



West African Youth
Protection and Advocacy
Network (WAYPAN)

Understanding Contemporary Challenges of Youth Activism in West Africa through the **Intergenerational Lens**

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Youth activism has become a powerful voice for democratic change in West Africa for decades. It is driven by widespread violence of exclusion, governance failures, corruption, shrinking civic space, among others. Continuing on a long history of anti-colonial and pro-democracy struggles, contemporary youth movements increasingly rely on digital platforms, decentralized organization, and regional solidarity to demand accountability, democratic governance, and social justice.

This report, which draws on existing literature, relevant data and stakeholders' engagement, finds out that while movements such as **#EndSARS**, **#Balai Citoyen**, **#Y'en a Marre**, **#FixTheCountry**, and **#EndBadGovernance** have expanded civic participation and influenced public discourse, they continue to face significant obstacles. These include state repression, weak democratic institutions, economic constraints, insecurity, organizational fragmentation, limited intergenerational collaboration, and challenges associated with digital activism.

The report concludes that strengthening youth activism requires coordinated action by governments, civil society, regional institutions, international partners, and youth movements themselves. Protecting civic space, expanding economic opportunities, strengthening democratic institutions, promoting responsible digital engagement, and fostering stronger organizational capacity and intergenerational collaboration are essential to ensuring that youth activism continues to advance democratic governance, peace, and inclusive development across West Africa.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

West Africa is a sub region of Africa covering roughly 6.14 million square kilometers and commonly described as comprising 16 countries: Benin, Burkina Faso, Cabo Verde, Côte d'Ivoire, The Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, and Togo (*United Nations Statistics Division, 2004*). The region is home to nearly half a billion people and has a very young age structure, with a median age of about 18 years (*Worldometer, 2026*). In this paper, youth is understood according to the African Union's definition of 15–35 years, while the United Nations definition of youth (15–24 years) is also noted where relevant (*African Union, 2006; United Nations, n.d.*).

This demographic profile presents both a challenge and an opportunity. On the one hand, it underscores the urgency of economic and social policies that can generate decent jobs, expand access to basic services, and improve the quality of life of young people. On the other hand, it creates the possibility of a demographic dividend if young people are educated, empowered, and given meaningful responsibilities. Realizing that dividend, however, requires functional institutions, democratic governance, and a peaceful social environment (*United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, n.d.; World Bank, 2025*).

Unfortunately, the region is still lagging behind when it comes to youth prioritization, and existing policy frameworks have often been weak or poorly implemented. In several countries, democratic backsliding, military interventions, insecurity, and a shrinking civic space have weakened the environment in which citizens can organize, speak, and participate effectively. Even so, youth across West Africa have not remained silent; they continue to act, organize, and demand change (*Freedom House, 2025; V-Dem Institute, 2025; United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, n.d.*).

The broader development context remains difficult. Youth not in education, employment, or training remains a serious concern across sub-Saharan Africa; informal employment continues to dominate labour markets in Western and Central Africa; under-five mortality remains especially high in West and Central Africa; and literacy outcomes remain uneven across many countries in the region (*International Labour Organization, 2024; UNICEF, 2025; UNESCO, 2024; World Bank, 2025*).

1.2 Condition of Youth in West Africa

West Africa’s predominantly young population should, in principle, shape governance and development outcomes. Yet demographic weight alone does not guarantee influence; what matters is whether institutions convert that weight into economic inclusion, political voice, and social opportunity. In practice, many of the region’s most populous states have policy choices whose effects spill across borders, especially in areas such as security, migration, labor markets, and youth development (*World Bank, 2025*).

<i>Indicator</i>	<i>Latest figure</i>
<i>Total population (West Africa)</i>	468.1 million (2025 estimate)
<i>Population below age 25</i>	61.3%
<i>Median age</i>	18.2 years
<i>GDP growth</i>	4.1% (2024)
<i>Youth NEET (15–24)</i>	33.0%
<i>Informal employment</i>	87.3%
<i>Under-five mortality</i>	68 per 1,000 live births (regional average)
<i>Adolescent birth rate</i>	101 births per 1,000 girls aged 15–19
<i>Adult literacy</i>	Below 50% in 7 countries
<i>Extreme poverty</i>	Wide disparities

Sources: World Bank, 2024; UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2024; UNICEF, 2024; ILO, 2024; African Development Bank, 2025; United Nations, 2024; UN DESA, 2024.

Young people remain central to the economy and polity of West African countries, but they are often confronted by weak service delivery, limited opportunities, and exclusion from decision-making. Although many youth policies exist on paper, implementation is frequently weak, consultation is limited, and young people are seldom treated as genuine co-authors of the policies that affect them. This disconnect helps explain why frustration sometimes takes destructive forms, including violence and extremism, while also fueling constructive forms of youth activism (*Honwana, 2012; International Labour Organization, 2024*).

Youth activism and youth-led movements have therefore emerged as responses to exclusion, unemployment, corruption, and governance failures. When properly supported, they can strengthen accountability, democratic participation, and policy innovation by bringing the knowledge, energy, and lived experience of young people into public life (*Honwana, 2012; United Nations, n.d.*).

