

AFRICA'S YOUTH RISING: Inspirational stories from Ghana, South Africa and Uganda

There is neither a tarmac road nor an electricity wire leading to the village of Boti in Southern Ghana. But Google found the village anyway. The search machine located a waterfall that gives the village its name. Apart from that, the area is a blank spot in the digital world.

We don't know how Google found Boti, which is four bumpy bus ride-hours away from the capital Accra. The fact that Boti is on Google or Youtube, or any other site on the Internet, must be attributed to Josephine Godwyll, a 29-year-old geomatic engineer. Her organisation, "Young at Heart", teaches primary school pupils in rural areas of Ghana holistic digital literacy that goes beyond just how to operate a computer. "We guide them to discover how they can use the skills they've acquired to solve problems in their community through design thinking," Josephine says. "It translates to improving households and improving livelihoods."

Josephine Godwyll's father, who is computer illiterate, took her to her first computer class when she was seven. Computers have been practical tools for her ever since. "I don't think people should be left at a disadvantage just because of where they are born. They should be able to choose from a wide spectrum of opportunities, and this, I believe, is made possible through tech."

The fact is that the continent continues to get younger: In 2015, 226 million Africans were between the ages of 15 and 24. By 2050, this number could more than double. Africans' average age is 19; that of Europeans is 42.6. Is the continent's youth bulge a blessing or a curse? As it is, millions of young Africans struggle to make a living, their level of education notwithstanding. Solid empirical data on youth unemployment in African countries are hard to come by and difficult to compare as the criteria used to generate data are not harmonised (different countries define the age bracket for youth differently) or are not transparent. Hence statistics given by different sources vary significantly.

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Josephine Godwyll, like many young people in Ghana, believes in the opportunities technology presents. "I dream of a Ghana in which digital tools make our lives easier", she says, surrounded by Boti's primary school students who push each other for a better look at Josephine's computer screen. "A digital revolution, this is what I am fighting for." Statistically, every third person in Ghana has access to the Internet, but in reality, this access is mostly limited to urban areas.

In the past four years, Josephine Godwyll and her 30 volunteers have coached more than 200 children. As a result, one graduate of their programme designed a website for his mother's hair salon, alongside a flyer advertising its services. "The students touch a computer, and a new world opens its door to them," Godwyll observed.

She strongly believes that there is one huge challenge young people face today: To connect the skills and knowledge they acquire with their daily lives, and to translate them directly into job opportunities. Oftentimes they don't learn what they need to secure a livelihood.

William Senyo agrees. "The ones in charge of educating people must bring an open mind to what it takes in this kind of global economic dynamics and then the young people must also be willing to do extra," the 31-year-old Ghanaian says. In his opinion, the parents raising the young generation are fairly conservative. Thirty years ago, a university degree almost guaranteed a job for life. Today, many parents don't even understand how their children make an income as they sit at home all day, laptops on their knees. "The state has a contract with these young people," Senyo says. "But there is a disconnect and it almost feels like a lie: Why did the government make me go through [formal education] just so in the end you tell me you don't have the resources to put my skill set to use?"

In Ghana, 90 per cent of its 30 million citizens can read and write. [About a third of Ghanaians are between the ages of 15 and 35](#). Ghana's government defines this age bracket as youth, [though it does not provide statistics on employment for this group](#). While the Ghanaian economy has grown on average by an impressive 8.1 per cent annually between 2007 and 2013, this growth did not translate into increased employment opportunities for an ever-growing labour force, which has

impacted the youth in particular who, given their age, have less or no work experience in comparison to other workers. Therefore, they tend to engage in informal or underpaid jobs.

The lanky agribusiness graduate digs a mine of ideas in Accra. Five years ago, he founded Impact Hub, a social experiment that gathers restless, inquisitive young people with alternative ideas. The “innovation cluster“, as Senyo likes to call it, supports starting businesses with a social approach. Currently, the team focuses on health, education, agriculture, sustainable energy and financial inclusion. They invented and produced drain covers: “We take all the plastic waste we generate at the Hub to a recycling plant. They recycle it into 3D thread for us and we print out the 3D drain covers. People don’t see it’s possible until you show them,” he grins.

With his Impact Hub, William Senyo does not focus on job seekers but job creators. “Those with initiative that are the rare ones you have to work with and grow and slowly hope that their work will translate into jobs for the mass of unemployed people. They cannot all be entrepreneurs.”

Senyo has given up on the Government of Ghana to solve the country’s youth unemployment crisis. He believes in the effects of a political consciousness: “Exposed, socially aware individuals are always a win compared to people who just walk around like robots and do the work. An empowered group of young people is a threat to any government if they don’t have opportunities.”

For the time being, his best bets are on African entrepreneurs. “Political leadership has failed us consistently. The entrepreneurs have actually shown more capacity to lift us up than our political leaders. They have created opportunities.” Senyo does not question how these entrepreneurs made their fortunes, whether they pay their workers fairly or what motivates them to support creative young people. Not yet. For now, they are useful.

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Zest for action and the energy of his generation are what tax expert Mabutho Mthembo from South Africa's metropolis Johannesburg counts on. His country's population is almost twice the size of Ghana's, but with [36 per cent of the total population](#), the proportion of South Africa's youth is similar to that of the West African nation.

