

# Youth & COVID-19 Prevention in Africa

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COVID-19 is among the deadliest pandemics the world has experienced. The virus has infected and killed millions, while essentially bringing global socio-economic life to a standstill. The African continent has, thus far, been comparatively unscathed with just under 100,000 confirmed infections and about 3,000 fatalities at the end of May 2020.<sup>2</sup> While some analysts estimate that the situation will worsen in the coming months, what is already clear is the heavy economic, social and emotional toll of the pandemic on the continent. Given the largely under resourced healthcare systems and lack of social safety nets, Africa's best hope for mitigating the spread of COVID-19 lie in community-based prevention efforts. This will require very strong locally led campaigns of information dissemination, along with community mobilisation and sensitisation. We contend that Africa's large youth population must play a prominent role, as key drivers in the combat to the pandemic. Moreover, we argue for prevention interventions that are germane to the communities' social and cultural values in order to be fully engrained in their everyday life praxis.

This paper asserts that mitigation tactics that articulate innovative strategies better are suited to local conditions, rather than simply reproducing often incongruent strategies from the global North, such as social and physical distancing, lockdowns and isolation. The majority of African urban populations live in crowded slums, working in the informal sector. There are numerous examples of how social distancing violations, have led to confrontations between people and the police.<sup>3</sup> Violent police enforcement of lockdowns in Kinshasa, DRC is stoking public anger; and in Eldoret, Kenya, crowds defied the 7 pm curfew, protesting their inability to make a living.<sup>4</sup>

## Not the 'Same Old' Response

Africa is the youngest continent in the world, with more than 70 percent of its population below the age of 30, and an average age of 20.<sup>5</sup> But African youth constitutes a disenfranchised majority dealing with socio-economic and political challenges that stem from deficient education, high unemployment and political marginalization. Despite these challenges, many young Africans are savvy entrepreneurs surviving and thriving in the informal economy. They dominate the internet and digital spaces, and many are creative innovators and steadfast community organisers. The COVID-19 pandemic thus offers an opportunity to empower the youth and harness their energy, creativity and knowledge to drive prevention campaigns, especially given that they are, seemingly, less vulnerable to the coronavirus.<sup>6</sup> In fact, young volunteers are

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<sup>2</sup> Data from the Africa CDC Dashboard is tracking this data. For more information see: <https://africacdc.org/covid-19/>

<sup>3</sup> See: Lashitew, Addisu. 2020. "Social distancing unlikely to hold up in Africa without a safety net for micro-entrepreneurs." April. Brookings Institution. Available at: <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/africa-in-focus/2020/04/09/social-distancing-unlikely-to-hold-up-in-africa-without-a-safety-net-for-microentrepreneurs/>

<sup>4</sup> See: Zhu, April. 2020. "Five ideas on how to ease the impact of COVID-19 lockdowns in Kenya." *The New Humanitarian*. Available at: <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news/2020/04/06/kenya-coronavirus-lockdowns>

<sup>5</sup> Data from Worldometers; see: <https://www.worldometers.info/world-population/africa-population/>

<sup>6</sup> Recent analysis shows that malnutrition and disease may render young populations vulnerable to the virus.

already involved in a myriad of actions to support their communities. They have focused primarily on: (i) *mitigating contamination* through communication and accessibility to information, control of digital spaces and provision of health and related services; and (ii) *promoting community cohesion and social solidarity* with appreciation for local values and kinship bonds, and with support for the most vulnerable.

### ***Mitigating Contamination***

Communication and accessibility of information is critical, as no information, misinformation and disinformation about the pandemic can be widespread in both in the real and the virtual worlds. Young people have increasingly relied on digital spaces to inform themselves and others, while communities often rely on local leaders and ‘word-of-mouth’ information from relatives and neighbours. This is true especially in contexts where official channels have spread misinformation and eroded social trust. Thus, a good prevention strategy must engage people in the very spaces where they access and share information. It is important that the propagation of fact-based COVID-19 information is done through reliable sources and dependable actors. Young people are using social media platforms to communicate and disseminate this information as well as organizing within their communities through canvassing campaigns and public space awareness programs alongside community leaders.

