

PUBLICATION

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# Challenging the Youth

## Democratic Disconnect in Africa through Pockets of Democracy



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# **Challenging the Youth Democratic Disconnect in Africa through Pockets of Democracy**

*Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung*

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# 1

## Introduction

### **The Paper**

Securing the future of democracy and consolidating its gains thus far, in a world fast degenerating into autocracy, requires an investment in youth democratic agency. There is growing concern that youth are disconnecting from democratic spaces and discourses. This trend is characterised amongst other things by apathy, alienation, and exclusion. This is at the backdrop of growing dissatisfaction with democracy, marked by democratic backsliding globally. Rising authoritarianism, conflict, repression and shrinking of the democratic space, further fuels the youth democratic disconnect. Proponents of democracy and other concerned actors must understand this democratic disconnect currently observed in African countries in terms of its dichotomies, discontinuities and pursue effective interventions in response.

The paper *contextualises and conceptualises* the democratic disconnect of youths. It further *analyses the dichotomies* of the disconnect and *explores the (dis)continuities* observed in the democratic agency of youth. Lastly, it *proposes the 'Pockets of Democracy' (PoD) concept* as a potent strategy for addressing the disconnect and strengthening youth democratic participation.

Far from being prescriptive, the paper ignites conversations, unravels insights, and reframes the decades long question of youth apathy, alienation, and exclusion from the democratic discourse. It proposes that while there are discernible patterns of youth political participation albeit falling short of expectations, there is need to qualify the form, content, and outcome of that participation to ensure that it is democratic and democratising.

### **Methodology**

The development of this paper is based on conversations that problematised the youth democratic disconnect within the ambit of the now apparent global democratic regression and autocratic consolidation on the continent. These conversations were in the form of focus group discussions, interviews, and plenary discussions with more than 30 prominent young activists from 20 different African countries. Some were part of the 'Young African Democrats Incoming to Berlin' in March 2023; others were participants at a Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung supported workshop of the Young African Activists Network convened in May 2023 in Madagascar. The paper is informed in its proposed response, by action learning from the implementation of the Pockets of Democracy concept in autocratic settings.

### **About Friedrich Ebert Stiftung**

Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) is a political foundation that focuses on the core ideas and values of social justice and democracy – freedom, justice, and solidarity. In addition to the pursuit of political emancipation of the working class, social democracy strives towards a free society based on solidarity and offering everyone an equal opportunity for economic, social, and cultural participation.

FES runs Youth Leadership Training Programmes in 21 countries across Africa in pursuit of developing the next generation of progressive, value-oriented, democratic leaders equipped with essential knowledge, skills, and values for their meaningful participation in the democratic discourse as well as sustainable development of their countries. FES further supports the Young African Activist Network (YAAN), a network of alumni of its Youth Leadership Training Programmes (YLTP) to deepen their agency, connect and collaborate across countries and regions, and ignite and lead conversations.

# Contextualisation and Conceptualisation

## 1.1 Contextualising the Youth Democratic Disconnect

Youth have for a long time been touted as the game changers whose energy, ingenuity, idealism, and creativity will positively impact and transform politics in Africa towards democracy. This view held that the increased youth participation in politics will not only promote inclusivity but will also strengthen and consolidate democracy in the continent. After several decades of lethargic democratic progress and a recent democratic backsliding at the back of weakened institutions of democracy, the promise of youth democratic agency seems to be waning. Setting in its place is a clear democratic disconnect and apathy coupled with a tolerance for strong-man politics and military rule compared to their older counterparts. Youth are dissatisfied with democracy, and this partly explains the disconnect (Afrobarometer, 2023).

There is consensus that youth carry the hope for the future of democracy in the continent and are a strategic resource for democratic consolidation. The actualisation of this hope is, however, mired in a paradox. Despite their huge demographic dividend with 75 percent of Africa's population projected to consist of young people below the age of 35 years by 2030 (African Union, 2019), youth are faced with a crisis of representation due to disproportionately low participation in democratic processes. Young people are increasingly disconnecting from democracy in many ways as unpacked later in this paper.

Not only is Africa headed for a crisis of youth representation, but it also faces the crisis of youth disenchantment with democracy. Afro Barometer (2023) reports that while they show a strong commitment to democracy, young people are significantly less satisfied with the way democracy works in their countries (Majiga, 2022).

