Youth Policy and the Future of Africa’s Development: Exploring the Potential Contribution of Information and Communication Technology in the Youth Empowerment Process in Cameroon

Completed Research Paper

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Abstract

Youths in Cameroon feel politically neglected, socially and economically marginalized; this is because they have been caught in a cycle of poverty, dis-empowerment, unemployment and underemployment. The government is aware and has put in place structures and programs to address these issues. With these programs in place, the assumption is that the problems youths face have become obsolete or in the very least, have been tackled to an extent. This, however, is not the case as the structures do not provide opportunities youths need to effectively participate in the development process of Cameroon. Reasons such as corruption, bad governance and the lack of proper dissemination of information which characterize the implementation and monitoring process of these programs could be advanced as major reasons for their failure. However, the introduction of Information and Communications Technology can greatly contribute to the effectiveness of these programs which would directly influence youth empowerment and the development of Cameroon.

Keywords: Youth policy, development, empowerment, effective governance, monitoring and evaluation, Accountability, Information and Communications Technology (ICT)

Introduction

During the early years of independence in the 1960s and 1970s, young people in Africa and Cameroon especially did not pose a serious social problem. As a consequence, unemployed and disadvantaged youth were not a major target for governments and funding agencies (Bennell and Mulenga, 2000). This is no longer the case as the consequences of not fully developing and harnessing youth’s potential has led to dire consequences including significant economic losses, armed conflict, and political and social upheaval and instability—as demonstrated recently by the Arab Spring which was fuelled by the intensive use of social media (Gerkin, 2011) which was described as a youth rebellion driven by grievances about unemployment and dissatisfaction with existing regimes (Hoffman and Jamal, 2012). As the years go by, there has been a shift from traditionalist roles of Cameroonian youths; who were considered not to be matured enough to be involved in decision making and good governance processes, to educated youth, youth leagues and movements and participatory approaches which have increasingly put young people at the forefront. Young people constitute a substantial share of the population of most Sub-Saharan African
countries and Cameroon in particular. Cameroon is found in the Central African Sub-region. With a population of over 20 million people, she has the biggest economy in the sub-region. This creates a need for practical policies and related programs to engage youth effectively in all aspects of the development of their countries. Looking at the general economic and social situation in Cameroon which is characterized by generalized poverty and unemployment; and the global digital divide and limited access to ICT by the Cameroonian youth, one can notice a gap which needs to be filled to enable the future of Cameroon’s development and that of Africa as a whole. To ensure development, these policies have to not only be implemented but evaluated as well; this implies implementation as well as evaluation.

In this regard the Government of Cameroon has tried to address this need by enacting youth policies that support young people. Cameroon is signatory to several international treaties which pertain to the youth; the World Programme of Action for Youth (WPAY) which guides the United Nations youth agenda and the African Youth Charter to name a few. The Cameroon Government also enacted the 2006 national youth policy which is anchored in both national priorities and international commitments. To ensure the implementation of these agendas, the government has also put in place The Ministry of Youth Affairs and Civic Education; setting a framework for youth’s emancipation and employment which focuses specifically on challenges and problems faced by Cameroonian youth under which there are many youth support programs. The aim of these is to cater to the issues which affect the youth in Cameroon. Moreover, there is talk of carrying along the youth in realizing the 2035 emergence vision.

Against this background, irrespective of the efforts put in place by the government, there has been a gap in the implementation and evaluation process. There seems to be a lack of proper monitoring and evaluation of existing policies and programs for youths in Cameroon. This has hindered the developmental process and therefore, the future of Cameroon’s development which is inextricably linked to the development of Africa. More specifically, this study seeks to answer the following research question:

- As a follow up to the implementation process of youth support programs in Cameroon and the various evaluation and accountability mechanisms put in place to check their impact and relevance to youth empowerment, and the development of Cameroon, what are the potential contributions of ICT in improving the outcomes and impacts of these programs?

In order to address this research question, this research draws on the extant literature on youth support programs in Cameroon such as the Rural and Urban Youth Support Program (PAJER-U), the Youth Socio-Economic Integrated Project for the Manufacturing of Sporting Materials (PIFMAS) and the Integrated Support Project for Actors of the Informal Sector (PIAASI). The general objective will be to assess the implementation and evaluation processes of youth support programs in Cameroon. Specifically, the aim will be to identify youth support programs in Cameroon, to examine the implementation process of these programs, to identify the evaluation and accountability mechanisms in the implementation of the programs, to evaluate the outcome and impact of these implementation processes and to gauge their relevance to youth development and the development of Cameroon; finally, to discover the potential contributions of ICT in improving the outcomes and impacts of these programs.

