

**REGIONAL CONSULTATION FOR AFRICA IN PREPARATION FOR  
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***Theme: Small and Medium Enterprises as Drivers of Productive  
Capacity and Job Creation***

***A Youth Perspective***

**Presentation by Helena Okiring, Youth Leader from Uganda**

The Vice President of the UN Economic Social Council representing Africa, Your Excellencies and Ministers present, distinguished members of the AU present, ladies and gentlemen, protocol observed, I greet you all.

My name is Helena Okiring from Uganda and I am 25 years young. As a Youth leader, I worked with Uganda Youth Network till January this year. I am a founding member of the Young leader's think Tank for policy alternatives by Konrad Adeneur Stiftung and a member of the Youth Advisors programme to Washington by USAID. I am also the editor in chief of the Green light magazine-a space I created for young people to share their insights and views on mainstream issues and lastly I am also a volunteer with the Uganda National NGO Forum, a platform for sharing and reflection of NGOs in Uganda where I find the space to learn and unlearn different mainstream aspects about civil society engagement with different actors, for the good of all Citizens. It is the experience I have from working in this diverse array of spaces that shape my views.

Therefore, Ladies and Gentlemen, like so many Young leaders across the continent and in the African Diaspora, who I not only represent today, but salute, remain committed to making my contribution towards ensuring Young people are engaged in issues of their governance for strategic reasons in the interest of the continent, particularly if we are to reclaim and own Africa's future. It is from this departure point that I find the courage to say what must be said here and now as I make a modest effort to speak truth to power.

I am also very grateful to ILO and ECA for providing the opportunity for me to be part of these deliberations.

When I got this invitation, I had a million thoughts on what I should speak about-The temptation to impress and be diplomatic because of the opportunities this space presents for me as a 25 year old did beckon me, but the voices of young people, who I did consult with before this meeting, telling me what they want you to know was also too much to resist. I speak for the Youth of Africa, a weighty burden indeed, but not weighty enough for me to shun.

I came to tell you that the Youth want you to know that they are tired. Tired of excuses for being unemployed<sup>1</sup>, fatigued by endless promises to create jobs, tired of dependency because they are helpless, and are drunk with apathy because their hopes have run dry- The Youth are tired and are asking why: Why are you pushing them to become enemies of society because they have to steal and kill to make ends meet yet? Why have you betrayed Young people and made them desperate, yet they are the majority of your voters?

For these reasons, I will not make proposals for new laws, policies or even proposals for more Youth councils. I will not demand for more commitments and Instruments related to Enabling SME's and Job creation for Young people. We have too many good policies and well intended instruments which have not done much for the betterment of the lives of Young people across Africa for reasons as follows

Many of these instruments and policies have actually become an excuse for the delayed response and "Any other business approach" given to issues that actually affect our people. They have

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<sup>1</sup> National Youth Manifesto: A pre-electoral initiative undertaken in Uganda spearheaded by Uganda youth Network to aggregate the demands of Young people to the next Government into a tool for both pre and post election engagement towards more responsive governance and political accountability to Young people. Atleast 3000 Youth took part in this process.

become an excuse for very costly and ineffective meetings across the continent. These meetings are now rhetorical –these meetings are wanting for Political Action and seriousness on the parts of our governments.

This is not the first, second-or even third time that Job creation is being discussed in this space. And there in lies the problem. There is too much rhetoric, too much talk, too many meetings- but very little Action. If for example we audited how many Countries here have made an effort to implement the different commitments and Instruments at Global, Regional and Sub-regional levels<sup>2</sup>, you would be shocked!

How many Countries here, for example, have implemented the 1994 Cairo Youth Declaration, 18 years later or the Dakar Youth Empowerment strategy, adopted at the Fourth Session of the World Youth Forum of the UN System in 2001?

How many of us here have had the courage and commitment to follow through on the resolution concerning Youth employment which many of the Countries represented here signed in 2005?

What about the commitments made by APRM in 2003, the resolution to revitalize the Pan African Youth Union in 2003, the African Youth Charter 2006 or the resolutions made by the African Union Conference of Ministers in charge of Youth, the Addis Ababa Declaration of Youth, adopted by the African Youth Forum ,2006? All these were put in place to create employment for Young people in Africa and most, if not all of Your Countries signed these commitments!

I am very sure many of us here may not even be aware of these commitments, or have forgotten about them because we have a very big challenge with following commitments through after we sign many of these very important resolutions. In Uganda for example, we have a Youth Policy that is under review-as always, but has never been implemented.

That is why despite over 15 years of meetings to discuss employment, Africa has the highest level of Unemployment in the world, now as high as 65% in many countries on the continent and in some cases, at 83%<sup>3</sup>. So for us as Young people, the commitment of our leaders to create and enable SME's for Young people is very questionable and far from believable because of the litany of commitments and instruments they have adopted over the years but have failed to implement for different reasons. Unless our leaders implement the commitments and instruments they have already signed, we will remain cynical about the commitment to create jobs for the Continent.

Secondly, the environments with in which many Young people struggle to develop SMEs are hostile and brutal-and the biggest burden is inflicted by many of you sitting here. Ladies and gentlemen, I would like to share a short story with you.

Gerius, a friend of mine is a Young business man in the Democratic Republic of Congo and we shared on some of the biggest hindrances to doing business in Congo. Like many Youth in Africa, he said the biggest challenge in his business, is the corruption that has bottled and clogged the system. Corruption increases the costs of doing business or investing for Young people because you lose so much in unnecessary bureaucracy and protocol as these processes must be greased by Youth trying to make ends meet.

You must pay to sign, pay to get paid and pay for what you have already paid for.

