The Africa *we* Want: Family and Youth Ministry, Inequality, and Poverty

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Abstract

This contribution draws on the Agenda 2063 document to engage the role of family and youth ministry in relation to inequality and poverty. The question this paper addresses is, how can we read Agenda 2063 with a specific lens on 'The Africa we want', in conjunction with the challenges faced by unemployed youth? Many of them have given up on their aspirations because of traditional cultural views, while others have foregone their education to engage in a struggle for liberation – not only political liberation but also socio-economic liberation – and now face an uncertain future. Furthermore, how does youth ministry collaborate with the poor and the marginalised in their struggles for survival, liberation, and life, to live in the Africa 'they' want? This article makes intra- and interdisciplinary contributions by engaging the theological disciplines of missiology and practical theology as well as social and economic policy documents.

Introduction

On the front page of the Agenda 2063 Framework Document, reference is made to 'The Africa *we* want' (African Union, 2015). This is followed by the catch phrase: 'A shared strategic framework for inclusive growth and sustainable Development & a global strategy to optimize the use of Africa's Resources for the benefit of all Africans'. In the foreword of Agenda 2063, the term 'all Africans' is defined as 'including those in the Diaspora and the international community' (AU, 2015:5). The inclusivity of Agenda 2063, as highlighted by its consideration of Africans both within the continent of Africa and all over the world, raises thought-provoking questions about the definition of 'African', and who is African, in an era of globalisation. These are important questions when focussing on youth and millennials, since many of them might have been born and raised outside the continent of Africa but are still (viewed as) descendants of Africa, and yet do not face the unique challenges of Africa.

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However, the uniqueness of African agency lies in its qualification "African" which is both self and place bound. African agency is how people, who identify themselves as African (the self and identity), have managed, through making conscious choices, to change their structures. These are especially contextual structures that confine/oppress them (Achieng, 2014:52).

This paper will, however, only focus on millennials of African descent who are residing on the African continent. The author acknowledges the existence of African millennials who are born on the African continent, make a living here, and whose ancestors have been rooted here for many generations, but are still viewed as European or white, and are discriminated against because of colonial history.

The vision of the AU to be 'an integrated, prosperous and peaceful Africa, driven by its own citizens and representing a dynamic force in the international arena' is the foundation of Agenda 2063 (AU, 2015:5). Agenda 2063 recognises the distinct challenges that are closely linked to the African continent, yet are also observed on a global scale:

There are still far too many people living in abject poverty, the lack of decent jobs is pervasive, especially for the youth, and the continent lags behind other regions of the world with respect to social development indicators. The progress made is also threatened by rising inequalities of incomes and opportunity, particularly for the youth and women (AU, 2015:5).

As such, this paper will focus on the latter part of aspiration six (underlined in the quote) of Agenda 2063, namely:

An Africa whose development is people-driven, relying on the potential of African people, especially its women and youth, and caring for children: strengthening the role of Africa's women through ensuring gender equality and parity in all spheres of life (political, economic and social); eliminating all forms of discrimination and violence against women and girls; creating opportunities for Africa's youth for self-realization, access to health, education and jobs; and ensuring safety and security for Africa's children, and providing for early childhood development (AU, 2015:14).

Africa's youth context: A South African perspective

As a South African, I will draw from the context I am most familiar with to give an overview of the situation in which most of Africa's millennials find themselves. Millennials, for the purpose of this article, refer to young people between the ages of 15–35 years, a demographic often referred to as 'emerging adults'. Knoetze (2018:1–2) describes this group as follows: In South Africa in 2015 it was reported that 61% of all birth registrations did not specify a father. This statistic suggests the emergence of a generation growing up without fathers and could potentially signify a shift away from the recognition of 'traditional' family values associated with men/fathers. The mothers' average age was 27 years, with corresponding unemployment rates as follows: Mothers aged 20–24 had a 70% unemployment rate, while mothers aged 30–34 had a 46% unemployment rate. A mere 34% of the mothers had completed Grade 12, while only 6% had any tertiary education. This starkly illustrates the pronounced gender inequality within (South) Africa. While traditional African culture may contribute to this disparity (Nürnberger, 2007:38), the present socio-economic environment further exacerbates it.

On 16 June 2023, Youth Day, Naidu expressed in her article:

… this shows that "youth aged 15–24 years and 25–34 years recorded the highest unemployment rates of 62.1% and 40.7% respectively". Furthermore, approximately 3.7 million (36.1%) out of 10.2 million young people aged 15–24 years were not in employment, education, or training.

