Africa’s regional bodies key in boosting role of the youth

It is up to the regional entities to ensure the AU’s vision for youth in peace and security becomes a reality.

The African Union (AU) recently showed renewed resolve to strengthen its Youth, Peace and Security agenda when it established the dedicated Youth for Peace (Y4P) Africa programme, which was long overdue and much-needed. The move was applauded and accepted by the regional economic communities (RECs). This is a promising response, which once again raises questions around the role and contribution of the RECs in taking AU initiatives to the vast and diverse communities in their member states.

RECs are described as the building blocks of the AU system. They are increasingly involved in coordinating AU member states’ interests in wider areas such as peace, security, development and governance. They also represent a united regional front that often centres around common languages, markets and cultures.

The AU recognises eight RECs, namely the Arab Maghreb Union (AMU), the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA), the Community of Sahel–Saharan States (CEN–SAD), the East African Community (EAC), the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS), the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) and the Southern African Development Community (SADC).

RECs are ideally positioned to enact open, consistent steps to promote youth participation and enhance the engagement of young people – as is the vision of the AU’s Youth, Peace and Security agenda.

One reason for this is that the level of cultural affinity, inter-dependency and unity is relatively higher among states that share borders and cultures. RECs are closer to their member states, both geographically and culturally, and they are usually the first responders to emerging issues in their regions. This proximity to local communities means that the roll-out of youth-inclusion programmes at the level of RECs and regional mechanisms (RMs) will naturally attract greater buy-in from local policymakers and youth groups.

ECOWAS has become one of the first regional bodies to partner with the AU to magnify its Youth, Peace and Security agenda. A year after launching the Youth for Peace Africa programme, the AU partnered with the ECOWAS Commission to convene a National Youth Dialogue in Nigeria. The event culminated in the establishment of the Youth for Peace Nigeria forum, which aims to create strategies to promote peace, security and development in the West African nation. The forum is a powerful platform where young Nigerian men and women from different ethnic and religious backgrounds can take forward innovative solutions to issues that range from preventing and countering violent extremism to youth inclusion in managing climate change.

ECOWAS youth programming is supported by a dedicated Youth Centre in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, which focuses on youth development in areas.
such as education, employment and health. It is time for this REC to promote and nurture the creation of national Y4P programmes in its region.

Most RECs have existing mechanisms for youth development, which will be complemented by AU collaborations. This is another area that holds immense potential for AU-RECs relations. For instance, the EAC has a robust Youth Engagement programme, which coordinates youth learning exchanges, a youth ambassadors programme and other activities.

These initiatives are all backed by the EAC’s regional youth policy. What is missing from their programming are activities that promote the inclusion and participation of youth in peace and security. This limits the EAC’s ability to align with the AU vision on youth, peace and security, which is essential for a REC made up of states troubled by violent extremism and a refugee crisis, among other challenges.

The two aspects highlighted above show clear potential that can easily be harnessed. On the other hand, there are at least two key challenges that limit the successful integration of the AU Youth, Peace and Security Agenda in the policies and programming of the RECs/RMs.

Most have a chequered record of youth inclusion and participation in governance and peace processes. For instance, IGAD – tasked with overseeing key peace processes in the region, including in South Sudan, has done poorly for its youth. This Horn of Africa nation has been affected by violent political conflict, economic woes and drought since 2013. While youth representatives were visible during the South Sudan peace process, their representation thereafter was never guaranteed. The prevalence of a high illiteracy rate among the youth limits the full participation of youth in politics amongst other civic affairs.

Secondly, there is a high chance that youth, peace and security is not slated as a key priority in REC programming. An example can be seen in SADC, where the absence of an active armed conflict in the region sidelines dialogue relating to the role and inclusivity of young people in peace and security. The region is, however, plagued by other ailments related to governance deficits. Though a youth desk exists at the SADC secretariat in Gaborone, Botswana, a focus on the role of youth in regional security is missing.

As much as there are challenges for AU-RECs partnerships in this domain, there are clearly opportunities too. At a minimum, all RECs should create Y4P programmes to liaise with and coordinate activities with the AU, and ensure that member states establish national offices. RECs are essential in facilitating this process.

Critical to empowering RECs to achieve the above is a normative guiding framework. It will ensure that expectations from the key stakeholders, namely the AU, RECs/RM, member states and youth, are met. An upcoming Continental Framework for Youth, Peace and Security, developed with support from the Training for Peace programme, will increase the possibility of achieving a more robust and continent-wide effort.

The framework will articulate the key priorities as well as propose criteria for effective programming by the key stakeholders.

As the year progresses, monitoring the actions, particularly the programming of RECs/RMs towards peace processes, is key to identify entry points for increased youth engagement. These are vital in ensuring policymakers are made aware of the existing possibilities of mainstreaming youth in their quest for Africa’s peace and security.

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