*Youth leadership for development: contradictions of Africa's growing leadership pipeline**

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A B S T R A C T

Over the past decade, hundreds of youth leadership initiatives have been established globally with the mission of grooming a new generation of leaders. This paper examines this largely unstudied and rapidly expanding leadership pipeline based on an ongoing study, which has collected data on 277 programmes that: target African youth, offer educational training or professional development, and have goals of cultivating leaders who will contribute to African development; and interviewed and surveyed 240 youth participants. Our purpose is twofold: (1) we offer an overview of the organisational approaches of these initiatives, which reveal a global ecosystem within and beyond Africa that is investing billions of dollars into youth leadership. Then, using case studies of the African Leadership Academy and University, and the Young African Leadership Initiative, (2) we ask what their tendency toward elite-driven strategies, corporate leadership models, and foreign collaboration may indicate about their larger politics and likely impact.

INTRODUCTION

In a 2014 TED talk entitled, 'The leaders who ruined Africa, and the generation who can fix it', Ghanaian educational entrepreneur Fred Swaniker predicts that, 'Africa [will] rise or fall because of the quality of our leaders'. Swaniker makes the case that the 'transformative' leaders Africa needs will only emerge by moulding a new generation of youth leaders in 'African institutions, home-grown, that will develop these leaders in a systematic, practical way', such as the African Leadership Academy boarding school he co-founded in Johannesburg in 2007. The argument that 'failed', 'corrupt', or 'bad' leader-ship is the major cause of Africa's political and economic challenges is a long-standing one (Achebe 1984; Bayart *et al.* 1999; Chabal & Daloz 2005; Jackson & Rosberg 1984; Jallow 2014), as is the notion that a rising generation of empowered youth will be the solution (Ayittey 2007; Lamble 2012). However, this emphasis on youth leadership development has taken on urgency in recent years with growing attention to the compounding impact of Africa's 'exploding' youth population (Kaplan 1994; Sommers 2011; Omoju & Abraham 2014) and recurring movements for regime change led by youth (Branch and Mampilly 2015; Strong 2017). Today, more than seventy per cent of Africa's population is under the age of thirty while the average age of heads of state is seventy years old (Kiwuwa 2015). For Swaniker, it is a lost cause to try 'reforming' existing leaders, who represent the largest number of 'sit tight' gerontocrats in the world (Ojo 2019), because 'you can't change someone who is 60 or 70 years old. You need to groom a whole new set of leaders' (CCTV News 2013).

Over the past decade, a global ecosystem encompassing governments, multi-lateral, non-governmental, corporate and philanthropic institutions, and actors with public and private interests in African leadership, has attempted to groom a new generation of leaders by establishing hundreds of youth leadership initia-tives. For instance, as part of the African Youth Decade Plan of Action (2009–2018), the African Union (AU) described the 2010 launch of its Youth Volunteer Corps for 'young professionals' aged 18–33 as helping to 'build a more integrated, prosperous, and peaceful Continent' (African Union 2020). The AU's more recent 'One Million by 2021' initiative announced in 2019 has further promised one million new opportunities for youth through colla-borations between African governments, corporate sponsors and development partners. Foreign governments such as the USA and China have also invested significantly in signature efforts. In 2010, US President Barack Obama estab-lished the Young African Leaders Initiative (YALI) to 'spur growth and prosper-ity, strengthen democratic governance, and enhance peace and security across Sub-Saharan Africa'. In 2018, during a summit of the Forum on China–Africa

Cooperation, Chinese President Xi Jinping pledged to invest US$60 billion in African leadership, through 50,000 government scholarships and leadership training and exchange opportunities for another 50,000 Africans. These commitments suggest that, in addition to being central to 'home-grown' solutions, educational development and other soft-power strategies related to youth are central to the escalating 'great-power competition' over resources and power in Africa (Ashford 2021).

Yet, despite billions of dollars of concerted investment, surprisingly little is known about the surge in African youth leadership development initiatives, their politics beyond ambitions of 'growth and prosperity' for Africa, or their actual impact. This paper examines the global landscape of youth leadership-focused development based on an ongoing study, which has thus far collected and interpreted data on 277 initiatives that: target African youth; offer educational training or professional development; and have explicit goals of cultivating leaders who will contribute to transforming Africa. We utilise *youth leadership for development* (YLFD) to conceptualise this phenomenon as a specific convergence of interventions and investments in youth leadership which intend to shift power in Africa, rather than as isolated initiatives. Our purpose is two-fold: (1) to offer an overview of the major structural and organisational patterns of YLFD; and (2) to begin to interrogate its politics and impact, using programmatic data from 277 initiatives and interview and survey data from 240 youth participants. We begin by situating the current proliferation of youth leadership initiatives in larger histories of educational and youth development in Africa. We then examine the six predominant approaches to contemporary African youth leadership development that emerged within our data – brick-and-mortar schools, short-term programmes, scholarships and grants, conferences and meetings, networks, and online learning – and we present examples of these approaches with attention to structure, funding and youth experiences. Finally, using case studies of two prominent initiatives – *the African Leadership Academy and University* and the *Young African Leadership Initiative* – we ask what the current tendency within African youth leadership initiatives toward elite-driven strategies for social change, their embrace of corporate leadership models, and collaboration with foreign interests may signal about their larger politics and likely impact.