Following the introduction, the paper is organized as follows. In Section 2, we provide a theoretical background to the study. In Section 3, we describe the research methodology that is being adopted to address the research questions. Section 4 deals with the case presentation, findings and analysis. Section 5 will include general discussions on key lessons learned, the conclusion and implications as well as research limitations and future research directions.

**Literature Review**

The youths play a critical role in the socio-economic and political development of Cameroon and Africa as a whole. National development in most cases depends a lot on the population of the country and the current generation also. According to UNICEF Cameroon’s 2015 demographic statistics, Cameroon’s
Youthful population stands at over 60% of the country’s population. Youths have gotten involved in good governance and electoral processes through information sharing, especially through the use of ICT; volunteering, decision making, Capacity-building in aspects like leadership training, Youth-adult partnerships, citizenship as well as peer education.

**Youth and Information and Communications Technology**

Technology – specifically ICT – has played a central role in young people’s rise to prominence on a global scale. It has helped them mobilize, collaborate and given them a voice where there was none before. It has brought them together in response to social concerns. It has connected them across vast geo-political barriers.

According to the International Telecommunication Unit (ITU) and Broadband Commission of the United Nations, research has shown the benefits of ICT access across all major sectors (UNDESA, 2011). For young people, access to information means better access to capital, markets and training needed to pursue a career or studies; increased participation in political processes, and recognition of youth as responsible citizens in today’s society. Youth entrepreneurship which is facilitated by access to technology, the internet and information, is fast being positioned as a solution for youth unemployment (Oye, 2011).

According to Michael and Samson (2014) in the Impact of ICT on Youth and its Vocational Opportunities in Nigeria, the development of ICT will provide employment opportunities to the youths thereby securing the nation both socially and economically. Thus the paper recommends that, potentials of youth should be upgraded to encourage the application of ICT.

**Youth and Unemployment**

A group of writers have postulated that, if unemployment which is major youth issue that hinders the future of African development is tackled, then there will be hope for Africa’s future (Gyimah-Brempong and Kimenyi, 2013).

Gough, Langevang, and Owusu (2013) have posited that, young people in the global South are seeking employment opportunities in challenging economic and social environments. This paper provides an overview of current debates regarding youth employment, highlighting conceptualisations of youth and (un)employment, emerging youth employment trends and the nature of policies introduced to tackle youth (un)employment. It shows how highlighting the complexities and diversities of youth employment strategies in sub-Saharan Africa provides valuable lessons, both for enhancing current conceptualisations and theorisation of youth employment and in terms of related policy instruments. It however does not provide an adequate way forward on how these strategies can be sustainable.

**Youth and Poverty**

Cunningham et al., (2008) posited that “Targeting youth may be a starting point for reducing poverty and inequality...” (p.26). Poverty has always been, and still is a thorn in the development journey of developing countries especially those in sub-Saharan Africa. Young people as stakeholders in the development process have been affected most in this poverty dilemma as they lack access to capital, education, and employment opportunities, all due to poverty. This has led to migration in search of greener pastures and of course brain drain.

**Social Capital and Synergies**

Collaborations between young people, informal and governmental institutions can have a synergetic character in order to overcome the problematic gap between civil society and formal institutions under the process of policy making and policy implementation. Evans (1996) amongst others believes that a synergy between the state and the civil society can catalyse social, political and economic growth in developing countries. Synergies between the national, regional or local government and people, communities or civic organizations can be based on complementarity or/and embeddedness. Complementarity synergies are characterized by mutually supportive relations and the interactions between the government and the civil society. The government provides common goods, financial means and a legal framework such as the rule of law, while the private sector provides goods like labour, time, and human skills especially skills in ICT. Both kinds of inputs complement each other and increase the
quality and quantity of the outputs. The cooperation between the private/informal institutions and the public/formal institutions incorporates a divide of labour and the dependency on each other's commitment (Evans 1996).

To conclude, for youth policies to be effective, policy implementers must consider a number of factors associated with policy implementation. The above authors have located the dimensions of policy implementation within the wider policy literature and described in their own way why each component of the dimension is important for effective policy implementation. However, what is lacking is the fact that they have not been able to provide concrete solutions for the ineffectiveness of existing policies. This is because there is a gap in the monitoring and evaluation process whereby policies are being implemented but no precise follow-up is carried out to ensure their effectiveness in respects to future development. It is clear that, effective youth police directly leads to both human and socio economic development.

