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Urban Youth Gangs and Violence in West Africa

Dr. Celestina Ekene CHUKWUDI

Department of Political Science and International Relations, Covenant University, Ota, Ogun State, Nigeria.
E-mail: celestina.chukwudi@covenantuniversity.edu.ng

“We cannot always build the future for our youths, but we can build our youths for the future”, was stated by Franklin D. Roosevelt, who led the United States of America as the 32nd president of the United States from 1933 till he passed away in 1945. The above statement was made with great regard to the United States, coupled with their government’s commitment towards achieving success in society regarding the wellbeing of the youths.

Youth is a time when people grow, develop, and explore from childhood to adulthood. This is a time the transit from being reliant to non-reliant. United Nations has a specified age of 15- 25, which can vary in different societies, such as the African youth age between 15 and 35. This is a period when youth want to explore their environment and community to live a meaningful life and plan for their future with education, business, job opportunities, association and socialisation. The youths generally are easily distracted and have typical characteristics of moving with the local and international trends. Ismail and Olonisakin (2021), in their work on youth gangs, noted that there is a generally mixed body of research connecting teenage vulnerability and exclusion to violence. In other words, the circumstances around the youths highly contribute to their joining gangs and causing violence.

A youth gang is defined as a group of more than three who can either be juvenile or young adults that have a common identity and reasoning, take part in criminal acts, characterise themselves as gang members and are also seen by others as gang members (Gottfredson & Gottfredson, 2001). Youth gangs are the notable factor that leads to most global social vices, especially in different parts of Africa. Youth gangs have also been noted to be more common within urban areas than in rural areas because of factors like migration, affiliation, regrouping, and the like.

An urban youth gang is the bedrock of organised crime. In places where there are few public security organisations, organised crime tends to make it easier for communities to become uncontrolled, and such actions also trigger violent crimes against the local populace.

However, many societies in West Africa have nursed youth gangs of different categories: organised and unorganised, modern and local, linked and unlinked, and literate and illiterate youth gangs. The situation of youth gangs and violence has added to other risks of conflicts in West Africa. It is worth noting the reports that, even though recent events in West Africa have drawn attention back to the region's vulnerability to war and risk of violence, the subregion has experienced fewer conflicts and conflict-related deaths over the past 60 years than any other in Africa.

Some questions bother the mind about youth gangs in West Africa, such as: What is the relationship between urban youth gangs and violence? Has the exclusion of the youths in leadership positions in West African societies contributed to youth gangs today? What are efforts made toward empowering the youths of West Africa and discouraging them from establishing or joining gangs? An urban youth gang is highly related to violence because when youths migrate to the urban area, the increase in urbanisation rates above a certain threshold enhances the likelihood of political and other forms of violence, especially when combined with other risk factors like high youth unemployment, a system that is only loosely democratic, and a high dependence ratio. The urban demography (Figure 2: Demographic at a glance) is provided by the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) to show the differences between some West African countries' urban populations, poverty rates, and estimated population.

The youth are mainly attracted to the urban areas where life is easier with facilities such as transportation, jobs, business transactions, and connecting with others. In Mali, the local demand for drugs in the country has increased because of drug sellers and criminals moving into cities like Bamako and others; marketplaces, parking lots, nightclubs, bars, and brothels are now viable locations for drug usage. These same elements of attraction of youths lay the ground for violence, which can easily be sparked in times of disagreement.

Youth gangs can quickly get hired by civil society in their search for a secure environment/ neighbourhood. In most cases, politicians see youth as the best force to engage in their battle against their political opponents. All these engagements add to identifying the youth gangs as violent groups.

The population of youths in Africa has shown that there are more youths, and the old are the ones in leadership. United Nations (2022) submitted that in sub-Saharan Africa, 70% of its population is below 30 years of age, thereby positioning Africa as a habitation of the youngest population globally. The large population could be linked to development, but it all depends on how opportunity is availed for young people to explore their potential.