In Kivu, Democratic Republic of Congo, Joseph Tsongo, a young leader of the Amani Institute, enlisted a group of young volunteers to visit markets, town squares, businesses and go door-to-door distributing informational pamphlets on how to stop the spread of COVID-19. Tsongo explains that even though markets in Kivu are crowded, they are working with stall owners and buyers to limit person-to-person contact as well as the number of family members out shopping. More than simply countering the spread of the pandemic, Tsongo’s initiative creates a space that allows young people to be helpful and show leadership and offers an alternative to the violence that has plagued their region for decades. Their efforts are bolstered by radio and an online presence through which they hold ‘Facebook Live’ sessions and community radio programs about the dangers of the pandemic, offering solutions on how community members can protect themselves. Tsongo and his group have already reached over 50,000 people<sup>7</sup> since March 2020.

Others have also busied themselves with similar awareness campaigns. In Burkina Faso, the National Youth Council established an initiative aimed at training 1500 young volunteers on health, sanitation and social measures to prevent the spread of the virus. The initiative, called “Battalion 2020 Against COVID-19,” will dispatch these volunteers into communities across the country. Also, from Burkina Faso, a young female leader, Emmanuella Toé, is working with her colleagues to produce informational pamphlets urging people to wear masks, respect physical distancing and follow government issued safety instructions. She is collaborating with the National Women’s Association program “Femme Riposte Covid19” (Women’s Response to COVID-19), other NGOs and local government institutions.

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<sup>7</sup> Amani Institute; <https://amani-institute.org/2020/05/04/coronavirus-in-a-context-of-conflicts-and-humanitarian-crisis-in-eastern-drcongo/>

Social media influencers,<sup>8</sup> musicians, poets, painters, social and political activists, television and sport stars are using their own talents and social platforms to reach out to others. Through social media campaigns, catchy song lyrics, spoken word and poetry, cartoons and art in local languages, their interventions reach millions of people. In Mozambique, the popular reggae-fusion band Gran'mah released a public service announcement "Lava as tuas Mãos" (Wash your Hands). The music video offers instructions on proper hand-washing techniques and alternatives to hand-shaking. The video was shown on local television channels, but most importantly shared across WhatsApp, Twitter and Facebook, reaching not only Mozambicans, but Portuguese speakers around the world. Likewise, in South Africa, the famous "Ndlovu Youth Choir" composed, performed and filmed a musical rendition of the World Health Organization's (WHO) coronavirus safety advice, featuring translations of in various South African languages. The video went viral on Twitter.<sup>9</sup>

Similarly, 26-year-old Ibrahima Diabaté, leader of the "Youth Peace and Security Network" in Ivory Coast, rallied his colleagues to record a series of awareness raising videos in different local languages to propagate information about the coronavirus. The videos were posted to Facebook and shared widely on WhatsApp. A young Nigerian, Isaac Olufadewa and his organisation "Slum and Rural Health Initiative" have produced #STOP-COVID-19 infographics in more than sixty local African languages. The infographics are designed to help spread accurate information about the deadly disease across the continent. The use of local languages and the cultural translation of the messages in ways that make sense to the communities enhances the accessibility of information.

The control of digital spaces has been an ongoing battle for many young activists on and beyond the continent. While platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp have been at the forefront of young people's strategies to increase information sharing about COVID-19, there have also been a number of independent platforms created by and for young Africans. Through innovation and entrepreneurship, we see new platforms dedicated to fighting COVID-19 being set up by young people across Africa. Stowelink, a youth-led social enterprise on health and well-being in Kenya, created partnerships with eleven international organisations to gather the most accurate and relevant information about the COVID-19 pandemic. The information is processed into a simple informative format and disseminated across social media platforms in English, Kiswahili and Amharic. In South Africa, in an effort to curb fake news and quell panic, two recent graduates of the University of Cape Town established the "CoronaApp" - a tool that centralizes information flow about the pandemic.<sup>10</sup> In South Sudan, Nelson Kwaje, director of the organization #DefyHateNow has launched the #211CHECK collective, a digital community of youth working in various fields who collaborate to fight misinformation and raise awareness on coronavirus prevention and protection, using the #COVID19SS hashtag. Mbiyzenyuy Ferdy, a young Cameroonian entrepreneur,

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<sup>8</sup> Social media influencers have access to a large online audience (thousands or millions of followers) and they are able to can them by virtue of their authenticity and reach.

