing world" (1995: 53). While a more recent estimate suggests that Africa's annual urban population growth rate has declined to four percent, the rate remains "the highest of any world region" (Harsch 2001: 2). In 2000, African ministers responsible for housing and urban settlements "forecast that the [African] continent will experience unprecedented urbanization over the next quarter century" (Ibid.).

Within this staggering drive towards cities are a number of provocative trends. Unusually high rural-urban migration rates reported for some African countries dramatize the ongoing urge to urbanize. For example, the migrant share of urban growth in Tanzania is 85 percent (cited in Hope 1998: 351). Tanzania's capital, Dar es Salaam, is the fastest growing city in East Africa,¹ which has the highest urban growth rate of any region in the world (Torrey 1998: B6). The United Nations estimates that by 2025, nearly half of all East Africans will live in cities, and almost three quarters of the population of Southern Africa will reside in urban areas (cited in Hope 1998: 347). Although "young adult men predominate among [urban] migrants in Africa" (Hope 1998: 352), the number of female youth in cities is also increasing (Chant and Radcliffe 1992; Gugler 1996). A recent estimate cited that the number of women-headed households in African capital cities ranges between 10 and 25 percent (Harsch 2001: 3).

Almost inevitably, signs of a rapid concentration of youth in African cities raise the specter of expanding youth unemployment, discord, and unrest. For instance, half of all South African youth are unemployed, a figure that is expected to rise to between 60 and 70 percent in the next few years (Guardian 2001:1). In 1993, Tanzania's Minister of Youth, Hassan Diria, stated that slightly more than three percent of the country's youth had jobs in the formal sector. Diria then chastised the "poor upbringing of the anti-socials," an invented catchphrase for young urban troublemakers (Maunya 1993:1).

Although "the dearth of information" remains "one of the most significant problems in addressing urbanization" in Africa (Rakodi 1997b: 10), the impact of war on African urbanization stands out as a particularly understudied and overlooked subject. Strong indications of war's significance, however, exist across Sub-Saharan Africa. From Angola to Sudan and the Democratic Republic of the Congo to Sierra Leone, hundreds of thousands of people displaced by wars have sought refuge in capital cities. For example, Freetown, the capital of Sierra Leone, saw its population rise from 384,499 in 1985 to an estimated 837,000 in 2001 (Africa South of the Sahara 2002: 926). This 217 percent

¹ For example, Ankerl (1986) estimated that the population of Dar es Salaam would increase by 1,239 percent between 1970 and 2000. Such extraordinary growth has never subsided. The current annual population growth of Dar es Salaam is estimated at 10 percent, meaning that "the city's total population will double in seven years (Harsch 2001: 1).

increase, which mainly took place during the decade of civil war (1991-2001), may not have included internally displaced persons (IDPs) living in the Freetown area, which were thought to have reached half a million by 1995 (Synge 2002: 920). IDPs remained a significant population throughout the latter stages of the war. Data gathered from officials working in Sierra Leone's capital suggest that Freetown might have far more residents than the published estimates indicate. Regardless of the actual figure, however, the Freetown example demonstrates how urban populations can grow rapidly during and immediately after civil war.

War can radically transform urban areas, particularly for youth living there, in ways that become permanent. Jacobsen and her colleagues (2001) highlight this phenomenon in their research on IDP lives in Khartoum, the capital of war-torn Sudan. Sudan has approximately four million IDPs—known to be the world's largest IDP population (US Committee for Refugees 2003). About 1.8 million of the displaced persons live in or near Khartoum (Jacobsen, Lautze, and Osman 2001: 78, 80). Viewed as aligned with the national government's opponents during the 20-year civil war, Sudan's urban IDPs have faced ongoing and extensive persecution by the government. "More than 1 million displaced persons," the authors note, "have lost their homes—often more than once—to the [government's] bulldozers" (2001: 81). Significantly, the various methods of persecution have not dimmed the resolve of most of Khartoum's IDPs to endure life in the capital. For example, in a survey conducted in 1992, 80 percent of the displaced wanted to remain in Khartoum (Ibid.: 85). In addition, "Ten years of displacement to the urban areas of Khartoum have resulted in a fundamental shift in identity, particularly among young people, who consider themselves to be urbanised and have no real desire to return to their rural origins. . ." (Ibid.: 84).

