

## The Roots and Vaccine of the City. African Youth as Catalysts for Urban Vitality and Well-being

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### Abstract

As cities in Africa confront a constellation of systemic vulnerabilities, the narrative is often one of despair and decay. Yet, this overlooks a vital lifeline: the city's youth, who serve both as the roots that nourish and the vaccine that heals. Like roots nourishing trees, African youth serve as transformative agents, shaping the future of urban living across economic, social, mental, physical, digital, and educational spheres. Through active engagement in public spaces, they unlock and administer the antidote to systemic urban challenges.

This study uses empirical data to highlight youth-led public space initiatives in Nairobi, Kenya, Kampala, Uganda, Freetown, Sierra Leone and Harare, Zimbabwe, revitalising local economies via urban farming and income diversification. As stewards of green spaces, they enhance urban vitality, social connections, and well-being. Notably, the youth expand their influence into the digital sphere, advocating for internet access in public spaces as a fundamental socio-economic right. This stance aligns with Reglitz's (2020) view on online access as essential for human rights. Within this narrative lies the principle of adaptive governance, transitioning from merely including youth as beneficiaries to youth-led decision-making.

This photo essay elucidates these dual roles, highlighting how African youth are both the roots that sustain and nourish and the vaccine that heals and rejuvenates the cities. It serves as a clarion call for a paradigm shift in how we approach planning for public spaces and governance. The message is clear: the solutions to our most pressing urban challenges reside within our cities, activated, and administered through the untapped potential of youth in public spaces.

**Keywords:** urban youth, public spaces, health and well-being, urban vitality

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Figure 1. Youth cleaning up the Nairobi River in Korogocho supported by Public Space Network.  
Credit: Sticker, 2023

## **I. Ailing Cities: Background and context**

### *1.1 Nairobi City, Kenya*

Nairobi's rapid urbanisation, marked by a growth rate of about 4% annually (World Population Review, 2024), brings a host of challenges: strained infrastructure, pressure on essential services, and the proliferation of informal settlements under harsh conditions, affecting the quality of life for many Nairobi residents. Environmental issues like air pollution and waste management are becoming increasingly pronounced. Amidst these urban struggles, the city's public spaces suffer significantly. Originally designed to cater to a population of 250,000 as per the 1948 Master Plan (Makworo and Mireri, 2011), these spaces, now serving over 5 million people (World Population Review, 2024), face severe congestion and degradation, impacting the well-being of the city's inhabitants, especially those in informal settlements where about 60% of the residents live (KNBS, 2019; Mutisya & Yarime, 2011).

With limited access to green areas, the urban populace faces heightened mental stress,



Figure 2. Aerial View of Korogocho Peoples' Park along the Nairobi River in Korogocho Community, Nairobi, Credit: Sticker, 2023

reduced opportunities for social interaction, and diminished avenues for physical activities, contributing to an overall decline in urban health and well-being. Mental stress among youths in Nairobi is driven by socio-economic challenges, high unemployment, and inadequate access to mental health services. The pressure to meet societal expectations and the lack of job opportunities create hopelessness and anxiety. Rapid urbanisation and lifestyle changes further increase stress levels, while peer pressure and family expectations worsen the issue. Despite these challenges, there is a significant gap in mental health support, leaving many youths without necessary resources (Ndetei et al., 2009; Patel et al., 2010). The environmental degradation exacerbates the city's vulnerability to climate change impacts, such as increased heatwaves and flooding. These environmental vulnerabilities not only pose immediate health risks but also perpetuate a cycle of poverty and marginalisation, disproportionately impacting Nairobi residents.