<sup>9</sup> See: Wickramanayake, Jayathma. 2020. "Meet 10 young people leading the COVID-19 response in their communities." *Africa Renewal*. April. Available at: <https://www.un.org/africarenewal/web-features/coronavirus/meet-10-young-people-leading-covid-19-response-their-communities>

<sup>10</sup> See: <https://www.news.uct.ac.za/article/-2020-03-20-uct-alumni-build-coronapp-platform>

launched the online platform “Community Mutual Aid Crisis Response” to connect those in need of assistance with willing volunteers in their cities, neighbourhoods and villages.<sup>11</sup>

Online digital platforms are bringing together young people and the wider population to share ideas and prevention practices. In Uganda, a group of young people created “Zetu Africa” (Our Africa) an enterprise which designs simple solutions for complex social challenges. Under the slogan “Our challenges, Our solutions!” Zetu Africa launched the campaign “#Smarterthancorona” (Smarter than Coronavirus) to bring people together to share information and discuss solutions to problems caused by the COVID-19 outbreak. Their online appeal states: “Have you identified a problem worth solving, Sign-up! Do you have an idea that can help, Sign-up! Let us be “#smarterthancorona” together. We need each other now more than ever!” This kind of voluntary, multi-sectoral approach invites young people to be a part of the solution to a global pandemic in which their skillsets - whatever they may be - can be employed.

Beyond creating accessibility and sharing reliable information within their communities, young people in many countries have also taken an active role in providing access to preventative health services and equipment. In Kenya, Victor Odhiambo, a young entrepreneur and his colleagues from the “Garden of Hope” initiative raised money to set up a series of hand-washing stations in Kibera and other slums in Nairobi. Volunteers periodically refill water tanks and soap dispensers, inviting people to make use of the facilities.<sup>12</sup> In Cameroon, young people from the Local Youth Corner started a Youth Coalition Against COVID-19. One of their flagship initiatives is “One Person, One Hand Sanitizer, a rapid response lab that produces home-made hand sanitiser for free distribution to families and communities in need. The young team of biomedical professionals followed the World Health Organization’s directions and crafted the perfect mixture of hydrogen peroxide, glycerine and water to produce hand-sanitizers; they enlisted a number of young volunteers who can sign up through an online volunteer form. Along with producing and delivering their product they also disinfect neighbourhoods and public spaces. To date they have produced and dispensed over 7,000 bottles of hand-sanitiser and the initiative is now supported by the Ministry of Youth and the Ministry of Health.<sup>13</sup> Collaboration with government institutions often facilitates the work of volunteers and bolsters their impact through the use of state resources.

In Kenya, a young health manager for Shining Hope for Communities, Emma Ingaiza is leading a team of 60 young volunteers working in Kibera to provide essential healthcare services to local residents. Shining Hope for Communities established a clinic near the Kibera School for Girls that specializes in women’s and child healthcare, including health education, family planning, maternal health, gender-based violence and door-to-door outreach. Emma and her team are assisting over 400 patients a day.

And perhaps the greatest show of solidarity has been the production of masks in communities across the continent, made in Kente cloth, Ankara fabrics, Capulana textiles and more. Indeed, from Nigeria to Liberia

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<sup>11</sup> Most of these cases are presented in the article “Young Leaders in Africa Responding to Covid-19.” Available at: <https://www.oneyoungworld.com/ambassadors-africa-coronavirus>

<sup>12</sup> *ibid*

<sup>13</sup> For more information see: [loyocameroon.org. https://www.loyocameroon.org/covid-19-operation-one-person-one-hand-sanitizer-free-donation-of-home-made-hand-sanitizer-in-cameroon/](https://www.loyocameroon.org/covid-19-operation-one-person-one-hand-sanitizer-free-donation-of-home-made-hand-sanitizer-in-cameroon/)

to Mozambique, young people are at the fore of mask making and distribution, which has been instrumental in protecting entire populations against the spread of COVID-19. In many instances the masks are donated to medical institutions and in public places for free or sold at discounted rates.