**Methodology**

**Research Design**

This study uses a mixed-method combining both qualitative and quantitative research methods Berg and Lune, (2012). Qualitative in that, it uses case studies which typically combine data collection methods such as archives, interviews, questionnaires, and observations Eisenhardt (1989). Documentary and desktop evidence involving policy documents and reports have also been used. Case study, which involves either single or multiple cases, and numerous levels of analysis Yin, (1984) has been used here to track the progress of several youth support programs and their impact on youth in Cameroon. The quantitative method of research is used to arrive at concrete statistics and measurable evidence through the use of structured questionnaires that contain predominantly closed-ended questions and focus group discussions. Computer-assisted and telephone interviewing were also used to obtain quantitative data. An appraisal of these institutions and programmes by making a sample comparative study between the set objectives of the programmes/institutions and the achievements will be made. However in this paper, we will only present part of our qualitative and quantitative analysis.

**Sample**

The main sampling technique used in this study was the purposive sampling. This was because the researcher needed particular information which particular respondents could provide. It was necessary to get appropriate information from the youth population as well as policy makers who understand the subject matter. Youths from two towns in Cameroon were chosen for this study. These included youth from Centre and South West Regions. These were purposively selected because both Regions are representative of the Anglophone and francophone cultures of the country. It was therefore of paramount importance to make the study more inclusive and representative of both Anglophone and francophone youth. Secondly, most National institutions in charge of youth affairs are found in Yaoundé. Choosing Yaoundé, therefore, helped ensure accessibility to these programs.

**Interviews**

The interview was used as a means to get data from the interviewee. In order to carry out the interviews judiciously, the researcher made use of interview guides. The interview guide used by the researcher was very helpful as it directed the respondent towards the researcher’s topic. The interview was a structured one; the researcher asked the same questions to all the respondents and the questions were asked by the researcher herself. However, both open ended and close ended questions were used to give a balance to the interview process. Open ended questions were used by the researcher in some areas in order not to influence the respondent’s answers while close ended questions were used in other parts to limit the impact of context effects; that is, in instances where the answer given to a particular question depended on the nature of preceding questions.

**Documentary Analyses**

The analysis of secondary documents related to youth policy and development had an important function in strengthening the data collected on the field. The quality and hence the relevance of such documents
was assessed through the criteria of authenticity, credibility, representativeness and meaning (Scott, 1990). Authenticity questions the reliability of the origins and author of the documents, whereas credibility concerns the quality and the plausibility of the document’s content. The third criterion addresses the representativeness or the uniqueness of the document’s statement and the final point investigates the comprehensibility of the text.

**Research Sites**

Several institutions were selected for this study among which include: the Ministry of Youth Affairs and Civic Education, the Ministry of Employment and Vocational Training, the National Employment Fund (NEF). However three main youth Support Programmes in Cameroon where the focus of this project these are: the Rural and Urban Youth Support Programme (PAJER-U). This program piloted by the Ministry of Youth affairs and Civic Education is aimed at promoting the socio-economic insertion of Cameroonian youths (educated and non-educated) through social mobilization, training and financing so as to enable them become veritable actors of development.

The second program is the Integrated Support Project for Actors of the Informal Sector (PIAASI). PIAASI was designed with the specific objective of training youths and facilitating financing of income generating projects submitted by youths. It should be noted that the informal sector in Cameroon presently recruits more youths than the formal sector. PIAASI is supervised by the Ministry of Employment and Vocational Training. Finally, the Youth Socio-Economic Integrated Project for the Manufacturing of Sporting Materials (PIFMAS) is the third youth support program studied. This program is under the tutelage of the Ministry of Youth and Civic Education and unlike PAJER-U that is nation-wide, PIFMAS is focused on four regions of the country only: Far North, North, Adamawa and the Northwest regions. Another major characteristic of this programme according to the project document is that it targets only youths of between 18 and 35 years who are school drop-outs or have never gone to school.

**Case Analysis**

The following paragraphs will present an in-depth analysis into the programs studied by bringing out some key insights.

Some of the programmes have benefitted the youths by indirectly reducing the unemployment rate in Cameroon. These programs have encouraged the creation of sustainable projects by youth which have provided alternative means of employment for them. The programs have provided financing for many youth projects giving those who have benefited a sense of hope and belonging to the country. These programs have also restored some trust in the government and reduced political apathy among the youths.