The fact that "young people see their future" in Sudan's capital (Ibid.) is a phenomenon that can be found in other African capitals as well, despite the hardships and persecutions youth may face there. Dar es Salaam was the site of a series of government campaigns to "repatriate" urban migrants, most of whom were young men, to rural areas. Every effort failed (Armstrong 1987; Kerner 1988; Lugalla 1995; Sommers 2001a). As Sawers noted, "the deportations of Dar es Salaam's unemployed wasted scarce transportation resources without affecting the city's population growth" (1989: 854-855). The idea that migrant youth—voluntary as well as forced migrant—consider themselves to be "urbanized" is a theme that will resurface later in this paper.

The shift of refugees—refugee youth in particular—into cities further underscores Africa's urbanization phenomenon. In 1985, for example, Rogge (1985: 128) reported that "an increasing proportion of [African] refugees of rural origin in becoming displaced simultaneously become urbanized." Ten years later, Bascom noted how African refugees "go to great lengths to avoid camps and get into urban centres" (1995: 205). Indeed, recognizing that foreigners fleeing persecution often refuse free humanitarian assistance in refugee camps and risk persecution and marginalization in cities suggests that the uses and appeal of African cities may be much greater than is generally suspected.²

² See Sommers 2001a and 2001b for more information about these issues.

POPULAR PERCEPTIONS OF AFRICAN CITIES

Popular perceptions of African cities from Western observers tend to be negative. Urban Africa is regularly depicted as dangerous and veering out of control. Images of children and youth on the streets have inspired some particularly lurid prose. "With poverty as their pimp," Harvie Conn writes, "hundreds of [children] roam the streets of Nairobi and Kampala" (1998: 3). Alex Shoumatoff considers the emergence of large African cities as the source of "societal madness." Such madness is best seen in the behavior of "detrified young men" in Nairobi, Kenya, whom he describes as "lost souls wandering in the vast space between the traditional and the modern worlds" who "can be heard howling in the streets of downtown Nairobi in the middle of the night" (1988: xiv).

Probably the most renowned purveyor of the perception of African cities as ghastly places is Robert D. Kaplan, whose 1994 article, "The Coming Anarchy," was, according to Paul Richards, "faxed to every American embassy in Africa, and has undoubtedly influenced U.S. policy" (1996: xv). Kaplan has a knack for asserting his personalized view of African cities with dreadful clarity. It is a view that offers absolutely no hope and no inspiration, and the youth who continue to migrate to urban Africa, in Kaplan's view, only make an already disastrous situation much, much worse.

Reading *The Coming Anarchy* and Kaplan's subsequent book, *The Ends of the Earth* (1996), is to recoil from urban Africa. For example, consider Kaplan's "first memorable experience of West Africa" – a whiff of Abidjan, which he describes as "an odor of sour sweat, rotting fruit, hot iron and dust, urine drying on the sun-warmed stone, feces, and fly-infested meat in an immovable field of damp heat" (1996: 16). Such sensory displeasures may be difficult enough. But in Kaplan's view, it is the underlying cultural, social, and political collapse that is more serious. "As it decays and people pour into coastal shanty-magnets," he writes, "West Africa is left with high-density concentrations of human beings who have been divested of certain stabilizing cultural models, with no strong governmental institutions or communities to compensate for the loss" (Ibid.: 29).

The youth who populate West African urban areas face the "corrosive effects of cities, where African culture is being redefined as deforestation tied to overpopulation" (Kaplan 1996: 34). They are also dangerous. Kaplan considers the young men that fill West African cities as "out of school, unemployed, loose molecules in an unstable social fluid that threatened to ignite" (1996: 16). Not even the youth's apparently good physical condition is a good sign. Instead, "[t]heir robust health and good looks made their predicament sadder" (Ibid.).

The dread and danger expressed by Kaplan's nearly decade old and often purple prose, in addition to other observers expressing similar views, is carried to the present in descriptions of the "youth bulge." John L. Helgeson, Chairman of the National Intelligence Council, gave a speech in 2002 entitled, "The National Security Implications of Global Demographic Change." Calling on data drawn from the CIA's report, "Long-term Global Demographic Trends," and the National Intelligence Council's report entitled, "Global Trends 2015," Helgeson depicts a situation where "the world is getting

older at an unprecedented rate” while many developing countries are facing the challenge of a bulge in the proportion of youth between ages 15-24 in their populations.³ “Some of these countries,” Helgerson notes,

are located in Sub-Saharan Africa and lack the economic resources to support the educational and employment opportunities necessary to effectively integrate youth into society. Over the next 20 years, with the exception of Sub-Saharan Africa, the size of youth bulges will decrease in all regions of the world. . . The inability of states to adequately integrate youth populations is likely to perpetuate the cycle of political instability, ethnic wars, revolutions, and anti-government activities that already affects many countries. And a large proportion of youth will be living in cities, where opportunities will be limited (2002: 3-4).