To contextualise these statistics within Africa, Gallal (2023) published the following:

South Africa registered the highest unemployment rate in Africa in 2023, with around 30 percent of the country's labour force being unemployed. Djibouti and Eswatini followed, with unemployment reaching roughly 28 percent and 25 percent, respectively. On the other hand, Niger and Benin had the lowest unemployment rates in Africa. The continent's average stood at roughly eight percent in the same year.

Gallal (2023) further highlights that Africa's youth unemployment rate stands at approximately 12%. Djibouti reported a staggering youth unemployment rate of 81% in 2021, followed by South Africa at 64%. Naidu (2023) cites Waseem Carrim, who emphasises that South Africa possesses one of the highest global unemployment rates, particularly among the youth.

Youth unemployment is the greatest concern, with two-thirds of the more than one million young people entering the labour market each year not in any form of employment, education or training.

He adds:

The only solution to unemployment in the long term is to achieve higher and more inclusive economic growth. If economic reforms are not implemented to address the binding constraints on economic growth, employment will not grow and additional social spending will not be sustainable. However, in the short term, public employment and social spending act as an important buffer to provide work experience and pathways for young people.

The statistics mentioned underscore the significance of Agenda 2063 not only for Africa but also for South Africa. Nevertheless, a decade has passed since the AU published Agenda 2063, prompting the question: has any improvement taken place? Have any of Africa's policies undergone transformation in the past decade? From a South African perspective, it seems to have deteriorated.

Context of Agenda 2063: Are youth included?

In his interrogation of Agenda 2063, Amupanda (2018) argues convincingly that the youth are not at the centre of state policies and are rather viewed as beneficiaries of an independent Africa. As such, the 'liberating heroes expected the youth to sing praises to them—and this in turn led to some forms of dictatorship' (Amupanda, 2018:57). He highlights that Africa boasts some of the world's most seasoned leaders, with the 20 oldest presidents on the continent ranging in age from 71 to 93 years. Furthermore, it is noted that 10 of these leaders have held office for durations spanning 20 to 42 years. Amupanda references other scholars who describe this phenomenon as *gerontocracy*. Gerontocracy, as defined by these scholars, 'is a political system, a form of oligarchical rule, whereby a small group of elderly individuals are in control of power. Unpopular due to its peculiar nature, it is in short, a rule by old men' (Amupanda, 2018:59). This concept is closely linked to the African tradition of venerating elderly individuals and the belief in their possession of enhanced authority and wisdom. As per Nürnberger (2007:39), within the framework of African Traditional Religion (ATR) and ancestral hierarchy, the concept of being 'higher up' is

synonymous with being 'earlier' in terms of age and experience. Consequently, the elderly assumes a role in shaping the life of the community, while the youth are expected to adhere obediently and maintain a subdued presence. In Africa, decisions are often founded not on an anticipation of potential future consequences, but rather on the precedence of longstanding traditions (Nürnberger, 2007:39).

Within the African tradition,

> The elders are construed to be the custodians of customary law, its promulgators and enforcers…In the post independent Africa gerontocracy in the political sense has become notorious as some elders cling on power to dominate and favour their next of kin. … Elders in political leadership in Africa have been associated with hunger for power other than wisdom (Onyoyo, 2017:2–3, in Amupanda, 2018:59).

In the following phrase 'some elders cling on power to dominate and favour their next of kin', there is a close connection to the concept of *ubuntu*.[1] In addressing the question of '*Who are the we?*' in Agenda 2063, Amupanda highlights that youth participation is often limited to superficial statements and engagement confined to events like 'celebrating youth day'. He contends that both the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) and its successor, the AU, treat the 'youth agenda' as 'either a non-issue or peripheral issue' (Amupanda, 2018:61). Nonetheless, the youth of Africa haven't remained passive. They have taken proactive measures to ensure their political participation and have compelled political leaders to interact with them. Instances of this include the Arab Springs in Egypt and the student protests in South Africa, which led to outcomes such as presidential resignations, departures, or policy adjustments. In some North, East, and West Africa countries where the youth's (political) views are attained by armed forces, some of the youth have opted to join armed military groups such as Boko Haram and others.

Amupanda (2018:67) writes:

> While there is a considerable content and mention in Agenda 2063 of youth, it is not clear as to whether this constitutes political participation. The discourse adopted in Agenda 2063 speaks to what AU will do for youth and not what it can do with, or together with the youth. It portrays the youth as mere subjects that would benefit from the generosity of their elders, who have now mentioned them in policy documents. It makes statements such as "support young people" and uses many ''othering'' terms when discussing youth issues. … Although it appears that the youth are indeed part of the ''we'', or they might perceive themselves as part of the ''we'', it appears on close inspection that the ''we'' is an exclusive imagery of the African Heads of State and government.

