Introduction

In recent times, the world has been experiencing changing trends in population growth, migration, education, poverty levels, women's empowerment, global economic integration, rapid urbanisation, technological development, disease outbreaks, conflicts, and climate change. These events have direct implications for the future of human rights. These events significantly reverse progress made in promoting human rights, widen inequality gaps, and impede social justice. Particularly, the challenges faced by the world in recent times further weaken the potential for social and economic empowerment of vulnerable groups and the marginalised, thereby dampening their resilience (UN Human Rights Report, 2021). Focusing on Africa, this report draws on current trends in the world and in Africa to present the threats to human rights and suggest workable solutions that can contribute to empowering young people.

The future of human rights

The rise in armed conflicts continues to threaten the right to education. According to UNESCO (2023), at least 70,000 international students were adversely affected by the Ukraine war as their access to education was truncated. Locally, insurgents and armed groups have taken a foothold in West Africa, attacking civilians in Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, and Nigeria (Amnesty International, 2020). The documented abuses and violations include kidnapping, torture and ill-treatment, and gender-based violence, which affect the physical and mental health of young men and women. The COVID-19 pandemic has compounded the effects of armed conflicts on human rights. For example, Uganda, the largest refugee-hosting country in Africa with 1.4 million refugees, immediately closed its borders at the start of the pandemic and did not make an exception for refugees and asylum seekers trying to enter the country. As a result, over 10,000 people were stranded along its border with the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Students and student activists have not been spared from direct abuse of their

rights (Kapit, 2023). The changing democratic climate in Africa poses severe threats to the right to association, voice and representation of students. To date, students in Africa continue to experience police brutality and unlawful imprisonments, especially in countries like Ghana, South Africa, Eswatini, and Zimbabwe, during protests for the reduction of tuition fees and safety (Teferra and Ntuli, 2021). Given the informal nature of economic activities in Africa, students of children of school-going age are being actively engaged in child labour, whereas young girls are continuously being lured or coerced into child marriages (Boender, 2021).

Although state and non-state actors have made considerable efforts and commitments to address the challenges Africa is currently grappling with, they continue to persist. This necessitates attention to the future of human rights in the face of these challenges. The increasing incidence of forced migration attributed to climate change and armed conflicts will continue to contribute to the refugee crises. This implies reduced access to education, employment opportunities, and health care for victims of conflicts. Also, the refugee situation makes women and girls more susceptible to gender-based violence. The persistence of human trafficking and gender inequality on the African continent implies an increase in forced labour, limited access to quality education, and reduced participation in decision-making. The barriers to effective student activism will impede students' rights to freedom of expression and opinion (Article 19) and freedom of peaceful assembly and association (Article 20), as enshrined in the 1948 UN Universal Declaration for Human Rights (UDHR).

The future we want

From the foregoing account, young people's aspirations for human rights in Africa must be highlighted. As young people, we desire that our rights to education be highly protected. This includes increased access to quality education and the elimination of child labour and child marriages, which present significant barriers to access to education by children. Increased access to education for women can lead to greater labor force participation for this group (Institute for Security Studies, 2012), thereby contributing to their empowerment. Also, we

desire the elimination of all forms of brutality and unlawful imprisonment levelled against student activists in Africa. This includes the promotion of voice and representation for students and the protection of rights of expression. By doing this, students' agencies are protected, and education is effectively tailored toward students' interests (Klemencic, 2015). With the advent of new technologies and diverse modes of delivery of teaching, we aspire that no one is involuntarily excluded. In effect, we desire reduced socioeconomic inequality and the elimination of discrimination based on gender and religion.

What should be done?

Based on our aspirations for human rights, we recommend that African governments significantly increase their budgetary allocation to education. Education financing provides a critical pathway to increase access to education through improved infrastructure and the procurement of resources required to improve the quality of education, even in emergencies. Civil society organisations in Africa should strengthen their advocacy against human rights abuse regarding child labour, child marriages, gender-based violence, and discrimination based on gender and religion. International organisations and the United Nations are encouraged to intensify developmental programs on building the resilience of refugees, protecting activism and advocacy, and promoting youth and gender development programs. International organisations should put in place strong monitoring mechanisms to monitor and document human rights violations. Development partners should provide direct financial support to support student movements' work to mobilise, educate, and fight for reforms. African students should be supported with scholarships, emergency funds, and legal assistance for at-risk students and student activists. Governments and development partners should collaborate to promote digital inclusion to enhance access to education during emergencies.

Young people have a role to play in protecting human rights in the future. First, youth representation on high-level panels is crucial in advancing the aspirations of young people in Africa. Young people must constantly seek capacity building to effectively mobilise to campaign for solutions to specific and broader

issues ranging from access to education to unemployment and climate change. Also, young people can leverage advocacy spaces such as government ministries and policy-oriented conferences and summits to hold their governments accountable. Further, through students and youth groups, young people can mobilise and organise to effectively advocate for policy changes.

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