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## **WHO WILL SILENCE THE GUNS? (THE YOUTH AS AFRICAN SOLUTIONS TO AFRICAN PROBLEMS)**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Organization of African Union marked a significant time for reflection on the progress made on the continent, as well as persisting challenges. Protracted civil conflicts, proliferation of small arms and light weapons amongst civilian populations and the spread of violent extremism were identified as significant impediments to the progress of the continent. The initiative 'Silence the Guns by 2020' recognises dialogue-centred conflict prevention and resolution, human centred development and peace as requisite to ensuring and realizing Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want. This paper identifies alternative dispute resolution methods and soft power approaches as key to conflict prevention and management. It also identifies African youth as the African solution to African problems. Using examples from South Sudan, Somalia, Uganda and Kenya, the paper highlights young people's leadership and peacebuilding efforts towards silencing the guns. The paper calls for recognition and engagement of this emerging leadership.

### **INTRODUCTION**

In 2013 during the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the African Union (AU) the leaders reflected on the progress made in the last five decades, while planning for the next fifty years. This led to the launch of the AU's flagship project Silencing the Guns by 2020 which was first adopted in 2013. In February 2020, The African Union (AU) re-launched the campaign calling for the elimination of illegal weapons in Africa. Ms. Aïssatou Hayatou, the Silencing the Guns in Africa Operations Manager at the African Union Commission (AUC) specified that the campaign is primarily targeting governments (member states) because the responsibility of providing peace and security lies with governments. However, she also emphasized a focus on youth because, "It is their future at stake." (Musau, 2019). It is in this context that this paper makes the case for the youth as African solutions to African problems in the bid to silence the guns – be it physical or figurative guns.

The paper seeks to showcase that the youth are emerging as leaders who are silencing the guns through alternative approaches to state-led processes. It challenges the securitisation of the youth bulge in Africa (Sukarieh & Tannock, 2018; Olawale & Abiodun, 2007), and demonstrates that the quest for African solutions to African problems lies within the "youth bulge". In the process, it contributes to the argument that peace and security in Africa is a leadership issue (Olonikasin, 2017).

The paper is divided into five sections besides the introduction. First, it discusses the African landscape and initiative to silence the guns by examining the progress made, challenges and opportunities. Second, it tackles the securitization of the youth bulge and argues that the youth are critical to solving the problems Africa is facing including violence and conflict. The third section appreciates the need to tackle illicit proliferation of small arms and light weapons (SALWs). The fourth section discusses soft power approaches to silencing the guns when dealing with terrorism and violent extremism. Fifth the paper calls for recognition and engagement with the leadership and solutions offered by young people in the bid to silence the guns.

### **SILENCING THE GUNS IN AFRICA'S LANDSCAPE**

The African Union's (AU) flagship project Silencing the Guns 2020 was borne out of African leaders' resolve "not to bequeath the burden of conflicts to the next generation of Africans and undertake to end all wars in Africa by 2020" (African Union, 2013). The realization that, even after 50 years of existence, the AU had not



adequately addressed the issue of conflict on the continent, motivated the adoption of the project to be part of the broader developmental Agenda 2063.

The initiative was created with the objective of ending all wars, civil conflicts, gender-based violence, violent conflicts as well as genocides by the year 2020. This is in tandem with the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) goal 16.4, which aims at significantly reducing financial and arms flows by 2030. The goal of silencing the guns by 2020 is also key to achieving Agenda 2063 (ACCORD, 2015; African Union, 2019).

Additionally, aspiration 4 of Agenda 2063 explicitly aspires for a peaceful and secure Africa grounded in grass-rooted social cohesion, management of diversity and equitable socio-economic transformation. It aspires for an Africa free from armed conflict, terrorism, organized crime, intolerance and gender-based violence, which are major threats to human security, peace and development. That Africa will have ended the illicit trade and proliferation of small arms and light weapons. (African Union, 2015).

Musau (2019) notes significant achievements over the past two decades since the adoption of the project. Guns have been silenced in previous conflict areas such as Angola, Cote d'Ivoire, Liberia and Sierra Leone. Potential flare-ups have also been addressed through this initiative. However, challenges exist in countries such as Libya, South Sudan, the Central African Republic, the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, and the Lake Chad Basin where violence persists (Musau, 2019). Additionally, the threat of violent extremism and transnational crimes remains within the Horn of Africa, the Sahel region and is spreading in northern Mozambique.