In Ghana, for example, violence is still being perpetuated and is frequently led by young people, and the high unemployment rate, unequal gender roles, pervasive male chauvinism as a cultural norm, and a socialised environment where people condone violence are all factors contributing to this development. These conditions negatively affect the livelihood and security of young people and communities in the local areas and, at the same time, pose security risks for the people.

Ghana and Nigeria are not alone. This same situation is peculiar to all other West African countries such as Cameroun, Sierra Leone, Guinea, Niger, etc.

It is important to note that there are local and foreign efforts from different organisations toward tackling urban youth gangs and violence in West Africa. The ugly situation of youth gangs and violence in Africa has attracted foreign help to join the local efforts in tackling the menace, and the United States of America (USA) is a good example. As part of their strategies, the Global Fragility Act (GFA) platform enabled the United States to impact a high level of calmness in Benin, Ghana, Guinea, Ivory Coast, and Togo within more than ten years to come causing Eric Silla to argue that, though it will be contentious and requires high-level diplomacy. In the same direction, the European Union (EU) established the EU mission in support of the Security Sector Reform in Guinea Bissau (UESSRGB) in 2008 to assist with implementing the Security Sector Reform in Guinea Bissau. Western and African regions have worked in unionism to assist in the prevention and solving of the outcome of urban youth gangs and violence.

The regional Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) adopts gains and traditions that match GFA principles and could serve as a forceful diplomatic partner for the United States. Promoting economic cooperation among member states is ECOWAS' primary objective to increase living conditions and advance economic growth. In a similar direction, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), between the second and fourth of August 2022, organised a policy workshop on "Building youth resilience to violence and crime through social developmental approaches to crime prevention" examined the protective and risk variables for teenage crime and violence, and provided best practices for successful preventative strategies. Interestingly, UNODC worked with others. They endeavoured to involve all stakeholders in Bayelsa State and the Nigerian government. These included representatives of the three local pilot communities that benefitted: the Bayelsa State Council for Arts and Culture, the Ministry of Women, Children Affairs, Empowerment, and Social Development, the law enforcement community, and civil society organisations.

All efforts to combat urban youth gangs and violence in West Africa have faced a lot of challenges that range from insecurity, political instability, bad governance, lack of respect for the rule of law, failure to plan, corruption of government personnel, bad governance, and mismanagement of the available resource.

In summary, urban youth gangs in West Africa is a development that has occurred because of migration from rural to urban area where there exist disparities in infrastructural developments. These structures have continued to attract the young ones searching for better livelihood, engage in higher education, and gainful employment. These youths unite with others in urban areas. They meet with affiliates they have identified themselves as a group. Violence comes up once there is disagreement within or outside the group. It may be in their protest against the government or other groups.

Different governmental and non-governmental organisations have worked toward assisting West African countries in youth development/empowerment and returning security to their environment. Despite all efforts, West African countries need help with peculiar problems of youth bulge, bad governance, poor planning, corruption, youth exclusion in government, and low levels of development.

In conclusion, urban youth gangs and violence in West Africa have remained disturbing to regional security. The implication is that urban youth gang in West Africa has continued to smear the image of the countries and their citizens, especially in their relationship with Western countries. They are quickly tagged as corrupt and violent.

This ugly situation should be blamed on bad governance, resulting in the inability of the countries to manage their youth population. The bad governance is evidenced in the rate of population growth, youth bulge and eventually, the unfavourable outcome of youth gangs and violence. The youths of any society should not be undervalued. Kailash Satyarthi rightly said, “The strength of the youths is the commonwealth for the whole world, and the faces of young people are the faces of our past, present, and future. No segment in the society can compete with the young people’s power, idealism, enthusiasm, and courage.”

It is therefore recommended that all hands be on deck in the West African region and globally to ensure that the youths’ values are upheld.

The government of every country must plan with the outcome of the census to accommodate the concerns of the demography at every stage of existence.

Improved development must be extended to the rural areas to make it comfortable for both old and young generations, thereby reducing the rate of rural-urban migration. The government must embrace policies that will see to the development/empowerment of youths in the West African society. When the youths are adequately developed with needed skills, gainful employment/ self-employment can be a norm.