Young people in Africa are growing up in the tail end of the euphoria of the 3<sup>rd</sup> wave of democratisation as ushered by post-liberation and post-cold war politics. This dovetails directly with the third wave of autocratisation where three times as many countries have become autocracies compared to democracies meaning 72 percent of the world population lives in autocracies (Wiebrecht et al, 2023). This is comparable to the state of democracy in the world in 1986, pointing to a roll back of four decades of progress.

Youth dissatisfaction with democracy is also attributed to the fact that their parents grew up with imposed democracy partly championed by then French President François Mitterrand in his La Baule speech in 1990 which is viewed as the foundation for tying development aid to democratisation in former French colonies. This also resonance with World Bank Structural Adjustments Programmes (SAPs) in the 1990s which put similar conditionalities on aid (Bourgi, 2000).

The push for democratisation tied to the conditionalities of international development aid effectively placed undue expectations that democracy would automatically deliver economic growth. The recurring economic crises, which had nothing to do with democratisation, but a result of market failures and inadequacies of capitalism. Notwithstanding, these have come to be viewed from the same prism where the failure of capitalism is synonymous with the failure of democracy. This prism has been challenged by notable prosperity at the back of rapid economic growth in autocratic countries contributing to 46 percent of the world Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Notable examples like China and Rwanda have reinforced the perception that democracy is an impediment to economic growth. Hence, economic failures have come to be viewed as the failure of democracy as a system of government. As such, youth growing up in dire economic circumstances begin to view the 'imposed democracy' as the cause of their woes. Presenting it in this way has created a false dilemma in which the choice is either democracy or economic growth, yet youth ought to demand both.

This partly explains the spat of popular coups in recent years, particularly where civilian governments have been overthrown. The rising support for authoritarian alternatives and military coups does not necessarily mean that youth generally have an antipathy towards democracy. Rather, it betrays the dwindling satisfaction with the status quo and hence are open to non-democratic alternatives, resulting in a serious democratic disconnect (Mounk & Foa, 2016).

Part of it is also a rebellion against the older generation who are accused of having collaborated with the French colonisers even after independence. As such, these coups are not a rejection of democracy per se, but can be characterised as coups against France and the West,

represented locally by corrupt, authoritarian and old elites. It often symbolises a search for identity by youth in Francophone West Africa, which southern African countries managed to forge influenced by the liberation struggles.

This era of democratic decline has dovetailed with and is compounded by converging crises like COVID-19, climate change, wars like the Russia-Ukraine war, and the Israel-Hamas war as well as recurring global financial crises. These have strained and exposed the weaknesses of the global social, economic, and political structures as inadequate in responding to these emerging global and local problems. It would seem that young people globally and in Africa are growing up in the shadow of democracy's inadequacies, where its ability to deliver on the promise of progress is increasingly being questioned.

As such, the democratic disconnect of youth can be viewed as an indictment of the non-effectiveness and non-functionality of democracies in Africa, with glaring deficits in terms of the freedoms, rights, and benefits that ought to be derived from a democracy. The public goods deficit characterised by the inability of governments to adequately deliver for the youth, notably education, health, employment, etc can also be cited in this indictment. As such, a mismatch between the expectations of citizens on the demand side and the fulfilment of those expectations on the supply side of democracy. When such a mismatch is not addressed, it erodes the aspirational proposition of democracy, resulting in youth disengagement from the discourse.

This disengagement among the youth is evident in the decline in electoral turnout, "rising anti-party sentiment, and the decay of civic organisations," as Norris (2004)

## *From disconnection to reconnection*

Image 1





points out. A typical pattern emerging from observation and analysis of past electoral processes in Africa is that young people's participation in these processes is very marginal and certainly disproportionate to the huge population under the age of 35 years (Brancati, 2008). This apathy is a pervasive withdrawal from democratic institutions and formal processes primarily evident in voter turnout and political party membership

This trend has not set in overnight as Nkomo & Du Plooy (2014) observed that most African youth are interested in public affairs and discuss politics with those around them. However, there are relatively low levels of youth political participation in formal institutions, which suggests a disconnect between the continent's "youth bulge" and democratic processes. The disconnect in this case is therefore not from political affairs but from engagement in formal political processes.

The disconnect of youth from political parties is also a result of a litany of issues ranging from prohibitive practices and culture in political parties where youth fail to find spaces and their disillusionment with political leadership. There is also a ubiquitous disinterest in electoral processes by youth fueled by disenfranchisement in the body politic, attitudes, and perceptions, resulting in apathy. This is compounded by the lack of sufficient civic and political information, misinformation, and poor means of disseminating information on democratic processes.