### **TACKLING THE YOUTH BULGE DILEMMA**

The African Youth Charter defines youth as people aged between 15 and 35 and according to a report by Mo Ibrahim Foundation 60% of Africa's population was below the age of 25 as of 2019 (Mo Ibrahim Foundation, 2019). The Institute of Security Studies study states that Africa's population is the fastest growing in the world and will account for nearly half of the global population growth over the next two decades (Institute of Security Studies, 2017). It also states that by 2035, half of Africa's citizens will still be under 21 years old and notes that this demographic divide can be harnessed. However, the report cautions that if governments fail to provide adequate public services and employment in the context of pervasive poverty and inequality, youthful populations presage an increased risk of social instability and political violence.

Similarly, a study by Population Action International ascertained a relationship between countries with an increased youth population and those inclined to civil conflicts (Population Action International 2012). It makes the claim that a growing young population has the potential to destabilize states that lack the capacity to accommodate and cater to their needs. The theory contends that deficient state capacity manifests in lack of (quality) education, high rates of unemployment and lack of access to healthcare services, which produces a disgruntled youth population that is susceptible to recruitment into "rebel" or terrorist groups (Beehner, 2007). Braungart (1984), who writes in agreement with Beehner (2007), puts forward that rising youth unemployment in any given society undermines the legitimacy of the political authority and stability of the political system. Thus, the AU Operations Manager in an interview (Musau, 2019), noted that 600 million young people in Africa are unemployed, uneducated or in insecure employment. She asserted that there is a need to invest in economic development to prevent the youth from taking up arms.

It is however important to note that narratives of the youth as given to violence are misleading and misrepresent the "youth bulge" as a security threat. Olowawale and Abiodun (2013) assert that the reality of a youth upsurge in many African countries presents both challenges and opportunities for national socio-economic transformation. Aya Chebbi, the Youth Envoy to the African Union has furthermore pointed out that,

[it is indeed] ... first and foremost a question of narrative. When African youth get the worst leader's attention they are talked about as perpetrators of violence with images carrying the guns, as the dangerous class, as the



number of the unemployed, as migrants dying in the Mediterranean, as a youth bulge. But they are not spoken of as a generation of peacebuilders that changed the course of history, that revolutionised technology; that inspired new ways of citizen engagement. [It is worth noting that] African youth do not resign themselves to the hardships of their situation. They are using their agency and creativity to build the Africa we want (United Nations, 2019).

By large 'youth-hood' often carries a political undertone that creates distance between young people and formal power structures. This is because beyond the age categories, youth is a stage of transition from childhood to adulthood otherwise known as waithood (Alcinda Honwana, 2012). The transition is not only physical, but also psychological, social, gendered, and political. It is informed by the cultural, socio-economic, political context; it prescribes the position of the youth in the present and future social order.

The establishment of the Office of Youth Envoy to the African Union in November 2018 is a step toward mitigating the distance between young people and the mission of the AU, allowing for intergenerational dialogue, exchange of influence and synergy. Additionally the African Youth Charter adopted in 2009, recognises that the youth are “partners, assets and a prerequisite for sustainable development and for the peace and prosperity for Africa with a unique contribution to make to the present and future development of Africa”. It further charges the youth to be custodians of their own development (Africa Union, 2009) and recognizes that young people are making efforts to build peace. As Africa searches for African solutions to African problems, this paper asserts that the youth are the African solution to African problems. Moreover, with the youth constituting over 60% of Africa's population, any solution in Africa that does not involve them consequently excludes over half of the African population (Obonyo, 2020).

### **TACKLING THE ILLICIT PROLIFERATION OF SMALL ARMS AND LIGHT WEAPONS**

The proliferation of small arms and light weapons (SALWs) in Africa is largely due to their low cost and ease of management. The illicit flow of these weapons has contributed to increased violence and the rapid militarization of civil society. Transnational crime, intra-state conflict and terrorism thrive on proliferation of small arms and the illegal small arms trade (Religions for Peace, 2017). About 80% of all small arms in Africa are in the hands of civilians according to the Small Arms Survey (SAS). Civilians, including rebel groups and militias, hold more than 40 million small arms and light weapons while government-related entities hold less than 11 million according to the 2019 SAS and African Union study, Weapons Compass: Mapping Illicit Small Arms Flows in Africa (Musau, 2019).