Alarming though is the fact [that 53 per cent of young South Africans are jobless](#), as the International Labour Organisation (ILO) estimates. This is despite the fact that [the literacy rate in South Africa](#) is at 99 per cent, and almost 70 per cent of South Africans attend or have attended a secondary school. "In a society where jobs are rare, it takes young people with courage and a sense of innovation," the 32-year old Mthembo says.

His statement can be read as criticism of South Africa's education system: Mthembo grew up with his grandmother in rural Kwazulu Natal where primary school students were taught in Zulu, the local language. "Nothing much happens in the countryside," he remembers. "Nobody ever told us what opportunities are available in South Africa in regard to education and jobs. Learning English was neglected. So getting to university was a shocker as English was the language of instruction. It was very trying at that time."

Based on his experience that a lack of information, education and social networks prevent young people from seizing opportunities, Mabutho Mthembo started the Youth Managers Foundation about ten years ago. About 2,000 students between the ages of 14 and 18 from 37 high schools in townships and rural areas of South Africa have since received career guidance, have been mentored by professionals from the industry and were introduced to managerial and leadership functions. "The energy that exists in these young people, it's massive," exclaims Mthembo. "We try to channel this energy in the right direction: We need leaders who are responsible, generative and constructive." He believes that the only way South Africa and Africa can thrive is by developing their own visions for the future.

Mabutho Mthembo's struggle for education and eventually better job opportunities is typical for many young black South Africans. In fact, had it happened years earlier, he might have been among them when in October 2015, students at the University of Witwatersrand in Johannesburg started what would eventually turn into a country-wide political protest: The university management had announced it would raise tuition fees by 10.5 per cent the following year.

Before long, the students' demonstrations had spread to other institutions of higher learning throughout South Africa, [famously known under the hashtag #FeesMustFall](#).

The raising of fees at one university was just the spark that lit the fire that had been nurtured for years by wider and deeper issues that the Rainbow Nation had been struggling with: the inaccessibility of higher education for poor black South Africans due to high costs; inadequate government funding for public universities; rampant corruption within the government administration that was channelling urgently-needed funds away from the public service; and the inability of the government to provide opportunities for its young black citizens to make a decent living and to have a promising future.

The same year, after increasing protests that followed decade-long calls to do so, the University of Cape Town removed a statue commemorating Cecil Rhodes from its campus: For the protestors, the late politician and colonialist symbolised white supremacy and suppression of the black population. The protests, which quickly spread to other universities under the hashtag [#RhodesMustFall](#), called for action against institutionalised racism, for better chances for black academics to become faculty members, but most importantly, for the decolonisation of the education system in South Africa that still had not addressed policies in which racism and inequality were deeply entrenched. Since then, the South African government has come up with a bursary scheme to fund [free higher education](#) for poor and working-class students. And the wider calls by South African students for inclusion, anti-colonialism and equality have resonated with students all over the world.

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Wartson Atukwatse, a Ugandan, studied Environmental Science at Kyambogo University, but getting a job was never on his agenda. During his studies, he

quickly discovered that reading was meant only for passing exams. “But I would read a lot of different books for my own benefit, something that was not even taught in class,” the 26-year-old remembers. “I was reading a lot of historical books, about social and artistic work.” He became an activist, a member of several book clubs and was the chairman of the university environmental association. “At that point I was looking at finishing my education and then a job would come. It’s all about getting the necessary skills and then strategising how you can create your future.”

Necessary skills and knowledge, to Wartson, come with reading widely and engaging oneself with matters that develop society. “A job would come but it would find me when I would be doing my own activities,” he remembers. Today, Wartson runs the library at the Uganda Museum in Kampala that he revived a few years ago, and is a sought-after research assistant for academics from abroad coming to Uganda.

He is passionate about creating a reading culture in Uganda. “If we have a population that is literate, that is exposed, that is empowered to create and innovate, then all the problems we have on the continent can be solved. It pains me that most of our governments don’t see that and don’t invest in the creative industry.”

Maybe the government doesn’t, but singer-turned-social-activist-turned-member-of-parliament Bobi Wine certainly uses his skills and popularity he had garnered as an artist to challenge Ugandan president Yoweri Museveni and the system he represents: that of a “Big Man” who concentrates most state power in his hands.

[Bobi Wine’s appeal](#) as a young person from a poor Kampala neighbourhood and his calls for “people power” resonate particularly with Uganda’s overwhelmingly youthful population, the fastest growing and among the most youthful populations in the world. About 77 per cent of Ugandans are younger than 30 years and 52 per cent are under the age of 15. The majority of them were not born when President Museveni became the head of state in 1986 and do not feel represented by his government.

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Despite remaining rather [elusive about his concrete political plans](#) for Uganda's future, Bobi Wine is emerging as a long-awaited beacon of hope for those who were looking for a leader representing the majority of the Ugandan population who are looking for solutions to corruption and injustice. As he expresses in his song "[Situka](#)" from 2016: *"When our leaders have become misleaders and mentors have become tormentors. When freedom of expression becomes the target of oppression, opposition becomes our position."*