## 1.2 Conceptualising the 'Democratic Disconnect'

Youth political disengagement continues to be a significant issue facing contemporary democracies that needs to be better understood (Kitanova, 2020). The conversation on youth public participation has mostly focused on youth political participation, i.e., the engagement of youth in civic and political organisations and processes. This has, however, fallen short in that it does not place 'democratic' participation as a specific qualifier of the forms, content, and outcomes of their political participation. The conceptual framing of this phenomenon places emphasis on the realisation that political participation generally is not equal to democratic participation. While a form of political participation, democratic participation is distinct in that it places democratic values at the bullseye of the form, means, and outcomes of political participation.

Harris et al. (2007) aptly capture the democratic disconnect as a gap between institutional understandings, expectations of young citizens, the **nature** and **substance** of youthful **forms** of political identification and action. As such, the gap – or disconnect is widely seen as a 'problem' of youth disengagement with democracy, not necessarily disengagement from politics. This seems to manifest in three distinct ways.

Firstly, there is a discernible and extensive apathy of youth participation in structured democratic processes like elections, public meetings, and public consultations. This does not mean they do not participate in other less structured and less formal democratic processes to raise their voice and exercise agency as alluded to earlier in this paper.

This disconnect also has a dimension of gender and social inclusion. Young women do not participate meaningfully in civic and political spaces. They are excluded and unheard from the democratic discourse due to the patriarchal construct of society, social pressures and traditional norms, and the burdens of unpaid care work.

Further, there is widespread violence, harassment, and abuse of women in civic and political spaces including Gender-Based Violence (GBV) and sexual harassment. There are few female role models who have defied the odds and can inspire young women to engage in public affairs. Those who have stood out have often been ostracised and are subjected to mudslinging. This was the case for Margeret Dongo in Zimbabwe, Wangari Mathaai in Kenya, and Winnie Mandela in South Africa amongst others. All this results in young women disconnecting from the democratic processes. This exclusion also extends to other vulnerable groups like people with disability and minorities.

Secondly, young people may participate in politics but do so in non-democratic and sometimes violent ways. In the past, they have been mobilised and instrumentalised as merchants of violence, intimidation, and closure of democratic spaces in various countries in Africa.

For instance, in the 2008 disputed elections in Zimbabwe, an estimated 80,000 graduates of the National Youth Service were deployed by ZANU-PF to perpetrate violence against the opposition and civil society (Mwonzora-Simango & Dumani, 2021). The same can be said of the violence in Kenya's 2007 elections in which youth were the key perpetrators of violence. In Nigeria's Kwara State, political figures reportedly recruited, armed, and deployed youth gangs to engage in electoral fraud and violence during the 2003 elections (Luqman, 2010).

Thirdly, youth may participate in politics to pursue outcomes that do not advance or consolidate democracy. Over time, there has been an expectation that youth will inherently be drawn toward the kind of participation that demands and expands democracy. However, lessons from recent observations in several African countries suggest that youth may be co-opted and assimilated as enablers of authoritarian consolidation (Oosterom & Gukurume, 2023; Agbiboa, 2023; Cheeseman, 2022).

It is a case of a potential resource for change being instrumentalised to reinforce the repressive control of those in power. For instance, while there has been an apparent



increase in youth participation in Zimbabwe's politics, particularly in the 2023 election, there is growing concern that this generational transition might not be anchored to democratic values.

This discourse points out an inconvenient reality that informs our conceptualisation of 'democratic participation' as a frame of analysis for the 'democratic disconnect' of youth. Active participation in politics is not enough. As Ojok & Acol, (2017) point out that, "From Cape Town to Tunis, Freetown to Djibouti, young people have played crucial roles in shaping the political discourse in Africa, both negatively and positively."

The interest of democracy supporters is to ensure that the role of young people in politics is positive and largely contributes to democratic consolidation.

As youth are increasingly disenchanted with democracy, they may participate actively even within political parties, organisations, or movements that are undemocratic and whose actions roll back democratic gains. Thus, the discourse must move beyond just increasing youth participation in politics and qualify the values guiding and being pursued by their participation. Throughout this discussion paper, democratic participation is presented as more than just political participation.

Youth participation must be anchored on a belief in democracy and be in pursuit of the same within the ambit of democratic processes. The conversation must shift from youth participation in politics to youth democratic agency i.e. participation whose nature, form, substance, and pursuit is *democratic* and *democratising*.