The threat that proponents of the youth bulge thesis assert is embodied in these young men, most of whom are in cities, many of whom are in Africa, and all of whom are, in the words of Samuel P. Huntington, “the principal perpetrators of violence in all societies” (cited in Heinsohn 2002: 1).

Hendrixson argues that the youth bulge thesis is based on the premise that youth “have the potential to send a nation into a state of chaos” (2003: 3). Moreover, the thesis is gender-specific: “It contends that men, particularly young men, are prone to violence. It preys on fears that when young men face challenges like gaining employment, political power, and wealth, they will form alliances and find outlets for their essentially violent natures” (Ibid.: 4). As a result, there is a condemnation of young men “as potential terrorists who are swayed by dogma and rhetoric to form collective reins of terror” (Ibid.: 5).

In neither the descriptions set forth by youth bulge proponents nor in the depictions of urban Africa highlighted by Kaplan and others does there seem to be a way out of an urban future that is both threatening and violent. As Kaplan predicts, “The perpetrators of future violence will likely be urban born, with no rural experience from which to draw” (1996: 12). Yet there is scarcely any evidence of this in Africa. Although degrees of urban violence persist in many African cities, very few, if any, African civil conflicts in recent decades—including those involving Angola, Burundi, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Liberia, Mozambique, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, and Sudan—derived their origins from urban unrest. Rebel groups have tended to find their followings outside of large cities.

Subsequent sections of this paper will present a view of urban youth in African cities that differs from the purely threatening conceptions that have been reviewed here. It will provide examples of how Africa's urban youth have been misunderstood, undervalued, and distanced from mainstream society. They have some positive reasons for living in cities, and have views of urban life that tend to be overlooked by policymakers and development planners. To build a more promising and stable future, the distancing of urban youth from mainstream society will need to change. Understanding and learning

³ The age range of the youth bulge was listed by a former Chairman of the National Intelligence Council, John C. Gannon in 1998 (Heinsohn 2002: 1).

how to constructively engage with young urbanites will be required. Policies marked by exclusion will need to be transformed into those emphasizing inclusion. Without such recognition and positive interaction, discussions about the current youth generation will continue, as Hendrixson notes, to “strip it of self-respect, underestimate its potential, and leave it devalued” (2003: 5).

THREE COMPONENTS OF URBAN YOUTH LIFE

If urban experts contend that “cities are essentially locations for economic activity” (Rakodi 1997b: 4), and yet “African countries are substantially more urbanized than is justified by their degree of economic development” (Hope 1998: 356), then something is amiss. What is drawing millions of youth to urban Africa? Is it simple economic desperation?

Here it will be argued that the answer to this question, and to the perspective of urban youth as dangerous and destructive, which is contained in the Kaplan and youth bulge arguments described above, is no. The reasons that urban youth are in cities and the functions that cities play in their development extend far beyond the search for economic viability. Moreover, violence is hardly an automatic outcome of urban youth migration. Indeed, given the immensity and speed of Sub-Saharan Africa's demographic transformation from a rural-based region to one that is becoming largely urban, the widespread poverty that afflicts so many people in African cities, and the generally minimal investment in urban Africa, it could be argued that many African cities are much more peaceful than might be anticipated.

Such a statement should not suggest that large African cities resemble the sort of graceful urban areas that bolster the reputation of some famous cities as centers for culture, history, and romance. While such urban centers clearly exist in Africa, it is also true that many, if not most, neighborhoods in urban Africa are nothing of the kind. Expecting otherwise would be unreasonable. The cities are growing too fast. As Harsch has noted, “Since most African cities simply are unprepared to accommodate the additional [urban migrant] population, this will lead to a further ‘mushrooming of squatter settlements of high densities and inadequate or no services’” (2001: 2). It would also be inaccurate to suggest that huge African cities are neither difficult nor dangerous. To some degree, they most certainly are.

What will be suggested here is that a disconnect exists between perceptions of urban Africa as economic and civil ‘black holes,’ suggested in the previous section, and urban youth life. Three components of urban youth lives will be described here, which collectively suggest that the vitality and creativity present in African cities, and the youthful majority who live there, remain largely untapped as development and civil society resources.