LEGACIES OF EDUCATIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN AFRICA

Historical patterns of educational development in Africa, particularly those that have ushered younger generations into the ruling class, are critical to interpreting the current formation of youth leadership for development and anticipating both its impact on the material conditions of African people and the structural contradictions it may produce. 'Educational development' is used here as shorthand for the spectrum of organised investments, interventions, praxes and philosophical approaches to education that have historically been adopted within African societies and state formations or imposed through imperialism,

which encompass indigenous, colonial, nationalist, anticolonial and socialist paradigms of education (Turner 1971; Prew 2012; Abidogun & Falola 2020; Matasci *et al.* 2020).

Among these forms, legacies of colonialism have most directly shaped the conditions through which youth leadership for development is rationalised today (i.e. misleadership, political instability and economic insecurity). For centuries, 'western formal education' has been central to 'imperialist domination' in Africa and throughout the colonised world (Carnoy 1974). Beginning with the first wave of mission schools in the 19th century, education was established as the 'bait' to conscript the young into colonial power regimes (Ekechi 1972). Through the mid-20th century, vocational training in the colonies and scholarships to study in the metropole for mission-educated Africans consolidated this group into an 'educated elite', whose functions as a social and political class have been theorised, unsparingly, as 'deluded hybrids', colonial 'collaborators' and power-seeking 'windsowers' (Ayandele 1974; see also Lloyd 1966; Van den Berghe 1973). Not unlike the present moment, education was the primary channel for youth aspiring for power to circumvent gerontocratic authority (Last 2005), given schools' role as 'one of the few alternate avenues of social mobility operating independently of traditional modes of status acquisition' (Foster 1965, cited in Bassey 2009). Though educated Africans assumed leadership within anticolonial struggles after the Second World War, the transfer of administrative power to this 'new petty bourgeoisie' in independence settlements 'consolidated control in the existing state machinery', largely preserving imperial structures of power (Zeilig 2007: 27–30). The power struggle created by the onset of the Cold War later opened the door for the USA and Soviet Union to join former colonial powers in capturing popular demands for education through aid in the form of scholarship and grant programmes (Pugach 2019; Burton 2020; Tarradellas 2020).

Imperial educational development also had the unintended consequence of bolstering nationalist struggles and strengthening Pan-African solidarities amongst the emerging intelligentsia. In the leftist milieus of metropolitan universities in the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s, African students ideologically struggled around independence, nationalism and self-determination in student groups such as the West African Students Union, the Association des Etudiants Sénégalais and the Fédération des Etudiants d'Afrique Noire en France (Adi 1993; Yusuf 1998; Rice 2013), including those who become celebrated heads of state like Kwame Nkrumah, Léopold Senghor, Jomo Kenyatta, Amilcar Cabral and Julius Nyerere. These first nation builders sought to decolonise imperial educational structures, albeit with varied ideological approaches and relations to imperial power structures. Though most newly independent nations adopted sweeping educational development plans, they remained dependent on access to capital from foreign governments and foundations (Teferra & Knight 2008). After the debt crises of the 1980s, the imposition of structural adjustment programmes and austerity policies by the International Monetary Fund and World Bank withdrew state resources from public

education, especially at the tertiary level, which brought about the material collapse of and 'recolonisation' of education in Africa (Federici *et al.* 2000; see also Caffentzis 2000).

With these histories in mind, youth leadership for development is undoubtedly following a long-standing pattern of education in Africa grooming new generations of leaders, who challenge gerontocratic authority and existing power relations. However, the inherent tensions between foreign interests and African self-determination in educational development suggest that caution is warranted with the current convergence of investments in youth leadership development, which reflect a broader shift in international development to 'youth empowerment'. In 'the new turn to youth', described by Sukarieh & Tannock (2008) as the unprecedented prioritisation of youth in the funding and policy agendas of the World Bank and other international aid organisations over the past 20 years, representations of youth in development reports as both 'ticking time bombs' and 'agents of change' have created urgency and international consensus around the necessity of global youth interventions. This paradoxical framing of youth is less novel in Africa, where research and policy over the past quarter century has centred on youth as 'makers and breakers' (Honwana & de Boeck 2005) and the 'lost generations' disenfranchised by conflict, authoritarian regimes, unemployment and the deterioration of educational systems (Cruse O'Brien 1996; Richards 1998; Urdal 2004; Argenti 2007; Bay & Donham 2007; Honwana 2012; McLean 2020). However, the insidious role of development-proscribed youth interventions as 'protecting the rights and interests of capital, by attempting to save the scrambling neoliberal project' rather than 'protecting the rights and interests of youth' (Sukarieh & Tannock 2008: 307), is an added reason to interrogate the political and material impact of youth leadership for development in Africa today.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Beginning with a pilot study in 2016, this research has followed a two-phase iterative process: the first sought to understand the scale, scope and structures of global African youth leadership development; the second to understand the leadership trajectories of African youth and their experiences as participants in leadership initiatives. Without the existence of significant data on contemporary African youth leadership development at the time of the pilot, we first worked to build a dataset of initiatives that we identified through an online search using terms related to youth, Africa, education and leadership, in addition to approximately 30 informal interviews with youth, educators and administrators in our networks with ties to leadership development efforts.[1] As we identified patterns among the initiatives, we created clearer analytical boundaries for our study and determined that programmes would only be included if they met four criterion: (1) they target African youth; (2) offer some form of educational training, professional development or support; (3) have an explicit goal of cultivating

leaders, even if the definition of 'leadership' may vary; and (4) have an explicit mission of contributing to African development.