# Dichotomies of the Youth

## Democratic Disconnect

As has already been established, a study by Afrobarometer across 34 African countries reveals a disturbing trend where young people are less likely to support democracy than their older counterparts. They are also less likely to reject military rule and to support democracy overall (Majiga, 2022). The waning commitment to the importance of democracy by the younger generation inevitably results in them disconnecting from the democratic discourse. Of course, this problem is not exclusive to Africa. The trend is comparable to the rapid and marked decline in the political participation of youth elsewhere in the world (Mounk & Foa, 2016). Various reasons account for this growing trend.

### The trust deficit

Trust in political institutions is the most critical component of a legitimate state (Nikitina et al, 2021). Youth in Africa have expressed a strong mistrust of public institutions, including political parties. This results from the waning legitimacy of the state and the erosion of the credibility of its institutions. Driving this sentiment is the lack of transparency and accountability, weak institutional capacity and competence, pervasive corruption, and exclusionary policies and practices within the political system.

Democracy has always been presented as a proposition that carries the promise of progress. The failure of these institutions to deliver public goods to the populace further weakens trust in democracy. Democracy continues to contend with the rise of populist authoritarianism, violent extremism, radicalism, and undermining of rules-based multilateralism. African countries are currently mired in recurring and emerging crises that converge and compound the already strained social and economic systems. This further weakens the already fragile systems which ought to deliver public goods. In the face of an uncertain future characterised by public goods deficits, youth disengage from these institutions and the public processes that shape them as they do not trust that democracy will deliver for them.

This is because young people stake their future on the change that democracy can bring. When the change they hope for does not happen, coupled with a growing onslaught against democracy and its institutions, the youth lose hope and disconnect. The logic of participating in democratic processes when there is a perception of manipulation and corruption defeats the whole purpose, hence they disconnect.

### Apathy, alienation, and exclusion

The youth democratic disconnect can also be explained from the prism of apathy, alienation, and exclusion. Youth apathy explains the lack of a desire, or motive, to take an interest in politics while alienation emanates from the youth feeling they cannot influence public affairs even if they were to participate in the democratic process. This is further reinforced by the perception that the norms and rules that govern political relations in a democratic society have broken down.

On the other hand, youth have to contend with exclusion and marginalisation due to structural barriers that limit their ability to access and influence spaces and institutions of democracy. Politics, as the exercise of power, is mainly carried out through institutional and organisational settings. As such, political parties, civil society, formal institutions of democracy, and government institutions are the most viable and common avenues and arenas for youth to participate in the democratic discourse. However, youth are increasingly disenfranchised and marginalised from occupying meaningful spaces in these institutions, which results in disengagement from the political system.

There has been a litany of policy commitments, legal frameworks, and institutional arrangements that seek to foster youth participation and inclusion. The foundational prerequisites for inclusive participation in a fair and transparent manner are in place. However, institutional frameworks are inadequate as they only address the procedural side of democracy. There is a need to translate these provisions and actualise their aspirations into substantive outcomes. For instance, Acemoglu & Robinson (2005) have argued that such policy and institutional arrangements must structure political power in a depersonalised way that creates meaningful spaces for participation. This does not seem to be the case at the moment, hence the disconnect of youth from public affairs.

The deepening poverty and limited economic opportunities faced by young people also render them vulnerable to manipulation and exploitation for political interests which may be undemocratic.

## 1.1 Patronage Politics

Participation in politics is often dependent on wealth and connections. In Africa politics is primarily exercised within and elaborate patronage systems which monopolise and distribute opportunities based on clientelism. This results in dynastic politics and the exclusion of youth who do not have access to these patronage networks. It also means that the form and content of youth participation are influenced by and in service of the older generation. This frustrates young people, resulting in partial or total disengagement. For those who thrive in such a system, they become enablers and conduits for the social reproduction of authoritarianism.

It must be understood however that in most of these instances, youth are exploited to champion interests that have little or nothing to do with their own aspirations or benefit but rather serve the interests and ambitions of the older political elites.

## 1.2 Economic status

Cheeseman (2022) argues that the lack of economic opportunities can undermine young people's willingness or ability to demand and fight for democracy. Youth form the majority of the unemployed and those employed in precarious forms of employment like the informal sector. The resultant poverty and the lack of financial resources are major limiting factors for the sustained democratic participation of youth. Due to high unemployment, young people are forced to survive on a day-to-day hand-to-mouth basis. This means that politics becomes secondary, and sometimes an inconvenience even, as their primary focus is on their daily struggle to earn a living in a challenging economic environment.