Amupanda (2018:70) further underscores this issue of youth exclusion by examining the positioning of the youth portfolio within various African parliaments. It becomes evident that the youth portfolio is consistently merged with other portfolios and is never given primary attention:

> This is a clear indication of two things—firstly, as is the case amongst AU member states, AU understands the youth in the context of entrainment and celebration of days such as Africa Youth Day. Secondly, it is an admission that the mandate of the division is not to influence decisions but to use the outcomes and recommendation (already made) to strengthen the youth. In other words, youth are to be beneficiaries and recipients of the ''generosity'' of the elders.

What, then, must be done to include the youth in documents like Agenda 2063? To achieve the latter, Amupanda (2018:71–73) offers the following recommendations: Expand participation – the political elite should encompass both the youth and all citizens; Associate youth with economic

freedom – acknowledging that colonial liberation did not translate to economic empowerment; Adopt a suitable African communal approach in Youth State Policy – the African leadership should safeguard a thriving community with enduring values for future generations; and Rethink Africa through a lens of decoloniality – as an example:

> The youth of southern Africa, through popular radical protests against inequality, poverty, underdevelopment and neoliberalism, has taken the African elite by surprise once it occurred that the discontentment is homegrown and in some instances, has strong Pan-African, Black Consciousness and African communalistic values (Amupanda, 2018:73).

What Millennial Culture are '*we*' Creating?

Hesselgrave (1991:100) defines 'culture' as *learning* a *shared system* within a society. Accordingly, culture forms an *integrated whole* within the society while constantly changing because of different relations and influences. Culture is thus not biologically determined nor restricted by race. Knoetze (2018:2), building on Hesselgrave, contends that culture transcends the confines of traditions and biological heritage. It is, in fact, a social construct that is in continuous flux, as it adapts to physical, social, spiritual, and religious environments. One could assert that African millennials are no longer confined to a single culture, given their diverse contexts – be it rural or urban – and the array of situations they occupy – ranging from illiteracy to education, affluence to poverty, and the dichotomy of traditional/modern versus postmodern/Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) orientations. Nevertheless, amidst these disparities, millennials remain individuals, and as humans, we all share a common need – the innate desire to belong and engage actively. African culture, like all cultures, is profoundly impacted by globalism and is far from static. It is within this dynamic context that millennials can offer a valuable contribution. Therefore, the Africa we aspire to must consider the following facets. First, the strong influence of original traditionalist religion till this day; second, the impact of other religions like Christianity and Islam on African culture; third, the impact of modernity and secularisation; fourth, the current postmodern culture; and fifth, the influence of the 4IR, especially on African millennials since the COVID-19 pandemic.

> Although original African traditionalism is rarely found today, together with the impact of Christianity, it still influences the worldview of many Africans, for example over 12 000 young Africans participated in initiation schools in Mpumalanga province in South Africa during 2018. Most African people are somewhere on the way to modernity in tandem with large-scale urbanisation. Especially young (African) people in the cities have largely become part of the global modern-postmodern African culture (Knoetze, 2019:2).

Acknowledging the disparities and variations, encompassing the inequalities and myriad perspectives among millennials, the crucial question *we*[2] need to answer is: What is the new millennial culture we are creating? Is it a culture of inclusion, belonging, and collaboration? Or, are *we* creating a culture of exclusion, of fighting and opposition? Are political leaders fostering a culture of entitlement – one where their past accomplishments during the struggle grant them positions and power, and where the youth are perceived 'as mere subjects that would benefit from the generosity of their elders'? (Amupanda, 2018:67). Entitled leaders create entitled followers. Consequently, millennials are demanding employment, education, and even qualifications without taking any responsibility to contribute to the broader society. A good example may be the 'fatherless' children in (South) Africa, highlighting the prevailing inequalities, where men

view themselves as entitled to have a woman's body, even by force or rape, without bearing any accompanying responsibilities. The millennials 'sense of entitlement derives from an upbringing where they were rewarded just for participation' (Pantou, 2017:3).