Geoffrey Duke, a member of South Sudan Action Network on Small Arms (SSANSA), in an interview noted that South Sudan which has a population of slightly over 8 million has approximately 3 million arms in circulation. It is also believed that half of the arms in circulation (1.5 million weapons) are in the hands of civilians (Overton, 2013). In the Focus Group Discussion Report titled Youth perspectives on peace and security: South Sudan, one youth is quoted saying “my gun is my salary”. This youth admitted to killing three people, selling their guns, and using the money to buy cows for dowry (Conciliation Resources, 2018). For him and others, the gun is a sure way of earning a livelihood, transitioning from childhood to adulthood, securing aspirations and place in the community. Hence, this points to the need to not only end overt violence, use and trade of guns but also to redress the structural drivers and enablers of violence and conflict. The AU recognises that it is imperative that the root causes of African conflicts are redressed; that most African challenges can be mitigated through prioritizing development and investing in the continent's growing youth population. (Musau, 2019; Africa Union, 2009; Africa Union, 2015).

As part of the campaign, September 2020 was set as an amnesty month during which guns could be turned in to authorities without penalty. This included all illegally acquired light weapons used in cattle rustling, crime, and urban violence. Otherwise the illicit proliferation of small arms and light weapons destabilises communities, security, and development (ACCORD, 2015). It challenges the nature and authority of the state premised on “the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory” (Weber, 1945,



p.4). This is especially relevant in Africa, given that many nations are generally characterised by weak institutional environments unable to ensure human rights, social services, good governance, and rule of law in all occupied territories. (ACCORD, 2015).

### **SOFT POWER APPROACHES TO SILENCING THE GUNS**

Hard power or military approaches to countering violent extremism have proved to be costly, both financially and in terms of human capital. They have also been criticised as being unsustainable and ineffective, as operations are often funded by non-African governments and institutions and these violent extremist groups still pose serious security threats. Furthermore, the “war on terror” has resulted in heavy-handed responses culminating in human rights violations which create conducive grounds for anti-government sentiment and recruitment into armed groups (Amnesty International, 2015). Terrorist acts generally occur at the confluence between existing group grievances (that could be real or imagined), ideological narratives and some margin of operational capability (ACCORD, 2015).

Even as military operations and prosecution of armed groups continue, African states and policy makers should explore soft power approaches as these would build state legitimacy amongst communities. Agenda 2063: Aspiration 4 states that dialogue-centred conflict prevention and resolution will be actively promoted (Africa Union, 2015). Additionally, member states at the Arusha Retreat agreed to prioritise building trust and confidence in all their respective domestic constituencies to better secure a legitimate social contract (Accord, 2015). Although dialogue with militant groups is a complex and time-consuming process, it shows the state's willingness to prioritize human security over state security which in the long-term creates a conducive environment for ending cycles of violence thus providing a long-term solution (Olojo, 2019).

For example, Ilwad Elman in 2010 returned to Somalia from Canada while the majority of Mogadishu and South Central Regions of Somalia were under Al-Shabaab authority. Alongside her mother Fartuun Adan and sisters, she co-founded the Elman Peace Centre, in honour of her father Elman Ali Ahmed who coined the mantra "Drop the Gun, Pick up the Pen". She also opened the first rape crisis centre in Somalia for survivors of sexual and gender-based violence. She intentionally engaged young men and boys in conversations about sexual violence to change the social attitude about sexual and gender-based violence. Ilwad's initiative has helped to de-radicalize young people who had joined Al Shabaab by supporting their disengagement, rehabilitation as well as reintegration into society (Specter, 2019). Given its effectiveness, the initiative has been replicated in Mali, Cameroon, and Nigeria.