## 1.3 Inexperience with different political systems

Young people have not experienced one-party states, autocratic regimes and military dictatorships that their parents once knew; hence they may not see the need to defend democracy and to resist autocracy and military rule.

Another explanation for the apparent democratic disconnect of youth is that democratic change in Africa's competitive autocracies is scant and far between. Currently only 7 percent of Africa's population lives in what Freedom House classifies as 'free countries' (Repucci, & Slipowitz, 2022). This reality is within a context of setbacks to democratisation where there has been at least 106 successful coups in the past 50 years (Angalapu, 2023). As such there are very few examples where far-reaching political change has happened through democratic means like elections in Africa.

This creates disillusionment amongst youth as to whether democracy can deliver political change as elections get to be perceived as impotent rituals to legitimise pre-determined outcomes.

## 4.0

# (Dis)continuities of Youth Democratic Agency

The democratic disconnect of youth in Africa can be viewed through the (dis)continuities in their democratic agency. These discontinuities are explained by the socio-economic and political realities in which youth democratic agency is framed, negotiated, and transformed. Various personal and generational considerations and exertions influence the extent to which the form and content of youth participation is democratic and democratising. Most critically, it influences whether or not as individuals and as a collective, youth remain active in the discourse. Several realities account for this.

### 4.1 Youth liminality, waithood, and cross-over challenges

The stage that defines youth is a liminal one where they transition from childhood to adulthood. This transition is not uniform, nor does it have certainty regarding trajectory and outcome. It is different for every young person. It is a unique life stage where they face various start-up problems related to economic, career, and family pressures as they seek to set out for their future (Zukin et al., 2006). This means they engage less in politics as they have more immediate pressures. As Wagstaff & Parker (2020) argue, 'Social and economic challenges often lead to the creation of a disengaged and alienated generation struggling to participate actively in society.'

This is further exacerbated by the reality that a huge number of educated young Africans who would otherwise be better poised to take up the mantle of public intellectuals demanding and consolidating democracy are emigrating for better economic and educational opportunities abroad. At the back of a constrained economic environment with limited opportunities for employment, career development, and upward social mobility, the brain drains facing many African countries deprives it of its most active and strategic demographic group in the democratic discourse.

In authoritarian systems, such considerations may be coupled with worries that their political activities and persuasions would jeopardise the other aspects of their lives which has nothing to do with politics like their career development for instance (Zhang, 2022). It may be because the government may grey list them from the civil service or that employers in the private sector fear reprisals should they be seen to employ or promote someone viewed as a

critic of the government. Inevitably, one then has to make a choice between their career and their political activities, and the logical choice would be to secure the livelihood opportunities presented by their career prospects.

With poor employment prospects amid constrained social issues, there is a delayed transition from childhood to social adulthood, a notion referred to by Howana (2014) as '*youth waithood*.' In this case, those who are older than 35 years technically have outgrown the youth phase, as per the African Youth Charter definition are not yet socially and economically ready to take up responsibilities, and obligations and also enjoy the privileges of being adults. Delayed or denied a smooth transition from youth to adulthood, they are caught in a difficult interregnum where they begin to be excluded from the youth spaces but are not yet able to penetrate the mainstream socio-economic and political spaces.

Youth who are active in youth political spaces like protest movements, youth wings of political parties and student activism then do not always find space in the mainstream political spaces when they transition from the youth spaces. This is sometimes a result of gatekeeping tendencies that block their entry into mainstream political spaces. Youth leaders in the youth wings of political parties and in student activism usually have paradoxical relationships with their parties. They are characterised as party foot soldiers, stone throwers, the vanguard, opportunists, revolutionaries, and agitators. An identity that is both embraced and dismissed by the party depending on its obtaining political interests. As such, the political standing of young leaders within the party is subject to suspicion and mistrust, and they often struggle to rebrand themselves as they transition from what Snellinger (2018) presents as, "street-level revolutionary politics" to find space in a political party system to influence national politics. The discontinuity from youth activism into mainstream political parties is also partly a reality influenced by the youth's disillusionment with mainstream political leadership and political institutions where they are only politically active in universities but are apathetic, alienated, or excluded when they transition from the youth sector.

