

Youth and capability development:

Research summary

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Context

Young people are indispensable in the pursuit of inclusive urban development in African cities. By 2050, over half of Africa's population will be under the age of 25. As such, young people will play a game-changing role in the development outcomes across Africa's cities and are often regarded as the “makers or breakers” of the future of the continent. The ACRC youth and capability development research uncovers prevalent systemic barriers hindering young people in African cities from fulfilling their potential, particularly within social welfare systems and politics.

Drawing on insights from five cities, our findings show that the key social systems provide limited support to young people transitioning into adulthood, yielding the need for reform. In particular, young people have emphasised the significance of quality education, vocational skills training programmes, financial services, health services and avenues for political participation. Overall, youth have high stakes, but low power in the political sphere, undermining their ability to influence and improve the core social systems affecting their livelihoods.

Methods

The study builds on evidence from five cities that are part of the youth and capability development domain, including **Addis Ababa** in Ethiopia, **Freetown** in Sierra Leone, **Kampala** in Uganda, **Maiduguri** in Nigeria and **Mogadishu** in Somalia. These cities were chosen because they have youth-majority populations and have been directly or indirectly affected by conflict. The objective in selecting these cities was to investigate commonalities in youth capabilities, as well as the political and systemic influences shaping these capabilities, across diverse urban contexts.

City-level research teams drew on a combination of secondary and primary data collection. Primary data was collected through individual interviews and focus group discussions. In all cities, research teams were committed to distinguishing between the experiences of different vulnerable groups of young people, including young migrants and those living in refugee camps, as well as documenting how these challenges differ based on gender and socioeconomic status. Building on extensive debates on social versus biological definitions of youthhood, participants' ages ranged from 15 to 30 years of age. Children ages 0 to 15 were not included.



Key findings

Limited access to quality education, secure work, and mental and reproductive health services hinders the capabilities of youth

Political settlements in five research cities often exclude young people, as political elites engage with them primarily during the elections through patron–client campaigning strategies. These power dynamics restrict youth influence on policy agendas and hinder their ability to hold government agencies accountable. Additionally, conflicting interests among various government departments tend to undermine the effectiveness of youth programmes.

Navigating insecure labour markets is a central aspect of youth experiences, with challenges of un- and underemployment being similar across five cities. Youth from low socioeconomic backgrounds face hurdles in securing formal jobs and accessing microbusiness loans regardless of their education, due to issues like nepotism and corruption. When livelihood opportunities are scarce, some young men join militia groups or organised youth gangs to meet social and economic needs. Meanwhile, young women are more likely to encounter financial exploitation and sexual discrimination during job searches.

Opportunities to acquire skills to better navigate the labour market are frequently limited, as both formal education and vocational skills programmes fall short in terms of quality and relevance to market demands. Gaps in government-funded education systems are often filled by private provision and vocational training programmes, perpetuating socioeconomic inequalities. Religious schools are another alternative that is more affordable but often of variable quality.

Research participants across various cities voiced concerns about the use of substances by peers as a coping mechanism for depressive

symptoms arising from the stress of conflict and economic insecurity. Existing health systems generally provide limited mental health support, primarily due to persistent stigma among policymakers and young people. Moreover, mental health treatments alone often fail to address the core drivers of ill-being, such as unemployment, precarity and experiences of conflict-induced violence. Access to reproductive health services is severely restricted, often due to exorbitant costs at the time-of-service use.

Implications for urban policy reform

> Integrated and multisectoral approaches to promoting youth capabilities

The number of cross-sectoral projects across African countries is on the rise; however, they predominantly concentrate on combining health interventions, such as HIV/AIDS or malaria prevention, with cash transfers. Findings in this report suggest the need for broadening multisectoral youth programmes to incorporate youth skills training and mental health support. As the first step, it is crucial to support locally led initiatives of this nature that can be expanded or scaled up, as most evidence focuses on stand-alone, short-term skills training programmes.

Furthermore, lessons could be drawn from the Integrated Mental Health, Skills, and Work Policy strategies that have been rolled out across OECD countries since 2015, based on the evidence that mental ill-health weighs disproportionately on young people who are unemployed and from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. One example of such type of support is the “I Can Work” programme in Wales, which offers integrated skills training and mental health support. The programme is accessible through the national network of health clinics and community-based support services and has resulted in improved interministerial coordination and integrated programming.



> Protection and support for young people in informal labour markets

Many participants stressed the importance of regulating technical and vocational education and training (TVET) curricula, due to the considerable differences in the quality of skills training programmes. Of particular concern are informal apprenticeships, where young individuals are highly vulnerable to exploitation. At the time of writing, there is a striking lack of research evidence on education and training and the informal economy and how young people can be supported when navigating these informal arrangements. One option could be to learn from successful community-managed savings group models (for example, Ajo, Esusu, Saccos, Vicoba) and consult with the local communities when designing strategies to mitigate the risks faced by young people in the informal sector.

> Meaningful inclusion of youth in decisionmaking

Research findings yet again emphasise the importance of participatory programme design – youth empowerment and capability development projects, whether funded by national or international actors, need to allocate time and resources to meaningfully collaborate with youth during research and programme design phases. Incorporating youth into decisionmaking processes enhances the likelihood that interventions will not only adhere to the cost-effective principles emphasised in the global North's policy discourse of “what works” and “smart buys” but will also be more sustainable and relevant to young people.

While numerous examples exist for shifting the power to local actors originating from the global South, pathways to inclusion of young people in politics are less clear. In contexts where elections are either not held or dominated by money and violence, elevating youth voices and issues is challenging. This research illustrates that youth often find themselves forced to align with existing power networks to access any benefits at all. However, at the same time there is a growing awareness among political elites regarding youth's disruptive potential and the inadequacy of current clientelist approaches. As such, there are increasing prospects for more meaningful inclusion of youth in the political settlements as the current powerbrokers will seek ways to ensure their political and economic survival.

Figure 1: Cities covered by the youth and capability development domain research



About this summary

This is a summary of a Working Paper, written by the African Cities Research Consortium (ACRC) youth and capability development domain team: Olha Homonchuk, Elizabeth Dessie, Nicola Banks, Katja Starc Card, Susan Nicolai, Nansozi K Muwanga, Imrana Buba, Zainab Hassan, Haja R Wurie and Eyob Balcha Gebremariam.

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Photo information (by order of appearance):

1. Young people outside an electrical shop in Kampala, Uganda - AnjoKanFotografie / iStock; 2. Young woman in Cockle Bay informal settlement in Freetown, Sierra Leone - Alexandre Apsan Frediani; 3. Young people in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia - Tim Kelsall.



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