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Africa’s Young Urbanites
Challenging Realities in a Changing Region

UNICEF/ADAP

December 2009

Marc Sommers
Consultant
UNICEF

&

Associate Research Professor of Humanitarian Studies
Institute of Human Security
The Fletcher School
Tufts University
160 Packard Avenue
Medford, MA 02155
Marc.Sommers@tufts.edu
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Foreword

This # 5 issue of the ADAP’s Learning Series explores the impact of urbanization with special attention to its impact on young people in Africa. In reviewing current trends in the region’s rapid process of urbanization, the paper seeks to situate Africa’s young people in this dynamic and changing context.

Sub-Saharan Africa is experiencing the highest rates of urbanization in the world. Meanwhile, its significant youth cohort is expected to increase for another 20 years with many of these drawn to cities for a wide number of reasons. Experience has shown that many of these young people will never return to rural or less-urban areas. In profiling life for Africa’s young urbanites, the author reviews the services, opportunities and aspirations of this age group.

Though many of these urban youth seek ways to “reinvent” themselves in cities, they often feel frustrated and misunderstood. Contrary to some perceptions, the vast majority of young people are non-violent and are seeking ways to sustain a livelihood, gain skills, and be accepted by their peers and communities. Given the lack of opportunities to be heard or understood by adults, many resort to music and youth associations to share information and navigate their surroundings.

We hope this paper will contribute to increasing our understanding of youth in rapidly urbanizing environments.

Finally, we wish to thank Marc Sommers for preparing this paper for UNICEF. Marc based his findings on information gathered through desk reviews as well as his own extensive research in this area. He is an Associate Research Professor of Humanitarian Studies at the Fletcher School at Tufts University and is currently a Jennings Randolph Senior Fellow at the United States Institute of Peace for 2009-2010.

Victor P. Karunan
Chief
Adolescent Development and Participation
Gender, Rights and Civic Engagement
Division of Policy and Practice
UNICEF Headquarters
New York

December 2009
I. Prologue: Beyond the Comfort Zone

African cities have perplexed and dismayed many of its visitors. Writing at the dawn of the era of African independence, in a book called *The Death of Africa*, Peter Ritner stated that African cities “work, but they work for decay instead of growth... These cities and these industries are not the embryos of a wonderful new Africa of the future, but [are] merely beckoning mirages of what might be” (1960: 18).

The sense of threat emerging from African urban life, and its connection to the presence of prodigious numbers of young men, is regularly expressed. In *African Madness*, Shoumatoff, for example, contends that

> It is only when large cities begin to appear in the [African] landscape... that a societal madness begins to occur; that detribalized young men, lost souls wandering in the vast space between the traditional and the modern worlds, can be heard howling in the streets of downtown Nairobi in the middle of the night... [1988: xiv]

Using his travels through West African cities as his pallet, Kaplan paints a still more disturbing picture of urban Africa in yet another gloomy book, *The Ends of the Earth*. He describes the “out of school, unemployed male youth” that seem to be everywhere as “loose molecules in an unstable social fluid that threatened to ignite” (Ibid.: 16) and considers African cities as places “where African culture is being redefined as deforestation tied to overpopulation [which] drives peasants out of the countryside” (Ibid.: 34). For Kaplan, West African cities are not urban areas as much as “high-density concentrations of human beings who have been divested of certain stabilizing cultural models, with no strong governmental institutions or communities to compensate for the loss” (Ibid.: 29). Kaplan’s cocktail of decay and collapse results in a prediction of near-complete anarchy and “new-age primitivism” (1996: 29) arising from urban Africa (led by West Africa).

The views of some Africa scholars share the contention that African cities are out of control. Simone, for example, presents the pervasive view that African cities seem to be places that “don’t work” and where, for many urban residents, “life is reduced to a state of emergency” (2004a: 1, 4). Hope contends that African cities don’t make sense in economic terms, since “African countries are substantially more urbanized than is justified by their degree of economic development” (1998: 356).

Some African scholars even share the apocalyptic forecasts expressed by visitors to Africa like Ritner, Shoumatoff and Kaplan. El-Kenz, for instance, considers African cities “monsters.” and places where “everything happens”, most of which is bad. In his view, African cities are “cruel,” the anonymity they offer is “disconcerting,” and their residents find it “difficult to adapt” to urban life. He considers the situation for the many young urbanites who live there to be not only dreadful but perilous. In urban youth (El-Kenz seems to be primarily talking about urban male youth), he senses “anger, a sense of

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1 I owe thanks and appreciation to Regina T. Wilson for contributing significantly to the document research for this publication. Ms Wilson is a candidate for the Master of Arts in Law and Diplomacy at The Fletcher School, Tufts University, and also works part-time as a Research Assistant.
hurt, and revolt,” and he surmises that “It is a small step from the culture of violence to its actual practice” (1996: 54, 55).

Given the collective views of many travelers to and scholars of Africa, it is small wonder that many international agencies focus their attentions on Africa’s villages instead of its cities. Rural areas, after all, appear to be linked to tradition and stability, and they seem to be viable, familiar and perhaps even logical places to develop communities and countries. Yet this broad institutional tendency contains a potent irony: international agency investments are largely flowing into rural Africa while ever more of its residents are heading in the opposite direction: towards cities. Most of these urban migrants are youth, and they are the active agents of Sub-Saharan Africa’s radical transformation from a mainly rural to a predominantly urban region.

African youth stand far ahead of nearly all government and non-government institutions in their urban orientation, and not just those living in cities and towns: in their clothes, their interests, and in the urban youth slang they use, many if not most village youth are slanting towards cities as well. Their gestures, words and interests intentionally indicate that they, too, will go to taste “town life” themselves one day soon. Through youth eyes, the anonymity of city life, which causes such discomfort for El-Kenz and others, is not a threat but a resource: cities are places where youth can throw off (or, at least, delay) adulthood expectations and reinvent themselves. Surviving in cities is hardly easy, but if you ‘make it’ there’s a chance to assume a glow of success that may be forever out of one’s reach in home villages. If cities are unquestionably difficult, for many youth they also offer new challenges and opportunities. They are also exceedingly interesting, and they are places where finding wealth seems possible.

In an overwhelmingly youthful region, where increasing numbers of young people find cities irresistible, the urban world is not only Sub-Saharan Africa’s future. It also permeates its present. Most African youth are already living in cities or, it would most certainly appear, plan to shift there soon.
II. Introduction: Catching up to Africa’s Vanguard

One issue that links almost every author cited above is their limited interaction with the very urban youth about whom they are so concerned (and, apparently, afraid of). Field research with African urban youth reveals a remarkably different picture. While most urban youth in Africa are certainly poor and many are struggling, their lives are not characterized by enveloping disaster, as many assume. Life in town is indeed tough and sometimes threatening. But cities are hardly ‘black holes:’ they also provide youth with opportunities, attractions and possible trajectories that are simply not available in rural areas.

Illuminating the difference between perception and reality regarding Africa’s urban youth is the underlying purpose of this study. It is informed by the following argument: successful engagement with and lasting, effective support for African youth can only be achieved if it is first understood why youth are in cities and how they strive to survive and hopefully succeed there.

Accordingly, this study will highlight the contours of Sub-Saharan African urban life and what it’s like to be a young person (in this case, those between ages 10 and 24) in a big African city. It will begin by examining some assumptions about urban Africa and what trends help illuminate Africa’s high urbanization rate and the challenges that African cities face. Next, it will review some central themes of urban youth life in Africa. Wherever possible, particular attention will be paid to adolescent youth and to cities in East and Southern Africa. The study will conclude by considering programme and policy implications for working with Africa’s urban youth and providing suggestions for enhancing strategies that support them.

Before launching into a broad consideration of youthful urban African, one comment is necessary. It has been noted widely that documentation on many vital dimensions of Sub-Saharan African urban life, and on the lives of the many youth who inhabit the cities, is thin. Myers, for example, states that “Sub-Saharan African urbanization processes and urban dynamics are poorly understood and comparatively understudied” (2005: 4). The lack of data and description on urban youth life in Sub-Saharan Africa, and adolescents in particular, is still more serious. Although approximately one in four Africans are between 10 and 19 years old, “the nature of urban adolescent life in not well understood, and much remains to be learned about its distinctive features” (Montgomery et al. 2003: 247). This study is undertaken with a recognition of the constraint on available information.
III. African Urbanization: Assumptions and Trends

Africa is extraordinarily youthful and rapidly urbanizing. Young Africans dominate the continent with their sheer numbers. They are leading the advance towards city life. While details about these changes will be examined shortly, it is useful to consider four assumptions about Africa that hinder the ability to accurately grasp and appropriately respond to Africa’s dual transformations and the role of young Africans at the vanguard of both.

It is often assumed that:
(1) Africa is a rural-based continent;
(2) Male youth are inherently violent (making African cities, where there are dense concentrations of unemployed young men, unusually violent places);
(3) African cities make little economic sense; and
(4) Urban migrants can be drawn back to their rural homes of origin.

