

POSITION PAPER by Groupe *initiatives*

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For a systemic, deliberate approach to support young people's empowerment trajectories



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In Africa¹, **2 out of 3 people are younger than 25**. According to all prospective analyses, these figures should continue to grow in the coming decades. This demographic structure will have consequences for social, economic and political organisation in African countries. It can have enormous potential for their future, particularly in terms of demographic dividends. Provided that investments are made for young people. Yet, **this category is currently facing a major crisis in terms of accessing resources** (economic, social, cultural and political), while more global changes observed in African societies are having profound effects on young people's empowerment processes, leaving them only limited room for manoeuvre.

Since the 2000s, strong commitments have been made by African States and by their technical and financial partners. However, actions tested by these various stakeholders tend to prioritise vocational training and professional integration of young people, and/or development of entrepreneurship, while **the issue of their access to economic, social and civic rights is rarely raised**.

For international solidarity associations too, the issue of young people is very acute. As with the subject of gender, the issue of young people calls the way we do things into question. Based on the experiences of Groupe initiatives member organisations and partners, the study days that took place in March 2019 enabled a series of observations and critical points to be identified. They invite us to **rethink the subject of young people, taking an inclusive, systemic and political approach**. They also call the notion of "beneficiaries" into question, advocating for **recognition of young people as stakeholders and partners in our actions**.

These critical points are addressed at various stakeholders working alongside young people, primarily international solidarity associations, but also institutional stakeholders at national or local level, who develop and implement policies in favour of young people, and their technical and financial partners. They also concern professional organisations and private stakeholders.

1. To ensure geographic coherence, the experiences and practices quoted in this issue of Traverses are located on the African continent. However, the operational recommendations drawn from these analyses can be applied to other contexts of intervention.

1. The figure of “the young person”: deconstructing preconceived ideas

Defined and perceived variously as vectors of public disorder or, on the contrary, as drivers of change and modernity, young people draw attention, in particular when significant changes are underway in society. Normative narratives with regards young people (lassitude and idleness, migration, attraction to easy money and modernity, participation in armed violence, etc.) contrast with low quantities of data and empirical knowledge on their trajectories, and prevent the development of appropriate strategies.

- **Young people are not a monolithic group:** the notion of youth is defined more in terms of social and cultural practices accompanying periods of transition, rather than in terms of biological age. Furthermore, within this category and in its relationships with others, various factors influence power relationships, such as gender, origins, level of education, etc., placing them at the intersection of several discriminations, and have an impact on their living conditions and situations. Considering youth in the plural makes it possible to give greater consideration to the diverse range of situations and trajectories.
- **Young people are not a static category:** young people are stakeholders in social organisation. The latter is a product of social relationships and delineates individuals' roles and positions according to their affinities (gendered identity, age, class, social and religious origin) and the stereotypes attributed to them, thereby influencing the extent and nature of their participation in public life and their conditions of access to resources. These positions are part of dynamic contexts and are therefore evolving.
- **Young people are stakeholders in their territory:** even if they are confronted with numerous obstacles hampering the completion of their projects, young people are not immune to social transformations underway. They demonstrate their determination and their capacity on a daily basis to be stakeholders in their future and their territories. When forums for expression are opened up and are democratic, and they can find ways to express their aspirations, young people demonstrate their creativity through entrepreneurship, new forms of artistic, cultural or political expressions, and social and civic commitment.

2. Supporting ambitious strategies and policies for young people

Sociodemographic changes underway should lead to urgent support for ambitious deliberate policies for young people, taking challenges in terms of numbers into account, but also by tackling the underlying problems societies are faced with. This is the case at several levels (local, national, sub-regional and international).

- **Prioritising a systemic approach enabling the various economic, social and political levers to be activated:** young people's professional integration trajectories are not just about financial empowerment (through access to employment), professional activity is part of a lifelong perspective – this activity also determines a social position. It is therefore necessary to

consider other aspects in addition to professional integration, in order to open up subjects such as young people's access to economic, social and political rights, and more broadly to raise the question of development models that are favourable for young people.