To date, we have identified 277 unique leadership initiatives that meet these criteria. Data on each of these programmes are available at the study's website (africanyouthleadershipstudy.com) alongside contextualising information on their eligibility criteria, mission, curricula, programme design and organisational structures. In 2018, our research expanded with a second phase of qualitative data collection, which directly engaged with self-identified youth leaders, who have participated in global leadership initiatives. Thus far, we have collected 229 survey responses from youth leaders who are citizens of 24 African countries,[2] conducted in-depth interviews with 39 youth leaders from 13 African countries,[3] and held two focus groups with six youth leaders from four African countries.[4] In this article, we draw upon both our data on the programmatic structures of youth leadership for development, and our survey and interview data on the experiences of youth in these initiatives.

We acknowledge a few caveats in our conceptualisation of YLFD. First, to avoid imposing our own definition of youth on the initiatives, we allowed for a flexible interpretation of the category of youth, though this was typically defined by programmes as under the age of 35. While international organisations such as the United Nations define youth as individuals between the ages 15–24, the African Union extends the category of youth to the age of 35 years, and the initiatives in our study include participants as young as age 9 (Table I). This broad age range aligns with how youth is variably constructed and experienced in African societies, particularly at a time when youth encounter significant social, political and economic challenges in establishing livelihoods and being socially recognised as adults (e.g. Durham 2004; Honwana 2012). Second, we define the criterion that programmes target African youth to mean having an explicit eligibility for African youth as opposed to being exclusively for African youth. In practice, this means that most programmes in this study are specifically for African youth though, in a few cases, non-Africans are eligible to participate, usually from other Global South contexts. Third, our data currently skew toward programmes that have English-language content online. To offset this, on our research website, visitors can recommend programmes that are not currently included in our data.

PATTERNS OF YOUTH LEADERSHIP FOR DEVELOPMENT

Though virtually all the youth leadership initiatives we identified centre 'leadership' in their organisational nomenclature, mission and pedagogy, the way leadership development is conceptualised and operationalised varies significantly. This section outlines our findings on the organisational approaches through which African youth leadership for development is currently being implemented, which we analysed according to six categories of activity that emerged within our data: (1) short-term programmes, (2) scholarships and grants, (3) brick-and-mortar institutions, (4) conferences and meetings, (5) networks

T ABLE I.

Organisational characteristics of programs in database.

Programme features	Number of programmes	Percentage of data	Region (number of countries in region)	Duration	Enrolment	Eligible ages
Short-term programmes	156	56.3%	Africa (21); North America (2); Europe (7); Asia (1); Australia (1)	3 weeks–2 years	2–1000	9–35
Scholarships and grants	97	35.0%	Africa (11); Asia (2); Australia (1); Europe (6); North America (2)	1–5 years	1–140	9–35
Brick-and-mortar institutions	46	16.6%	Africa (11)	2–5 years	25–800	11–25
Conferences and meetings	89	32.1%	Africa (18); Asia (1); Europe (2); North America (1)	2–7 days	25–3000	13–35+
Networks	90	32.5%	Global	Ongoing	500–40,000	15+
Online learning	44	15.9%	Global	3 weeks–6 months	200–2000	15+

and (6) online learning. Table I summarises these organisational patterns along with contextual data on geographic location, programme duration, age of eligibility and enrolment figures. Though we describe these individually, most initiatives incorporate multiple approaches, and we highlight examples within each of the categories to further contextualise their implementation, which reveals a global ecosystem of actors and institutions within and beyond the African continent that are pouring billions of dollars into grooming youth for leadership. It also illuminates an uneven landscape of investment, most of which is concentrated in schools, signature programmes and direct aid, while other kinds of grassroots and informal activities that bring young leaders together are organised through digital technologies and other youth-initiated means.

Short-term programmes

Short-term programmes are the most common leadership development approach we have identified and more than half of all the initiatives in our data (or 56%) offer some form of leadership and professional training for periods of up to a year. Forty-two per cent of our survey respondents (96 youth) indicated that they had participated in a short-term leadership programme. Located in 21 countries in Africa, North America, Europe, Asia and Australia, these programmes are highly selective and often administered by government agencies, think tanks and non-profits, which promise participants professional experience, leadership skills development, or networking opportunities with 'global leaders' in conjunction with university, corporate and non-profit partners. Ranging from small community-based initiatives to multinational, government-funded outfits, these programmes offer coveted opportunities for international travel, which might otherwise be challenging for African youth to access due to visa restrictions and de facto travel bans. These opportunities were reflected in our survey data, as most young leaders indicated participation in leadership programmes within their home countries (60%) and respective regions (33%), with a significant number also able to access opportunities to travel outside Africa (36%).