### *1.2 Freetown, Sierra Leone*

The Freetown landscape is marked by uneven and unplanned urban expansion, leading to severe challenges in urban planning, basic service provision, food insecurity, waste management and public space maintenance. The lack of effective waste disposal and recycling systems has led to widespread illegal dumping, contributing to environmental degradation and public health risks. In Freetown, as of 2004, over 742 tons of MSW are generated daily with an average of 0.45 kg per person per day, with 84% being

biodegradable organic waste (Sood, 2004). In 2020, the estimated MSW generation per capita per day in Freetown was 0.5 kg, indicating a significant increase that could pose threats to the environment and public health if not addressed. The MSW generation per capita per day is projected to increase to 0.6 kg with 436, 175 metric tons annually by 2027 (Ngegba and Bertin, 2020). Despite this high volume, only about 30% to 35% of the waste is effectively collected and disposed of in approved dump sites (Komba, 2022). The remainder often clogs drainage systems, contributing to flooding and other environmental hazards.

Furthermore, haphazard urbanisation has led to a significant loss of green spaces and recreational areas. This deterioration of public spaces significantly impacts the health and well-being of residents, who lack safe and healthy environments for recreation and socialisation. These worsening conditions in Freetown have a profound impact on the economic activities of its residents, and youth in particular, introducing a vital concept of economic well-being into our essay's narrative.

The inefficiencies in waste disposal and the deterioration of public spaces not only pose



Figure 3. Kissy Dumpsite in Freetown, Sierra Leone, Credit: Sticker, 2023

environmental and health risks but also significantly hinder the economic potential of the city. These challenges affect local businesses, impede the ability of entrepreneurs to thrive, and limit the opportunities for youth engagement in economic activities. By finding innovative ways to address these issues, there's an opportunity to enhance not just the environmental and health aspects of urban living in Freetown, but also to uplift the economic well-being of its citizens.

### 1.3 Kampala, Uganda

The urbanisation of Kampala is a complex process marked by rapid growth and numerous challenges, closely tied to the broader urbanisation trends in Uganda. The country's urbanisation rate is growing at a remarkable pace of 3.3% per annum, with projections indicating that the urban population could nearly double between 2010 and 2030 (UN-Habitat, 2023). Currently, about 24.36% of the total Uganda population lives in cities and urban areas, with Kampala constituting about 25% of the country's total urban population (Kwiringira et al., 2021). This rapid urban growth is slowly turning Kampala into an ailing city, where challenges such as inadequate housing, environmental degradation, and insufficient public amenities undermine the overall well-being of the populace.

Enormous pressure has been placed on urban infrastructure and public spaces, ultimately affecting the quality of life, public health, and overall well-being of its youth. This is crucial considering Kampala is experiencing a youth bulge, with the country having the second youngest population in the world after Niger (UN-Habitat, 2023). More than three-



Figure 4. A glimpse into the daily life of urban vendors along the railway line Kampala, Uganda.  
Credit: Sticker, 2023

quarters (78%) of its residents are under the age of 35, and this youthful population is expected to double in the next 25 years (UNICEF Uganda, 2024). While this presents the potential for a significant youth dividend, the current trajectory of development raises questions about the sustainability of urbanisation and the ability to harness this demographic advantage for sustainable development. Kampala's challenges point to the need for revitalising public spaces to improve the health and well-being of youth, ultimately improving the quality of life.

#### *1.4 Harare, Zimbabwe*

Urban sprawl in Harare has led to the increase in informal settlements. As of 2018, the World Bank estimated that 33.5% of Harare's urban population resides in informal areas, with 63 neighbourhoods classified as 'slums' under the Harare 'slum upgrading project' (Masimba, 2021). These informal settlements, often excluded from the formal services grid, highlight the city's struggle with providing basic amenities to its residents. These challenges are deeply intertwined with the socio-economic context of the city and directly impact the well-being of its people. The youth, as a significant portion of Harare's demographic, are particularly affected by these urban challenges. They experience barriers to accessing quality education, health services, and other opportunities for personal and professional development. One of the major challenges in Harare remains its high unemployment rate, especially among the youth.



Figure 5. Community Sports Event by House of Arts in Harare, Zimbabwe, Credit: Sticker, 2023

Amidst the backdrop of rapid urbanisation and the proliferation of informal settlements, public spaces have increasingly become a haven for the city's youth. These spaces offer a respite from the dense and often challenging living conditions in informal areas. Public spaces in Harare provide essential venues for social interaction, economic activities, and community engagement, particularly for young people navigating the difficulties of urban poverty and limited access to services.