Opportunities for Coexistence

In the face of Kaplan's depiction of African cities and its youth lies an entirely different conception of urban Africa. The case of Rwanda and Burundi in Central Africa is instructive. For example, in 1999, the proportion of urban residents in Rwanda was 6.1 percent of the total population and in Burundi it was 8.7 percent (UNDP 2001: 156-7)—Although urbanization is transforming much of Sub-Saharan Africa, the continued inability for most Rwandans and Burundians to congregate in cities has contributed to a degree of rural isolation and fear that has fueled waves of massive ethnic killing, including genocide, in recent decades. Consider the following comment about Burundi, which has a constellation of ethnic identities (mainly Hutu and Tutsi), terror, and violence similar to Rwanda:

[The] absence of big cities has had a significant effect on divisions within the country. Without the opportunity to mingle together in large numbers in cosmopolitan settings, most Burundians remain largely within their ethnic group, their clan, and their region. By contrast, many of those Burundians who live in the capital are conscious of their ethnicity only in times of conflict. . . I saw many cases in April 1995 of young people of the capital unable to identify with an ethnic group and often attacked by both groups before they migrated abroad or chose, against their will, to be Hutu or Tutsi. Extremists on both sides despise them because they constitute living proof of the possibility of peaceful coexistence (Ould-Abdallah 2000: 21).

Here we have a depiction of urban Africa that directly contradicts the image of African cities as centers of social degradation and predatory violence. In Africa and elsewhere, cities force people to mix and become familiar with members of groups whose paths might never cross in rural areas. In this sense, cities hold the potential to expand opportunities for peaceful coexistence.

Empowerment Through Alienation

It is ironic that many of Africa's urban youth, who are members of the dominant population segment in African cities, may feel both alienated by and marginalized from mainstream urban society: a majority feeling like a minority. If this is the case, what does it say about "civil society" in cities if a significant proportion of residents feel they don't belong to it?

Macharia highlights how Africa's urban youth are typically overlooked: "The youth in most African cities make up at least 60 percent of the urban population, yet most programs in these cities rarely address this specific problem" (1994: 161). A World Bank report entitled, "The Future of African Cities," supports this assertion. It suggests both that urban projects constituted less than five percent of all World Bank projects for Sub-Saharan Africa in 1972-96 (1998: 9). But in a tendency reflective of the approach of many urban development planners regarding Sub-Saharan Africa, The World Bank's development priorities are largely infrastructural: improving urban roadways, drainage,

water supply, sewerage, and household garbage (Ibid.: 23). Targeting urban youth needs and concerns is not directly addressed.

In this context, then, it can hardly be surprising that impoverished, unskilled, and poorly educated urban youth often recast themselves as heroic underdogs. Rather than accepting their sidelined social existence, many celebrate it. This is an indication not only of the resilience of urban youth but of their distance from those seeking to stabilize and develop African cities.

Two examples of this combination of internal resilience and social distance among urban youth will be examined here. The first examines a benign product of youth alienation in Tanzania. The second looks at a much more dangerous case in wartime Sierra Leone.

Tanzania. Across Tanzania, in even the remotest corners of the country, youth speak what has come to be known as the “Language of the Ignorant” (in Swahili, *Lugha ya Wahuni*), “Angry Swahili” (*Kiswahili Kali*), “Dar Language” (*Kidar*), “Young People’s Language” (*Lugha ya Vijana*), and still other names. What is called a language is actually not even a dialect. Instead, it is an ever-changing vocabulary of words that Tanzanian youth use to confer their connection to *Bongoland* (literally “Brainland,” the nickname for Dar es Salaam) and their separation from elite society. Keeping up with the latest words from “*Bongo*” signifies an aspiration to migrate to Tanzania’s capital for those youth still residing in the countryside. The proportion of youth living in rural Tanzania is, in some areas, noticeably low. As early as 1981, the Tanzanian scholar C.K. Omari was able to remark that “Many rural areas nowadays are left with old people. Go the villages, and you will observe this phenomenon instantly as you set your foot there” (1981: 2).

“Language of the Ignorant” vocabulary words have many sources and meanings. They can be used to describe the difficulties of urban life, as in the greeting, “How are your anxieties?” (*Harbari ya mihangaiko?*). Most Tanzanian youth, while fluent in one national language, Swahili, know scarcely any English, Tanzania’s second national language. English, however, can signify a person’s connection to wealth, glamour, and modern, forward-looking ideas and activities. English words may be assigned new meanings in the “Language of the Ignorant,” and can come from a variety of sources. One phrase was taken from a plastic bag printed in Zanzibar and sold in Dar es Salaam and other mainland towns. The bag had pictures of Western-style clothes and other items signifying a “modern” lifestyle. Across the bag, in large letters, was the phrase “Fashion Design.” Soon, “Fashion Design” became a response to greetings such as “How are you?” (*Harbari yako?*), “What’s up?” (*Mambo gani?*), and “How are your anxieties?”