All four of these assumptions will be challenged in the following pages. The analysis is integrated into the following description of some dominant trends and contours of Africa’s urbanization and the young Africans who live there. This section aims to provide context for understanding African cities before turning to the lives and perspectives of urban youth in the next section.

African Youth Demographics

Today’s population of human beings is the youngest in history. This is true not only in terms of the population’s sheer size, but in terms of the proportion of youth relative to the overall human population. In rough terms, half of all people are under age twenty-five and a billion are between ages 10 and 19. As it is anticipated that fertility rates will begin to decline across most of the globe, “there will likely never be in human history a youth cohort this large again” (Barker 2005: 11).

As the population in the developed world ages, the extraordinary wealth of young people in today’s world exists almost entirely in the developing world: out of a total human population of 6.5 billion (as of 2006: Leahy et al. 2007: 15), 1.5 billion are youth (here defined as people ages 12-24) and 86% of them – 1.3 billion – live in the developing world (World Bank 2006: 4). This is an unprecedented situation for those addressing development issues, since “The current cohort of young people in developing countries is the largest the world has ever seen” (Ibid.: 33). Sub-Saharan Africa’s youth population has attracted particular attention from demographers, partly because, of all regions of the world, the absolute number of young people is enlarging there faster than anywhere else. Sub-Saharan Africa’s population has quadrupled since 1950, and, quite unlike all other world regions, the expansion of Sub-Saharan Africa’s youth population will not peak for another twenty years (Ibid.: 44, 33, 4). Out of 46 countries and territories where at least
70% of the population is under the age of 30, only seven (15.2%) are not in Sub-Saharan Africa (Leahy et al. 2007: 87-91).²

While working for the U.S. Government’s Central Intelligence Agency in 1985, a demographer named Gary Fuller coined a term – youth bulge – (Hendrixson 2004: 2) that has turned out to have a lengthy shelf life. While the term merely describes a particular demographic phenomenon (Urdal defines it as “extraordinarily large youth cohorts relative to the adult population” (2004: 1)), it conjures a sense of instability. A ‘bulge’, after all, may burst.

It is thus not entirely surprising that the ‘youth bulge’ term has come to be mainly associated with threat and danger. A series of publications have highlighted the statistical correlations between nations with youth bulge demographics and the incidence of political instability. An illustrative example is found in The Shape of Things to Come, whose authors confidently state that “A positive relationship between the proportion of young adults in a population and its vulnerability to conflict has already been established” (Leahy et al. 2007: 22).

In statistical terms, this statement is entirely correct: Urdal, in fact, notes that the correlation between a nation with a youth bulge population and civil conflict is “extremely robust” (2004: 16). But in contextual terms, the statement, as well as many of the ways in which the youth bulge has been applied, invites serious distortions. For example, the correlation is not a predictor of war: the strong majority of nations with youth bulge populations today have not had recent civil conflicts. The correlation also overlooks the fact that when civil conflicts do occur in countries with youth bulges, “the vast majority of young men” never get involved in violence (Barker and Ricardo 2006: 181).

In addition, while it may be claimed that young men are “inherently violent” (Cincotta et al. 2003: 44), there is biological evidence that directly challenges this claim (e.g., Rowe et al. 2004: 550). Indeed, given that most nations that have youth bulges are also largely unable to generate much employment (a category of nations which would seem to include virtually every nation in Sub-Saharan Africa), it is remarkable to note just how peaceful most youth, male and female, are, particularly when issues relating to youth marginalization, unemployment and the like are thrown into the mix. As a result, what might be called the youth bulge and instability thesis does not account for youth who resist engagement in violence or the role of youth in the construction of post-war peace.

The youth bulge is useful when it attracts attention to nations that have unusually large numbers of youth, since nations with more youth should provide more support for them. It can also help highlight concerns over political instability and caution those who assume that democracy necessarily connects to stability. Urdal, for example, has found that “a partial and gradual process toward democracy may substantially increase the risk of conflict in the Arab world” (2004: 17). But highlighting the youth bulge and instability

² That is, Afghanistan (72.8%), Guatemala (71%), the Maldives (70.3%), the Palestinian Territories (72.2%), the Solomon Islands (70.1%), Timor-Leste (70%) and Yemen (75%) (Leahy et al. 2007: 87-91).
thesis is counterproductive when it incorrectly colors most youth as dangerous and inspires other counterproductive, unproven assertions about how youth think and act. It is helpful to remember that the youth bulge literature contains little data featuring interviews with youth themselves.\(^3\)

**Urbanization**

The rate of urban growth in the world has been astoundingly rapid. In 1900, 13% of all people lived in cities. By 1950, the proportion had increased to 29%. In 2005, nearly half of all humans lived in urban areas (49%), and by 2030, it is estimated that 60% of the world’s population will reside in cities (United Nations 2006: 1).

Sub-Saharan Africa is not only the world’s youngest region. It is also urbanizing at the fastest rate in the world. The general consensus is that “Africa is one of the least urbanised regions in the world; cities and towns are growing faster [there] than anywhere else; and large-scale urbanisation is a fairly recent phenomenon” (Tostensten et al. 2001: 8). Indeed, it has been found that “The urban populations of sub-Saharan Africa have increased by 600% in the last 35 years: a growth rate which has no precedent in human history” (Caraël and Glynn 2008: 124).

While Africa had the smallest proportion of urban dwellers in 2005 (38%), 51% of Africans will live in urban areas by 2030, when it will have the second largest number of urban dwellers (following Asia) and 70% of all urban dwellers will be living on those two continents (United Nations 2006: 3). Sub-Saharan Africa easily has the highest annual urban growth rate in the world: an average of 3.61% for each year between 2000 and 2005 (Ibid.: 77). Accurate demographic statistics are notoriously scarce, since “there is a dearth of basic demographic data” for most African cities (and for each African country) (Tostensten et al. 2001: 8). Within Sub-Saharan Africa, “Eastern and southern Africa have led the world in urbanizations rates for nearly half a century” (Myers 2005: 4). In addition, it appears not only that conflict-affected countries have particularly strong urban growth rates (Peters et al. 2003, Sommers 2003), but that increasing proportions of refugees are shifting from camps and settlements to cities – even if such movements are illegal (Human Rights Watch 2002, Sommers 2001a).

Finally, and significantly, once African youth migrate to cities, very few will ever return to reside in their former rural homes (Ogbu and Ikiara 1995, Sommers 2003). This has been demonstrated, over and again, in Africa’s urban history. Governments have periodically engineered orchestrated returns of (mostly male) urban youth to the countryside, and they have proven to be almost completely fruitless. Perhaps the most famous of these was *Nguvu Kazi* (“Hard Work”) in 1983 in Tanzania. Heralded by President Julius Nyerere, the campaign aimed to ‘repatriate’ apparently jobless urbanites (many of whom worked in the informal economy, which will be described just below) in

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\(^3\) Among the most documented and cited recent studies promoting the youth bulge and instability thesis is *The Security Demographic* (Cicotta et al. 2003). Critical assessments of the thesis are available elsewhere (such as Hendrixson 2004 and Sommers 2006a and 2007).
Dar es Salaam to their rural homes. It proved to be an expensive, embarrassing flop. The army-led campaign to corral mainly urban youth and deport them to the countryside “wasted scarce transportations without affecting the city’s population growth” (Sawers 1989: 854-855). Once dropped in a rural area, youth simply hopped a bus or train and returned straight to the capital. Probably the most dramatic evidence of the determination of African urban youth to remain in cities is the case of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) in Khartoum, Sudan. Despite intimidation, including extensive bulldozing of IDP homes by the Sudanese government, a survey of IDPs found that “young people see their future” in Khartoum:

Ten years of displacement to the urban areas of Khartoum have resulted in a fundamental shift in identity, particularly among young people, who consider themselves to be urbanized and have no real desire to return to their rural origins. [Jacobsen, Lautze, and Osman 2001: 84]

Youth, and male youth in particular, are at the forefront of Africa’s advance towards cities (Hope 1998: 352). The presence of so many young people in African cities should hardly be surprising, since the overall population is overwhelmingly youthful. Yet it has created considerable agitation among some analysts, including members of the ‘youth bulge and insecurity’ community (e.g., Cincotta et al. 2003). The concern is also reflected in the development community, including the US Agency for International Development, which published a youth and conflict “toolkit” containing the following warning:

Urbanization concentrates precisely that demographic group most inclined to violence: unattached young males who have left their families behind and have come to the city seeking economic opportunities. [USAID 2005: 7]

The potential threat that male youth present in cities requires context. There is no question that large concentrations of unemployed or underemployed people may lead to instability at some point. Yet what is so striking about most African cities is that they are not far more difficult, threatening and unstable. Indeed, it has been suggested that crime rates in cities in developing countries are partly linked to city size (Montgomery et al. 2003: 56). Furthermore, the alleged connection between large numbers of unemployed urban youth in Africa and conflict is questionable, since virtually all recent civil wars in Africa have their origins in rural areas, not urban ones (Sommers 2007a: 105).
Africa’s Young Urbanites

Formal and Informal Markets

The lives of many urban youth, like nearly all of their counterparts in town, are dominated either by work or the need to find some. Simone argues that the uncertainty of urban life takes place, in part, by design. There is an “enforced precariousness of existence” that governments create by intentionally making it hard to find a livelihood. The resulting economic desperation and uncertainty “cheapens labor inputs, extracts various unofficial surcharges on consumption, and excuses public authorities from having to assume responsibilities for social reproduction” (2004b: 16). That life is difficult for most in African cities and the informality of (and lack of systems for) nearly everything invites possibilities for siphoning capital off all sorts from urban dwellers.