## **2. The African Urban Youth Bulge - How urban vaccinators are rooting for change through public spaces**

With ailing cities being a wicked problem, the population in African countries is increasing astronomically. By 2050, two-thirds of the world's population will live in cities, and the greatest growth in urban populations will be in the least developed countries. (Udal & Hoelsher, 2013). Urban governance becomes considerably difficult especially in the provision of services and opportunities to a burgeoning urban population. Among the concerns is that large youth bulges in urban centres could be a source of political instability and violence. The high rate of urbanisation, a growing middle class, and high urban-to-rural migration have led to a massive youth bulge all over Sub-Saharan Africa. The urban youth bulge indicates potential social disorder stemming from economic challenges, housing deficits, increased crime rates due to reduced opportunities for income generation and insufficient sewer systems to serve the rising population.

Despite this, most African youth are using the roots they have developed by residing in urban neighbourhoods, especially those in low-income settlements to improve their quality of life. They choose to be urban vaccinators who mould better cities with the little resources their roots can take up to ensure the cities still flourish. They anchor their neighbourhoods in innovation and take ownership to change the narrative. They reduce the chances of the neighbourhood children from being struck down by climate-related outbreaks. They inoculate their mothers by providing urban farms to feed their families. Most importantly, they reach other young people by giving them nutrients through rehabilitating public spaces and delivering the nutrients of health and well-being in its various facets. This innovative brand of vaccination is being delivered through movement, togetherness, and empowerment; the movement of urban vaccinators.

## **3. Thematic solutions for Ailing Cities: Public spaces as urban pharmacies**

As the roots and vaccinators, the youth utilise public spaces as pharmacies to nourish physical, mental, social, educational and economic well-being. Beyond medical hospitals and clinics, public spaces are transformed into lively pharmacies supplying doses of movement, information, interaction, and opportunity. Young Africans are injecting life back into dilapidated areas and underserved communities in urban areas while redefining the power of agency and connectedness.

### *Movement as Medicine*

*“Movement is a medicine for creating change in a person’s physical, emotional, and mental states.”*

- Carol Welch

Young people crave spaces for play, movement, self-expression, and interaction with others. As mentioned earlier, Harare's informal settlements lack adequate spaces for play, yet, physical activity is still an essential part of human life, as it promotes growth and development and has multiple benefits for physical, mental, and psychosocial health (World Health Organization, 2022).

In Harare, Mbare hosts a vibrant youth movement by the House of Arts Association (HAA) cultivating art-centric culture through festivals and activities. Movement through



Figure 6. Young urban farmers in Kampala, Uganda, part of the Ghetto Go Green project by Network for Active Citizens and Dreamtown, Credit: Sticker, 2023

dance and performance is a tool for advocacy in the community (Kronsted, 2020). Mental health issues in Zimbabwe disproportionately burden youth, yet these conditions remain underreported due to stigmatisation (UNICEF, 2023). To raise awareness surrounding mental health issues, HAA is empowering youth in the community to develop sports and arts-based mental health initiatives.

In Kroo Bay, Sierra Leone, a dynamic soccer team for girls thrives, and nurtures their passion for the game. Globally 81 per cent of teens are insufficiently physically active and girls fall behind the most. This highlights the urgent need for spaces where young females can participate in sports and physical activities. This brings to light the significance of support structures such as 'Football for a New Tomorrow' (FANT)<sup>1</sup> in promoting active and healthy lifestyles among youthful female footballers in Sierra Leone and other parts (World Health Organization, 2022).





Figure 7. Community activation sports and arts event in Mbare, Harare, Zimbabwe, Credit: Sticker, 2023

### 3.1 *Together we Thrive, Inclusive Communities*

Public spaces are a cornerstone of social cohesion; well-planned public spaces can amplify social interactions, enhance social capital, and foster trust, and cross-cultural understanding, ultimately contributing to the cultivation of strong communities (Love & Kok, 2021).