The “Language of the Ignorant” is also used to describe how many urban youth in Tanzania see themselves: as alienated outcasts. A compelling example of this took place soon after the beginning of the Gulf War in 1991. Saddam Hussein almost instantly became a folk hero for many in Dar es Salaam, in addition to others across the country. They viewed Saddam as a defiant underdog, fighting valiantly against insurmountable odds. His Scud missiles became symbols of the underdog’s counterpunch. Soon after the first round of Scud missiles was launched by the Iraqi regime, the word “*Scudi*” could be

observed across Dar es Salaam, written in graffiti and scrawled into the dirt on buses and other vehicles. In no time, “*Scudi ya Bongo*” became a catchphrase for a fearless, unsinkable urban youth.⁴

The “*Scudi ya Bongo*” example is instructive because it signifies how many youth in Tanzania’s capital feel alienated and marginalized from mainstream society, including leading members of civil society. In a sense, the masses of alienated youth in Africa’s cities call the idea of “civil society” into question. Indeed, in some African capitals, it is often unclear the extent to which “civil society members” truly represent the poor young people who throng the country’s towns and cities. Relatively few may vote, and they are probably unlikely to be well represented in any census.⁵ They are present in cities, in short, but their connection to civil society may be, at best, tenuous.

Sierra Leone. The invasion of Freetown, Sierra Leone by the child and youth soldiers of the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) in January 1999 dramatizes how youth alienation can be manipulated to terrible and devastating effect. Called “Operation No Living Thing,” the RUF entered Sierra Leone’s capital and initiated among the most grisly military actions in modern African history. Junger, for example, noted that “war does not get worse” than what happened in Freetown early in 1999 (2000: 116).

By the time of the Freetown invasion, RUF leaders had already found ways to adapt popular culture figures to specific purposes. Paul Richards described how the RUF used the first Rambo film (*Rambo: First Blood*) as a military training video, highlighting the idea of a misunderstood individual using well-honed military skills to battle against predatory forces (Richards 1996: 57-58). In “Operation No Living Thing,” the RUF adapted another ‘patron saint’ – the deceased, mythologized, American “Gansta” Rap musician, Tupac Shakur, popularly known as ‘Tupac.’ “The rebels [RUF] wrote Tupac’s lyrics on the side of their vehicles” during the Freetown invasion, one Sierra Leonean refugee later recalled during a field interview. According to the refugee, “they wrote ‘Death Row,’ ‘Missing in Action,’ ‘Hit them Up,’ ‘Only God can Judge,’ and ‘All Eyez on Me’ on them.” Junger also notes that the rebels “favored Tupac T-shirts and fancy haircuts” (2000: 116). Drugged and brutalized, terrorized and truly terrifying, the rebel child and youth soldiers attacked Freetown residents. Amputations, rapes, and killings took place across the city. Descriptions of the mayhem, as in other depictions of RUF military tactics during the war, bordered on the unbelievable:

Teenage soldiers, out of their minds on drugs, rounded up entire neighborhoods and machine-gunned them or burned them alive in their houses. They tracked down anyone whom they deemed to be an enemy—journalists, Nigerians, doctors who treated wounded civilians—and tortured and killed them. They killed people who refused to give them money, or people who didn’t give them enough money, or people who looked at them wrong. They raped women and killed nuns and abducted priests and drugged children to turn them into fighters. . . They had been

⁴ Information on migrant and refugee youth in Dar es Salaam is detailed in Sommers 2001a and 2001b.

⁵ An excellent example of urban residents avoiding census takers is detailed by John Briggs (1993) in his analysis of the 1988 census in Dar es Salaam.

fighting since they were eight or nine, some of them, and sported names such as Colonel Bloodshed, Commander Cut Hands, Superman, Mr. Die, and Captain Backblast. . . Although the rebel assault. . . failed militarily, it had so traumatized the civilian population that they were prepared to do almost anything—including accept the rebels as part of their government—in order to bring an end to the war (Ibid.: 116-117).