Programmes such as *Develop Africa's Girls Leadership Programme*, established in 2006 in Sierra Leone, are grassroots organisations that offer volunteer-based coaching to youth – often with an emphasis on marginalised subgroups such as girls, orphans or refugees – using a holistic model of leadership development that includes personal, creative and spiritual growth in addition to academic and professional 'success'. Interview participants consistently described such community-based programmes as playing a formative role in offering early leadership development and shaping their interests in pursuing further leadership roles. Surely, there are exponentially more of these kinds of initiatives offering leadership development to youth in communities across Africa than we have been able to identify. Better-resourced programmes, such as those involving corporate or international partnerships, were more likely to have an online presence and mission oriented around discourses of 'youth empowerment' and

'global leadership' and are, thus, more prominent in our data. They include traditional internship experiences such as the *Equity African Leaders Programme* established in 1998 by one of Kenya's largest commercial banks, which describes its purpose as nurturing 'global mindsets' among the 'most promising young talent', and the *Yale Young African Scholars Program* established by Yale University in 2014 in Ghana, Rwanda and Zimbabwe as a university preparatory programme for secondary school students 'who wish to make meaningful impact as young leaders on the continent'. Among the YLFD initiatives established in partnership with non-profit organisations, universities and corporations, especially those with international ties beyond Africa, this emphasis on 'global' mentality and elite education for 'promising' youth was typical.

Scholarships and grants

As one of the oldest methods of sponsoring educated leadership in Africa due to the legacies of imperial educational development, scholarships and grants are the second most common organisational approach we identified, with more than one-third of all programmes (or 35%) offering financial sponsorship for an educational programme, or for a non-profit or business initiative. Historical patterns of scholarships and other forms of educational aid to Africa by government and donors have been extensively examined by scholars (Teferra & Knight 2008; Kishun 2011), and much has remained the same with contemporary sponsorship. However, the current emphasis on 'transformational' or 'professional' leadership in the mission of sponsorship sets it apart – discursively at least – from legacy programmes such as the US Fulbright or the British Commonwealth scholarships that supported previous generations of African political and intellectual leaders. For instance, Canada's *African Leaders for Tomorrow* programme established in 2015 describes its mission as supporting 'young African professionals to become leaders in public policy and administration' and China's *African Union Scholarships* programme established in 2017 selects postgraduate students who 'desire to play a transformative role in Africa'. Prominent corporate philanthropic institutions such as the *MasterCard Foundation* have been forthright in their intentions to 'develop Africa's next generation of leaders', already investing over US$700 million in scholarships for young leaders toward secondary and tertiary education at 30 partner institutions in the USA, Africa, Europe and the Middle East, in addition to funding research on African youth and hosting the *Young Africa Works* summit in Rwanda.

And yet, only 35 young leaders we surveyed (or 15%) reported receiving some form of scholarship or grant as part of their leadership journey. Furthermore, a recurring theme in interviews was frustration around the critical role of scholarships in young leaders' access to education and professional opportunities, and the ways these connections to foreign donors or international travel reinforced global power systems, which compel African youth to leave the continent to receive desired training or personal development.

Of the 64 scholarships and grants for young African leaders, 78% are sponsored by institutions with headquarters outside Africa or require recipients to travel outside Africa. Often students receive little social and emotional support after they arrive at destinations abroad. As a past recipient of the United Students Achievements Program (USAP) scholarship to study in the United States shared in a December 2018 focus group:

I think the only problem with the programme is that they do not follow up with the students. So after we get into the programme, we get into [current university], no one is really communicating anything, so I don't have anyone to look up to anymore. I kind of have to look for people who have been in the programme and see what they are doing … It's as if these programmes are just looking at young talent and after they get it, what happens to the people? People are just being shipped here and then who's going back? Who's doing what?

Brick-and-mortar institutions

One out of every six of the initiatives in our data (or 17%) has established a school or other kind of brick-and-mortar institution, which is by far the most capital-intensive approach to leadership development as well as the most structured in inculcating leadership education. Thus far, we have identified leadership schools in 11 African nations, with most operating at the secondary school level. In the 2000s, several well-resourced, African leadership-focused secondary schools and universities gained prominence as hubs for a new generation of Pan-African leaders, often with niche focuses on entrepreneurship, technology or specific populations such as girls. Among the institutions we identified, South Africa has emerged as a geographic centre of leadership education, representing 35% of our data. The *Oprah Winfrey Leadership Academy for Girls*, established as a boarding school in 2007 outside Johannesburg, offers four years of secondary education, while the nearby *African Leadership Academy* (ALA) established in 2004 offers two years of secondary education. *Ashesi University*, established in 2002 in Ghana, and *African Leadership University* (ALU) campuses, established as sibling institutions to ALA in 2013 in Mauritius and in 2016 in Rwanda, are among the few programmes offering tertiary education. These institutions are all residential, emphasise elite-driven models oriented around educating the 'best and brightest', and pedagogically, offer courses based on entrepreneurial, technology-centred education. A small number of institutions – just three that we have identified so far – have deviated from this emphasis on individualised approaches to leadership development and established long-term, community-based models. For instance, *Ubuntu Pathways* employs a 'cradle-to-career' model centred on providing educational support from pre-primary education to post-secondary employment as well as wraparound health and social services for 'the most vulnerable children' and their families.