There is another side to this as well. Cities are populated by large numbers of people who may not pay taxes to their government with any regularity. City governments may be overwhelmed by the services that urban dwellers require. As Lubuva (a Tanzanian government official) notes, “urban local authorities have very little revenue of their own, far less than what they would require to keep pace with the rate of urbanization” (2004: 4). Indeed, the difference between services that are provided to urban dwellers can be extremely broad: South Africa, for example, provides clean water to 90% of its urban population while Mozambique provides clean water to only 17% of its urban residents (Simone 2004b: 15).

Accurate youth unemployment rates in Africa are remarkably difficult to establish in Africa. The range is phenomenal. Liberia’s reported rate is 88% (Government of Liberia 2004: 7), while the reported rate for Burundi has been estimated as low as one percent (Leibbrandt and Mlatsheni 2004: 38). That two of the world’s poorest and youngest nations, each with significant urban growth rates, could have such extraordinarily divergent rates for youth unemployment is difficult to believe.

There are at least four reasons for this remarkable disjuncture. First, accurate, reliable data on who is employed and not employed in African nations (among others) can be extraordinarily difficult to gather, particularly in impoverished post-war nations such as Burundi and Liberia. Second, it is not at all clear just what would comprise having a job and not having a job, and whether the same definitions of what could constitute ‘work’ and ‘no work’ are used in different countries. Related to this is a third reason: the employment-unemployment dichotomy fails to include a far more significant marker of economic activity for youth and most other urban dwellers: underemployment, the kind of work that is commonplace in big African cities but is difficult to quantify because employment may be short-lived and irregular. And finally, how many urban dwellers make a living is, in many if not most cases, at least technically illegal. Accordingly, economic life is frequently shielded from official view; what residents of Dar es Salaam might call mambo ya kujificha (the affairs of hiding oneself).

It is this fourth reason that leads us to consider the predominant location of the overwhelming majority of economic activity in urban Africa: the informal sector. It has a host of other names, including the black market, the parallel economy, the second
economy and the hidden sector (Tripp 1997: 18), and still more, including the underground, fraudulent, peripheral, shadow, and creeping economy. Given the informal economy’s many threatening nicknames, it is usually not deemed to be a location for honorable economic activity. Yet in Africa, two in three urban residents get their livelihoods from the informal economic sector. It is thought to be growing at an annual rate of 7%. In the near future, it is estimated that over 90% of jobs will be part of informal economies (Karl 2000: 53).

The extent and dominance of informal sectors in Africa (and, to be sure, most of the developing world) has not gained it much official acceptance. Governments and some international agencies are intent on expanding the formal economy (also often deemed the ‘modern’ or ‘private’ economic sector; the home of officially recognized business activity and employment). This is, in principle, an understandable and even worthy collective effort. There is no question, for example, that informal sectors include illegal, exploitative, dangerous and destructive economic activities such as the trafficking of people, guns and drugs. But it is also the only place where small-scale entrepreneurship of all sorts can thrive.

Failing to recognize the vitality and necessity of informal markets constitutes a denial of fundamental economic realities. Formal sector growth rates in developing countries (perhaps 2-3%) cannot even keep up with urban growth rates (which are often around 4-5%) (Ibid.: 53). There are significant limits on formal sector growth in many if not most African countries. One study found that, for example, “If you were paying all [formal sector] business taxes in Sierra Leone, they would take 164% of your company’s gross profits” (World Bank and IFC 2006: 1). In Sub-Saharan Africa, it has been estimated that 78.2% of non-agricultural employment takes place in informal sectors (Charmes 2000: 64). Finding formal sector work can be particularly difficult for urban youth in any case, as there are few jobs and many youth without the sort of qualifications that formal sector work often requires. In Sierra Leone, for example, one World Bank study found both that formal sector employment opportunities were significantly lower for youth as compared to older adults and that a mere nine percent of the working population had formal sector jobs (World Bank 2007: xiv).

Dar es Salaam, Tanzania’s capital city, is another case in point. Myers notes that the city’s population actual growth rate has averaged an incredible eight percent a year for the last four decades. During that time, there has been “an absence of corresponding expansion in formal sector employment” and limited public sector investment in housing, infrastructure and management. The result has been that nearly three in four residents of Dar es Salaam “make do for themselves” in finding livelihoods and service provision. In other words, from work to housing to marketing, their lives take place within the unregulated (and technically illegal) informal sector of Dar es Salaam’s mushrooming economy (2005: 42-43).

African formal sector economies, in short, are generally far too small to absorb large numbers of out-of-school urban youth. Informal sectors are unavoidable and dominant

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4 Karl’s remarkable list totals 30 terms for the informal economy (2000: 54).
factors in African urban life, as they are very likely the only place where most urban youth have a chance of making a living in town.

Neoliberalism and the Collapse of Urban Services

George Packer is not enamored of urban Africa. Certainly not Lagos: his description of Nigeria’s capital city contains a strong sense of revulsion. “It’s hard to decide,” he observes, “if the extravagant ugliness of the [Lagos] cityscape is a sign of vigor or of disease – a life force or an impending apocalypse” (2006: 5). He also speaks of “a kind of moral unease” lying just beneath “the relentlessly commercial surface of Lagos” (Ibid.: 7). To illustrate the difficulty of life in Lagos, he ventures, among other places, to the city dump, where “the smell of burning rot became overpowering” while approaching it. Inside the garbage pit itself, Packer found “hundreds of hovels” where perhaps a thousand garbage pickers lived, as well as a church and a mosque (Ibid.: 10). It is a chilling description of a wretched urban existence. Packer concludes that “the human misery of Lagos not only overwhelms one’s senses and sympathy but also seems irreversible” (Ibid.: 11).

Garth Myers takes an entirely different approach to African cities and the garbage they create. His starting point is that African governments, goaded and otherwise encouraged by multilateral institutions and donor governments, have adopted neoliberal policies that have left a path of ruin for most Africans. Among the neoliberal reforms that virtually every African nation has undertaken are: a heavy emphasis on exports, the devaluation of national currencies, a rollback in government intervention in economic matters, and “a devotion to free markets” (2005: 5). In his survey of three East African cities (Dar es Salaam and Zanzibar in Tanzania, and Zambia’s capital, Lusaka), he finds devastating results:

First, poverty has become more – not less – widespread and consequential in each city. Second, precarious urban local governments have lost financial capacity and autonomy. [Ibid.: 140]

In all three cities, municipal governments privatized solid waste disposal. As a result, “Those who can pay for waste services” from the private companies “sometimes receive them now,” while “Virtually everyone else is out of luck, choking on their own burning waste” (Ibid.). Myers further condemns decentralization, a standard feature of neoliberal reform, because the rhetoric of shifting government authority and responsibility ‘down to the grassroots’ “does not match the reality for the specific reason that it is not supposed to.” His three-city study found that

when we start to ask who ‘owns’ the projects and policies enacted... our answers move away from the supposed downward restructuring of the relationship between people in poor neighborhoods and the government. The ideas from below hardly matter at all to policy development or outcomes, particularly where the working groups’ structures are extraordinarily top-heavy with government personnel and where expatriate consultants and donors drive the program from beginning to end. [2005: 142]
Whether one views the difficulties at an on-the-ground, sensory level (like Packer, a journalist) or from the level of structure, policy and process (like Myers, an academic scholar), the result, for Africa’s urban poor, is pretty much the same. Municipal governments may be weak, overrun and even hapless for any number of reasons. They very likely depend, heavily, on some combination of donor and non-governmental organization (NGO) ideas, monies and private sector partnerships. Their coordination of such efforts may range between loose and nonexistent; informal, perhaps. Indeed, informality is probably the most dominant trend, or theme, of life for most urban residents in Africa. Private sector economies are too often tiny, wracked by corruption and nepotism, and provide economic opportunities merely for the fortunate few. Public sector provisions for basic necessities like water, housing and garbage removal are, in general, minimal and likely favor the wealthy. As a result, informality “has become a vital facet of African urban life in the sense that it is predominantly driven by informal practices in such areas as work, housing, land use, transportation and a variety of social services” (Konings et al. 2006: 3).