Similarly, in northern Uganda Victor Ochen is cultivating healing, peace education and youth leadership out of the obscurity of conflict, trauma and marginalisation,. Victor Ochen spent 21 years of his childhood in refugee camps. He grew up amidst violent conflict that displaced over 3 million people, more than 60,000 children were abducted and forcefully recruited as child soldiers including his brother. As part of his contribution to peacebuilding in northern Uganda, Victor through the African Youth Initiative Network (AYINET) has provided reconstructive medical repair to over 21,000 war victims of rape, mutilation, and gun shots. AYINET also champions peace education, transitional justice, youth leadership and development. Furthermore, recognising that efforts towards 'silencing the guns' must go beyond redressing overt violence (ACCORD, 2015), there is need to acknowledge youth leaders who are helping to redress structural violence. One such young leader among many others in Africa is Wawira Njiru of Kenya- the founder of Food4Education. Her initiative is “feeding the future” through the provision of subsidized meals to underprivileged children in Kibera. Kibera is the biggest temporary settlement (slum) in Africa and one of the biggest in the world. Using smart technology the Food4Education initiative provides approximately 10,000 meals a day (Food4Education, 2019). Each student is issued a Tap2Eat wristband linked to a virtual wallet into which parents deposit money for the subsidized lunches (Mwambari, 2020). When schools were closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Food4Education found means to provide food to the children and their families while observing government precautions. In several ways, Food4Education is addressing some of



the structural violence, causes of inequality and conditions that drive individuals to be more inclined to disaffection, crime and even urban violence (Solomon, 2020).

### **SILENCING THE GUNS THROUGH EFFECTIVE LEADERSHIP**

Examples like that of Wawiru of Food4Education challenge mainstream leadership narratives that tend to focus on designated offices, institutions and government as sources of leadership while undermining the agency and leadership which often emerges in the everyday and informal spaces (Mwambari, 2020). According to Fanon, “each generation must, out of relative obscurity, discover its mission, fulfil it, or betray it,” (Fanon, 1963; Mwangola, 2011). Young people like Geoffrey Duke, Ilwad Elman, Victor Ochen and Wawira Njiru have identified their missions: to end violence and build peace by offering solutions specific to their community problems. Using intimate knowledge of their contexts, these young people are responding to their societal needs in direct and appropriate ways (Mwambari, 2020).

It is in offering these solutions that they are also offering the kind of leadership that can silence the guns in Africa. It is a leadership that is borne out of a shared vision for peace and utmost desire for change for themselves and their communities (Olonisakin, 2017). A look at leadership as a process recognises that leadership emerges out a shared vision to resolve a particular situation at hand, that the process is fluid and hinges on mutuality, an exchange of influence and agency between the emergent leader and followers.

Mutuality entails “a sense of common purpose — between person(s) engaging in leadership and the population to whom leadership is directed. It is difficult to achieve effectiveness in dealing with situations of conflict and insecurity when there is no common goal or mutuality between leaders and the population that they seek to lead,” (Olonisakin, 2017). This resonates with the observation by member states at the Arusha Retreat of the need to prioritise building trust and confidence in all their respective domestic constituencies to better secure a legitimate social contract (Accord, 2015).

The need for transformative leadership to achieve the 'Africa we want' (Africa Union, 2015) and reorganisation and reorientation of the social order, beliefs and values is inevitable (Todaro, 1980). In fact, Pan-Africanism is not founded on marginalisation of the youth but rather the engagement of the youth as partners, assets and critical stakeholders to sustainable development and peace. Moreover, the generation that led the liberation struggle of Africa was not considered to be too young; it discovered its mission and fulfilled it (Fanon, 1963; Mwangola, 2011). Inevitably the youth have a propensity to confront and contest uncondusive situations because it is their future at stake. The AU and member states must therefore engage this propensity to secure peace and security in Africa.

### **CONCLUSION**

African leaders committed to Silence the Guns in Africa by 2020. To this end the African Union launched the Silencing the Guns campaign in February 2020 premised on finding African Solutions to African Problems. The paper has demonstrated that even though governments are primarily responsible for peace and security, the youth are key stakeholders to the African solutions to African problems. With the youth constituting 60% of Africa's population, any solution in Africa to Silence the Guns that does not involve them consequently excludes over half of the African population (Obonyo, 2020). Using examples, the paper has showcased the leadership that is happening in mundane, alternative and everyday spaces away from state and international platforms in Somalia, Uganda and Kenya. It has proposed comprehensive engagement and recognition of solutions and leadership being offered by young people on the continent to silence the guns, build peace and achieve the Africa we want.



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