Challenges Arising from Millennials

Pantou (2017:2–3) identifies several significant challenges that millennials pose to the church and society. She asserts that due to 'changed parenting methods, increased democratic decision-making in family life and the society changing rapidly', engaging young people in church activities and services has become challenging. Closely linked with parenting methods and decision-making are the sources of authority in the lives of millennials. Earlier generations accepted the authority of senior persons as a given, but this is no longer the case. Millennials are in general sceptical of authority and institutions. Authority is mainly accepted in relationships. This also contributes to 'issues of segregation and discrimination such as racism, classism, elitism, and gender bias are seen by them as a thing of the past. People are no longer judged on account of the identity with which they were born or their upbringing' (Pantou, 2017:3). Consequently, there has been a shift in their perspectives on morality. Issues such as human sexuality are no longer at the forefront of moral debates. Instead, issues such as corruption, violence, disregard for human and animal rights, and injustice have taken centre stage.

Family and Youth Ministry: Can It Make a Difference?

In his discussion on family and youth ministry, Knoetze (2015:2–3) employs the term '*reculturing*' as used by Floomsbee (2007). As a reculturing process, family and youth ministry is transform-ational and must create 'opportunities for Africa's youth for self-realization' (cf. Agenda 2063). Self-realisation, which can only happen in relations, entails a continuous testing of boundaries. Therefore, family and youth ministry cannot be something the church 'does' to some people. Instead, the latter encompasses 'a holy way of living towards God and towards one another' (Dean and Foster, 1998:9).

> African family and youth ministry is not about programmes or techniques that portrays an irrelevant Jesus to the context of Africa, but about people living in the covenantal-character of God. These characteristics must be visible and known throughout the local faith community. Hence, the character and identity of the faith community are not in the first place determined by its members or their circumstances, but (as new creation) are determined by Christ, the head of the church. The application of this covenantal-characteristics and identity in society will be influenced by the context and culture of the specific society (Knoetze, 2015:3).

Considering that 'African spirituality is characterised by presence' (Nürnberger, 2007:47), and taking into account the marginalisation of African youth by political leaders (Amupanda, 2018), it becomes crucial for the church to create a family and youth ministry culture that is inclusive, engaged, and resilient to the challenges of power, status, money, education, substance use, technol-ogy, etcetera, all within the unique context of Africa. Such a 'family and youth ministry must be a redemptive and restorative ministry liberating people to find a new identity of freedom in "giving" (cf. Volf, 2006:7–9)' (Knoetze, 2015:3) rather than enslavement to receiving and entitlement. I believe this 'freedom in giving' will provide millennials with a sense of belonging, worthiness, and hope for themselves and for Africa.

The Hope Millennials Need

The biblical concept of 'hope' embodies three distinct characteristics: First, it is 'never egocentric, but always Christo-, and Theocentric' (Prins, 2003:145), signifying a 'freedom in giving'. Second, hope is not built on our (good) works, but rather on the grace of God through the redemptive works of Jesus Christ. This perspective underscores that the newfound identity in Christ is not about individual capabilities or achievements. Third, Christian hope is a gift, as expressed in 2 Thessalonians 2:16–17: 'May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and by his grace give us eternal encouragement and good hope, encourage your hearts and strengthen you in every good deed and word'. Hence, Christian hope is not a mere 'pie in the sky' belief that everything will simply turn out fine. It doesn't entail a passive stance of sitting back and passively waiting, hoping that circumstances will eventually resolve favourably for oneself. 'It is a certainty that Christ has risen from the dead, that He is King and that He will come again. Christian hope is resurrection hope' (Prins, 2003:146). Christian hope is not a state of mind; it is an active qualitative state in Christ, affecting every aspect of life. Furthermore, hope is not about living in the future, but it is connecting the (challenging) present with an expected good future that is born from God's promise and supported by his grace. Thus, hope is not without any complications.

> The experience of hoping presupposes the experience of doubting, fearing, and despairing. Hoping is not an elegant drifting in leisure and comfort, as a tourist may do in a Venetian gondola. It is much more like steering a ship in a gale. Hoping is a singularly unsentimental, unromantic affair. It permits no departure from reality, otherwise it becomes illusion and delusion (Prins, 2003:147).

How can we facilitate a sense of hope in millennials? First of all, not by merely imparting facts and knowledge, but by actively engaging them in the entire life of the faith community, encompassing both the church and the family. The importance is therefore not what the church or family *does* for the millennials, but what the church and family *is* for the millennials. Church- and family-involvement are built through relationships. Due to the African context described above, many millennials are negative, depressed, and a high number even commit suicide. Prins (2003:150) points out that among non-depressed youth, two constant themes emerge. First, they have meaningful adult friendships. This implies more than just good relationships but rather sharing in the same destiny and connectedness. This underscores the connection between youth and family ministry, or intergenerational ministry. The church must be careful to think they can or must address the youth on their own. While they possess distinct qualities and face unique challenges, it is crucial to remember that they are individuals with their own experiences. Nevertheless, at their core, they share the same fundamental human needs as anyone else – including the desire for love, acceptance, and a sense of belonging. The second theme was the involvement in continuing acts of service to others. When people start to serve each other in the family, the church, and the community, it is empowering and gives a sense of belonging. As such, service involvement is both the fruit of hope as well as the stimulus of hope.

