

PROMOTING THE MEANINGFUL PARTICIPATION OF YOUTH IN AFRICA'S GREAT LAKES IS CRUCIAL FOR THE REGION'S STABILITY



In the Great Lakes Region, 75% of an estimated population of 420 million people are below 35 years old. Youth in the region is, however, still largely underrepresented in decision making and is disproportionately affected by the negative impacts of conflicts, such as unemployment. The predicament of unemployed youths has been further exacerbated in 2020, due to the various repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic. Another challenge facing the youths is the lack of job opportunities in the region, which makes them easy prey for recruitment in non-state armed groups operating in the region. Other important issues facing the youth today range from lack of education, high percentage of youth refugees and internally displaced persons, to drug and substance abuse. These factors undermine regional development, threaten security, and have an impact on durable peace and reconciliation in the region.

“Youth should actively be engaged in shaping lasting peace and contributing to justice and reconciliation”

Recognizing that youth should actively be engaged in shaping lasting peace and contributing to justice and reconciliation, the Office of the Special Envoy for the Great Lakes region, as part of the celebration of the United Nations 75th anniversary, convened on 14 December 2020 an interactive dialogue with youth representatives from the region titled “Mobilizing the Youth to Create the Future We Want in the Great Lakes Region”.

The objective of the meeting was to achieve a greater understanding of the needs and concerns of the youths in the region, and to clearly define the role that the UN, regional organizations and member States can play in supporting them over the coming decades. Youth participants also shared their views on specific actions in addressing their concerns, ranging from youth participation in conflict prevention and peace processes, as well as engagement in community development through youth-led projects.

The meeting saw the participation of several high-ranking officials of the UN and regional organizations, including Ambassador Huang Xia, UN Special Envoy for the Great Lakes region; Fabrizio Hochschild Drummond, Special Adviser to the Secretary-General on the commemoration of the UN 75th Anniversary; Ambassador Basile Ikouébé, African Union Special Representative to the Great Lakes Region; Ambassador João Samuel Caholo, Executive Secretary of the International Conference for the Great Lakes Region (ICGLR); and Ambassador Liberata Mulamula, former ICGLR Executive Secretary. Some eighty young leaders across the region took part in the dialogue, including Nancy Kaizilege, President of the ICGLR Youth Forum.

Ambassador Ikouébé noted that the issue of youth empowerment in relation to peace and security had been reflected in various AU documents such as Agenda 2063, the African Charter of Youth, the Malabo Decision Youth Empowerment for Sustainable Development adopted during the 17th Summit of the African Union in 2011. Ambassador Ikouébé called the countries of the region to sign and ratify all regional and international documents on youth. He also went on to propose the establishment of a quota for youth in public offices to guarantee their effective participation in peace and security processes as well as governance.

For his part, the newly appointed Executive Secretary of the ICGLR, Ambassador Caholo, said his organization would push for the implementation of the conclusions of the Youth Employment Conference that took place in Nairobi in 2017. Ambassador Caholo also vowed to assess the impact of COVID-19 on youth in the Great Lakes region in collaboration with the Youth Forum. Mr. Drummond, Special Adviser to the UN Secretary-General on the Commemoration of the United Nations 75th Anniversary shared ideas on how young people could contribute to cultivating a culture of peace and tolerance in the Great Lakes region.

The Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for the Great Lakes region, Mr. Huang Xia, highlighted the importance of the UN75 events and most importantly the platform created through the interactive dialogue with youth. He noted the opportunity that the event created in charting a course to address the challenges in the context of COVID-19 and its impact on youth, and highlighted that young people possess significant potential to create positive dynamics and changes. Mr. Xia urged the participants to transform this demographic capital into catalytic forces for peace and sustainable development and highlighted the importance of the new UN Regional Strategy for Peace Consolidation, Conflict Prevention and Resolution in the Great Lakes Region, in helping people to shape the future of the region.