Uganda youth aspirational but lack in integrity and opportunity

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Nearly 80 percent of East Africa’s population is below 35 years of age, and the median age is estimated to be 18 years. Our future is in the hands of this unprecedented large proportion of young people. Hence the future is not out there, nor is it some unknowable moment in the misty distant time.

The East African Institute of the Aga Khan University commissioned a survey of youth in Kenya, Uganda, Rwanda and Tanzania between 2014 and 2015 to understand their values and attitudes, concerns and aspirations. To paraphrase Irish author, political theorist and philosopher, Edmund Burke, if we understand the sentiments that preoccupy youth today we can shape what the future could look like.

The Uganda Youth Survey Report, which will be released officially in Kampala on September 1st 2016 reveals findings that offer reasons both for optimism, deep concern and the need for urgent action. Moreover, some of the findings are contradictory and counter intuitive. About 1,900 out-of-school youth were interviewed.

The good news is that Ugandan youth are optimistic about the future. 75 percent of the youth believe Uganda will be richer materially and 66 percent believe there will be more opportunities for youth – better access to quality education and health, and more jobs for youth. Moreover, 62% believe society will reward merit or hard work.

This is perhaps the most educated generation in Uganda’s history. About 80 percent of the youth surveyed had post-primary level of education. About 40 percent had post-secondary education. Moreover, this study showed that the proportion of women enrolled in primary school and university exceeds that of men by about 10 percent.

While this is Uganda’s best educated generation, unemployment remains a critical challenge especially as the country begins to transition into a knowledge-based economy. The study showed that youth with post-secondary education were twice more likely to be employed compared their counterparts who did not have tertiary education qualifications.

Currently majority of youth without tertiary qualifications or vocational skills are in informal employment jobs, which low paying, intermittent. Hence, there is need to expand enrollment in business, technical and vocational training to enhance labor participation among youth who do not possess post-secondary qualifications.

Here is what is disconcerting about the findings of the survey. Only 27 percent of the youth strongly believed it is important to pay taxes; 40 percent would readily take or give a bribe; 30 percent believed corruption is profitable and 56 percent believed it does not matter how one makes money as long one does not end up in jail. Moreover, 73 percent of the youth were afraid to stand up for what is right for fear of retribution.

The youth had positive views about politics and democracy and 68 percent believed it was important to vote and would participate in the 2016 elections. But only 54 percent believed their vote could make a difference. The survey reveals that 74 percent of the youth were vulnerable to electoral bribery, with 39 percent saying they would only vote for a candidate who bribed them.
Throughout his campaign for re-election in 2016, President Museveni pledged to address three of the most urgent issues, which concern youth; unemployment, access to capital for young entrepreneurs and poverty through industrialization, skills development and a youth venture capital fund. This renewed commitment should hopefully expand awareness and enhance access and responsible utilization of public funds for youth development. Moreover, such funds must be targeted to address priority needs identified by the youth.

The Youth Survey report does not prescribe solutions or policy options. Instead, the report provides a reference point for reflections and conversations that could inform policy priorities and action to address the needs and aspirations of the youth. The report is also an invitation to all stakeholders to join in earnest dialogue, debate that could raise new questions to inform and shape future research in social change.

Now is the time to harness and channel the strongly held positive values of faith, hard work and of optimism among Uganda’s youth to address urgent challenges, especially integrity and low levels of labour participation. In the words of Mr. Lavender of Restless Development, “this moment of ‘Peak Youth’ can be a historic opportunity for positive change”.

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