As we will discuss in our case study of the *African Leadership Academy and University*, none of the brick-and-mortar schools we have identified are imagined

as mass education models and most choose to cater to an elite group of 'promising' youth. This selectivity was reflected in our survey data as only 14% of our survey respondents (or 42 youth) were able to attend such an institution. Across the board, the leadership schools, particularly those granting degrees or certificates, require tremendous investment of resources both for operations and for support of enrolled youth. Most follow a social enterprise model due to their capital-intensive structures, which compel these institutions to combine non-profit missions with funding strategies that rely heavily on donor contributions or revenue-generating enterprises. The hyper-selectivity of these interventions along with the investments required to resource them should raise questions around the accessibility and impact of this approach to youth leadership development.

Conferences and meetings

Conferences and convenings such as forums and summits are components of roughly one out of every three initiatives in our data (or 32%), and half of our survey respondents indicated participation in such gatherings. Bringing together young leaders for the purpose of sharing knowledge, networking or strategising is an approach employed by the more resourced programmes within the global ecosystem of YLFD as well as youth, who organise peer-based leadership development themselves. For instance, the *Young Global Leaders Network*, described as a 'global movement of youth change agents', annually hosts 500 delegates for the three-day *African Youth Leadership Summit*, which youth organisers call the 'biggest African youth summit' in the world. The aims of the summit and youth-organised convenings like it – to create space for young people to 'exchange experience and ideas', to strengthen Pan-African connections, and to generate youth-led solutions to common challenges – contrasts with prestigious convenings associated with elite institutions outside Africa. The *Wharton Africa Business Forum* established in 1992 at the University of Pennsylvania and the *Harvard University African Development Conference* established in 1999 are examples of prominent hubs for Africa's power players and youth leaders who are advancing within global political and economic networks. Such conferences demonstrate the continued role of elite Western universities in training young business and civic leaders who are establishing development-oriented, technocratic enterprises in Africa.

Networks

Like convenings, the youth leadership networks we identified facilitate opportunities and relationship building among young leaders. One out of three initiatives in our data (or 33%) have attempted to build a network into their structure. For instance, the *African Leadership Network* is part of the brick-and-mortar *African Leadership Academy and University* ecosystem, and the *Young African Leadership Initiative (YALI) Network* connects members of the Mandela

Washington Fellowship short-term programme with other leaders in YALI hubs throughout Africa. Many network activities take place in online forums such as LinkedIn as well as on social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. *Face2Face Africa* established in 2011 and *Ghana4Ghana* established in 2013 are examples of stand-alone networks, organised by African youth for other African youth, which host formal convenings and informal social events to provide face-to-face interactions for members. Young leaders we interviewed emphasised the positive personal impact of informal networks in directly connecting them with likeminded youth and providing access to information about leadership opportunities. Though these informal communities were often the most accessible forms of leadership development to youth, they were also the most unstructured and under-resourced.

Online learning

The loosest and most ephemeral category of leadership development that we identified, online learning, encompasses digital and social media-based activities that facilitate knowledge-sharing, training or support. One in six initiatives in our data (or 16%) offer online programming for young leaders of some sort, such as formal coursework, workshops, mentorship and livestreamed conversations. Programmes such as the *Young African Leadership Initiative* and the *Young Global Leaders Network* offer structured online courses in professional tracks related to entrepreneurship and civic leadership for certificates. We are certain that there are exponentially more leadership development activities organised for and by African youth online, particularly in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic which has shifted face-to-face activities to digital contexts. Several young leaders we interviewed reported using digital technologies to share knowledge with peers and to cultivate personal and professional brands as young leaders. Three reported curating digital newsletters and social media accounts where they offer leadership tips for other African youth. One young leader self-published a book in 2015 about his experiences in the *Young African Leadership Initiative* entitled *Yes, Africa Can: Lessons from Mandela Washington Fellows* and regularly convenes online forums and Twitter chats about youth leadership.

Across the organisational approaches that we have described above – short-term programmes, scholarships and grants, brick-and-mortar institutions, conferences and meetings, networks, and online learning – we are able to discern structures of African youth leadership development with varying levels of capital-investment, institutionalisation and international collaboration. The most conspicuous efforts, by which we mean the most highly sought out, selective and exclusive, require immense resources and often involve global corporate, philanthropic and non-governmental partners even when they based are in Africa. While 161 of the initiatives we have identified (or 71%) have programme locations in African countries, 140 (or 62%) have headquarters or activities that are based outside Africa. We have found that the initiatives that

are most accessible to youth also tend to be the ones that youth self-organise, while also being the most unstructured and short-lived. These dynamics suggest disparities within youth leadership development around access, resources and institutionalisation.

We turn now to case studies of two prominent and highly resourced initiatives that speak directly to these tensions: the *African Leadership Academy and University* and the *Young African Leadership Initiative* (YALI). Since their establishment, both programmes have supported over 30,000 African youth from all 54 African nations, and received the most significant investments from donors, corporations and philanthropic organisations by our estimates. As contrasting examples of home-grown and foreign initiatives, their organisational approaches reflect the common challenges and contradictions youth leadership initiatives negotiate.

