

Youth, Waithood and Protest Movements in Africa

Alcinda Honwana, Lugard Lecture

Africa is the world's youngest continent, with the majority of its population under the age of 24. Although during the past decade the continent has experienced considerable economic growth, it has not translated into job creation and greater equity. Soaring unemployment rates have affected the younger generation especially severely; young people find it difficult to carve out a decent future. Most young Africans are living in a period of suspension between childhood and adulthood that I call 'waithood'. Youth in Africa, like their counterparts in Europe, North America, and other parts of the world, face similar crises of joblessness and restricted futures. Their struggles have driven many young Africans into the streets in protest movements that challenge the status quo and contest socioeconomic policies and governance strategies that exacerbate poverty, heighten social inequalities, and deny them basic freedoms. Young people have emerged as active social agents in the uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya, in the 'Y'en a Marre' movement in Senegal, and in the food riots in Mozambique, counteracting the notion that youth are apathetic. What will be the result of these youth movements? Will young people be able to sustain them beyond street protests and hold onto the promise for more equitable societies? This lecture examines the broad challenges facing young Africans today, particularly those relating to their socioeconomic position, citizenship, and political activism.