## 4.2 Minimalist issue-based spaces and impatience for results

The form and substance of youth struggles are usually modelled around issue-based movements grounded on youth exceptionalism and targets only a minimalist demand. For instance, the #FeesMustFall movement in South Africa, #DropThatChamber in Ghana and #EndSars in Nigeria organised around single issues. Uwazuruike (2021) argues that the success of the #EndSARS movement was limited to achieving sensitisation and reparation, but failed to result in far-reaching change because it pursued overly modest demands.

When the single issue pursued by such movements is resolved or if it loses currency, the movement cannot be sustained hence it becomes irrelevant. In the absence of intent and effort to transform it or connect it to the broader struggle for democracy, the activists disconnect.

Young people are often willing to translate their dissent, dissatisfaction, and frustration into protest action on the street, but are less willing to take up the 'boring' everyday actions that form the bulwark of defending and advancing democracy like voting, participating in public meetings etc (Logan et al, 2021).

*This presents youth spaces for democratic participation as unsustainable single issue-driven movements and organisations that rarely evolve after tackling the issue whether successfully or not. Sometimes these movements have dovetailed with other issues and leveraged the momentum to shape electoral outcomes as the case with EndSARS in Nigeria which dovetailed with the "Not Too Young to Run" movement. Still, sustaining it has proven difficult beyond the election.*

A consequence of the above reality is that youth spaces for engagement often struggle to establish institutionalised - as opposed to informal means of political participation that can be sustained in the long term. As a result, political activism of youth is not organised according to formal groupings. They exercise their agency through direct action in the form of disruptive dissent like protest, instead of engaging with and in government and political institutions. This relegates them to 'mercenary participation' or 'hit and run participation' as compared to sustained engagement.

Young people also want 'quick responses' and 'quick fixes'. They are impatient for results and get frustrated if response on key issues takes time to materialise. Honwana, (2014) aptly captures this reality stating that: "Young activists appear to be struggling to translate the political grievances of the protest movement into a broader political agenda. Clearly, they seem to be more united in defining what they don't want and fighting it, and much less so, in articulating what they collectively want."

Viewed as a manifestation of youth exceptionalism, this form of participation also exposes the lack of will or capability to play the game of politics. Youth often make demands and are not willing to compromise nor to negotiate trade-offs that can result in some meaningful outcomes albeit some concessions as well. As a result, the forms and spaces of participation remain ineffective and do result in sustained democratic expansion and consolidation where gains can be achieved incrementally. It also partly explains the reality that youth are more likely to run as independents or for smaller parties than their older counterparts as they are usually disillusioned by mainstream political players.

## 4.3 Harvest of fear, co-option and assimilation

Repressive political environments are usually the context in which youth find it necessary to organise for democracy. In such environment, their movements face violent repression characterised by disproportionate force, harassment, incarceration, and infiltration. They may face persecution and have their movement taken over or banned. The violence and intimidation results in youth disengaging from action due to fear.

Some youth voluntarily cross over to the side of the repressive system to guarantee their safety and secure their livelihood. Others may be co-opted and ultimately demobilised either through coercion or incentives. In the process, youths, individually or collectively as a strategic resource and force for democratisation are subverted and assimilated to reinforce authoritarianism. This means that they disconnect from the democratic discourse and whatever form, or content of their political participation then on is not democratic nor is it democratising.

## Translation of online activism to change

Youth have become avid users of social media as a potent tool for organising and mobilisation. The power of social media has been used by various social and political movements including during the Arab Spring, #ThisFlag movement in Zimbabwe, #EndSARS in Nigeria and #DropThatChamber in Ghana. However, in most countries and various movements, virtual spaces of engagement have proven not to expand spaces for participation nor translate to change on the ground. While digital platforms have strengthened youth democratic participation to a certain extent, they also give a false sense of accomplishment, while on the ground their spaces remain limited. The level of participation on social platforms has not effectively translated to physical participation, hence their spaces remain closed relegating youth to the periphery of the political discourse.

# 5.0

## Cultivating Youth Pockets of Democracy

To challenge the democratic disconnect of youth, there is need for viable, practical strategies that can inspire young people to reject authoritarianism, resist co-option and subversion and reconnect to and sustain youth democratic participation.

Narratives of closing spaces are a great tool of analysis but fail to motivate action and are no tool for democracy support. The term “closing spaces” emphasises the importance of autocrats and their numerous techniques to limit civic participation. Such narratives fail to put activists and democracy supporters at the centre of the debate. The term limits our thinking, increases desperation, and, at best, brings us to defend those now-closing spaces.<sup>1</sup> These hotly contested, albeit closing civic spaces are typically at the national level and in key urban areas.

