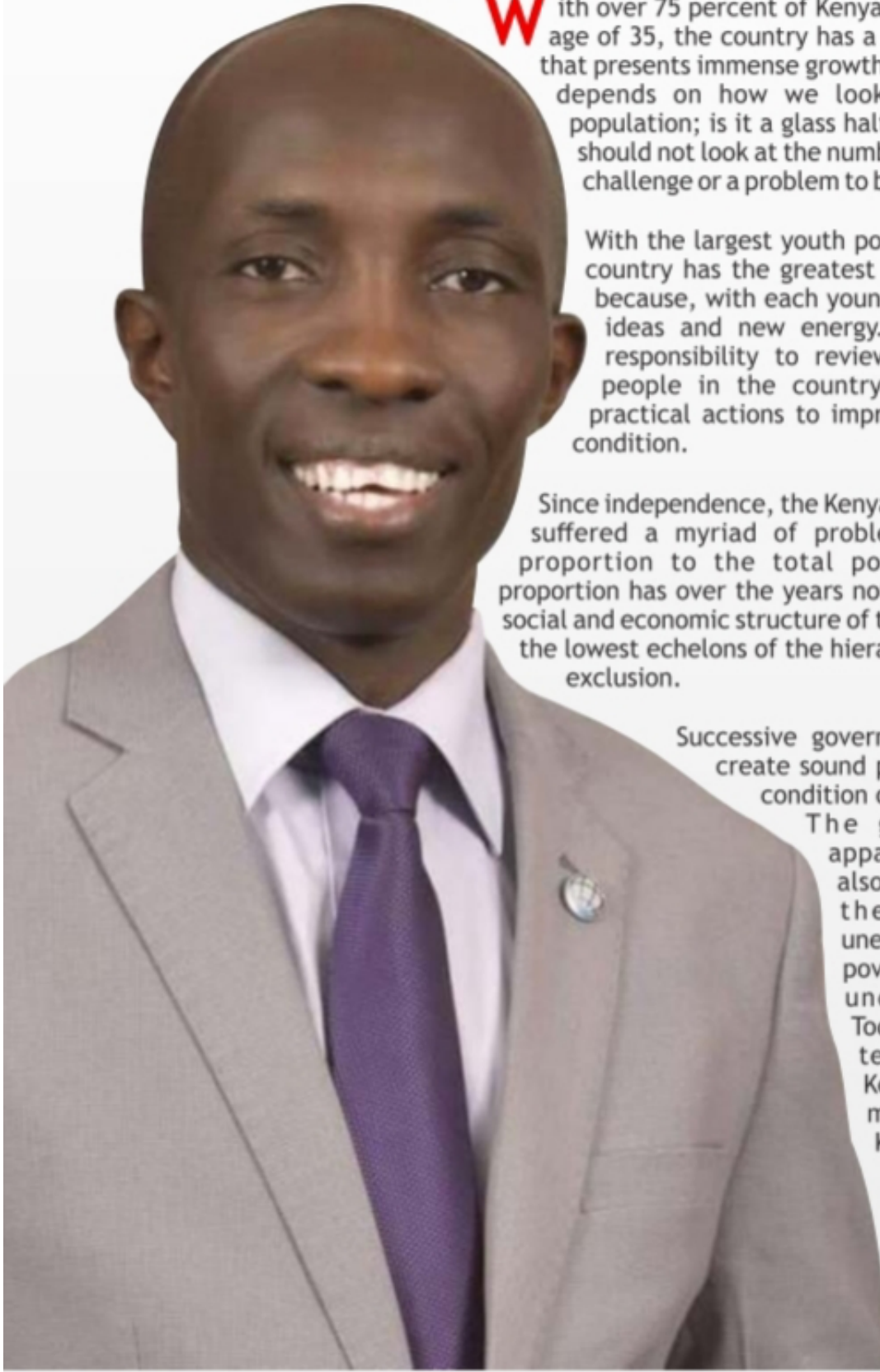




State of Youth Sector in Kenya

BY RAPHAEL OBONYO



With over 75 percent of Kenya's population under the age of 35, the country has a large youth population that presents immense growth potential. Moreover, it depends on how we look at the large youth population; is it a glass half full or half empty. We should not look at the number of young people as a challenge or a problem to be managed.

With the largest youth population in history, the country has the greatest opportunity in history, because, with each young person, we have new ideas and new energy. We have a common responsibility to review the place of young people in the country by putting in place practical actions to improve their position and condition.

Since independence, the Kenyan youth population has suffered a myriad of problems despite its huge proportion to the total population. This large proportion has over the years not been reflected in the social and economic structure of the nation. They occupy the lowest echelons of the hierarchy and suffer serious exclusion.

Successive governments have failed to create sound policies to improve the condition of youth in the country.

The group remains in appalling conditions. It's also the reason most of them are victims of unemployment, illiteracy, poverty, and are political under-representation. Today, seven out of every ten jobless people in Kenya are youth. It is most unfortunate that Kenyan youths are still waiting for the government to afford them the necessary platforms for enhancing essential economic and social development skills.