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<sup>2</sup> UNECA Africa Youth Report 2011: Addressing the Youth Education and Employment Nexus in the New Global Economy

<sup>3</sup> Africa Development Indicators: World Bank report 2010 (Uganda)

Worse still, the bureaucratic processes that are involved in registering a business, for example, many of which are unnecessary, only enable corruption to thrive.

This is only exacerbated by the fact that there are challenges in as far as protecting small businesses in Africa is concerned. Often time, Global multi-National Companies, especially retail supermarket chains, displace our Young entrepreneurs by setting up stores that sell imported goods that can be produced locally.

Why don't Governments here put in place the necessary framework to protect Cottage industries for example and seriously check the activities of Multi-National companies?

I find it very disturbing, for example, that Congo imports Bread and Water from Uganda!!!! Bread and Water!! Can't Youth in Congo bake bread?

It is also sad that fish die in the DRC Rivers while millions of tones are imported for consumption by the people of Congo! Why should you permit the importation of fish while fish in your own rivers grow-and die before they are caught! This is un-acceptable! Why do we import Fruits and vegetables like oranges and juice to our countries knowing this creates unnecessary, costly and disempowering competition for our goods and services? The saddest bit is that many of our own policy makers are paid in corrupt bribes to deliberately fail local efforts at enterprise. That is another impediment to the growth of SME's in Africa.

Further still, if people have to pay their way through a process, then the quality of goods and services is compromised-or rather the right to demand for better goods because the right to quality is inapplicable where you have already paid bribes to sell your goods: You do not owe any one anything.

Why don't the Policy makers responsibly regulate the private sector so that the benefits are equitably distributed as opposed to putting the interests of investors primary to those of your own citizens-the majority of who are Young people? We are being pushed to the edge and the realities seem to suggest that you can't go forward by earnestly working hard. That is why Youth are overthrowing regimes in North Africa. We either fight or are fought-either we hunt or we are hunted!

If African leaders present today are serious about enabling SMEs, decisively deal with corruption and improve public sector management and administration, decide to protect cottage industries and decide to responsibly manage the private sector. Africa is the wealthiest continent in the world so there is enough for every body's need but not every body's greed. Leaders must be seen to be protective of local enterprise for the sake of the growth of SMEs.

That notwithstanding, it is said that Africa's time is now. The African renaissance has come. Not of famine and disease, but of Equity, Peace, Dignity and prosperity for all Africans. Despite the current challenges and limitations we live with, many young people struggle to survive, by vending, doing odd jobs and chores, running small or medium enterprises. Little geniuses our people are if you ask me.

I believe with all my heart that Africa's Youth are the tangible manifestation of power and potential locked inside this wonderful continent. I put it to every one here, that Africa's greatest resource is not her oil, her diamonds or even minerals. Those are just symbolic of the phenomenal, untouchable and yet very real manifestations of the treasure locked up in every Young person on

the continent. They are a golden promise waiting to be fulfilled. Let us, look at each of ourselves as stewards of the people these faces represent; Stewards of these gold mines. The temptation is to stack and steal the gold-or to hide it so that nobody can find it.

Your duty as leaders is to ensure that this gold is purified and refined through World Class Education, Dependable and accessible healthcare, Availing opportunities for continued skills training and development and all the things you have heard the other panelists speak of. If we are as serious as we claim to be about creating employment for Young people, our Priorities as governments must change to reflect this.

We must invest more in Quality education infrastructure and scholastic materials to improve the quality of the human resource on the continent- much more than we spend on defence or buying arms for wars that our people pay for with their lives, we must invest more in health care than we do on fraudulent electoral processes that cost us much more than what we bargain for in the market place of democracy.

We must invest more in the Primary growth sectors in our countries and create the environment for SMEs in these sectors to steer development and Economic growth. We must refocus on Agriculture, Tourism and Information and communication technology so that commercial farmers, for example, can access markets more easily and more affordably. We must also invest in Enabling sectors that support the emergence of strong and resilient SMEs like the Justice sectors where issues of Trade justice are concerned Environment and sustainable Water resource use and Management,

We must invest more in research, particularly in sectors that promise new jobs like Green enterprise for sustainable development.

We can not sit here and continue to promise heaven and earth while our National budgets, for example, tell a different story in as far as our commitment to Young people, and the future is concerned, be they commitments to improve the quality of education, be they commitments to ensure increased access to financing for SMEs, be they commitments to establish centers for training and business development: Let us walk the talk. As Young people, we challenge you all to move from commitment to Action. We must do what we said we will do.

Your duty as leaders is to restore hope to the Youth of the continent by putting your money where your mouth is. I don't believe the excuse of being a developing country and all is an excuse any longer. You must live up to all your commitments and instruments you have ratified. You must ACT NOW.

As leaders- You also have a duty and responsibility to ensure that you put in place the necessary framework to enable every African boy and girl-man and woman a chance to emerge and live to their fullest potential. YES YOU MUST. You each have the power to make a difference not just for Youth in Africa but you must choose to do so! You must have the conviction, courage and commitment to better the lives of Young people for the future.

As I conclude, I wish to appeal to each of us first as Africans, then as leaders in the spirit of Love for Africa. Young people must be the reason we move from meeting to discuss policy proposals to commending policy implementation. The plight of Africa's Youth must move us from board rooms and conferences to Action and Urgency with tangible and undisputable outcomes if only in the interest of ensuring peace and security. We must order our priorities to reflect the aspirations of the people.

This meeting can very easily be just another Ministerial review pre-event-or it could be the start of an era where African leaders say what they mean and mean what they say. It is an opportunity to actually transcend from commitment rhetoric to action.

Young people are more than able to transform Africa for Africa's Good: To turn Africa into a hub of investment and employment and endless opportunity not just for themselves but for the whole world. The question is "Will **you** let them?"

I thank You All