



# Youth Participation in Leadership Development Processes: A Survey of Public and Private Corporations in Zimbabwe

Blazio M. Manobo (PhD)<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

The First National Development Strategy formulated in 2020 as Zimbabwe's blueprint for achieving Vision 2030 recognizes youth participation as a cross-cutting enabler. The blueprint sets an outcome target of improving youth participation in decision-making and development processes from 3.3% in 2020 to 25% by 2025. Strategies for achieving Vision 2030 for youths in Zimbabwe have taken a multi-faceted approach. This independent study provides baseline data on the proportion of youths in decision-making and development processes in public and private entities in Zimbabwe. The study used the definition of youth as contained in the African Charter which defines youths as those between the ages of 18-35 years. Using a mixed methods approach, the study sought to unpack the proportions of youth in decision-making and developmental processes; explore the perceived effectiveness of youth employed and those leading; and assess the challenges that inhibit the recruitment and appointment of youth in decision-making and developmental processes in public and private organisations. The study demonstrates that youths are underrepresented in decision-making positions in Zimbabwe. This under-representation of youth in employment can be explained by lack of experience or exposure, organizational systems that block opportunities for youth, and lack of or no vacancies within the organizations. To mitigate these hurdles, the study recommends that organisations should be encouraged to have youth employment policies in particular the public sector. There is a need to train youth to be leaders and encourage organizations to recruit more youth in particular females and persons with disabilities.

**KEYWORDS:** Youth leadership development, Youth in Decision-Making, National Development Strategy (NDS1),

## I. Introduction

The Government of Zimbabwe recognizes the need to develop the mental construct of youths on the significance of the value of hard work as a variable for national development. In the National Economic Blueprint, of the NDS1, which came into force in 2021, a strong emphasis was put on youth development and empowerment as a cross-cutting measure for all Ministries, Departments, and Agencies (MDA). To achieve the targets for youth development and empowerment, the government of the Second Republic called for all MDAs to mainstream youth participation in decision-making and development processes, and improve access to employment opportunities (GOZ, 2020).

The case of youth empowerment policies has never been as explicit as it is now in Zimbabwe since the country attained independence in 1980. A survey of literature on Zimbabwe's economic policies demonstrates that little attention has been given to the role of youths in economic development. The immediate predecessors of the current NDS1 which includes the Zimbabwe Agenda for Sustainable Socio-Economic Transformation (ZIMASSET) crafted in 2013 and the Transitional Stabilization Program (TSP) of 2018 make references to youths only as a cross-cutting measure along with women. No deliberate outcome indicators for the youth dividend existed in most of the Zimbabwean policy documents since independence. This does not imply an absence of youth programs by both government and private players. What was lacking was a deliberate and strategic result-based youth empowerment programming that only came into effect with the birth of the NDS 1.

Zimbabwe is a signatory to several international, continental, and regional protocols and commitments on youth development and empowerment. These protocols and commitments confirm the urgency of driving the youth

<sup>1</sup> Blazio M. Manobo (PhD) is a Development Practitioner and Lecturer at the Catholic University of Zimbabwe.



development and empowerment agenda due to the myriad of challenges among the youths which include among others, unemployment, drug and substance abuse, rising crime, teen pregnancies, and the rise in orphans and vulnerable children (SADC, 2015). These documents also sanction member states to regard youths as the greatest resource that countries should nurture for national economic development. However, little effort in terms of resource allocation for youth development and empowerment programs has been committed.

This independent study focuses on measuring youth participation in decision-making and development processes as an NDS1 mid-term process evaluation. The study seeks to fill the gap in the effectiveness of the NDS 1 policy implementation on youth development and empowerment programs implemented by the Second Republic. To achieve this objective, the article will first take a literature review on international, regional, and local frameworks for youth leadership and development processes followed by the presentation of findings and discussions.

#### **Guiding Frameworks for Youth Empowerment**

Youth development and empowerment as a collective aspiration by nation-states dates back to 1965 when the United Nations focusing on promoting peace signed a *Declaration on the promotion among youths of the ideals of Peace, Mutual Respect, and understanding between people* (UN, 1965). In the document, the world body acknowledged that the education of young people as future leaders in the values of peace, mutual respect, and understanding is essential to the promotion of peace and security in the world. In this regard, the UN called upon the member states to ensure the proper development of youths through education from the family up to the international level.