As a result, and for whatever reason, most residents of urban Africa must, again in Myers’ words, “make do for themselves” (2005: 43). Bryceson’s review of urban life in East and Southern Africa illuminates many dimensions of ‘making do.’ In all ways, life for most urban residents isn’t easy. In cities across the East and Southern Africa region, the demand for water “continually outstrips supply.” This creates “frequent water shortages and huge differences in personal consumption of water between neighbourhoods within the cities.” Illustrative of this is a finding that Nairobi families average 4-5 litres of water a day, less than half of what is considered the minimal daily requirement for human survival (13 litres) (2006: 24). The situation, at least for some cities, is getting significantly worse. One study of domestic water use in East African cities, for example, indicates a dramatic decline in the per capita rate of daily water use over a recent three-decade period (1967-1997). While the overall rate dropped nearly in half, it fell as much as 72 percent poor urban households, most of whom lack access to piped water (Thompson et al. 2000: 40, 42). Thirty years later, most residents of East African cities walked longer distances to fetch water and often buy water from private vendors, which has become “a booming business” in low and medium income urban neighborhoods (Ibid.: 48, 46). Sanitation in urban slums in East and Southern Africa is “deplorable” (Bryceson 2006: 24), and, as in most of urban Africa, not at all for the faint of heart. In poor city neighborhoods, water-related diseases like scabies, dysentery and cholera are commonplace (Ibid.: 24).

Bryceson asserts that “The common assumption that urban dwellers enjoy better health than rural dwellers does not apply to the urban poor” (Ibid.: 25), which is precisely the urban population that is growing the fastest (Water Utility Partnership 2003: 9). Bryceson supplies ample evidence to support her assertion. Much more than the public health threats posed by the water-borne diseases mentioned above, the real public health scourge is the HIV/AIDS pandemic. East and Southern Africa stand at the center of the pandemic, as it has, by far, “a higher prevalence than anywhere else in the world.” While the region’s HIV prevalence rates among adults reach as high as 39% (the situation is worse in Southern Africa than in East Africa), it is also true that the core of HIV/AIDS
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pandemic lies is in the region’s cities, where prevalence rates are about double to those in rural areas. As a result, AIDS is “the biggest threat to urban survival” in East and Southern Africa (Ibid.: 25). The threat applies not only to urban youth, who are the primary victims of AIDS, but those who depend on them, such as elder relatives in cities, who often rely on children and grandchildren for care and support (Kamwengo 2007: 112).

Bryceson also supplies an illuminating fact about education in town: that even though city residents no longer expect to get jobs there, “parents continue to place huge store in educating their children.” Older siblings in middle class families (such as in Nairobi) may be forced to postpone marriage and starting their own families to contribute to school fees for their younger brothers and sisters. While the attendance of children from poorer households in primary schools may be low, private foreign language, primary, secondary and tertiary schools may proliferate (such as in Mogadishu) (Ibid.: 25-6). In other words, acquiring an education in cities tends to be vastly more available to the minority of families with sufficient funds to obtain it. But when compared to their counterparts in rural areas, youth in cities are generally more successful. As noted in the World Youth Report 2007, rural areas in Africa “lag behind urban areas with respect to school attendance.” That said, the attendance trend in Kenya constitutes “a surprising departure from this pattern.” There, “school attendance seems to be higher in rural areas than in urban areas” (Department of Economic and Social Affairs 2007: 91).

As with just about every service in urban Africa, access to urban education is unequal and often exclusive. Bryceson notes, for example, that the differences between the rich and poor in African cities is expanding, and that the poor majority routinely confronts “daily visible confirmation of their economic disadvantage relative to the middle and upper classes vis-à-vis housing, transport and access to social services” (Ibid.: 30). A survey of Kampala and Nairobi, for example, found that “Vast numbers of urban residents in these two cities live just on the edge of basic needs fulfilment” (Amis 2006: 181) (the finding is, unfortunately, illustrative of urban conditions found across Sub-Saharan Africa). Bryceson is among a sizable group of urban Africa scholars who find that neoliberal economic policies and the expansion of direct foreign investment has exacerbated economic inequalities in cities. The group would include Myers (noted above) as well as many others, including Katumanga, who has noted that “What is striking is the assumption that a shrunken State [having reduced its economic role to help spur private investment] can play midwife to the birth of a productive African entrepreneurial class” (2005: 507). Katumunga doubts that it can.

Privatization and neoliberal policies have sparked important trends in many service sectors in African cities, including access to electricity. Bryceson notes, for example, that electricity supplies and blackouts became common in the 1980s. In response, high-income households and businesses bought gas-fuelled generators. At the same time, public utilities in African cities became privatized and more expensive. Although Bryceson states that the metered charges that resulted “have put electricity beyond the reach of vast numbers of the poor” (2006: 26), it is also the case that residents in a great many African urban neighborhoods have no access to electricity unless they can afford a
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generator. Most cannot (Liberia’s national electric grid, for example, reportedly consists of a few square blocks of downtown Monrovia). Nor can many regularly afford bus transport, much less a mobile phone. Included among the services that poor, unplanned settlements lack, the places where so many urban African urbanites live, are storm water drainage, street lighting, roads and footpaths (Water Utility Partnership 2003: 9). Most residents of African cities typically walk to their destinations, however long the distance.

Conflicting Assessments of Africa’s Urban Future

There is a profound difference of views about African cities among visitors to and scholars of Africa. Bryceson, Kaplan and Packer are unquestionably among those who view Africa’s urban future dimly, even darkly. They all predict a threatening, destructive future for urban Africa. This is illustrated by Bryceson’s conclusion that the apex cities (that is, capital cities and others with at least half a million residents) of East and Southern Africa are all “exceptionally fragile settlements and population concentrations” where “the foundations of city life are extremely flimsy” (2006: 31). While Myers does not share her dark view of African cities, he is clear about who is to blame for expanding urban poverty: not just African mismanagement but the neoliberal policies of multilateral institutions and major donor nations that have exacerbated inequalities.

On the other side of the divide are those who highlight the exceptional creativity that urban residents use to survive (all too frequently, to be sure, out of necessity) as an inspiring indication of a ‘new’ kind of Africa emerging in urban neighborhoods. Konings, van Dijk and Foeken illustrate this sort of approach. While African cities may be in decline, the authors nonetheless assert that “the majority of residents of disadvantaged African neighborhoods have not passively watched conditions deteriorate.” Instead, “they appear to behave as active agents, devising alternative strategies to shape their livelihoods and, in some cases, even to accumulate capital.” More to the point, the authors state, “Residents of urban neighborhoods often display a remarkable degree of creativity and imaginative innovation in eking out an existence in the informal sector” (2006: 3).

Regardless of how the strivings of most residents of Africa’s burgeoning cities are depicted, one thing is certain: most live in slums. As UNFPA has noted,

In sub-Saharan Africa, urbanization has become virtually synonymous with slum growth; 72 per cent of the region’s urban population lives under slum conditions, compared to 56 per cent in South Asia. The slum population of sub-Saharan Africa almost doubled in 15 years, reaching nearly 200 million in 2005. [UNFPA 2007: 16]

Whether the slums are dense concentrations near city centers or spring up along peri-urban margins, they generally lack even rudimentary facilities and are notoriously underserviced. Their residents operate almost entirely in the realm of unregulated commerce and housing, and many scratch out livelihoods marked, all too often, by sheer desperation.
All of this difficulty is immersed within an extraordinarily high degree of competition over housing and livelihoods: setting up shop on a busy street corner to sell cold water or sunglasses may be hotly contested, and what looks like a concrete slab to one person may be a bed to another. This heavy competition is fueled by ongoing urban population growth. The young Africans who are emptying villages and funneling into cities have never paid much attention to the widespread contention that African cities are built on an economic house of cards; that “African urban populations have expanded in the absence of industrialization and national economic growth” (Bryceson 2006: 3). To cities they go, joining those who are already there, and the families that, despite the dire straits they may face, refuse to return to their former rural homes. We will now sample what Africa’s urban youth see and experience in their urban world.

IV. Sketching City Life for Young Africans

However young people arrived on a city street corner or neighborhood, it is likely that – for just about all of them save some upper class youth – insecurity and stimulation mark their lives to a significant degree. Housing, water, electricity, and the threat of crime are likely all big parts of their insecurity. So is work: finding it may be temporary, and holding onto it may be impossible.

A striking characteristic of African urban life on the streets, in shops and markets and in neighborhoods, is how often the subject of moneymaking, in some way, comes up. Information is shared and tossed around in conversations with great regularity. Whom is moving ahead with new economic efforts, how a certain person or enterprise seems to be getting ahead, where prices for commodities are high or low, when new shipments of specific materials arrive at the docks, where and why police are sweeping through particular neighborhoods or markets – these are only a small handful of examples of the array of subjects that youth and others in African cities discuss. This is not idle chat – not at all. Instead, it is crucial information in a changing, and highly, perhaps extremely, competitive economic environment.