In as much as the programs have benefitted some young people, the programs do not address gender and specific challenges of young people. Some of the programs cover just some regions and leave out others. For example, PIFMAS covers just four of the ten regions of Cameroon. Different programs are designed as credit schemes with financing provided to youths on reimbursement terms but the allocated time for the reimbursement of these loan-like financing is often very short. From the program design, the loans are supposed to be paid back in 15 months. Consequently, the beneficiaries are obliged to repay the loans not from profits of the business but from the business capital itself. Thus, most of them are found jobless again soon after obtaining the financing. The process to benefit from the programmes is unduly perilous thereby discouraging the youth. The programmes are intrinsically short term mandates designed to solve longstanding issues. They are therefore interested in obtaining the results outlined in the project document such as the mobilization and training of 5000 youths (PAJER-U) rather than effectively solving the problems of unemployment through sustainable actions. The use of a centralized electronic platform to collect and share all data related to youth unemployment, financial aid, training, etc. across the whole country may increase the visibility of these programs, the sharing of success factors from one state to another one may help improve the performance of failing states.

The different programmes piloted by the National Employment Fund have little to do with agriculture or the promotion of ICT. Also, a programme like PIFMAS targeted only youths aged between 18 to 35 years who are school drop-outs or have never gone to school. This programme failed to meet its target as only a
total of 880 balls and 165 nets were produced out of 23800 balls and 400 nets targeted respectively at the initial phase. Another common weakness identified by respondents in this research is that they were designed without the participation of the youths. In most cases, these programmes are products of bureaucrats with little feedback from the target group. Focus seems to be little more tilted towards emphasizing on the aggregate outcomes rather than micro level distributions of the outcomes of the programmes in solving youth unemployment. One way to increase the outcome of this program is to intensively use IT to engage with the youths. Indeed, in Cameroon the youths are among the lead users of IT including mobile phones and Facebook and social Media in General. 

These programmes have also failed to explore the possibilities of the public-private partnership. This has made the burden to weigh on the government who has championed them all alone and being the repository of collective interest has other priorities to deal with apart from the plight of the youth. The programmes always provide only disproportionate training with weak programme development and limited links to the labour market. To this effect, there is need to ensure that the aspirations of the youths match the realities of the labour market. Cameroon’s future like many other African countries is geared towards a digital economy. Most transactions are more often than not done online and ICT has become indispensable in all sectors. Therefore it is imperative for ICT learning centres to be integrated into all these projects.

**Project Findings and General Discussions**

The core of this piece of work was to do a comprehensive assessment of youth support programmes established by the government: to assess their effectiveness, to gauge how relevant they are to youth development and empowerment and the development of Cameroon and to explore the potential contributions of ICT in improving the outcomes and impacts of these programs.

**Lack of awareness**

Two-fifths (2/5) of the youth surveyed were unaware of the existence of these youth programs meaning there was a failure at the level of sensitization and awareness campaigns. This lack of awareness in itself poses a major problem. One-fifth (1/5) of policy makers interviewed claimed that many young people fail to update themselves and are therefore unaware of the programs put in place by the government to cater for them. The role of ICT is of paramount importance here. Using newspapers and other outdated means of spreading information will greatly limit the number of people reached.

**Young People are not adequately consulted in the creation of youth policies and programs**

Carrying out limited surveys on youth and consulting the National Youth Council alone does not provide adequate evidence needed in the creation of youth friendly policies. In addition, over 4/5 of young people surveyed do not trust the government. Reasons of corruption and lack of transparency tops their lists. A large fraction of policy makers are sceptical of the contributions youths can make. If they state does not trust the contribution of young people in the development process of the Country then the youth programs cannot be effective and therefore cannot be evaluated because they exclude the participation of the youth. Most people use social media to carry out research. Putting up surveys on Facebook and other social media outlets will ensure that the opinions of the larger community are taken into consideration.

**Flaws in the evaluation process**

At the level of the evaluation of youth programs, a pressing discovery was made. About two-fifth (2/5) of the policy makers surveyed were unaware of the existing evaluation bodies. Three-fifth (3/5) said evaluation was done by partner ministries of the institutions put in place, the Prime Minister’s office as well as technical and evaluation committees within the programmes. However, they added that the existing evaluation bodies were not effective. That is why most youth programs are not sustainable in Cameroon and no impact is being felt by local communities. This was a revelation on its own because it is imperative that all policy makers be aware of these procedures in order to make informed decisions for future programs. This in its self is problematic because it is from the evaluation process that we are able to identify the effectiveness, impact and relevance of the programs. From the study, the researcher also
discovered that the lack of follow up of the implemented programs was a major hindrance to development. Some policy makers who were respondents claimed that there was a lack of man power to act as debt collectors and to run after beneficiaries to pay back their debts. Secondly the lack of continuity and sustainability was also brought forward as a barrier to the effectiveness of the programs.