However, there is a plethora of alternative spaces and actors with potential for democratic agency. Existing youth social structures at the very local level, like community media, sports and cultural groups, cooperatives, vendors’ groups, social and economic solidarity groups, and self-organised community projects for schools, dams, and clinics, are potent spaces for cultivating dialogue and civic participation. In this instance, pushed to the periphery by growing authoritarianism, communities are essentially disconnecting from public affairs and organising themselves outside of the ambit of the state. Youth who have disconnected from the democratic discourse are located in these spaces. These are pockets of democracy that carry the hope for democratic consolidation from below.

Pockets of democracy are organised around social and economic interests, not necessarily political pursuits. They are those spaces characterised by inclusive participation of members in decision-making and activities, and they hold their public representatives to account. Such social structures can loosely be characterised as democratic in their character and democratising in their pursuit.

To build youth democratic agency and challenge the youth democratic disconnect, democracy supporters must identify, cultivate, strengthen, and politicise existing youth social structures in African society and connect them to each other. This will enhance democratisation by scaffolding the democracy movement while also building democratic resilience at the local level. In this context, the Pockets of

Democracy Approach is relevant and enables democracy support work to continue meaningfully even where democratic spaces are closing.

### Characteristics of Pockets of Democracy (PoD)

With experience in applying the PoD concept on the ground the characteristics of spaces defined as pockets of democracy have become discernible. These characteristics are innate in the pockets and can be cultivated and amplified through various interventions. For a space to qualify as a pocket of democracy it must meet all these indicators:

- **Democratically self-organised.**

Pockets of democracy are founded on principles of participatory decision-making and collective leadership. These spaces allow members to actively shape their governance structures, fostering inclusivity and accountability from within. Rather than being externally dictated or imposed, they organically develop mechanisms that ensure democratic engagement among participants. This self-organisation ensures that decisions reflect the needs and aspirations of the community, reinforcing the culture of democracy at the grassroots level.

- **Organised around social and economic interests**

Unlike traditional political spaces that may be directly affiliated with party politics, civil society and social movements, pockets of democracy are primarily centred around social and economic interests. These spaces include community media, youth cooperatives, cultural groups, informal workers’ associations, and self-help initiatives. While their primary focus may not be overtly political, they inherently foster democratic participation by empowering members to organise, advocate, and hold decision-makers accountable. Their rootedness in everyday social and economic realities makes them essential arenas for democratic agency from below.

<sup>1</sup> Pockets of Democracy – new hope from a social democratic perspective By Thilo Schöne, FES Country Director Botswana & Zimbabwe



- **Can self-sustain without external intervention**

A defining feature of pockets of democracy is their ability to function independently without continuous reliance on external support. While initial interventions or partnerships may provide necessary resources, these spaces must demonstrate the capacity to generate and mobilise their own resources to sustain operations over time. This self-sufficiency is crucial in maintaining autonomy, resisting external co-option, and ensuring long-term viability. By leveraging local knowledge, skills, and networks, these democratic spaces become resilient even in restrictive political environments.

- **Democratising in its content and pursuit (promoting democratic values and outcomes)**

While not organised for political purposes but rather for social and economic interests, PoD should actively promote democratic values such as inclusivity, transparency, civic participation, and accountability. Whether through community dialogues, advocacy, or the defence of fundamental rights, these spaces cultivate and disseminate democratic principles. Their activities create alternative platforms where citizens, especially young people, can meaningfully engage in democratic processes.

By identifying, nurturing, and connecting these pockets of democracy, democracy supporters can strengthen local resilience against authoritarianism and lay the groundwork for broader democratic consolidation. Emerging lessons on how to cultivate and strengthen these pockets of democracy for long-term impact, reveal the following key approaches.

- i. **Mapping the pockets of democracy**

The first step in cultivating pockets of democracy is identifying existing local spaces where democratic practices are already present or have the potential to emerge. This involves mapping community structures such as cooperatives, cultural groups, community media, and informal networks that exhibit inclusive participation and collective decision-making. Identifying these pockets requires engagement with local communities, observing their modes of organisation, and assessing their commitment to democratic values.

- ii. **Capacity building and strengthening the competence of the pockets**

Once identified, these pockets need capacity-building interventions to enhance their governance structures, leadership skills, and engagement acumen. Strengthening their competence ensures that these spaces are equipped to effectively deliver on their socio-economic interests, engage public institutions, hold power accountable for their

public goods as well as function autonomously, resist external interference, and sustain their democratic ethos over time.