Inclusivity is a crucial aspect of social cohesion. In Kampala, Holistic Action for Development and Environment (HADE) is taking the lead in creating inclusively-designed public places to promote social harmony. The initiative, based on the HerCity toolkit by UN-Habitat, puts women at the forefront and tackles uneven access to resources by redesigning and constructing new green areas exclusively for women and girls in Kamwanyi's informal settlement. This creative method not only empowers women and girls, but also helps the overall well-being and unity of the local people (Kronsted, 2023).

### 3.2 *Empowered Minds and Digital Futures*

Non-formal education, especially when incorporated with information technology such as the internet, is becoming more effective in enhancing skill acquisition for the youths. This form of education is more flexible and based on competency rather than formal structures which can be valuable for training and developing practical expertise and life skills. The focus on internet access as a basic socio-economic right has prompted developments like internet provision and digital skills training in public spaces to close the digital gap and allow better learning opportunities and information resources (UNESCO, 2021). Today, free internet access is one of the most crucial resources among young people to learn new skills while exploring and staying connected with their community.



Figure 8. Girls team training in Freetown, Sierra Leone. Supported by 'Football for a New Tomorrow (FANT)', Credit: Sticker, 2023.

Public places and facilities are increasingly vital in closing the digital and education gap in Africa. The youth use these spaces to obtain practical skills, access crucial information, and connect not only with the local, but also the global village.

Financial constraints and distance challenges make traditional formal education less accessible to many young people in Sierra Leone. To close this gap, non-formal education programs are now seen as important alternatives that offer basic education and skills development for marginalised youth. Since the inception of this movement, non-profit organisation named the Youth Dream Centre has played a key role for more than ten years. They provide a complete programs that involve academic studies, vocational training, and computer and media skills as well. To further increase the scope and influence, Youth Dream Centre has collaborated with Dreamtown to open community centres functioning as education centres for those in the community who are unable to pursue formal education to develop skills such as cooking, tailoring, beadwork, etc., which they can utilise to create income generation opportunities. These centres offer secure and accommodating platforms for learning that are placed at strategic points within communities where the need is greatest in terms of education (Dreamtown NGO, 2021). *'I have a passion for tailoring, this is what motivated me to take this course at the Youth Dream Centre. Sometimes I did not have money for transport but I would walk all the way to the centre to empower myself. Now, other people can enjoy the work of my hands and I earn money for transportation and basic needs.'*



Figure 9. HerCity workshop by HADE at Kamwanyi, Kampala, Uganda, Credit: Sticker, 2023.

### 3.3 Enrooted Potential, Healed Livelihoods

*“I have always loved nature and working in the garden but what would pull me away was the question of where would I get money if I sacrificed all my time in the garden. But through this initiative, I was able to secure a space for the garden and use it as a source of income to finance my studies.”- A young man from Kampala*

The youth employment crisis in Africa is complex and involves such issues as the absence of decent work, underemployment, and restricted access to productive resources. However, entrepreneurship is considered a possible way of addressing the youth unemployment problem in Africa, providing opportunities for sustainable job creation and poverty reduction (Carreras et al., 2020).

Youth in Africa are exploring their enrooted potential to create diverse opportunities for livelihoods within cities. Komb Green Solutions is a youth group formed by reformed youth who were formerly involved crime within Korogocho community in Nairobi, Kenya. The group is committed to restoring the Nairobi River and riparian land along it. As part of the Changing Faces Competition run by Public Space Network in Kenya, the group transformed a dumpsite along the river into the current Korogocho people’s park offering access to green space to the local residents (Tehlova, 2019). The organisation carries out income-generating projects such as urban farming to employ the youth and improve food security for the local population. They have utilised innovative solutions such as mechanical waste collection equipment, hydroponic urban agriculture, and recycling plastic waste into construction bricks. The collective effort of creating the space has given the youth a



Figure 10. A girl writing at the non-formal classes at Youth Dream Centre, Freetown, Sierra Leone.  
Credit: Sticker, 2023

sense of empowerment and revitalised the livelihoods of the youth in the area. In Kampala, the Ghetto Green project is a similar initiative by Network for Active Citizens that has promoted the creation of green spaces known as K-zones. The youth are empowered to utilise these spaces for urban farming and gardening as an income-generating activity giving them not only a source of livelihood but also a new sense of purpose.