The call for youth participation was reiterated in 1995 through the *UN World Programme of Action for Youth* where member countries were called upon to place young people at the center of development and to direct their economies to meet human needs more effectively and to ensure that young people are active participants and beneficiaries in the process of development (UN, 1995). Emphasis was put on actions towards employment creation and the promotion of the full and effective participation of youth in the life of society and in decision-making. Signatories to the declaration had a mandatory responsibility to ensure opportunities for youth development and participation in decision-making.

At the continental level, the African Union in the *African Youth Charter* confirms its conviction

that the youths are Africa's greatest resource and their participation is key to the continent's economic development (African Youth Charter, 2006). The Charter which Zimbabwe is a signatory, affirms that African states should take measures to ensure that youths are not discriminated against on the basis of status, activity, or opinion. Hence, states are called upon to "facilitate the creation or strengthening of platforms for youth participation in decision-making at local, regional and continental levels of governance" (African Youth Charter 2006:6). This means, that African states should create provisions for youth participation within their structures as a cross-cutting measure. Structures like the Parliament, Ministries, departments, and Government Agencies must have a youth policy that directs their recruitment and advancement.

During the African Union Heads of State and Government meeting held in Malabo, Republic of Equatorial Guinea, on 1<sup>st</sup> July 2011, a *Declaration on Creating Employment for Accelerating Youth Development and Empowerment* was passed. In the declaration, the African Union urged member states to develop Integrated and Cross-sectional National and Regional Youth Empowerment Action Plans (African Union, 2011). This call formed the basis of Zimbabwe's National Youth Policy and the creation of NDS1 youth empowerment action plans. Among the NDS 1 Key Performance Indicators for youth development and empowerment is the number of youths participating in the decision-making process.

The Southern African Development Community (SADC) in its document *Declaration on Youth Development and Empowerment in SADC* proffers that 76% of SADC's population are youths under the age of 35 and of these, 35% are between the ages of 14-35 (SADC, 2015). The regional body affirms that youth participation and cooperation among member countries should be promoted from an early stage. This can be achieved through investment in youth development and empowerment and supporting youth participation and integration in all sectors of development. For SADC, the focus on youth development and empowerment should of necessity include promoting youth leadership development, participation, and governance.

In line with international and regional protocols and declarations, Zimbabwe developed a National Youth Policy in 2000 that was reviewed in 2013 as a response to the demands of the new National Constitution. According to Chapter 2, Article 20:1(C) of the Constitution of Zimbabwe, all state Institutions and Government agencies must provide youths with opportunities for employment and participation in economic development. Hence,



the National Youth Policy under the mandate given by the Constitution of the country was further revised in 2020 in line with the Second Republic's Vision 2030 and the National Development Strategies 1 and 2. Four key thematic priority programs for youth were identified as focus areas for the years 2020-2025. These include; education and skills development, employment and entrepreneurship, governance and participation, and health and well-being (Government of Zimbabwe, 2020b).

Ever since the country formulated the National Youth Policy in 2000, a number of achievements have been recorded in the area of youth development and empowerment. The government managed to create a program for financial inclusion by availing loans for income-generating projects to young people. Vehicles for financial inclusion included the establishment of the Youth Development and Employment Creation Fund, the Kurera/Ukondla Youth Fund, the Establishment of Youth Production and Incubation Hubs, and the establishment of a youth bank called EmpowerBank. These institutions provided financial assistance to young people for entrepreneurial and business purposes as a strategic mitigation measure against youth unemployment. In 2023, the youth bank managed to capacitate 5352 youths with loan capital for income-generating projects while 117,800 youths were trained in financial literacy (Empowerbank, 2023). Financial inclusion afforded young people the opportunity to participate in decision-making positions in the private sector. Several youths benefited from these programs.

The second area of achievement was the establishment of Vocational Training Centres (VTC) across the country. By 2022, 42 VTCs were operational throughout the country while 20 more were under construction. The Vocational Training Centres are critical in equipping youth with technical, vocational, and entrepreneurial skills for employment creation and self-sustenance and providing youths with relevant pre-vocational and life-long skills for personal growth, technical, and self-sustenance. The VTCs have been instrumental in developing an entrepreneurial mind-set in youths thereby contributing immensely to leadership grooming. VTCs provide alternative skills training to young people who are often discriminated against due to their lack of relevant qualifications or passes for entrance into mainstream colleges and universities. By June 2023, a total of 1,822,095 youths had received skills training through the VTC program (MOYSAR, 2023).