AFRICAN LEADERSHIP ACADEMY AND UNIVERSITY

The African Leadership Group (ALG) is currently building a Pan-African leadership ecosystem anchored by the *African Leadership Academy* (ALA), co-founded in 2004 by Fred Swaniker and his Stanford Business School classmate, US-citizen Chris Bradford, and the *African Leadership University* (ALU) established in 2013 in Mauritius. Now, with an additional campus of the ALU in Rwanda, the African Leadership Group appears to be advancing in its ambitious vision of 'grooming' 6000 leaders through its secondary school and three million leaders through 25 planned university campuses throughout Africa over the next 50 years. An ALU student from Ghana described this Pan-African model as what sets the ALG apart in an October 2019 interview, noting that 'the Pan-African nature of ALU is a differentiating factor because it taught little lessons such as just living with people from a different country or working in the same peer group as somebody from a different country and understanding different people's working styles or cultural differences'. Other interview participants similarly indicated the positive value of forming relations with peers from other African countries and regions for the first time.

Yet in their effort to achieve this vision, ALA and ALU are exceptionally selective institutions with small enrolments (fewer than 300 students at ALA and roughly 1500 on the two ALU campuses). Like many YLFD programmes which articulate goals of continental change, their accessibility is ultimately constrained by enrolment restrictions and financial costs. ALA reports an acceptance rate of only 4% of 21,000 applicants since 2008 and the tuition costs for all its institutions are on par with elite global institutions: per annum, US$40,000 for secondary education at ALA; between US$7000 and US$20,000 for a tertiary degree; and US$15,000 for a Harvard Business School-affiliated MBA programme. Aid is critical to offsetting these costs for aspiring young leaders, and ALA offers loans to admitted students that are eligible for forgiveness if graduates work in Africa for a decade after they turn 25 years old. While this condition might be interpreted as encouraging young leaders to remain in

Africa presumably after schooling abroad, the need for debilitating educational debt in the first place enacts the neoliberal logic of shifting the burden of education onto students and their families. Exorbitant fees have been the focus of student-led struggles across Africa and throughout the world, including the Fees Must Fall movement which formed in the backyard of ALA in 2015. The attitudes of administrators further suggest a level of elitism that is at odds with the realities of most African youth. In a 2013 South African TV broadcast, Frank Aswani, then ALA vice president, said of their admission priorities, 'We look for the most talented young Africans, whom we can give the best opportunity to grow into young leaders who will transform this continent … So we are not a school for *poor* kids, we are a school for *talented* Africans.' In a similar vein, ALA boasts a record of accolades for their alumni, including acceptance of US$90 million in scholarships to over 150 elite, mostly Western universities, and the establishment by alumni of over 150 for-profit and non-profit ventures. These measures of 'talent' and 'success' are curious for an institution that boasts being 'homegrown' yet measures the success of its mission in terms of proximity to capital in the Global North.

ALA and ALU are first and foremost educational institutions, which brand themselves as innovators in '21st century education', preparing youth for a 'rapidly changing world' rather than an 'archaic model built to train factory workers'. This is enshrined in their pedagogical philosophy that they developed and have branded as 'Entrepreneurial Leadership', which reasons that the rising generation of leaders must be 'effective', 'ethical' and 'entrepreneurial' to 'solve big problems with limited resources'. The curricula across ALG emphasise project-based experiential learning and 'market-based solutions' to social problems. The kinds of solutions imagined are evidenced in the ALA Student Enterprise Programme, which functions as a cashless micro-economy within which final-year students form student-run for-profit and non-profit enterprises. This push for entrepreneurialism in education is a growing phenomenon, which ALG seeks to be at the forefront of. In her 2016 ethnographic study of the implementation of Rwanda's national entrepreneurship curriculum, the first of its kind in Africa, Catherine Honeyman found that despite the curriculum's promotion of 'neoliberal values of self-reliance and creative independent thinking', youth had 'virtually no resources' to realise the government vision of a generation of 'orderly entrepreneurs' (Honeyman 2016: 230). While the ALA annually rewards one 'innovative' young entrepreneur with a 'lifelong fellowship' and USD$100,000 prize through its Anzisha Prize, the larger impact of ALA's experiment with entrepreneurship education remains to be seen.

Still, this institution-building approach has received considerable donor support from individuals, corporations and foundations, including the Coca-Cola Africa Foundation, Robertson Foundation, Google, McKinsey & Company and Credit Suisse. A major benefactor, the MasterCard Foundation, partnered with ALA to establish the Centre for Entrepreneurial Leadership in 2010, which now functions as a revenue source through training, consultant services and programmes catered to leaders, practitioners and institutions

interested in the ALG leadership development model. In October 2018, Strong participated in a week-long professional development training at the ALA on Entrepreneurial Leadership, alongside 20 other attendees who were African educators and community leaders. One of the facilitators, a US expatriate, suggested that participants interpret the ALA mission of entrepreneurial leadership as an insurgency:

Entrepreneurial Leadership needs to be replicated throughout Africa. The picture we should have in our mind is going back [home from the training] as insurgents … We're building coalitions and building something little by little. We can't attack with a traditional army … Change will be grassroots, and we will win people over bit by bit. Let's be insurgent together about the different things that we want to see.

As this insurgency metaphor makes clear, ALG is purposefully not a mass education model that is meant to be widely accessible, nor is it a cradle-to-career model that supports leaders and their community through their entire life course. ALG is an educational *enterprise*, whose vision for transformation is tied to educating future leaders in the classroom while exporting its pedagogical framework for impact and for profit.