- **Work within a political dynamic to support social transformations underway:** supporting young people in their empowerment processes can go hand in hand with questioning of socio-cultural structures and the power relationships they generate. The challenge consists of easing restrictions on young people and working to change these representations to favour a more equitable distribution of resources and powers.
- **Including the social environment in support systems:** young people evolve and live in a more global social environment, while the role of family and community networks is often preponderant in their empowerment processes. Working on and with their social environment therefore requires highlighting of common interests (between elders and young people) and demonstration of the positive repercussions of this support for young people themselves, their entourage and more globally for society as a whole. As with the theme of gender, projects aimed exclusively at young people cannot be the only response.
- **Favouring coherence in sectoral policies and interventions:** support for young people is often covered by various sectoral policies that often lead to distinct institutional responsibilities. In terms of external supports, technical and financial partners also often operate in silos, with results and impacts expected over short periods. Work on such a transversal subject must enable decompartmentalization of policies, by contributing to association of scales and strengthening coordination of sectoral policies, and between those working on professional integration of young people.

3. Developing ways of working that are suited to young people's profiles and constraints

There is not just one category of young people, there are many. Taking this diversity into account makes it impossible to propose “turnkey” solutions. It requires detailed analysis of contexts, life trajectories and social dynamics in order to adapt strategies and modes of support according to each person's needs and specific interests.

- In a majority of projects/programmes, young people's points of view and aspirations are not systematically considered, either in the diagnostic phase or in other stages of system development. In order to propose strategies for pertinent, efficient actions, **human, financial and time resources must interventions be launched**, in order to enable analysis and understanding of conditions, constraints and/or opportunities encountered by young people.
- Supporting initiatives led by young people and helping them to maintain the dynamic created over the long term means ensuring **simplified financial means and tools that are in line** with their constraints (absence of guarantees, seed money, social complexities influencing young people's “credibility”, etc.), such as

cascaded funding for example. This also requires testing of new modes of support, innovation and peer exchange, and therefore necessitates **flexibility**. **Action-research** must be prioritised.

- As with what is gradually being implemented for gender and/or the climate, **frameworks for accountability** (based on “youth” tools and markers) can be defined to enable progress made to be measured, provided that they are **accompanied by means dedicated to their appropriation** (training, support) to avoid standardised approaches.

GRUPE INITIATIVES MEMBER ORGANISATIONS' COMMITMENTS

Groupe *initiatives* and its member organisations defend an **inclusive, systemic and political approach to supporting young stakeholders**.

In light of this, our organisations undertake to:

- **Place young people and their projects at the core of the strategies and initiatives we test:** our organisations must listen more closely to young people, to their needs and aspirations, and to their diverse strategies. In other words, they need to be equipped with the means to “capture” the diversity of young people’s requests. This will require: i) strengthening young people’s inclusion in our various sectors of intervention, (ii)

provide them with access to information, both in their individual paths (possibility of making choices because alternative options are available), and in a collective trajectory favouring their engagement in their societies; iii) include them in co-construction of solutions to enable them to be stakeholders in these (transition from beneficiaries to users).

- **Position ourselves as a supporter and catalyst of change:** our organisations must move from their operator roles to supporter and facilitator roles, in order to create favourable conditions for all young people to express themselves and act. Considering young people as partners, rather than as beneficiaries targeted by our interventions, will contribute to their recognition as development stakeholders and progress their empowerment.
- **Take an approach that promotes synergies and complementarities:** internally, between different sectors of activities, and between our organisations, with the implementation of consortia or cross-capitalisations for example, thereby making it possible to take full advantage of our areas of action and to propose systemic solutions.
- **Within our organisations also, make room for young people!** By supporting renewal of age groups through recruitment and increased power for younger employees, prioritising senior/junior support and promoting greater responsibility for young people in our governance bodies.



©Gret

Sunu Gox project, Senegal.



©FAJR

FAJR programme, Mauritania. Collective assessment of the project actions with associations.

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Created in 1993, Groupe initiatives (Gi) is a collective of 12 professional international solidarity associations who assumed that *“they would make better progress together than separately and they would overcome their differences and conflicting interests by setting themselves common challenges and shared goals”*.

Gi is a forum for exchange and sharing of experiences and practices, making it possible to inform reflections conducted by development cooperation stakeholders and to formulate recommendations in terms of public policies.

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ITS MEMBERS