Other sorts of conversations involving youth spark high interest as well. One thoroughly magnetic attraction of urban life for a great many African youth is the swirl of ‘new’ and ‘modern’ trends, fashions, ideas and technologies that hit cities first. As soon as stylish new t-shirts, slang phrases, shoes, songs, arm movements, gadgets and the like hit the streets, many if not most urban youth are eager to master and/or own them. Rural youth, not wanting to be viewed as ‘backward’ or ‘bushy’, greedily grasp at incoming trends as well. Keeping up with the young urban trendsetters affects youth across countries and regions.

Overlooking or underestimating the significance of urban youth trends is a mistake. The significance of why so many African youth go to cities and never leave is suggested by a short conversation that I had with a Congolese mother in a rural village near Bunia (in the Democratic Republic of the Congo) in 2005. There was a new training and education program for youth in the village. Her son, an ex-combatant, was among the program’s
prime targets. But he had never attended any program activity because he wasn’t there (his mother was attending the program in his stead).

“Where is your son?” I asked her. “Mjini,” (In town), she said. “Why did he go there? I inquired. “Maisha ya kizungu” (The white man’s life), she stated. Then she explained: he wanted to be in the place that had the things that white people had, like mobile phones and watches. Such statements are too often deemed inappropriate and unjustified by elders or outsiders. They aren’t, and the mother of this ex-combatant male youth clearly understood the motivation and rationale for her son’s decision to migrate to town.

What follows are short sketches of subjects of critical significance to most if not all urban youth in sub-Saharan Africa.

Between Tradition and Urban Trajectories

The African dichotomy between the urban and the rural, the cutting edge and the all-too-familiar, is described with remarkable clarity by Utas. Speaking about Liberian culture, Utas explains that while elders dominate the world of tradition, youth claim the realm of modernity for themselves:

To most Liberians, modernity is what comes from overseas and predominantly takes the form of commodities (technology, clothes, etc.), communications, the western form of education, and world religions such as Christianity and to some extent Islam. Modernity comes in the guise of consumption... Tradition on the other hand is what is locally produced, whether it comes in the form of commodities, or of ideas. Traditions also occupy a space largely dominated by elders, thus youth, contesting the powers of elders, are prone to seek status in the modernities. [2003: 44]

This is no small distinction. The heartland of modernity in Africa is the urban world, and it is a prime attraction for male and female youth. When they leave rural Africa, in many respects they leave a significant degree of African traditions behind as well. This should not be overstated: Africa’s urban youth are still tied to the cultures and traditions of their upbringing. The traditional gender roles of male and female youth, for example, are frequently dominant, and they create trajectories and dangers for each.
Mugisha, Arinaitwe-Mugisha and Hagembe describe African gender archetypes in plain language:

Through ethnographic evidence, boys and girls are brought up with clear mandates on what they are expected to do to contribute to the household and the wider society. Boys are conditioned for the outside world, while girls are conditioned for the domestic world. [2003: 238]

There is visceral and immediate evidence of this separation on most African city streets: while women and female youth can certainly be seen, men and male youth tend to dominate the public world in cities.

Their under representation in public spheres of city life may help explain why female youth are so often overlooked.⁵ But beyond ‘out of sight, out of mind’ tendencies, there are extremely influential gender roles that significantly impact male and female urban youth lives. Highlighting the prominence of tradition, Mugisha et al. note that “Women are taught from childhood how to be submissive while men are taught how to exercise authority” (Ibid.). This sets the stage for significant difficulties that women and female youth may face. But times of crisis reveal a different picture. Women, who are normally charged with “the daily survival of children and the elderly” do not lose hope:

instead, they fight, find new answers, invent new solutions, group together with other women better to organize their daily struggle in the form of nurseries... and new economic activities such as organizing garbage collection. [Ibid.]

Meanwhile, men may fall apart when a crisis arrives:

Many [African] men faced with a situation that undermines their authority such as unemployment or an accident in the workplace far too often adopt an escapist attitude, seeking refuge in alcohol, drugs, violence or abandonment. [Bisilliat 2001; cited in Mugisha et al.: 238]

These sorts of crises – losing a job or experiencing an accident – are commonplace in urban settings.

Mugisha, Arinaitwe-Mugisha and Hagembe return to theme of the involvement of boys, male youth and men with drugs and alcohol when they consider what the shift from rural to urban environments can do to traditional African gender roles. The authors point out that rural African communities often provide highly articulated ways that gender roles are enacted: “In rural areas for example, males are supposed to help in the shambas [farm plots], plantations and taking care of animals.” However, using the example of Nairobi’s enormous informal settlements, the authors assert that the traditional roles which permeate rural life fall away. Urban settlement life cannot provide the kind of instruction that rural traditions provide because “no systems have been developed to help boys and girls fulfill the constructs that society has placed upon them.” The authors claim that school provides the kind of urban environment where traditional roles can be fulfilled. As a result, “it is the lack of schooling that drives adolescents to drugs and alcohol” (2003: 238).

Perhaps. The causal relationship between being out of school and falling into drugs and alcohol, which the three authors assert, may never occur. There are other options besides

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⁵ The seriousness of the situation that far too many urban female youth face will be addressed shortly.
going to school, on one hand, and becoming a drunk or a drug addict, on the other. For example, whether in school or not, some urban youth become deeply involved with religious institutions. The religious lives of urban youth, and the dominant roles they can play over many youth lives, is all too frequently overlooked by those seeking to engage with them. Urban slums tend to teem with churches and mosques, whose officials frequently target poor youth for assistance (and conversion). For those who accept the demands that a religious life entails, a youth may discover a pathway towards success in the city. In addition to joining a rich spiritual environment, the young person also enters a community of believers. Belonging to this community can provide structure, support and a wealth of resources and activities. Beyond joining a choir, for example, a male or female youth may, just possibly, receive help in finding housing or even a job. Choosing and succeeding along such a path can yield, if not success, at least a fairly stable life. Among Christian churches, Pentecostal churches are often unusually effective in attracting urban youth to their communities (Hansen 2008, Sommers 2001b).

The pronounced moral world of Pentecostalism, among many other religious institutions (in Islam as well as Christianity), can accentuate one of the most common distinctions that separate urban youth: those who belong, in some way, to mainstream society, and those who do not. The division is sometimes seen as between the ‘good’ and the ‘bad.’ Urban youth who reject the ways of mainstream tradition and religion are common targets of castigation. Yet a great many urban youth may be categorized as outsiders. Indeed, the situation in African social lives is informed by a powerful irony: that urban youth “are a demographic majority that sees itself as an outcast minority” (Sommers 2003: 1). Most unfortunately, the common terms of ‘marginalized youth’ or ‘excluded youth’ typically include a significant proportion of Africa’s huge urban youth population. Being out of school, and unemployed or in and out of work, invites perceptions of young people in cities as dangerous – even if most are not. Male youth may be castigated as derelicts and thieves and female youth as prostitutes. Such titles are markers of exclusion and moral ‘badness’, and are generators of profound social distance.⁶

⁶ Tensions between views of African youth as threats and underlying youth realities have been elaborated by the author elsewhere (Sommers 2006a and 2007).
Urban Advantages

The wealth of urban youth living on the margins of society can create an urban ‘mainstream’ that is, in terms of the overall population of cities, strikingly small. Similarly, the civil society that is dominated by educated elites may have, at best, tenuous connections to members of the out of school, marginalized, and underrepresented urban youth majority. While this can have devastating results for youth, in terms of access to services, jobs, and acceptance, the social separation also provides some opportunities. African city life, after all, remains an emerging context, and it is one where youth can claim new turf for themselves. It is here where the search for identity and adulthood merge with city living. It is expressed in a number of important ways.

When a migrant youth enters the city, there is an opportunity for many to reinvent themselves. They may also alter their identity again, and again, over time. The anonymity afforded by huge urban locales makes that possible. Quite unlike rural areas, where identities are usually tied to lineage, family, community, ethnic group, language group, region and so on, people may know you in one area of a city – but not in others. Reinvention is almost always available, and it offers a young person a realm of opportunities – including for youth who were born in town.

Male youth in particular partake in the possibilities. One way is to join a football club, which can be very serious business. Baller found that football clubs in peri-urban Dakar provided male youth members with a chance to see themselves not at the ‘end of the world’, but at its centre, re-imaging the urban landscape and taking possession of symbols of power and success. When they talk about their [football] clubs, they speak about globalization; they compare their dedication to football with the football culture in Brasil (some of the best football players also take the name of Pele); and they think about projects for establishing their own cyber-cafés. [2002: 8]

The nicknaming of youth, male youth in particular, is an important part of identity reinvention (in his heyday, Pelé was renowned as the greatest footballer in the world). The names can change often: during fieldwork in Dar es Salaam in 1990-92, popular youth nicknames included ‘Eddy Muffy’ (for the American comedian and actor, Eddie Murphy), and ‘Maiko’ (for the American pop star, Michael Jackson) (Sommers 2001b). Nicknames can change as soon as the namesake loses popularity or when the youth chooses a different identity. These days, hip hop and international football superstars, among many, many others, are common nicknames for African urban youth.