- iii. **Connecting pockets within the same sector to each other**

To reinforce their impact, pockets within the same sector should be connected to create networks of solidarity, collective agency and knowledge exchange. Linking similar pockets strengthens their collective voice, enhances collaboration, and provides opportunities for shared learning and joint advocacy efforts.

- iv. **Connecting pockets to other pockets in different sectors**

Beyond sectoral linkages, cross-sectoral connections are crucial in alliance building and broadening democratic engagement as well as fosters intersectional collaboration while building on the strengths of each sector. This strengthens democratic resilience by ensuring that democracy is integrated across different aspects of social and economic life.

- v. **Creating sustained platforms for dialogue**

A critical component of cultivating pockets of democracy is establishing sustained platforms for dialogue where different actors can engage and influence public policy and engage in social accountability. These platforms can take the form of forums, assemblies, community dialogues, or online networks that facilitate interface between youth and duty bearers like public institutions and officials.

- vi. **Connecting pockets at national level to the democracy movements**

Finally, to ensure long-term impact, local pockets of democracy must be linked to broader national democratic movements. By creating synergies between grassroots initiatives and national advocacy efforts, these pockets can contribute to larger political and social transformations. Strengthening these connections amplifies their visibility, provides access to broader networks of support, and positions them as integral components of national democratisation processes.



# Conclusion

Youth hold the key to the future of democracy in Africa, yet their increasing disconnect from democratic processes poses a critical challenge. This paper has unpacked the complexities of this phenomenon highlighting the dichotomies and discontinuities of youth democratic agency while offering a pathway to re-engagement through Pockets of Democracy (PoD).

The democratic disconnect is not merely a result of apathy but a broader indictment of governance failures, socio-economic disenfranchisement, and structural barriers that limit meaningful youth participation. While some young people have disengaged from traditional democratic processes, others have been co-opted into non-democratic spaces or mobilised for authoritarian agendas. These realities demand a reframing of youth participation—moving beyond mere inclusion in political processes to ensuring that participation is democratic, transformative, and sustainable.

PoD offer a promising strategy for reconnecting youth with democratic engagement by leveraging existing social and economic structures at the grassroots level. By identifying, strengthening, and connecting these spaces, young people can reclaim agency in shaping their political and social realities. This approach ensures that democracy is not only sustained at the national level but is nurtured from below, creating resilient democratic ecosystems that can withstand authoritarian backsliding.

Ultimately, securing the future of democracy in Africa requires more than just rhetorical commitments to youth inclusion—it demands deliberate investments in youth agency, leadership, and political capacity. If harnessed effectively, the energy, ingenuity, and creativity of young people can drive the democratic transformation of the continent, ensuring that democracy remains not just a system of governance but a lived reality that delivers on its promise for a better life for all.

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## About the author

**Ntandoyenkosi Dumani** is a democracy thinker and activist, political analyst, and writer whose work focuses on the intersection of the state, politics, and society within the ambit of democratisation. With a distinctive blend of activist organising, intellectual depth, and strategic insight, he explores perspectives to democracy. He currently serves as the Programs Manager at Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES) Zimbabwe, where he leads the pioneering work on Pockets of Democracy, which seeks to revitalise and strengthen democratic participation. He also leads the youth portfolio focusing on youth leadership and has over a decade experience working on youth democratic agency in Zimbabwe and across the continent.

## Challenging the Youth Democratic Disconnect in Africa through Pockets of Democracy

Securing the future of democracy and consolidating its gains thus far, in a world fast degenerating into autocracy, requires an investment in youth democratic agency. There is growing concern that youth are disconnecting from democratic spaces and discourses. This trend is characterised amongst other things by apathy, alienation, and exclusion. This is at the backdrop of growing dissatisfaction with democracy, marked by democratic backsliding globally. Rising authoritarianism, conflict, repression and shrinking of the democratic space, further fuels the youth democratic disconnect. Proponents of democracy and other concerned actors must understand this democratic disconnect currently observed in African countries in terms of its dichotomies, discontinuities and pursue effective interventions in response.

The paper contextualises and conceptualises the democratic disconnect of youths. It further analyses the dichotomies of the disconnect and explores the (dis)continuities observed in the democratic agency of youth.

Further information on this topic can be found here:

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