### ***Enhancing Community Cohesion and Social Solidarity***

The combat of COVID-19 requires a strategy that also addresses the social, cultural and emotional consequences of several months of lockdown, social and physical distancing and the emotional toll caused by widespread illness and death. Youth networks have been involved in initiatives that strengthen social solidarity through the provision of goods and services and offer support to the most vulnerable. Because people's lives are shaped by particular values and systems of meaning that make the world intelligible to them, notions of contamination and needs for behavioural changes would be more effective if embedded within local understandings of sociability and interpersonal relationships. As Felwine Sarr points out, in Senegal, life means being together and people bond in groups, on benches, in house entrances, in food stalls and on buses - people "form a social body."<sup>14</sup>

Indeed, the majority of Africans live in community.<sup>15</sup> The Zulu notion of *Ubuntu* means that we are all bound together in ways that can be invisible to the eye; that there is a oneness to humanity; that we achieve ourselves by sharing ourselves with others and caring for those around us. "*Umuntu Ngumuntu Ngabantu*" (I am, because we are) speaks to human interconnectedness and represents the various threads that bind together the 'human spirit.' A similar concept is the Swahili notion of *Ujamaa*, espoused by Julius Nyerere, which can be translated as 'familyhood,' 'extended family,' and 'brotherhood or sisterhood.' Like in *Ubuntu*, in *Ujamaa* an individual is recognized as a person through her/his ties to others, or the community.<sup>16</sup> The spirit of community, brings human beings together fostering love, cohesion and solidarity. Similar concepts exist in other languages and cultures across the continent. Notions of *Ubuntu* and *Ujamaa* are apparent in the way African communities live, work, celebrate and mourn. Especially in moments of great strife, solutions and problem solving are undertaken by the collective. This is evidenced in community responses to past epidemics and pandemics on the continent.

Lessons from the Ebola and the HIV/AIDS crisis in Africa show that strong kinship bonds and solidarity among community members was key to facilitate not just community ownership of the problem but also collective action to address the spread of the disease, resulting in what Richard's called "people's science" (Richards 2016; Banks 2020; Richards 2020; De Waal 2020; Niehaus 2018;).<sup>17</sup> The importance of bottom up

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<sup>14</sup> Sarr, Felwine. 2020. "We'll Talk After the Crisis!" *World in Fever Series*. April 7, Available at:

<https://www.sueddeutsche.de/kultur/coronavirus-senegal-gesellschaft-1.4869649>

<sup>15</sup> We understand 'community' as a symbolic construct based on perceived boundaries; people can belong simultaneously to multiple communities. See: Cohen, Andersen. 1985. *The Symbolic Construction of Community*. London: Tavistock

<sup>16</sup> For more information on Ubuntu and Ujamaa philosophies see: Chimakonam, Jonathan. "History of African Philosophy." In *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Available at: <https://www.iep.utm.edu/afric-hj/>

Mugumbate, Jacoba & Nyanguru, Andrew. 2013. "Exploring African Philosophy: The Value of Ubuntu in Social Work." In *African Journal of Social Work*. Vol. 3(1), August.

<sup>17</sup> Richards, Paul. 2016. *Ebola: How a People's Science Helped End an Epidemic*. London: Zed Books.

Banks, Leslie. 2020. "Will Covid-19 South Africa be Another Case of 'Death Without Weeping'?" *African Arguments/Debating Ideas*. May 18. Available at: <https://africanarguments.org/2020/05/18/will-covid-19-south-africa-be-another-case-of-death-without-weeping/>

approaches was clear in the way many communities with a strong sense of kinship began their own surveillance, prevention and response initiatives prior to state-led and international organization interventions. In Liberia, for example, many communities were protecting themselves, making adjustments to household care, social proximity and intimacy, well before the official Ebola Treatment Units (ETUs) were established (Alonge et al. 2019).<sup>18</sup>

Young volunteers leading COVID-19 campaigns are connecting with and engaging local leaders – women’s groups, teachers, priests, imams, village-heads, healers and elders in the communities. Together they are devising micro-solutions needed to isolate patients, care for the ill, implement physical distancing within existing conditions and support families in distress. For example, more effective physical distancing measures could be tailored around family units (often of extended families) rather than individuals. Therefore, preventive measures articulated in terms of household cohesion, will favour collective action rather than individual responsibility. This approach draws directly from people’s interconnections, as in the *Ubuntu* and *Ujamaa* philosophies, enhancing support strategies among extended family members. Confinement strategies through household units can also facilitate healthcare interventions as medical practitioners can isolate and treat contaminated units.