The country enacted a very progressive constitution in August 2010. Forming Kenya's biggest voting bloc, the youth overwhelmingly endorsed the document in a historic referendum that year. It was a clear indication that passing the new constitution was more than an ordinary voting process. It marked a new dawn in promoting the dignity and fundamental human rights of all Kenyans.

For example, the new Constitution under Article 55 provides that; "The State shall take measures, including affirmative action to ensure that the youth have access to relevant education and training; are accorded an opportunity to be represented and participate in political, social, and other spheres of life; have access to employment and are protected from harmful cultural practices and exploitation."

To realize the aspirations envisioned under the Constitution, the State is supposed to create an enabling environment and formulate effective policies that will support the implementation and sustainability of youth initiatives.

But the new constitution is not a panacea for youth development. Although the country has seen a raft of fundamental reforms since the promulgation of the Constitution, there is still a lot that needs to be done to protect and realize the full gains created by that document.

Also, over seven years ago, the country mooted the idea of a National Youth Council (NYC) anchored in the National Youth Council Act 2009. The drafters of the law intended to create formal mechanisms and structures to remedy the lack of proper engagement, which youth blames for their low participation in all the national matters. Strengthening the administration of youth programs through meaningful participation at all levels was supposed to encourage robust, youth-oriented policies.

Looking at NYC's performance, the organization inevitably needs strengthening to create a safety valve that will see more youth get representation in all spheres, including governance. There can be no doubt that a revitalized NYC will also allow the youth meaningful economic participation.

Another important development in the country is the review of youth policy. After five years of waiting, the country has finally given birth to the Kenya Youth Development Policy. As implementation begins, we expect it to transform the lives of our young people for generations to come. The policy forms a credible guide and reference tool for effective development and implementation of youth empowerment and development interventions in Kenya, in line with the Constitution and development goals at the county, national and international levels.

The policy is an expression of mutual understanding among concerned stakeholders. It seeks to harness and optimize immense strength and opportunities the youth in Kenya harbor, which they have failed to tap as they navigate difficult, personal, and structural barriers.

The framework offers an unclouded mechanism of implementation and coordination at national, county, and sub-county levels, down to youth at the grass roots— a component that has been missing in the past.

The new policy emphasizes the need for strong partnership and coordination among different actors including, government at both county and national levels, non-governmental organizations, youth-serving organizations, private sector, development partners, and others.

Although we've had some mechanisms for the coordination of youth interventions in the country, meaningful collaboration and engagement among stakeholders and mainstreaming of youth affairs in all the sectors of the economy remain elusive. The two missing links have negatively affected government-sponsored youth empowerment programs.

Young people's social, economic, and political rights cannot be met entirely by youth empowerment strategies. Youth mainstreamed policies complement the focus of discrete youth policies managed by the youth.

It gives forth a proactive youth sector, with effective, results-based management and monitoring and evaluation mechanisms that influence national and sub-national planning. The country needs to create an independent Ministry for Youth Affairs to improve the welfare of the youth, since integrating their affairs in various ministries has not worked out well. Also, now is the time for meaningful collaborations and engagements among stakeholders plus mainstreaming of youth affairs in all the sectors of the economy is now.

In 2016, the Public Service, Youth and Gender Affairs Cabinet Secretary, Sicily Kariuki, appointed a Youth Sector Working Group (YSWG) drawn from the National and County Governments, private sector, youth organizations, philanthropists, and development partners. The platform was constituted to provide a framework for the coordination of the numerous youth employment initiatives at both the National and County level. The constitution of the Youth Sector Working Group was to work together towards a common goal of the youth agenda.

Noteworthy, YSWG worked together to finalize the Youth Empowerment Strategy and facilitate wider public engagement on the National Youth policy review process. Thanks to that process, we now have a widely-acceptable Youth Policy that prioritizes the concerns of the youth while aligning itself to the constitution and the sustainable development goals.

Make no mistake. Young people are critical to the success of development plans in Kenya - the success is contingent on how youth are engaged, organized, and coordinated.

Assessments show if well-organized, youth can change and shape Kenya's socio-economic and political processes. If the youth can be made to believe that they can dictate their destiny, the country could embark on a trajectory towards good governance.

For example, Kenyans aged between 15 and 34 years form about 36 percent of the total population, where 80 percent of them are under 34 years. Out of the 14 million registered party members in Kenya, a paltry 27 percent constitute the youth.

The Youth Congress, a local NGO that mobilizes and supports young people in marginalized areas, launched "Youth Leagues" in each of the 47 counties. These are essential platforms to rally and inform young people on active participation in political processes.

We need to see non-state actors, especially the development partners and civil society, supporting more of these initiatives to prevent ill-intended political infiltrations.

As former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan once said, "Any society that does not succeed in tapping into the energy and creativity of its youth will be left behind." Indeed, young people have a vital role in the country's progress and must be well organized, coordinated, and engaged for Kenya to progress.

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