Ibrahim Bangura, (ed.) 2022). *Youth-Led Social Movements and peacebuilding in Africa.* Publisher: New York, Routledge, 2022. 276 Pages. ISBN: 9781032182377.

Reviewed by:Alinah K. Segobye, Extraordinary Professor, North West University, South Africa.

This book is part of a series on Peace, Conflict and Security in Africa led by an eminent scholar in the field of peace studies. The volume brings together researchers working across the continent who are also practitioners in the field of peace studies. The book comes at a critical time as the continent grapples with multiple development challenges which have converged to devastate local and regional economies. The negative impact of conflicts across the continent, climate crises and the impact of Covid-19 have amplified the vulnerability of youth on the continent.

The intersection of these multiple challenges has added to already precarious livelihoods including high unemployment and poverty rates. Africa's youth are posited as a positive dividend in discourses of Africa's emergence or as a threat in contexts where discourses shift to topics like migration and conflict (p.1). This volume tackles an important theme on peacebuilding which is an area where youth representation is very often absent or invisible. Given the number and intensity of conflicts across the continent, youth contributions to peacebuilding on the continent are an especially welcome contribution. The resurgence of violent and intersecting conflicts in all regions of the continent has led to increased attention to the Peace and Security agenda by the African Union. Changing geo-politics have also necessitated shifts in national and global policies to address contemporary and future security threats.

The introductory chapter highlights some of the issues which make this volume a necessary addition to African political and governance discourses. Youth as a critical category of African citizenry are presented more as a problem than as a critical stakeholder to be included in current and future decision-making processes for continental development. Bangura highlights that even the concept of youth is a contested identity as there are different age definer categories used by different stakeholders including the African Union (p.2).

The author further notes that youth in Africa have also been presented as a problem especially as focus has been on youth in the context of conflict. Given the multi-dimensionality of youth as a social, economic, and political category, it

is necessary that research and policy can appreciate the intersectionality of youth issues. What is especially critical is the recognition of youth as an important sector in the shaping of the continent's development agenda especially in respect to peacebuilding and addressing human security issues across all fronts.

> Thus, in many ways, African youth operate on the outside of the formal socioeconomic and political structures that define statehood. There is minimal youth representation in the elite political class of Africa, and young people instead occupy subaltern spaces (p.4).

The introduction presents an historical synopsis of how youth involvement and engagement has evolved over time from colonial to postcolonial times. The chapter highlights the intersections of power, ideology and socio-economic factors in shaping youth actions and actors through the different eras. As highlighted above, ambivalence to the role of youth contributions to Africa's liberation, governance and wellbeing has resulted stunted the appreciation of the positive role played by youth movements through time and space (p.11).

The positive contribution of this book is that it "draws on empirical case studies from all regions of Africa to critically examine and analyse the agency of youth in social movements and their long- term impact on African societies, especially in the domain of peacebuilding" (p.11). The fifteen chapters present case studies from across the continent highlighting locally situated experiences of youth and their intersections with other global events especially using technology and social media. The authors note the currency of many of the events documented including the uncertainty and unpredictable nature of how many of the events will develop.

What most highlight is the fact that leaders and the world at large cannot continue to ignore the lived realities of African youth and the importance of including them if peace and sustainable development are to be realised. "Waithood" (p.18) is highlighted as one of the drivers of youth activism and the formation of social movements and solidarity networks by youth at local and global scales (Ubachs p.19). The author notes that at "a global scale, we witness new solidarities forming and youth movements exploiting opportunities to transnationally unite and inspire each other (p.19).

Chapter 2 provides the theoretical and ideological frames through which youth social movements have been formed. It highlights how the convergence of diverse movements such as student movements, cultural and anti-war movements have coalesced through time and space to create solidarity movements of youth for various causes. In recent times, technology has enabled faster and multiple forms of networking and action including creating new languages for communication which subverted surveillance systems. The author notes how scholarship has not given attention to the role of youth in theory-building

choosing to instead lump them with adults under the category of social movements.