Given the lack of social safety nets in most countries on the continent, young people have included support services and foodstuffs as part of their interventions. These initiatives, along with showing leadership, also constitute strong expressions of social solidarity. In Kenya, two young leaders, Weyyn Muganda and Suhayl Omar, co-founded Mutual Aid Kenya, a grassroots disaster relief organisation that is using community-based groups in Nairobi and Mombasa to identify at-risk households.<sup>19</sup> Through digital fundraising campaigns, Mutual Aid Kenya collects mobile money donations from ordinary Kenyans to buy and distribute food packages to these households. And in Ivory Coast, Mahmood Ouedraogo, a young activist for deaf youth approached several businesses in Abidjan for food donations to support hearing impaired people and their families. Since April 2020, Ouedraogo’s association has distributed basic foodstuffs, liquid soap and masks to more than 100 families in Markory and Yopougon.<sup>20</sup> Local leaders in these municipalities supported the youth group with free transportation and some leaders and business people joined the youth brigades as they made the rounds to distribute the food packages.

In various countries across the continent, Scouts groups have launched community-level COVID-19 response initiatives, actively working with the authorities, NGO, the private sector and those on the

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Richards, Paul. 2020. “What Might Africa Teach the World? Covid-19 and Ebola Virus Disease Compared.” *African Arguments/Debating Ideas*. March 17. Available at: <https://africanarguments.org/2020/03/17/what-might-africa-teach-the-world-covid-19-and-ebola-virus-disease-compared/>

De Waal, Alex. 2020. “Can There Be A Democratic Public Health? From HIV/AIDS to COVID-19.” *African Arguments/Debating Ideas*. March 18. Available at: <https://africanarguments.org/2020/03/19/can-there-be-a-democratic-public-health-from-hiv-aids-to-covid-19/>

Niehaus, Isak. 2018. *AIDS in the Shadow of Biomedicine: Inside South Africa’s Epidemic*. London: Zed Books.

<sup>18</sup> Alonge, O. Sonkarlay, S. Gwaikolo, W. Fahim, C. Cooper, J. L. and Peters D. H. 2019. “Understanding the role of community resilience in addressing the Ebola virus disease epidemic in Liberia.” *Glob Health Action*. Vol. 12(1)

<sup>19</sup> See: Zhu, April. 2020. “Five ideas on how to ease the impact of COVID-19 lockdowns in Kenya.” *The New Humanitarian*. Available at: <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news/2020/04/06/kenya-coronavirus-lockdowns>

<sup>20</sup> Mahmood Ouedraogo was interviewed by the authors via WhatsApp on 5 May 2020.

frontlines. In Ghana, Scouts of the Ashanti region teamed up with international chicken restaurant, KFC Ghana to provide hot meals and water to vulnerable families. In Kilifi, Kenya, Scout groups launched the project “lend a helping hand” and are distributing relief food packages (maize flour, wheat flour, cooking oil, sugar, soap, tissues, sanitary towels and face masks) to vulnerable communities. And in Cape Verde Scouts are teaming up with the Red Cross in the supply of relief items to disadvantaged families.<sup>21</sup> In South Africa and Botswana the Rover Scouts are running errands, grocery shopping and running a delivery service for families unable to do leave their homes. Scouts are focusing on supporting children in the Democratic Republic of Congo. They are providing street children with temporary shelters, food and masks. And in Namibia they are spreading messages of love and solidarity encouraging people to stay home and stay safe.<sup>22</sup>

These are some examples of countless initiatives already taking place at local and national levels. While the majority are spontaneous and isolated, others are collaborative endeavours between youth-led civil society groups, civil society and community-based organisations, government institutions and regional or international bodies. These types of partnerships are significant for various reasons: firstly, they allow youth to engage with the public, private and third sector. Secondly, they afford youth – often seen as apathetic and uninterested in general social welfare – a level of legitimacy and authority they might not attain were they operating unilaterally. This is especially true given the leadership roles that elders have traditionally held in the community. While, elders can instil a sense of authority to community-based responses, young people bring new ideas, knowledge and technologies. These coalitions can work to reduce generational tension and lessen existing generational divides.