A typical frustration for urban youth is their inability to be heard and accepted. One theme that I have heard during interviews with African urban youth over many years is that youth are viewed as deviant when they are merely struggling to find a way to succeed. This sense of being misunderstood is frequently tied to a sense of hypocrisy among the powers that be. A powerfully important lens for viewing the surrounding world as unfair, and expressing a sense of being misunderstood and overlooked, is contemporary music. Two examples will be shared here. The first is the late reggae musician, Bob Marley. Moyer states that Marley’s worldwide popularity “is undeniable,
especially among young men living at the margins of global capitalism” (2005: 35). She interviews male youth in a Dar es Salaam neighborhood who are followers of Marley, and finds, among other things, that they “quote Marley’s lyrics as a means of commenting on local social and economic injustices, which they attribute to poor governance and hypocrisy.” They shared a strong sense that former political leaders renowned for fighting social justice had become hypocrites because they “had given up fighting for the rights of the poor, and had embraced neoliberalism” (Ibid.: 36).

Youth all over the world, including in Africa, have been powerfully drawn to hip hop, or rap, music. Since the reputation of hip hop may be negative among members of the older generation (in Tanzania, for example, rappers are commonly castigated as wahuni; hooligans (Perullo 2005: 76) or ignorant people), it might seem counterintuitive that so many youth embrace it so strongly. But they do, and for important reasons. African hip hop artists use the medium to express what it’s like to be young and searching for respect and acceptance on new terms. Youth have information, views and perspectives which they want to be heard, and rap music provides a powerful means for expressing them. The issue of hypocrisy in the ruling class is a common theme in African hip hop, as well as how traditional institutions have been disrespected. Many if not most African rappers also seek a broader audience by avoiding the use of curse words, which are commonplace in American rap songs. As Perullo notes about Tanzanian rap musicians in Dar es Salaam, not using curse words is “an important part of the local rap scene, since most Tanzanians consider swearing unacceptable in public” (Ibid.: 96). The result is a musical movement that allows urban youth in Africa to reach a broad public with their songs, and through a medium that is modern and youth-led. Speaking of rappers of Dakar, Niang concludes that they “do not represent a minority voice, but belong to the category of local youth whose major unifying features are urban poverty, and the daily inequalities they endure” (2006: 182). Commenting on the social role of rappers in Tanzanian society, Perrullo observes that the local rap musicians “encourage others to consider the place of youth in society” and seek to alter “popular conceptions of [youth] as hooligans and [allow] youth to become knowledge holders and educators within urban contexts” (2005: 77).

Civil Society, Crime and the Moral Worlds of Cities

One of the most common – and most commonly overlooked – forms of civil society in African cities are male youth social groups. Walking on a dirt path or pocked roadway in an African city neighborhood, it is not uncommon to see small signs announcing the meeting location of young men in the area. Scrawled, perhaps with a piece of charcoal on a wall, might be words such as “Action Boys” or “Sunglass Boys” among many, many other names. A wooden bench may rest on the sidewalk just beneath the words. That spot likely marks the meeting place for members of a local youth group. At the end of difficult days searching for work or some sort of action, joining your peers to discuss economic, social and political events at dusk is an important way that male youth create community and belonging in huge African cities.
Writing about Kano, Nigeria, Ya’u describes this sort of gathering as “adolescence banding”, which he describes in the following way: “Typically, adolescents between ages 10 and 20 tend to band together within their neighborhood in loose associations, to pursue group activities, separate from adults and other age categories in the society” (2000: 163). Ya’u asserts that such youth groups provided male youth with “appropriate conditions for the formation of the socially acceptable individual identity,” training youth “to acquire the values and skills the society expected them to have in order to prepare them for an acceptable adulthood.” What he calls “typical adolescence ‘gangs’” were actually “harmless groups” that not only provided certain social services (neighborhood protection, which he mentions, is a common function for counterpart groups in many cities), but became sport clubs as well. Critically, membership tends to be inclusive, peer-oriented and not hierarchical (the groups also do not tend to have formal ‘leaders’ such as president, vice-president, etc.). Such groups are thus often viewed as integral to urban community life and, in addition, serve as a “means of socialisation and a sort of a passing rite into adulthood” (2000: 164). Not least, they are “a strictly male affair” (Ibid.).

Ya’u argues that a profound shift took place in the organization and function of the adolescence banding, or gangs, following the introduction of a Structural Adjustment Program (SAP) in Nigeria in 1986. It is a theme that resonates with the findings of other scholars of urban Africa as well. SAP was a response instituted in the 1980s by powerful multilateral financial and development institutions, with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) among the most prominent, to the challenge of massive debts held by many developing countries. In retrospect, SAP commenced the beginning of an international development orientation that urged development country governments to shift from public to private service provision; the dawning of neoliberalism as a core international development approach. It also led, among other things, to a dramatic decline in government subsidies for crucial food items on which the urban poor depended. Myers notes that what began as structural adjustment in the 1980s assumed new terminologies in subsequent decades, when International Financial Institutions “advocated – and required – Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs) to orchestrate modest debt relief for Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC’s)” (2005: 5).

The impacts on Africa’s urban societies were immediate and immense, as food scarcities increased and public sector jobs decreased. Myers argues that the emphasis on privatization in economic and government spheres ultimately resulted in “the privatization of culture, society, and consciousness” which has “reshuffled ethnic and family relationships toward a more individuated, and fractured, sense of self and a commodification of many aspects of everyday life.” One result, in Myers’ view, is that city residents awarded themselves the moral justification “to be selfish, if only just to get by” (2005: 6-7). While some might seek to challenge Myers’ economic analysis, challenging the consequences on urban city life that he describes is much harder to do. The fallout from fairly drastic SAP policies (together with other causes, such as government corruption) on urban residents and their communities in many African countries has invited new interpretations of morality.

Interestingly, while the invented Kiswahili word for privatization is ubinafsishaji, the literal translation of the term is “the causing of individualism or selfishness” (Myers 2005: 6).
The core of the new moral interpretations have to do with what a city resident does to survive. Ya’u’s description of what happened following the implementation of SAP in Kano resonates in other African cities as well. “With the collapse of social services and [the] inability of young people to secure any other legitimate means of livelihood,” he notes, “they are left in the street to fend for themselves by whatever means.” Youth are not the only ones who were unemployed or suffering economically: their parents, and their parents’ generation, were negatively affected, too. The impact on the adolescence groups, or Yandaba, was profound. Rather than serving as a means for male adolescents and youth to gather socially, contribute to community life and help them pass into adulthood, the Yandaba became “organisational platform[s] through which they could secure their livelihood even if criminally.” In times of severe economic stress, some youth joined because of the promise of regular meals. Others joined (girls as well as boys) because of the promise of securing a place to sleep. Ultimately, food and accommodation, in addition to the promise of adventure, became more important to those who joined than finding a livelihood. At the same time, what supported Yandaba members in the aftermath of SAP was crime, including violent crime (2000: 172).

The challenge of morality, and its impact on youth and other urban residents of African cities, has invited a gray area between what may be seen as morally good or correct and what is required to survive in town. Selling drugs or other contraband to policemen, for example, may become a ‘good job’ because it is a regular business and protects the seller from arrests or confiscations by the police in the future. In poor neighborhoods such as Uwanja wa Fisi in Dar es Salaam, many residents “are engaged in marginally illegal activities like selling cannabis, gongo [homemade liquor] or prostitution” (Moyer 2006: 183). Government officials charging bribes for services may create moral exceptions, even for those who normally view the world as sharply divided between good and bad. This is illustrated by an Assistant Pastor of a Pentecostal church in Dar es Salaam, who explained that “People must take bribes here, since the salaries are too low to live on.” In such circumstances, “in no sense is it bad” to take a bribe (Sommers 2001b: 176).

The moral environment is also, of course, directly impacted by the behavior of the state. Katumanga, for example, describes the world of Nairobi in the aftermath of structural adjustment and neoliberal government policies as one where some government and political elements became directly involved in the promotion of deviance and crime through political patronage “or to wreak violence on those deemed enemies of the state” (2005: 508). The ultimate result was, in his view, “the perversion of the social order” of Nairobi and “the emergence of bandit economies” (Ibid.: 505). In contrast to pervasive views that rises in crime can be understood by the presence of a deviant sub-culture in African cities (largely inhabited by unemployed male youth), Katumanga argues that in 1990s Kenya, deviance “was state-encouraged for politico-economic ends” (Ibid.: 510).