Further, the literature overemphasises the Euro-American experiences especially events which shaped the industrial revolution and social change. Africa does not feature much until the post-independence period. The focus also leans towards the political activism of youth and does not provide a holistic critique of youth activism across different platforms. The chapter concludes by noting the importance of differentiating the different actions of actors including causes supported as inherently there are different motivations for youth engagement and participation in social movements. What has emerged though is that from historic to recent events, youth activism cannot be ignored in how it can shape the continent's outlook. Whether such activism is informed by violence or not, it is critical that the voice of youth is included in shaping action and in critical analyses and scholarship on social movements (Ubachs p.30).

Sesay gives a detailed outline of the formalisation of youth participation in Africa as articulated through the African Union and its various organs. What the chapter draws attention to is the pervasive challenge of institution making which does not meaningfully result with an inclusive and participatory process for youth but instead build facades which suggest that youth are actively participating in decision making. The chapter highlights the shortcoming of such processes which consequently lead the youth to continue seeking alternative platforms of engagement and activism (Sesay pp.48-49).

Such alternative platforms were provided by the technological revolution of ICTs over the last two decades which provided the youth with much needed resources to mobilise, organise and elevate their activism within and beyond social movements. Social media became a "safe space" which enabled youth to act and voice in ways which provided a modicum of safety and security especially in countries where authoritarianism threatened personal safety (Chitukutuku pp.52-58; Gukurume Chapter 11).

Chitukutuku notes how, across the continent, new movements formed around specific causes used hashtags and social media platforms such as Twitter to mobilise support and to gather information which enabled the youth to actively report and expose some of the brutality they faced at the hands of state apparatus (pp.60-66). The author notes that many states were caught off guard and typically responded by shutting down social media outlets including the internet (Gukumure p.175). Despite this, social media remains a critical resource in how youth can express their agency and critique of governance on the continent and cannot be ignored by local or global actors (see Chapters 5, 10, and 11).

One of the themes emerging from the book is the continued trauma experienced by youth as they seek redress to their everyday suffering and exclusion. Chapter 5 highlights the brutal and repressive response of state forces

to youth activism during the ENDSARS movement in Nigeria. The demonisation of youth has been systemic and state sponsored in Nigeria. Other African states have also been notoriously violent in responses to youth led social protests especially during the Covid-19 pandemic (see Chapters 4, 8,10, 11, and 12).

> Over time, a constellation of structural vulnerabilities, coupled with the demand for better socio- economic conditions, have triggered youth agitations and protests which often result in violent clashes with the state actors (Aubyn & Frimpong p.74).

The actions of youth to raise their voice has also been undermined by the rise and virulence of fake news and sponsored actors such as intelligence operatives who infiltrate social media groups and social movements to undermine their causes (see Chapter 11) often leading to the failure of social movements and protests. The authors conclude that sustaining social movements need a multipronged strategy to ensure that movements are not rendered ineffectual by low hanging opportunities such as social media (see Chapter 10).

That said, the huge benefits reaped from social media cannot be overlooked especially in fostering transnational solidarity for social movements such as #BlackLivesMatter and gendered campaigns (Chapter 9) which have resulted with policy changes on critical issues and human rights. One strategy which also sustained social movements is highlighted in the chapter by Jusu and Sen which outlines how youth in Senegal leveraged music and the arts to launch a sustained political campaign over a decade. Music especially the emergence of a new genre of artists who are politically and socially engaged has helped to engage youth in the political sphere and elections informing social change (Jusu & Sen pp.86-97, see also Chapter 7 by Mensah).

The various authors note that governments ignore engaging youth at their own peril as they too face threats from other fronts which have led to fragilities of the state (Gukumure p.178, see also chapter 14) and insurgencies which recruit the youth (Bangura pp.127-128). Mensah cautions that "terror-related groups are taking advantage of these gaps, to identify, mobilise, and use vulnerable youth as agents of terror" (p.108). The radicalisation of youth has preoccupied the AU and other global players in discussions of peace and security.

The chapters also reflect critically on the future of youth led movements especially in respect to sustaining change. Given the complex socio-political landscape of most states in Africa, gains made by youth during protests are often reversed during military interventions and usurping of power by other contending parties (Chapter 9) often leading to a reversal of some of the gains made by youth movements in democratisation or fostering change to improve polices. Further, weak governance systems including authoritarian leadership of leaders who have changed constitutions in their favour has resulted in worsening conditions for

youth activists across the continent (Makumbi Chapter 10, see also Tsafack Chapter 13).