The third area of achievement in youth development and empowerment in Zimbabwe is the

increased participation of youth in all Government Ministries, departments, and Agencies through the creation of Youth Focal Desks. All government Ministries, departments, and agencies are mandated to mainstream youth empowerment programs by having a department specifically dedicated to the promotion of youth participation. This allows the government to measure the extent of youth participation in the economic development of the country. The Youth Focal Desks were established in all line ministries and have enabled the government to identify sectors that need youth advocacy and promotion. In 2023, a total of 1,186,241 youths managed to access opportunities and services through youth focal desks (Murwira, 2023). By 2023, all Ministries had established a fully functional Youth Focal Desks.

Although the Government of Zimbabwe has managed to develop a comprehensive Youth Policy framework and recorded notable achievements under the Second Republic, youth development and empowerment programs have demonstrated several challenges as the country moves towards Vision 2030. Despite the fact that institutions for the provision of access to finance were created under the NDS 1, very few youths managed to benefit from the programs. Some youths could not get the required collateral to access loans while others especially the vulnerable rural youths did not have access to information about the program. Most of the youths who managed to access the loans did not manage to repay back the loans compromising the efficiency of the lending institutions. Also, the lending institutions were not fully capacitated financially to provide comprehensive support to youth programs (Youth Empowerment and Transformation Trust, 2018).

The second challenge associated with youth empowerment was the lack of legal frameworks to support youth advocacy. Only recently has the government managed to approve a youth quota at all levels of the government. Despite the existence of such a policy, there is a lack of legal frameworks for enforcement. This extends to the Youth Focal Desks whose existence is not backed by enforceable legal instruments. Consequently, it remains at the discretion of the Ministry to decide what action to take about youth participation. The National Youth Policy is relevant only within the government and cannot be enforced among Parastatals and the private sector. This is demonstrated by the fact that very few youths can be found on the board of directors for parastatals. Hence, youth participation in decision-making positions in both private and public institutions is highly compromised.



## II. Methodology

The study was grounded in a mixed-methods research design. Quantitative and qualitative data were triangulated. Quantitative data provided objectivity while qualitative data had an explanatory value on the experiences of youth in decision-making processes. Using the participatory component, the research team only focused on extracting qualitative information from the youth, but an interview guide was used to guide respondents' reflections on their current circumstances as well as the changes they would ideally prefer. Gender analysis was mainstreamed within the design and the study was executed in ways that facilitated articulation of conditions for women and men. The study sought to understand the proportion of youths in public, private, and national development processes by age, gender, and disability. 70% of the study sample comprised of the public sector while the private sector contributed 30%. A closer look at public institutions shows that local authorities had the highest proportion of 39% with parastatals (18%) in the second place. Development process (5%), commissions (5%), and government ministries (3%) were under-represented.

## III. Findings and Discussions

The study sought to understand whether public and private entities had a policy on youth employment. It came out that 50% of the institutions do not have a policy on youth employment, while 41.7% claim to have one. These findings could explain the low numbers of youth employment in both public and private entities. The Public entities stand high with no policy on youth employment. Generally, local authorities (56.8%), parastatals (64.7%) and commissions (60%) do not have a youth policy. On the contrary, 69% of private companies do have a youth employment policy. This has a bearing on the number of youths employed by either private or public entities.

On the proportion of youth employed in public and private institutions, the study found that the proportion of youth employed in different organizations varies significantly by the organization from 4.8% in some entities to 84.6% in others. Thus, without controlling for outliers, these organizations employ about 34.8% of youth on average. However, after controlling for outliers, the proportion of youth employed in these entities decreased slightly to 33.8%. The study found that Ministries, commissions, local authorities, and Parastatals positively compare differently in terms of the proportion of youth they employ. Major differences

exist between the public and private sectors in terms of the number of youths they employ. On average, the private sector tends to employ significantly more youths (47.5%) compared to public institutions (29%) ( $t = 4.219, p = .000$ ). Even after controlling for outlying organisations, the difference remains significant at 42% to 30% for private and public institutions respectively. Among other factors, the existence of a youth policy in most private sector organisations is associated with more youth being employed in the sector compared to public institutions.