### 3.4 The urban vaccinators

*‘What motivates me? I personally lost my brother through criminal activities. So, these initiatives we are doing is to give back to the community and to save more lives and to help more youth who are still in crime to get out of the life of crime and to concentrate on conserving the environment’.*

- A young man who spearheads the regeneration of Korogocho Peoples’ Park

*‘I have seen children as young as 10 years hanging out in drug dens, I wanted to create an after-school program - a place where they could be safe and remain kids.’*

- A passionate young female teacher and placemaker leading children’s program at Sister Brother Love Initiative, Dandora in Nairobi, Kenya



Figure 11. Young woman practising tailoring at Youth Dream Centre, Freetown, Sierra Leone.  
Credit: Sticker, 2023

#### 4. Conclusion

The role of African youth in reinvigorating urban spaces and promoting youth health and well-being is critical. They are the foundational pillars and dynamic change agents in the city, essential in shaping resilient, vibrant, and adaptive urban communities for the future. This photo essay illustrates how youth embody the roles of both roots and vaccines, crucial in revitalising and healing ailing urban environments, and the transformative impact of their initiatives in public spaces across African cities such as Nairobi in Kenya, Kampala in Uganda, Freetown in Sierra Leone, and Harare in Zimbabwe. These initiatives include urban farming, advocating for internet access as a fundamental socio-economic right, environmental stewardship, such as community-led green space development and recycling programs, cultural preservation efforts through local arts and heritage projects, health-related initiatives like community health awareness campaigns, and educational programs focusing on skill development and literacy.

The narrative goes beyond mere participation, calling for a shift towards empowering youth to assume leadership in urban decision-making. This transition articulates the urgent need for adaptive governance that deeply incorporates and elevates the role of youth in urban development processes. Young people, with their unique perspectives and innovative capacities, are indispensable catalysts in driving sustainable initiatives that bolster economic, social, mental, physical, digital, and educational aspects of health and well-being in urban settings. Their active engagement in designing, implementing, and maintaining public spaces is not just beneficial, but also imperative for the long-term sustainability of



Figure 12. Young man works in his urban garden.As part of the Ghetto o Green project, in Kampala, Uganda, Credit: Sticker, 2023



Figure 13. Youth in an urban garden in Korogocho, Nairobi, Credit: Sticker, 2023



Figure 14. A young man who spearheads the regeneration of Korogocho Peoples' Park Credit: Sticker, 2023



Figure 15. A passionate young female teacher and place maker leading children's program at Sister Brother Love Initiative, Dandora in Nairobi, Kenya. Credit: Sticker, 2023

urban development. This narrative calls for a decisive paradigm shift in urban planning and governance methodologies. It demands an approach where youths are not just participants but active leaders. Providing these young leaders with adequate support, resources, and platforms to express and implement their ideas is crucial for ensuring the vitality and resilience of urban landscapes.

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Equally deserving of recognition are the vibrant youth groups and CBOs in these cities, including the House of Arts Association, Football for a New Tomorrow (FANT), Holistic Action for Development and Environment (HADE), Youth Dream Centre in Sierra Leone, Ghetto Go Green in Kampala, Network for Active Citizens, and Komb Green Solutions. These groups embody the spirit of resilience, innovation, and community. Through their active involvement, they have turned challenges into opportunities, creating inclusive, safe, and dynamic spaces that cater to the diverse needs of their communities.

A special shoutout is reserved for Simon Sticker. His lens has captured more than just images – it has narrated stories, encapsulated emotions, and depicted the raw beauty and complexity of urban life in these cities. Each photograph in this essay is a testament to his skill, artistry, and keen eye for detail. Through his work with DreamTown, he has been able to capture the images presented in this essay.

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