The argument goes to the core of what is often seen as the elemental problem in African cities: crime and threat caused by vast numbers of angry, unemployed male youth. While Katumanga doesn’t deny their presence, he does note that many of them in Nairobi were

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8 Private interview in Freetown, Sierra Leone.
goaded by a government with devious aspirations. One is again forced to reconsider whether the strong majority of poor urban (male) youth are dangerous, as is so often assumed, or whether there exists a tendency to scapegoat them for urban ills.

“Small Small”: Everyday Economics

Tanzania’s Dar es Salaam is known to youth in the countryside as a place of extravagant wealth. One Burundi refugee youth, who had migrated from the rural Tanzanian settlement of his birth to the capital city, reported that his settlement peers considered Dar es Salaam’s residents to be so wealthy that they all wore shoes. Traffic jams and tall buildings were signs of the bounteous promise of city life. The lure of the city was confirmed by returnees from the capital, who came with Tanzanian shillings in their pockets and gifts for their relatives (Sommers 2001b: 78). A young man who had ‘made it’ in Dar es Salaam could return home to marry a village girl – before returning to the capital. A common family pattern is for a man to work in town while leaving his wife and children on a farm plot in the countryside.

The realities of city life too often stand in stark contrast to their marvelous reputations. Dar es Salaam is known to youth across Tanzania as Bongo or Bongoland. It is an illuminating nickname, since ‘bongo’ is slang for ‘brains.’ One requires cunning and smarts to make it in the capital, and many don’t because competition is so fierce. To describe the challenges, youth may employ two Kiswahili verbs to describe their situation. If they are looking for a job, they might say *nimezururazurura*, which suggests meandering (like a wandering stream) in search for work. But if they say *nimehangaika*, it suggests that they are anxious, even desperate, and are searching for food (Sommers 2001b). Some youth enter the city because they have been ‘called’ or invited to live with a relative or work for an entrepreneur. This may be common for some youth in some African cities, but it is not a region-wide phenomenon. Research with Rwandan youth, for example, revealed few signs that networks of some sort facilitated the migration of rural youth into Kigali. In Rwanda, “Migration lacked precedence, and potential migrants lacked networks” (Sommers 2006b: 92).

Many male and female youth are engaged in some form of irregular work. In some parts of Africa, the work may be called “small small,” or is providing only some “small small” money, or perhaps a bartered item, in return. However it is called, most of it takes place in the informal economic sector. This sort of work is frequently irregular. It is usually, in essence, entrepreneurial as well. A study of youth in the informal sector of Luanda, Angola illustrates some of the dimensions of this sort of activity. The study interviewed 1,344 people operating in 16 outdoor market areas in the city. The average age of respondents was 21, although the research work also “revealed the presence of a large number of relatively well-educated young people forced through economic circumstances to make a living by selling on the street” (de Barros [DATE]: 222). Both male and female youth had the same education levels on average (just over 5 years). The average monthly earnings of women were only 75% of the average income of men. The survey revealed something that appears to be common in urban economies across Africa: women have
significantly fewer economic options than men. In the Angola survey, the researchers found that 92% of female respondents sold goods in open markets. In contrast, only 62% of the male respondents stated this. Others worked as mechanics and ‘middle men’ traders (that is, buying from one source and selling to another, and receiving a fee for handling the exchange) (Ibid.: 212). Most of the respondents reported to be single or to be involved in some sort of unofficial marriage: in Angola, the researchers report, women generally consider a husband as “a man who contributes to household expenses” – whether they live together or not (Ibid.: 214). Somewhat strangely, the author warns that the group should be “targeted with special opportunities – be they flexible hours of attendance, or specially developed curricula” (Ibid.: 221). While this is an excellent recommendation, it does not address the evident need to improve the economic options and stability of a great many urban youth.

Manhood Pressures on Male Youth

The economic uncertainties and difficulties facing a great many urban youth in Africa is also tied to the phase that being a ‘youth’ in Africa normally describes: a person that is no longer a child but not quite an adult. Traditional equations of manhood being associated with having a house, being married, and having children, and womanhood being associated with being married and having children, may vary from place to place in Africa, but these tenants are nonetheless commonplace. They most certainly applied, for example, in research that I carried out in Rwanda in 2006-07. In that country, the capital city of Kigali can serve as a place where male youth escape manhood pressures. Cities can also serve as proving ground for male youth. In Tanzania, an urban male youth might be accepted as a man in his home village – if he can return from Dar es Salaam with sufficient money to marry and build a house (Sommers 2001b). Achieving this, of course, can be exceedingly difficult, and some male youth may never achieve it. Utas’ case of male urban youth in Monrovia, Liberia is an illuminating, if painful, description of the pressures and difficulties that male youth can face in town:

One of the cornerstones of my work is the argument that the Liberian Civil War was partially an outcome of the structural marginalisation of youth. Due to the economic crisis and increasing dependence on the central state in the 1980s an ever-growing number of young people in urban and semi-urban environments were excluded even from the possibilities of becoming adults. Possibilities to participate in the wage economy diminished and education ceased having any importance. With the crisis looming, many young men lost even the possibility to establish themselves as adults, by building a house, or getting married – though they continued to become fathers, of children for whom they could not provide. [Utas 2005: 150]

Utas’ description the result of this situation for young men ends with a powerful conclusion: that chronologically, the men “outgrew youth, but socially they became ‘youthmen’” (Momoh 1999; cited by Utas 2005: 150).

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9 A forthcoming book will feature this research, called Manhood, Money and Food: Youth in Rwanda.
Africa’s Young Urbanites

The prospect of male youth failing to become men and instead being seen as ‘youthmen’ powerfully illustrates the potential dangers that urban life can create for male youth who are unable to gain an urban foothold that is sufficient enough to become socially accepted as men. This is a much deeper form of marginalization or exclusion than arises merely from being unable to complete one’s schooling or being unable to become a wage earner in town. Not being seen or accepted as a man, and thus becoming a ‘youthman,’ is a permanent social punishment.

Pressures on Female Youth

The situation facing urban female youth is no less serious, and on a day to day basis, can be far worse. Female youth tend to have significantly fewer economic options than their male youth counterparts, as illuminated by the Luanda research (noted above). When other options fail, prostitution may be the only means of survival, and it is a perilous, if seemingly unavoidable, path. As Caraël and Glynn state, “the economic value of sexuality for adolescent girls [in Africa] is particularly important because they have fewer market opportunities than married women and less money then boys” (2008: 128).

The path does not necessarily include regular work as a prostitute. Often, as in Moyer’s description of some female youth in Dar es Salaam, a female youth may engage in transactional sex as a kind of occasional necessity. Some of these women may also have boyfriends, although the boys may be unusually poor themselves: “Young men with minimal resources were considered more likely to accept that their girlfriends also slept with other men for money because they knew they could not afford to support a woman on their own” (2006: 185). Significantly, many of the young women that Moyer interviewed wanted to become pregnant by their boyfriends in the hope that this would cement the bonds between them. They saw pregnancy as one of the only ways to escape the stigma that marked their lives... many men reported they were more likely to marry a woman after she had a child by him and proved that she was fertile... [Ibid.: 186]

The descent into dangerous, precarious lives by urban female youth, caused in part by desire to find a way to get married (even an unofficial ‘marriage’), results not only in ‘boyfriends,’ transactional sex and prostitution. It also gives way to a dramatically heightened vulnerability to infection from a sexually transmitted disease, including HIV/AIDS.

As with many other studies on HIV/AIDS and African youth, Moyer found that male and female youth in Dar es Salaam were well aware of the significance of condoms to decrease the risk of acquiring HIV/AIDS. She also noted that condoms were readily available. Yet for a variety of reasons, condoms were usually not used (Ibid.: 187). Recent studies suggest that youth (ages 15-24) living in informal urban settlements have a high incidence of being sexually active (a study in Kenya’s third-largest city, Kisumu, reported a rate of 79% among respondents). A survey in urban South Africa revealed youth with significantly higher HIV prevalence rates in poor informal urban areas.
prevalence rates were three times higher among female youth than among male youth (Caraël and Glynn 2008: 125).

Adolescent Experiences: The Case of Kibera, Nairobi

One study of urban life in Africa provides a lens for understanding the lives of youth who are frequently overlooked in youth studies: adolescents. In this case, the target group is between the ages of 10 and 19. The adolescents who were interviewed all live in the slums of Kibera, Nairobi, which is one of Sub-Saharan Africa’s oldest and largest slums. It is an extensive quantitative survey, and the findings are illuminating. Half of the adolescents migrated into Kibera from other parts of the country, suggesting that the range of urban migrants in African cities includes a great many young children. The adolescent girls in the study were significantly less likely to be attending school than their male counterparts: 43% of girls, and 29% of boys, were not in school. The main reason for leaving school, for boys and for girls, was the inability for their families to afford school fees. A quarter of the boys and 14% of girls were found to be working for pay. Boys were twice as likely as girls to be able to identify a public place for meeting friends of the same gender (two-thirds to one-third). The threat of crime was a pervasive finding among adolescents, and the fear of being raped appeared to be alarmingly high among the girls in the survey. Sixteen percent of the surveyed girls were married and sixteen percent were mothers (Erulkar and Matheka 2007: v).