Findings on the proportion of youth in national development processes showed that youth constitute approximately 42% of employees in national development processes. In this study, National development processes are conceived of as projects with wide national reach that are run through ministries and/or Parastatals as spelled out in the NDS1. The projects spun from agricultural inputs programs, and national road rehabilitation to environmental conservation among others). The results also show that the proportion of youth employed in development processes varies from each project from 14% at the minimum to 67% at the maximum ( $SD = 18.6$ ). These figures suggest that the proportions of youth in national development processes greatly vary from one development process to another. Given that only 0.04% (Figure I) of youth in national development processes are in decision-making, this implies that most youth participating in national development processes do so at the peripheral level.

The study further looked at assessing the proportion of youths in decision-making positions. Generally, youth are under-represented in decision-making. Thus, a combined 5.2% of the total workforce comprises youth in decision-making at all levels. Those occupying top, middle, and low-level management positions constitute 0.1%, 0.4%, and 4.6% of the total workforce respectively. These proportions are significantly different from older employees (aged 36 plus) in similar decision-making positions. In addition to these findings, 89.4% of the youth involved in decision-making tend to occupy low-level or supervisory positions. Thus, they are supervisors, section leaders, district heads, and superintendents, and mainly concerned with the execution and coordination of day-to-day workflow that ensures the completion of projects and that deliverables are met. An insignificant proportion of 2.2% is found in top management positions like ministers, permanent secretaries, commissioners, and mayors, chief executives, managing directors, or sitting on boards of directors. It is worth noting that



this observation applies to both public and private institutions. Youth in middle management stands at 8.4%, while an overwhelming majority is found in low-level management at 89.4%. The same applies to youths with disabilities occupying decision-making positions at 0.02% of the total number of employees in both the public and private sectors. This number is consistent with the fact that there are only a few youths (18%) with disabilities employed in both sectors.

Findings from the institutions assessed in this study, 45.8% of respondents cited lack of experience or exposure as the main challenge to equal participation of youth in leadership and decision-making within these organizations. The organizational culture that denies youth the opportunity to participate in decision-making preferring older employees is the second major challenge impeding youth involvement in decision-making processes. Other challenges include a lack of the required qualifications (4%), age limit set by Ministries (2%), and low uptake of advertised posts by people aged 18-35 in preference for greener pastures (2%).

Youth participation involves a process that is inclusive and directly engages the governed in matters that affect their public life. Youth participation then becomes the active, inclusive, engaging, and real influence (not mere tokenism) of youth in formal and informal spaces of governance (Checkoway, 2011). It is about whether youth are afforded an opportunity to engage and influence decision-making processes in public and private entities. Most organizations interviewed agreed that youth empowerment through participation is vital for economic growth. However, they struggled to provide evidence for recruitment for diversity among the youth. A few suggested that the evidence lies in the increased numbers of youth joining organization. Organizations confirmed that youth recruitment was a success and has a positive bearing on the performance of the organizations. However, a few interviewees felt that recruitment should focus on merit instead of diversity. Some interviewees in the private sector went further to suggest diversity was a theoretical concept that had no practical application within their organizations. It can be deduced that youth in decision-making could not provide evidence that organizations recruit diverse youth. There was agreement on the view that organizational diversity is based on merit. This demonstrates a lack of policy enforcement by most organizations.

The study further sought to unpack the meaning of decision-making from the perspective of youth in decision-making. The youth understood

decision-making differently. However, they all seem to agree that decision-making is the ability to influence an outcome or course of action. Others qualified that decision-making is a process of gathering information and considering ideas where choices are made. It can be deduced from the responses that decision-making is about having the ability to gather facts, deliberate on them, and make a decision that can influence the course of direction for an organization. This ability can only be exercised by people occupying certain leadership positions within organizations hence, the need to examine the proportion of youth found in those positions. The study sought to understand the circumstances that led youth to be appointed in these decisions makings and the following issues were raised. The interviewees were asked how they became involved in decision-making in their organizations. Generally, youth get involved in decision-making by virtue of the leadership position they hold. A few others claimed to be innovative or to possess the relevant skills needed in their organizations. Basically, most youths who held positions in organizations believed that they were in decision-making through merit and innovativeness.