YOUNG AFRICAN LEADERSHIP INITIATIVE

Unlike ALA's organisational structure as an enterprise centred on schools, YALI concentrates on short-term programmes based in the USA that feed into a network of youth leadership hubs located in Africa. Established in 2010 as a signature initiative of US President Barack Obama, YALI initially began by hosting annual events on governance and women in leadership in partnership with US companies. These activities formed the basis of the Mandela Washington Fellowship (MWF), inaugurated in 2014 as the flagship YALI programme targeting youth between the ages of 25 and 35 for leadership training in the USA every summer. Over 3000 youth (out of 120,000 applicants) representing every African country, have completed this fellowship and the programme prides itself on being a diverse alumni network with gender parity and 30% of participants from rural areas. The programme follows a cultural-political diplomacy model similar to other US programmes such as the Fulbright and Young Americans Leaders programme.

'Cultural exchange' and, specifically, the opportunity to travel to the USA were recurring motivations for our interview participants, who frequently expressed their desire to gain access to the resources available in the West through the discourse of global 'exposure'. A MWF alumnus from Uganda that we interviewed in October 2019, who is now a PhD student in the USA, stated outright that he chose MWF because he 'wanted to have exposure to go see people in the developed world do things'. Other young leaders spoke of the professional and material benefits they expected to gain through the programme prior to applying, and several confirmed being appointed to government roles in their home countries, receiving international

consultancies, gaining postgraduate admission in elite universities, and successfully fundraising for enterprises and non-profits through connections acquired through the programme's signature networking opportunities, as MWF alumni.

The US State Department sponsors participant costs for the Mandela Washington Fellowship, while International Research & Exchanges Board (IREX), a global 'youth empowerment' non-profit that is currently operating in 49 African countries, supports costs for host academic institutions. Fellows complete a six-week institute hosted by a US university in one of three tracks: Business and Entrepreneurship, Civic Leadership and Public Management. The 38 hosts in the last pre-COVID cycle included private and public research universities, historically Black colleges, and small liberal arts colleges. Though the YALI programme states that it is guided by the mission of developing young leaders, leadership pedagogy is decentralised, as MWF host institutions individually shape the curricula offered to fellows. As with most programmes in our study, YALI's definition of leadership is broader than elected leadership and adopts theories of transformational and servant leadership, which emphasise transparency, personal growth, ethics and collaborative teamwork, and stress that leadership is 'more than authority'. One 2020 MWF alumna from Kenya that we interviewed in June 2021 expressed disappointment in the curricula of the 'elite programme', stating that she 'expected to learn more' and to acquire more practical skills in public policy and governance. Still, she expressed no regret because her experiences with fellow young leaders transformed her outlook on African youth leadership:

I was able to learn that young people are not idle, they're actually coming up with innovative solutions. They're just trying to build a different Africa. And so, I was able to learn that young people are really doing amazing things out there. It's just that, you know, the outside doesn't really appreciate or even recognise what they do. So that was my biggest sort of mindset change, because I used to think, 'oh, every young person just wants to go be employed, and get money'. And, you know, that's it.

US-based MWF activities are paralleled with extensive programming in Africa based out of four 'regional leadership centres' in Kenya, South Africa, Senegal and Ghana. The US government has characterised the establishment of these centres as 'deepening [its] reach on the continent'. However, with the expanding scope of US militarism in Africa, the establishment of YALI should be understood as part of this shift in US policy back to increased interventionism in Africa after decades of 'low prioritisation' (Olsen 2017). Since 2010, the year of YALI's establishment, US embassies have accelerated outreach to African youth and expanded engagements with business and civic leaders across the continent. Regional centres have convened over 2000 events across Africa and offer professional development and networking opportunities for youth, as well as continued support for returning Mandela Washington Fellows, who have received US$750,000 in small grants for business and social enterprises. The US government has also sponsored close to 1300 African scholars through its educational and cultural affairs programmes and,

through USAID, the US has partnered with the African Union to increase the participation of youth in its departments, in addition to investing more than US$100 million in over 75 partnerships with African universities. Another MWF alumna from Uganda who we interviewed in March 2021 disclosed that YALI directly helped her circumvent government political machinery, which made it challenging to directly impact her community without access to elected office. As one of the oldest participants in our study at the age of 40, she'd unsuccessfully contested for an elected position before YALI, but with its connections, she expressed confidence that, 'I don't have to wait for government input to participate in the development of my people … I've met with organisations that want to partner with me, to do something to boost the investment potential of my people'. The US government's role through YALI, as an alternative, even competing, source of political power and resources was commonly referenced as one of the primary reasons for applying to the programme.

THE POLITICS OF TRACKING AFRICAN LEADERS

The organisational approaches of *youth leadership for development* programmes and what we are beginning to gather from youth participants point to enduring contradictions that are reminiscent of previous eras of educational development in Africa. Here, we conclude with consideration of the politics of contemporary African youth leadership development and what its elite-driven strategies, embrace of corporate leadership models and collaboration with foreign interests may indicate about their impact. The programmes in our study are guided by the belief that Africa needs a 'whole new set of leaders'. To groom this new leadership class, most of the programmes we have identified are hyper-selective and seek out youth leaders with demonstrated 'potential'. Low acceptance rates mean that most youth in Africa will not directly benefit from these opportunities for leadership development, since a significant portion of the youth population would not meet eligibility criteria in the first place (i.e. successful completion of secondary and tertiary education as well as other noteworthy academic and professional accomplishments). This focus on the 'best and the brightest' is steeped in pragmatism, but also reflects a deep-seated colonial logic of elitism that has historically animated educational development among African people from the adage, 'a rising tide lifts all boats' used by the ALG to justify its largely inaccessible approach to leadership development, to the Du Boisian 'talented tenth' concept, which similarly suggested that 'The Negro race, like all races, is going to be saved by its exceptional men' (Du Bois 1903: 33).