> Activism in many authoritarian spaces ... represents a precarious practice. Indeed… it is dangerous to be an activist…especially when your activism is critical of… government. Yet, despite the state's brutal and repressive 'strategies' of silencing dissent from social movement and civil society activists, these activists have continued to critique and subvert hegemonic forms of political power (Gukurume p.164).

The above point suggests that the youth are not about to give up in their activism and that governments must be responsive to youth activism and efforts to engage. This is especially necessary as the grip on power for several leaders has also become vulnerable as they are undermined by organised and sophisticated insurgency groups who are operating internationally and have used the continent as a base to strengthen their attacks.

These sentiments are echoed by Bangura and Sen in their review of the Arab spring which was one of the classic youth movements to catalyse political change across the continent. The Tunisian example highlights the urgency and necessity of engaging youth movements towards a peace building agenda. The below reflection succinctly captures the concerns.

> Rather than continuing to alienate youth-led social movements and youth generally across the country, the government and its development partners should open the socioeconomic and political space, invest in them and positively harness their energy for the growth and development of their country. Their voices and active participation in governance and leadership are critical for Tunisia's transition to a democratic country in the real sense. Failure to address the contentions of the youth and the other challenges that have undermined the democratic transition will continue to have negative consequences for Tunisia (Bangura & Sen p.229).

The concluding chapter highlights how the intersection of weak governance systems across the continent, impunity and the continued marginalisation of youth have led to the failure to positively harness youth contributions to Africa's development agendas. Further, the deepening crises in the post-Covid world have made youth more vulnerable and desperate which has resulted in more daring actions in social movements including their vulnerability to radicalisation by groups claiming religiosity.

One can also cite the increased insecurity visited on communities in urban inner-city spaces because of gangsterism. Governance failures from local to global governance have left youth and communities vulnerable and state safety and security institutions fail dismally to protect citizens (Bangura p.235). Further,

self-serving elites, patriarchal and patrimonial institutions have converged to create hegemonic power systems which suppress citizen voices especially the youth. The authors remain hopeful that avenues for engaging the youth can be found to resolve some of the critical structural barriers to inclusive and democratic governance.

> The constructive transformation of the relationship between the youth and the state, and the ability of the state to promote youth inclusion in governance and support their mobilisation for national development and peacebuilding, could have immense positive outcomes for all (Bangura p.245).

The optimism of the authors throughout this volume is not supported by current events in respect to hopes for a better future. As leaders cling to power and use state apparatus to unleash more violence on their citizenry, the hopes for embracing youth-led movements seems uncertain. The militarisation of everyday life even in states which had been free of extreme violence is worrisome. The spectacular failures to harness post-Covid recovery programmes in several countries and contested elections in the last two years suggest peace will remain elusive across the continent.

What is perhaps missing in this volume is a decisive voice which calls out the complicity of international actors who come in many forms as non-state parties, government led actors, and military support initiatives which have added to the complexity of conflicts on the continent. The road to peace and concerted initiatives towards peacebuilding on the continent especially leveraging citizen led initiatives are sorely missing in the short-term horizon. This commendable volume should inspire more inclusive policy discussions at local, national, and inter-state levels.

At the global level, it is urgent that the activism of young people evident in climate crises discourses can also be as influential for addressing violent conflicts on the continent. One can especially hope for greater support for capacity building for peacebuilding initiatives for women and youth led organisations especially as several countries implement the UN Resolution 1325 and institutionalise National Action Plans to ensure that processes of peacebuilding are inclusive and democratised.

Finally, tapping African knowledge systems to inform the theoretical and methodological approaches to conflict resolution and peace building are needed to complement the predominantly Western inspired tools used in the peace and security sector. This well referenced volume will be a key read for scholars and practitioners who are following events in 2022 and beyond and need to understand the historical contexts of conflicts on the African continent. Well done to the team and contributors for giving us insights into the rich case studies presented in the volume.