While youth in decision-making claimed that they were recruited and appointed on merit, there is a need to further qualify the positions they hold in public and private entities and development processes. The roles played by youth in decision-making vary with organization and from person to person. Mostly, they are working as Human Resources (HR) officers responsible for 'deciding on various courses of action on employees' welfare as well on the generic HR practice'. Some are responsible for research and analysis providing solutions to problems being faced by their organisations. Others have played minor to no roles in decision-making. More than half of the institutions (65.6%), believe that youth in leadership positions are effective in terms of influence and that they are overshadowed by older counterparts. The youth occupying leadership positions also concurred that they were effective. They strongly believe that they have been effective in influencing decisions made by their organizations. As evidence of their effectiveness, the youth argued that they still hold the decision-making positions that they were employed in, that their contributions have produced tangible results, and continue to get favorable job ratings from their superiors.

All the interviewees believe that their employment is key and have been effective in their positions of influence in these organizations. Tied to



the theme of effectiveness is whether youth view their involvement as critical to the organizations. There was an agreement among the youth in decision making that their participation in decision-making is important for several reasons namely: Creation of new ideas thus promoting organizational innovation, bringing forth concerns of the youth in organizations, timely achievement of organizational set goals and objectives, and youth as the future of organizational growth, economic growth, and technological innovation. The youths concurred that their participation is important as their innovation can match the current technological changes and their voices can be heard and influence the future of the organization. This importance could explain why youth employment is considered effective in various organizations.

Qualitatively, the major hindrances thought to prevent full participation of the youth in decision-making also varied. The common ones include lack of knowledge and experience which came out top in the quantitative data. Other hindrances include vulnerability to peer pressure, lack of resources, and the political and social environment. The greatest hurdle preventing the appointment of youth in decision-making in public and private organizations was lack of experience. These sentiments are expressed by both interviewees in public and private entities as well as the employer and employee perspective.

#### IV. Recommendations

The study recommends that:

- Both private and public organizations should be encouraged to adopt a youth employment policy. This was demonstrated by the recent harmonised elections of 2023 where both political parties had a total of 10 parliamentary seats reserved for youths between the ages 15-35. All public entities should be encouraged as a matter of policy to have both a youth employment policy and a gender policy. While these policies exist at the national level, ministries, departments, and Agencies have not adopted the national mandate. This may help to increase the number of youths employed in public entities.
- Tied to the need to have youth employment policies in public entities, this study recommends the introduction of a youth quarter system in both public and private organizations. This study has not managed to establish why there are fewer youth employed in public institutions as compared to the private sector. However, it was noted that private organizations have a better employment ratio for

youth than public. Yet, the public sector is the biggest employer in the country but employs a few youths.

- The government must also enforce the policy on recruitment of women, youth, and people with physical challenges. Youth, women, and people with physical challenges cannot assume positions of leadership due to the low numbers in the employment field. The number of women and people with a disability occupying leadership positions is very little due to the ratio of these special groups in the economic development of the country. The quarter system will be of great help in improving the employment of such marginalized groups.
- The government must create a database of young entrepreneurs and informal sector businesses in order to measure the levels of youth participation in development processes. Currently, the informal sector is highly disorganized making it difficult to identify areas of possible interventions. A database will facilitate relevant assistance that could be given to youths to improve their employment status.
- The ministry responsible for youth should identify and train youth about leadership. Programs like Junior Parliament should be enhanced to provide young people with relevant skills for leadership positions. This emerges from the debate that leaders are not born but made. The findings of the study have shown that youth lack the experience to qualify for appointment in key leadership positions.

#### V. Conclusion

Youths are poorly represented in employment and decision-making positions in Zimbabwe. The study has shown that 34% of youth are employed in both public and private organisations while 42% are found in national development processes in Zimbabwe. The private sector employs 47% compared to 30% in the public sector. The few number of youth employed is also reflected in those occupying leadership positions. Reasons cited include lack of experience, an organizational culture that favors mature and older employees and leaders, lack of policies, and a conducive environment that promotes youth employment and appointment in leadership and developmental processes. The study has shown that gender and disability factors do not play a major role in the employment and appointment of youth in organizations. Most organizations appear to observe non-discrimination employment and appointment policies. However, there are cases where gender and disabilities have been considered and these include sectors that are labour-intensive. Under the circumstances, issues of masculinity and femininity play a determining role. These factors are



not applicable in the appointment of men and women in leadership roles as this does not require the physical build-up of a person but a level of intellect. A deliberate attempt should be made to give priority to young people in decision-making positions in the public sector as a leadership development activity.

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