Research over decades has challenged the 'talented tenth' philosophy and perceived social benefits of creating a pipeline for advancement based on perceived abilities and imagined potential. Though this literature typically refers to this as 'educational tracking', or the separation of young people into different *academic* tracks (e.g. college preparation versus vocational training), the concept applies here as leadership initiatives are essentially attempting to track Africa's

next class of leaders through stratified educational and leadership development opportunities for those deemed 'exceptional'. In other contexts, tracking has been found to compound the advantages held by students with more resources, who are disproportionately labelled as having higher abilities, while further stigmatising and creating disadvantages for under-resourced students, who are more likely to be labelled as having less ability regardless of actual abilities (Oakes 1987). The continued use of this strategy – which formed previous educated elite classes – should raise fundamental questions about the social consequences of again creating a leadership pipeline for African youth in this fashion. If the documented pattern of educational tracking outcomes applies here, it is likely that YLFD programmes will replace the current ruling class with a new, perhaps more effective, political and economic elite but without fundamentally transforming power structures or material realities. In a historic moment when youth in Africa are increasingly rising with militancy against elderly leaders, it is unclear whether privileged 'leaders', perceived as being handpicked by foreign countries, will have political legitimacy.

The different organisational approaches we have analysed in this paper show a range of approaches to leadership development but left unanswered is what leadership education is offering in this moment. African youth leadership programmes borrow in discernible ways from recent trends in the field of leadership studies and tend to subscribe to some form of transformational leadership model, which many explicitly champion as an alternative to transactional practices of leadership with which African political systems are often negatively associated (Jackson & Rosberg 1984). Where transactional leaders adopt a managerial approach to subordinates that fosters compliance, transformational leaders are said to focus on cultivating the morale of followers based on shared goals (Burns 1978; Bass 1985). Pedagogical approaches to the development of transformational leadership vary greatly across African leadership initiatives and the question of *how* to develop leadership remains a topic of much debate, even within the broader field of leadership education where researchers and practitioners remain divided on whether leadership can be effectively taught (Brungardt 1997; Doh 2003; Matthews 2004). In addition, curricular approaches to transformational leadership education tend to adopt corporate managerialism given their predominance in business schools (Rost & Barker 2000: 4), and the infusion of neoliberal logics into YLFD is starkly evident in the way these programmes employ technocratic, entrepreneurial strategies common within corporate philanthropy, social entrepreneurship and venture capitalist philanthropy, which all position corporations and technology moguls as the new global problem solvers (Seelos & Mair 2005; Saltman 2010). This is particularly concerning for Africa because of the documented role of neoliberal reform projects, even those that mobilise the discourse of 'empowerment', in weakening the collective power of communities to oppose the larger socio-political relations and structural conditions that deny them power (Kwon 2013). More insidious and alarming is the effect of development interventions in intensifying the escalating forms of foreign interventionism,

which have been described as a 'new scramble for Africa' led by global actors in philanthropy, development, corporations and new soft powers with interests in the region (Carmody 2011).

Our findings raise important questions that future research must attempt to answer. For instance, in what ways are the philosophies of leadership and development operationalised within African youth leadership programmes contested or modified in practice? How do the differently positioned actors within these institutions (e.g. participants, administrators, donors, educators, Africans, non-Africans) understand the mission of youth leadership initiatives and negotiate discrepancies between organisational priorities and their own? In particular, how do the African youth who participate in these interventions understand the purpose of these opportunities for their future prospects and what critiques do they have of their experiences? And, as YLFD programmes continue to grow, what are the tangible effects of these interventions for individual participants and for the economic, social and political future of Africa? The second phase of our research, already underway, employs a qualitative research methodology to better understand the experiences of young African leaders within youth leadership programmes. With the public accessibility of our database, we invite researchers to join us in taking up these questions to better understand who, ultimately, will benefit from youth leadership for development in Africa.

NOTES

1. This study emerged from the previous research and lived experiences of both authors. Strong's previous ethnographic work (2015, 2017) on university student politics in Nigeria over the past 15 years documents an uptick in Nigerian tertiary students' interests in professionalised leadership and their participation in global leadership opportunities for African youth. Kallon Kelly received two scholarships for African youth leaders and served as a summer programme assistant for the 2017 cohort of the Young African Leadership Initiative Mandela Washington Fellows programme at one of the participating universities in the USA.

2. Angola, Botswana, Cameroon, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia, Ghana, Guinea, Kenya, Malawi, Mauritius, Morocco, Mozambique, Namibia, Nigeria, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, South Africa, South Sudan, Swaziland, Tanzania, Tunisia, Uganda, Zambia, Zimbabwe.

3. Cameroon, Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Mauritius Nigeria, Rwanda, South Africa, South Sudan, Uganda, Zambia, Zimbabwe.

4. Ghana, Kenya, South Africa, Zimbabwe.

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