An estimated 6,000 people, most of them civilians, were killed during this operation, while the RUF abducted perhaps 2,000 children and youth for child soldiering and related activities (Economist Intelligence Unit 1999: 1). One refugee youth recalled that “the girls were the worst” because they castrated their male victims. “Tupac uses bad words,” another Sierra Leonean refugee explained. “They are dangerous. The Rebels take [Tupac’s lyrics] very seriously and try to apply the lyrics.”⁶ During breaks in the action, refugee informants described how rebel soldiers would dance to Tupac’s music.

Tupac Shakur is famous across Africa, most particularly among urban youth. His music is as common in many urban neighborhoods as Bob Marley’s once was. His face and poses, pictured on clothing and in murals, are now widely familiar. A popular T-shirt has a black background, showing Tupac (spelled “2Pac”) looking alert, with U.S. dollar signs ringing the collar and his most popular slogan, “All Eyez on Me,” across the bottom. “All Eyez on Me” indeed – Tupac’s lyrics expressing his alienation, fury, and his conviction that his quest for revenge is thoroughly justified, the police sirens in the background of many of his songs, the belief that he was not really murdered but is still alive (often proclaimed in “Tupac lives” graffiti), all conjure an image of a defiant, proud antihero, and an inspiration for many of Africa’s young and alienated urbanites.

Defining Survival As Success

Surviving in cities is a hustle for many African youth. Many are neither fully employed nor entirely unemployed. Jacobsen and her colleagues list manual child labor jobs such as “water vendors, petty traders, sellers of plastic bags,” mud brick makers, car washers, and shoeshine activities (Jacobsen, Lautze, and Osman 2001: 94-95) as common urban IDP occupations in Khartoum. Prostitution and brewing beer are also common. There is also criminal work, which may range from simple thieving and vandalism to gang violence. A particularly compelling post-war example of threatening urban gangs is the notorious *Ninja* whose members terrorize Maputo, the capital of Mozambique (Sommers 2001b: 364-5).

Such hardship and difficulty can create different conceptions of what success in cities might mean. For many youth in “Bongoland,” for example, it may simply mean the ability to “survive,” to stay afloat in an urban world teeming with competition and danger. Returning to a rural home from Dar es Salaam without shillings in one’s pocket is

⁶ The quotes from Sierra Leonean refugees were drawn from private interviews with Sierra Leoneans in The Gambia in 2000, during fieldwork for the forced Migration and Human Rights Project, a Social Science Research Council activity. The refugees were present in Freetown during “Operation No Living Thing.”

practically unthinkable because it would signal a failure to succeed in the city. Urban migration, for male youth in Tanzania and elsewhere, appears to have become a kind of rite of passage into manhood. Cities are a challenge that must be surmounted, regardless of the cost, and through this process of being tested and challenged a new identity and degree of increased confidence and status may be gained.

TOWARDS INCLUSION OR EXCLUSION? SOME THOUGHTS ON URBAN YOUTH PROGRAMMING

Many observers of urban Africa continue to contend that rural Africans contemplate urban migration mainly because they are desperate and lack viable options. Accordingly, a popular remedy for intense urbanization is to intensify investment in rural Africa and thus draw people away from cities. This view is based on the contention that there continues to be an urban bias in African government outlays and that it must be reversed. Hope has argued that “the urban bias in African development policy has resulted in the rural areas lagging behind the urban areas in access to basic services and thereby reinforcing the concentration of poverty in those rural areas” (1998: 355). As a result, he contends that shifting more development resources away from cities towards rural areas “would contain the rural population, diminish their desire to migrate to urban areas, and thereby reduce both the rate and negative consequences of urbanization” (Ibid.: 356).⁷

Contrast this perspective of pronounced urban bias in development investment, however, with Linden's argument that “even without war, the quality of life for the poor has declined to the point where observers who long believed city dwellers had the advantage now recognize that large numbers of impoverished urbanites are worse off than the rural poor” (Linden 1996: 58). Furthermore, the cases of Khartoum and Dar es Salaam suggest that even persecuting urban youth cannot extinguish their resolve to remain in cities. Enticing urban youth back to rural areas through increased investment in the countryside may yield very minimal success. As Ogbu and Ikiara note, “There are some instances of reverse migration [from urban to rural areas in Africa] but this has been in trickles” (1995: 54).