Concerted efforts by the authorities to create volunteer platforms for youth that encourage them to be key actors in the prevention of the pandemic are similarly important. This is not to say that all youth interventions will merit support as some might be misguided or based on misinformation. However, African nations would benefit from engaging with and supporting young volunteers who are developing positive and impactful interventions. As noted in the examples above, state resources can help facilitate and scale localized youth-led initiatives. Moreover, state databases and dissemination resources could help identify gaps and greatly improve the delivery of service provisions. Lastly, given the sometimes-contentious relationship between governments and independent youth groups, state support of youth-led anti-COVID-19 work, could serve as a way to start bridging the divide between these two important actors in African societies.

## Conclusion

Ultimately, for COVID-19 mitigation efforts to be successful on the continent, prevention strategies must be tailored to the countries’ contextual reality. This means focusing and capitalizing on its strengths; in this case, a large and able youth population that can serve as volunteers in national efforts to combat the pandemic. Young people bring tremendous energy and creativity as innovators, entrepreneurs, activists

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<sup>21</sup> See “Scouts across Africa support communities in COVID-19 response.” Available at: <https://www.scout.org/scouts-in-africa-respond-to-covid-19>

<sup>22</sup> *ibid.*

and community organisers. Indeed, many young Africans are eager to contribute and protect themselves, their families and communities. Despite their challenges, this is a generation that is better educated than their parents; they master the Internet and navigate digital spaces with ease. Furthermore, by engaging in this way, young people acquire a sense of purpose and self-worth; they gain the appreciation and respect from the older generations and the State, paving the way to trust building and collaborative relationships. As we have shown, young people are not sitting on the side-lines, they are using their skill sets and knowledge in service of their communities.

Many of the youth-led initiatives discussed above are spontaneous and undertaken by youth associations and ad-hoc volunteer groups. There is no data to ascertain the real scale of these kinds of interventions. However, our research shows that volunteer-style youth initiatives are developing in multiple communities, cities and countries across the continent and merit nurturing, encouragement and support from the communities and State. State support, though, should not try to institutionalise these initiatives into rigid structures. Indeed, research has shown that rather than joining rigid and vertical organisations, young people privilege engagement in decentralised and horizontal associations marked by greater fluidity that accommodates a variety of interests, types of activities and levels of commitment.<sup>23</sup> The success of these youth actions lies in their ability to remain flexible and non-hierarchical.

Therefore, it is imperative that young people continue to fashion their own spaces – in their own communities, and in the digital world. From their communities (their families, friends, neighbours, teachers, priests, imams and healers) they derive a sense of belonging through the multiple relationships that ground their identity and animate their everyday life actions. They feel connected to the community and develop a sense of responsibility towards it. In digital spaces young people discover a wider world and define themselves within it. Here they create and share knowledge and articulate a sense of personhood and belonging in a space where they are the gatekeepers of what is and is not legitimate.

This paper and the examples therein serve to counter the dominant negative narratives about Africa's young population. We portend that young people are an under-valued and under-invested in resource, often seen as apathetic or negatively disruptive. While we acknowledge that as with all segments of a given population, they are not homogenous or driven by the same aspiration, it is critical to move beyond the deficiency perspective toward an asset-based approach. While this pandemic will have devastating health and socio-economic effects on the continent, it also offers a potential opportunity to rebuild trust and begin rewriting the narrative of Africa's young people. What this paper has highlighted are the many pockets of innovation, creativity, and entrepreneurship on the continent that must be engaged with, and harnessed, to effectively mitigate the impact of COVID-19.

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<sup>23</sup> See Honwana, Alcinda. 2019. "Youth Struggles: From the Arab Spring to Black Lives Matter & Beyond." *African Studies Review*. Vol. 62 (1), pp: 8-21.