What is striking about the findings from this survey is how similar the adolescent situation in an African slum is to their older youth counterparts. Many leave school early, many of them are urban migrants, most boys hang out with friends in public places, and the threat of sexual violence among female adolescent youth is high. The trends that apply to urban youth lives in Africa, in short, certainly appear to apply equally to their younger counterparts as well.

V. Engaging with Africa’s Urban Youth: A Look Ahead

It is hardly a broadside to state that most international assistance has proven ineffective. Easterly, for example, notes that the estimated $2.3 trillion dollars that Western nations have invested in foreign aid over the last half century has failed to significantly reduce, much less end, poverty in the developing world (2006: 11). Referring to the generally disappointing performance of Western government aid agencies, Collier states that “No aspect of domestic policy is run this badly” (2007: 184). A study on post-war reconstruction in Burundi found that international assistance was unintentionally reconstructing inequalities that were a cause of civil war (Sommers 2005). Uvin not only found the Mutara project in pre-civil war and pre-genocide Rwanda to be, for the most part, “a complete failure” – the project also supported forces of exclusion that helped lead, ultimately and unintentionally, to genocide (1998: 119, 121).
Perhaps one reason why foreign assistance so frequently comes up short is that the primary foreign aid agency constituencies are not poor people overseas but politicians and other citizens in the home country. Collier, for example, contends that “The key obstacle to reforming aid is [domestic] public opinion (2007: 183).” This is illustrated by the following explanation from U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) about its foreign aid expenditures: “Close to 80 percent of USAID’s grants and contracts go directly to American firms and non-governmental organizations” (USAID 2007: 1).

If international assistance generally creates underwhelming results, then the challenges of developing effective policies and programmes for urban youth in impoverished Sub-Saharan Africa are especially daunting. But it can be done, and doing so is imperative.

This concluding section is divided into two parts. The first will review some of the major trends and issues about Africa’s urban youth which arise in this study. The final part will provide recommendations for next steps.

Major Trends and Issues

Reviewing current knowledge about cities in Sub-Saharan Africa and what it’s like to be an urban youth living in one of them revealed the following:

About Africa and its Cities:

- **Africa will remain a rural-based continent only until 2030.** Sub-Saharan Africa is the world’s youngest region. Its population has quadrupled since 1950 and, unlike all other world regions, the expansion of its youth population will not peak for another two decades. The extraordinary youthfulness of Sub-Saharan Africa’s population is illustrated by the fact that only seven of 46 nations and territories where 70% of the population is under age 30 are not in Sub-Saharan Africa. At the very same time, the region has the world’s highest rate of urban growth. Within Sub-Saharan Africa, East and Southern Africa have had the highest urbanization rates for almost a half century. Nearly three in four urban Africans live in slums.

- **The available evidence indicates that rural investments fail to persuade many urban migrant youth to return to their original rural homes.**

- **The overwhelming majority of African urban male youth appear to be non-violent.** In addition, recent research on adolescent behavior challenges the widespread belief that male youth are inherently violent.

- **African cities contain fiercely competitive economic environments.** Most residents are negatively impacted, often severely, by difficulties in obtaining regular work, adequate housing, clean water, electricity, education and a host of other basic needs. Disease is commonplace.
• Neoliberal approaches to African development challenges create strongly negative impacts for its cities, particularly for the impoverished majority. This would include emphases on expanding the private/formal sector and reducing the public sector.

About Africa’s Urban Youth:
• Overlooking or underestimating urban youth trends is a mistake. While African cities may make little economic sense to outsiders, African youth migrate to them because they are stimulating, full of bounty and possibility, and provide opportunities for personal reinvention and shifting away from tradition and towards modernity.

• A new form of youth marginalization and exclusion – the inability of many to gain social acceptance as adults – is prominent in African youth populations. It is an alarming and extremely serious trend. For male youth, this may lead to becoming a ‘youthman’; someone who is growing older but is forever unable to enter manhood and is branded a failure. For female youth, the inability to marry may lead them towards transactional sex, prostitution and becoming highly vulnerable to contracting HIV/AIDS. Since poor urban female youth generally have significantly fewer economic options than their male counterparts, providing them with targeted education and livelihood training is especially urgent.

• The hypocrisy and corruption of ruling elites are prominent themes in urban youth culture. As a result, urban youth interpretations of what is right and what is wrong frequently defy mainstream norms. Their sense of being overlooked and misunderstood tends to be strongly felt. Frustration, alienation and defiance, and sometimes despair and fatalism, appear to be commonplace.

• Working with civil society in African cities requires a new approach. Accessing youth views and needs through mainstream civil society invites serious distortions because elite youth leaders are unlikely to represent the views and needs of the non-elite, undereducated youth majority. Marginalized urban male youth are part of a civil society that is distinctly separate from the mainstream. It is composed of local peer groups, such as neighborhood youth groups, football clubs, and youth groups in religious institutions. Marginalized female youth are alarmingly under represented in nearly all forms of civil society.

• Failing to recognize the vitality and centrality of informal markets constitutes a denial of fundamental economic realities in African cities and potential for entrepreneurship. Formal sector growth is generally tiny while informal sector growth is considerable. An estimated nine in ten new jobs in Africa will be in informal economies. Cities hold promise and opportunity for aspiring entrepreneurs, and many urban youth seek to develop these skills.
Recommendations

The following are broad, framing recommendations for engaging with and effectively supporting members of the marginalized majority of Sub-Saharan Africa’s urban youth:

1. **There is a need for vigorous policy reform.** As programmes alone cannot address the needs of most urban youth due to their numbers, design vigorous steps to advocate for and help make urban policies youth-centered.

2. **Develop programming strategies for addressing youth marginalization and exclusion by gender, class and location.** Strive to understand the causes of marginalization and exclusion and ensure that programmes do not make situations for poor youth even worse. Learn about the adulthood mandates for male and female youth, determine whether most are failing to achieve them, and ask youth what they need to become socially recognized men and women. Employ economic, neighborhood and youth needs assessments to develop programme content and objectives, target neighborhoods where programmes should take place and identify neighborhood youth most in need of programming. Develop strategies for including those male and female youth who are most in need of programming (members of the excluded, poor youth majority) and ensuring that better educated and more advantaged youth do not dominate programmes. Make programmes flexible enough to accommodate the time and childcare requirements of youth, female youth in particular.

3. **Design programmes according to stated poor youth priorities, including what they need to achieve adulthood.** Determine (by asking them) whether providing access to formal education is what poor youth seek – or whether they prefer assistance to meet immediate livelihood and adulthood requirements. Anticipate the latter: that most will require enhanced economic options and stability. As a result, vocational training of some kind (e.g., apprenticeship, mentoring, entrepreneurial business skills training, learning how to access small credit sources, etc.) will probably be necessary. Either way, incorporate health and protection needs into programming, to address threats such as HIV/AIDS and widespread sexual and domestic violence against women and female youth by men and male youth.

4. **Advocate for realistic approaches to urban youth programming.** Agencies (implementers and donors) must appreciate the daunting challenges that working with excluded, alienated and frustrated young urbanites requires. Anticipate that programmes will most probably not work well at first. Pilot programmes are strongly recommended. Incorporate youth views into programme design and feature their evaluations when making programme modifications. Share all assessment, monitoring and evaluation reports (see below) with government,

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10 Additional recommendations are found at the end of several of the author’s publications, including Sommers 2007a, 2007b, 2007c, 2006c, and 2003.
donor and agencies working with youth in your urban area. Regular local and regional information-sharing meetings are recommended.

5. **Invest sufficient time and funding for quality, unbiased and independent assessments, monitoring reports and evaluations.** A recent survey of youth and conflict programming literature revealed a shockingly small proportion of programmes that have carried out quality evaluation work (Sommers 2006c). This is unacceptable and avoidable. Incorporate regular study of marginalized urban youth the programme area who are not receiving programming. All assessment, monitoring and evaluation work must include this work because ‘successful’ programmes for participants may intensify feelings of exclusion, alienation, fatalism and despair among youth who are not receiving programming. In other words: ‘successful’ programmes can create seriously negative impacts for youth not in programmes. Programmes must remain vigilant to avoid this dangerous outcome.

6. **Coordinate, network and support local youth programmes, religious groups, youth groups, and sport/cultural initiatives** operating in your neighborhood as the proven structures though which youth can be reached. Work hard to ensure that different programmes do not include the same youth as participants. Consider hiring youth leaders as programme employees. Youth leaders in mainstream civil society tend to be well-educated youth (usually males) with limited experience with and understanding of marginalized urban youth needs. Hiring them to work with marginalized youth promises to provide them with important capacity building experience.
References


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