Most of Africa's urban youth are thus very likely to remain in cities regardless of the degree of investment in the countryside or the difficulties they face in cities. If this is the case, then there are three consequences of having so many young permanent residents of African cities who feel excluded and alienated from others. First, the combination of their dominant presence and marginalized social status invites the question of just who represents youthful urbanites, both politically and within civil society. What does civil society mean, for example, if the majority of its members feel they don't belong to it? Second, urban development will be hamstrung if most urban youth aren't central

⁷ Longstanding under-investment in rural Africa has also been noted elsewhere. For example, two decades ago O'Connor commented, “In terms of development . . . it is declared government policy almost everywhere [in Africa] that priority attention should be given to rural areas, even if such policies are often less evident in practice.” O'Conner continued, “Most academic observers share this view, as increasingly do outside advisers such as those in the aid agencies” (1983: 15).

contributors to it. Third, the presence of a vast youth population that remains largely disengaged from civil society and economic development activities will almost inevitably have a negative impact on personal and community security in urban Africa.

Looking ahead, what should be done to guide and bolster the energies and aspirations of Africa's youthful urban majority? How do African cities balance, for example, the potential to create a more cosmopolitan culture while protecting themselves against threats of youth alienation? To be sure, such a balancing act is not going to be easy. However, it is useful to note that inclusion is implied in the idea of urban cosmopolitanism (suggested in the utility of urbanization in Central Africa), while the forms of alienation that urban youth articulate and even celebrate is a product of their exclusion from mainstream society.

A starting point would be to keep the following three issues in mind. First, it is important to accept that most youth in African cities are not going to leave. Second, acceptance is not enough. Urban youth must be actively, consistently, and positively engaged. Finally, it will be essential to transform perceptions of urban youth. They must no longer be seen as the core of urban Africa's problem, but as the foundation for solutions.

What follows are some thoughts on improving youth employment opportunities and including young urbanites in civil society.⁸

- *Target the Marginalized Youth Majority.* Marginalized urban youth tend to be unpopular with other members of urban society in Africa and elsewhere, including government officials. They are not widely viewed as vibrant, dynamic contributors to a city's culture and daily life. More often, they are viewed as carriers of crime and disease. Although some urban youth may be involved in criminal activity of a sort and some may be ill with HIV/AIDS or another disease, their economic and health needs may be largely unmet. It is also true that limited institutional efforts are made either to understand and accept urban youth or to consider them as an untapped cultural and labor resource. Programming that is customized to the needs and concerns of male and female youth in African cities has the potential to help turn the tide against youth isolation and marginalization and foster a greater appreciation of their outlook and potential.
- *Design Emphatically Inclusive Programs.* Small or narrowly targeted programs also hold the potential for inadvertently promoting exclusion by exacerbating already existing feelings of alienation and marginalization among youth. This can apply to a variety of programs such as those for ex-combatants, street children, and youth. For example, the lack of programs for youth who have resisted joining a gang, army or militia, who have been victims of such armed groups, or who have been child soldiers not included in ex-combatant programs (e.g., underestimating the involvement of girls and female youth in soldiering), creates

⁸ A broader discussion of programming options for youth in crisis situations is to be found in Sommers 2001c.

the feeling that programmers are paying attention only to the most prominent militarized youngsters.

- *Actively Encourage Female Youth Participation.* Successfully reaching female youth is a persistent and particularly thorny youth programming challenge. It is more common to find male youth associated with the term “youth” than female youth, who may simply be considered “young women.” A related problem arises when female youth are married – are they still youth, or are they mainly young mothers? Youth programmers, accordingly, must advocate for the effective and equitable involvement of female youth. The tendency of urban male youth to live much more public lives than urban female youth makes this programming challenge even more difficult.

The need to advocate for and work to include female youth is all the more important during and after wars, when many young females fall victim to war atrocities. For example, Nordstrom has commented on the tendency to overlook the needs of girls and female youth during war. “The forceful conscription of boy children into militaries is now a popular academic and documentary theme,” she writes, “while the contemporary slaving of girl war orphans is given little attention” (1999: 65). Accordingly, there is a critical need to “lift the veil of silence that surrounds the treatment of girls in war” (Ibid.:75). Part of this process is for youth programmers to work hard to find and then include female youth and effectively address their needs, customizing a program to suit their timeframes and other limitations, and addressing their human rights, mental, and reproductive health needs.