**Absence of the use of ICT in the development process**

The impact of ICT on youth and the vocational opportunities ICT introduces cannot be overemphasized (Michael and Samson, 2014). Most young people in 2016 use ICT to run daily errands and to carry out their day to day activities. This includes research and educational purposes. This also translates into the job markets. Most companies and potential employers prefer to use ICT as a means to disseminate information. This is however not the case with the government. Long queues can be seen in front of government offices and old fashioned paper trails are still utilized. Most respondent were therefore fed up with the tedious and old fashioned way used to access information from the government. Therefore, the use of IT (e.g., social media; messages via mobile phones, Facebook, Twitter) as well as electronic government (e-government) infrastructures may help to reduce the lack of awareness of these youth programs. In fact, prior studies have shown that IT can transform e-government (Peristeras et al., 2009) and foster e-participation (Peristeras et al., 2009; Al-Dalou and Abu-Shanab, 2013).

**Conclusion**

ICT has become a driving force behind most economies in Africa and Cameroon in particular cannot be left behind. The lack of innovative ICT measures and high rates of political apathy especially among the young people in Cameroon have made many young people to miss out from life changing opportunities which could encourage not only personal growth but the growth of the country’s economy. Many young people in Cameroon while often involved in informal, politically relevant processes, such as activism or civic engagement, are not formally represented in national political institutions such as parliaments and many of them do not participate in elections. Moreover, young people are hardly ever involved in projects that are being designed for their benefit. Where a few young people are included in the design process, this is usually on ceremonial or decorative basis. That is, the government tries to adopt a positive public image but does not really take into consideration the real needs of young people. This does not only impact on the quality of democratic governance in Cameroon but takes a heavy toll on the development process of the country especially in matters that relate directly to youth. In this regard, youth support programs hardly reflect the needs of young people and therefore are ineffective. The fact that most of these institutions have been accused of corruption and tribalism in the very least does not help matters either.

One of the greatest challenges facing youth and which hinders the development of Cameroon and the continent is the youth. Driven by celebrity glamour, many young people in Cameroon demand instant materialistic gratification without putting in any of the necessary work needed to achieve them. Many young people have become very indifferent and even ignorant of the many opportunities available at their disposal. Cameroonian youth have not cultivated the habit of looking for information, reading or carrying out research. Judging from the data collected from respondents as seen in table 4.9: Presentation of respondent’s awareness of Youth Programs in Cameroon; of chapter four, where 40% of the respondents were unaware of the youth programs, it is therefore a clear indication that youths are not helping themselves. 40% is a very large population of the youth in Cameroon and their unawareness in itself poses a problem this indifference adds credence to the assumption by most elders in office that young people are not ready to undertake leadership positions.

Weak and ineffective monitoring and evaluation mechanism put in place to evaluate most developmental programs are major challenges which affect development. In the case of projects like PIFMAS, PIAASI or PAJER-U where their continuity and sustainability depend on the payment of debt by beneficiaries, there are no clear and concise strategies to ensure that this is done. Many implementers erroneously think the process ends after participants collect their loans but this should not be the case. Moreover, failure to return the debt and lack of man power to ensure this is done confounds the problem.
Future Research Agenda

Taking into consideration the findings of this study discussed in this work, it is safe to say that the scale of this study is extensive and multifaceted. In order to fully understand the relationship between effective youth support programs, youth development, youth empowerment, the accountability process and the outcomes and impacts on national development, there is need for assessment of youth inclusion in the decision making processes. Future research may use qualitative analysis tools like the Pareto diagrams to lend more weight and credibility to the research. In addition, youth and political apathy, E-governance and E-government, as well as effective communication can be explored as tools for effective development. Exploring the aforementioned points as future research opportunities can facilitate the attainment of this goal. In terms of contributions, an integrated approach to implementing and executing youth support programs in Cameroon with ICT at the forefront will positively influence the impact of these programs. Past research we have come across on youth development in Cameroon has greatly ignored the role of ICT. This research is therefore expected to enable government make more informed decisions during the design and execution process of youth support programs.

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