Employment, Millennials, and Governments

Establishing a connection between job creation and productive work is imperative to ensure that employment is 'future-led, demand-driven, inclusive, and capable of offering a sustainable livelihood to those who work' (Houghton, 2018:2). However, there seems to be a 'disconnect'

between economic development and the creation of actual jobs in surrounding (often poor) communities.

Governments possess substantial capacities; nevertheless, they encounter challenges when attempting to instil economic vitality within marginalised and underdeveloped areas (Houghton, 2018:3). In these contexts, the necessity for entrepreneurs becomes apparent. Koloba (2017:8267) describes entrepreneurial orientation 'as a set of beliefs, behavioural intentions and self-reported behaviours associated with preferences to establish new businesses'.

Yet, the question persists regarding where the responsibility of job creation should lie. Is it squarely on the shoulders of individuals? And if so, which group of individuals among 'the already economically active person, the individual, the one who seeks a job, or who wants to build a career?' (Houghton, 2018:3).

Millennials are progressively entering the job market, and projections indicate that they will constitute at least 50% of the workforce by 2025 (KPMG, 2017). This generation is at the forefront of confronting the challenges elucidated earlier.

> They [millennials] are more open to constructing their own work-life path on a short- and long-term basis through contracts, limited loyalty to brands, companies, and institutions, and expanded spatial footprints from which they will draw their work. It is also understood that millennials value the ways in which their work will contribute to society, reaching beyond individual and employer earnings. … Millennials are motivated by leadership and being given responsibility (Houghton, 2018:3).

The important role of a supporting community, whether the family or faith community, must not be underestimated, especially the importance of intergenerational relationships, and more specifically mentorship. This becomes clearer as Houghton (2018:4) indicates the challenges millennials face in developing the ability 'to be flexible, to shift across markets and sectors, and the psycho-social ability to deal with the vulnerability that comes with self-employment. … Instead of formal education, these skills require personal growth through life experiences, trial and error, and the experience of failure'. Both churches and marginalised communities must contribute to building cultural capital, which can facilitate access to employment or enable entrepreneurship. This is especially important in contexts where millennials are disadvantaged and experiencing a 'disconnect' from the formal economy. 'Cultural capital development needs to be paralleled with formal and informal education which fosters multiple skills and adaptability' (Houghton, 2018:4). The focus of millennials in entrepreneurship and development should be the creation of security, rather than focus on income or profit, since security is at the heart of resolutions to the unemployment crisis (Houghton, 2018:4).

Although the quest for belonging is important, millennials must be able to function and act independent in bringing forth new ideas and visions and take responsibility to carry them out until completed. Millennials need to have self-confidence to be innovative and willing 'to introduce newness and novelty through experimentation and creative processes aimed at developing new products and services, as well as new processes' (Koloba, 2017:8268).

Conclusion

What must then be done to include the youth in documents like Agenda 2063? Amupanda (2018:71–73) suggests the following: Make the circle bigger – the political elite and, for that matter, all institutions (family and church) must include the youth, linking the youth to economic freedom, given that colonial freedom did not inherently lead to economic liberation.

The responsibility also falls on the African elite and the church, through family and youth ministries, to safeguard and cultivate a community rooted in positive values, thereby benefiting future generations yet to come. Additionally, this process necessitates envisioning an Africa that transcends its existing boundaries and limitations.

African millennials represent a vital force in the realisation of Agenda 2063. Their energy, creativity, and determination can propel the continent towards a future characterised by shared prosperity, sustainable development, and social cohesion. Therefore, family and youth ministry must equip them with faith, love and hope, to serve their communities and empower them through good relations to use their gifts and knowledge (of technology) to build the Africa we want. By addressing the challenges they face and harnessing their potential, African governments, institutions, and faith communities can collaborate to build a brighter future for all. However, the next few decades will undoubtedly shape the trajectory of Africa's development, and the active involvement of its millennials will be crucial in steering the continent towards the realisation of Agenda 2063's transformative vision.

Funding

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Notes

1. It is not in the scope of this paper to discuss ubuntu philosophy, but it is important to note that it also relates to tribalism. There are enough examples of this from the African continent.
2. 'We' here may refer to the politicians, the church, the leaders, the families, the millennials, etcetera. It is used as inclusive as possible.

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