- *Develop Holistic Programs.* Existing data from youth-at-risk programming taking place both within and outside Africa suggest that holistic program approaches have a chance to address the array of concerns and problems that confront urban youth (Lowicki 2000, Sommers 2001c). The lives of urban youth are often so unstable, and their needs are so great, that youth employment programming alone may yield only minimal success. The introduction of literacy and basic life skills also may be required, particularly given the severe impact of HIV/AIDS on African's young. Accordingly, health education modules and medical referral protocol will most probably be required to address the dangers of HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases. Adapting life skills curricula also promises to reduce the vulnerability of youth to at-risk behavior. Addressing the trauma in young lives, particularly among the war-affected, also promises to be important.
- *Draw from Existing Entrepreneurial Skills When Developing Vocational Training.* Many urban youth are small entrepreneurs in the informal sector. They have often already made some sort of market assessment and identified a niche where they might have a chance to succeed. Even though this sort of work tends to be disconnected from the state, Macharia observes that “despite the lack of state support for the informal sector in most African countries, the sector has its

own ways of keeping dynamic” (1994: 168). The informal sector’s resilience can be so great that support systems arising from “social networks, kinship, ethnic [networks], and friendship” may keep an informal sector economy “thriving [even] when the state system [is] harassing it” (Ibid.). Since it is probable that most youth employment opportunities will exist in the informal sector, recognizing that most urban youth may have already begun to develop entrepreneurial skills, and finding useful ways to develop such skills, will probably be a key component of effective vocational programming for urban youth.

- *Foster Trust by Providing Access to Capital.* In addition to job skills, the primary support that some (not all) youth may require is improving their access to capital. Programming that recognizes and builds on the entrepreneurial skills of urban youth, including microenterprise business skills training, training about specific vocations, apprenticeships, and mentoring builds on pre-existing entrepreneurial skills. Unfortunately, microcredit programs for urban youth in Africa are rare. If such programming is made available to young urban entrepreneurs, it would have the added benefit of also constituting an expression of trust in them, a critical concern for young people who are alienated from mainstream society.

Another expression of trust can be employed with programming that features computers and education approaches that incorporate internet use (e.g., internet-based coursework or information research). Many urban youth interested in joining a program may be particularly curious about learning how to access and employ computers and the internet as a learning and training tool.

- *Create Effective Networks with Existing Youth Programs.* It is useful to examine, learn from, and form networks with urban youth programs that have demonstrated success in reaching marginalized young people. Research on migrant and refugee youth in Dar es Salaam (Sommers 2001a; 2001b) illuminated how Pentecostal churches have been effective at reaching poor urban youth. Their programs were emphatically holistic: in addition to the spiritual benefits, joining a Pentecostal congregation could afford a young person with a generally supportive community and opportunities for accessing employment training and work networks involving successful Pentecostal business people. In addition, church services often provide youth with an array of opportunities to be seen as contributors to the greater good of the community. A “saved” youth has a new identity, is accepted by fellow congregants, and is not an outcast. Following the strict Pentecostal code of behavior can be challenging, and Pentecostal leaders interviewed in Tanzania tended to depict Dar es Salaam as a place swarming with Satan’s temptations. But for those who joined and accepted Pentecostalism, the rewards could be quite significant. For many, Pentecostalism represented a road to urban success, as was evidenced in Tanzania when Pentecostal youth could

return to their rural homes (or refugee camps) with shillings in their pockets and gifts in their bags.⁹

While it is not being recommended that youth programming should adapt the spiritual dimensions of Pentecostal outreach and teaching, it is clear that the efforts of many religious groups—Pentecostal, Islamic, and otherwise—aid many urban youth. It is therefore useful to learn from and, where feasible, network with such organizations.

- *Maintain Ongoing Program Evaluations and Revisions.* Programs for youth in crisis, including urban youth, tend to receive inadequate support, reach relatively few youth, and are poorly evaluated (Sommers 2001c). For example, those who evaluate programs need to look at those who are not participating, not just at those who do. The low level of evaluation data creates a significant knowledge gap because it is not usually clear what sorts of programs work for urban youth and why they succeed.

The needs of most urban youth are so diverse and their lives are so full of change that it is critical to institute effective assessment, monitoring, and evaluation work as a consistent component of youth programming. Lessons learned from such activities can then be used to adjust the program accordingly. In addition, participatory methods that directly engage and inquire about youth and their lives, backgrounds, and aspirations can help develop trust between programmers and target group members and promote learning about youth lives and aspirations.

The most important youth to include in programs, finally, are likely the hardest to reach. Effective urban youth programming requires outreach, time, flexibility, networking, evaluation, support – and patience. Ultimately, what is needed is to accept Tupac's challenge: to transform the meaning behind the "All Eyez on Me" slogan from youth attracting attention as defiant outcasts to becoming accepted contributors to Africa's urban economies, cultures, and civil societies.

⁹ The attractions and benefits of Pentecostalism for the poor and the young has been widely described, such as by Cox (1995), Kalu (1997), and Martin (1990).

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