However, youth activism continues to face serious constraints, especially from shrinking civic space and the limits imposed by weak democratic institutions. This policy brief therefore examines the landscape, challenges, and policy options for strengthening youth activism and participation across West Africa (*Freedom House, 2025; V-Dem Institute, 2025*).

1.3 Youth Activism

Youth activism refers to organized action by young people to influence political, social, or economic change. It may take the form of digital advocacy, direct action, mass mobilization, public enlightenment, lobbying, and petitioning. More broadly, youth civic engagement is recognized as an important part of youth development because it helps build human and social capital and strengthens democratic participation (*United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, n.d.*).

For analytical purposes, youth activism can be divided into two broad categories. **Youth-involved activism** refers to wider civic or political struggles in which young people play a visible and meaningful role, even when the initiative is not primarily youth-led. **Youth-led activism** refers to movements initiated and led mainly by young people to advance youth-specific or broader systemic demands. This distinction helps clarify the different ways young people participate in social and political change.

1.4 Methodology

This paper adopts a mixed-method approach combining desk research and consultations with stakeholders. The desk review draws on existing literature, government documents, and statistics from international development institutions, financial institutions, and international non-governmental organizations. The field component uses key informant interviews, questionnaires, and focus group discussions with practitioners in the youth movement and civic space. The analysis combines quantitative and qualitative techniques to inform the paper's findings, conclusions, and recommendations.

1.5 Conceptual Framework

Youth activism refers to organized efforts by young people to influence political, social, and economic change (*United Nations, 2018*). This report is premised on an integrated conceptual framework combining ***Civic Engagement Theory***, ***Social Movement Theory***, and the ***Political Economy Framework*** to explain the emergence, character, and challenges of youth activism in West Africa. The choice of the three theories is informed by the multidimensional nature of contemporary youth mobilization in Africa, their relevance and complementarity.

Using the *Civic Engagement Theory*, youth activism is explained as a form of participation in the democratic process through which young people influence public policy, demand accountability, and contribute to governance beyond the rituals of elections. *Social Movement Theory* explains how youth mobilize and organize through collective action, utilizing organizational networks,

Social Movement Theory explains how youth mobilize and organize through collective action, utilizing organizational networks, shared identities, social capital, political opportunities, and digital technologies to pursue social and political

shared identities, social capital, political opportunities, and digital technologies to pursue social and political change. Complementing these approaches is the *Political Economy Framework* which explains youth activism within the broader political and economic contexts of unemployment, poverty, inequality, governance failures, shrinking civic space, and unequal power relations that shape grievances against the prevailing system on one hand, and opportunities for mobilization for civil action on the other hand.

Put together, these approaches suggest that youth activism is not just a spontaneous reaction to isolated events but resultant, rational and collective response to persistent socioeconomic exclusion and political marginalization. The interaction between socioeconomic and political conditions, civic participation, and collective mobilization provides a comprehensive lens for analyzing the evolution, contributions, contemporary challenges and future prospect of youth activism in West Africa. It also informs the policy recommendations aimed at strengthening democratic governance and youth inclusion.

CHAPTER 2

OVERVIEW OF YOUTH ACTIVISM IN WEST AFRICA

2.1 Historical Background

Youth activism in West Africa has evolved over several decades in response to shifting political, economic, and geopolitical conditions. From anti-colonial struggles to pro-democracy campaigns and contemporary digital mobilizations, young people have often played important, and sometimes decisive, roles in social change (*Chuku, 2018; Honwana, 2012*).

2.1.1 Colonial Era

During the colonial era, youth activism was driven largely by anti-colonial consciousness. The end of World War II weakened European colonial powers and accelerated decolonization, while new political energies emerged around labor rights, anti-war mobilization, and welfare-state politics (*Honwana, 2012; Hodgkinson, 2019*). In West Africa, educated youth and students were especially visible because colonial education exposed them to nationalist ideas and because they were among the groups most directly affected by racial exclusion and political marginalization (*Bob-Milliar, 2014; Chuku, 2018*).

In Nigeria, student organizations and the Zikist Movement became key vehicles for radical anti-colonial activism. Founded in 1946 by young Nigerians and inspired by Nnamdi Azikiwe, the Zikist Movement pushed civil disobedience, labor activism, and anti-imperial agitation as tools of decolonization (*Chuku, 2018*). In Ghana, nationalist activism also depended heavily on youth participation. The pre-independence political field included activist groups such as the CPP's "verandah boys," who helped mobilize support for self-government and broaden participation in the nationalist struggle (*Bob-Milliar, 2014*).

2.1.2 Post-Independence and Pro-Democracy Era

The post-independence period ushered in hopes of self-rule and development, and many former youth activists entered public life. However, by the 1980s and 1990s, widespread dissatisfaction with post-colonial governance produced pro-democracy mobilization across Africa, including West Africa. These movements were a response to authoritarian rule, economic decline, and the disappointment that followed the failure of many post-colonial governments to deliver inclusive development (*Freedom House, 2025; V-Dem Institute, 2025*).

Table 1. West African Countries under Authoritarian Governments (1980s-1990s)

Country	Regime type	Key leaders	Period
Nigeria	Military dictatorship	Muhammadu Buhari, Ibrahim Babangida, Sani Abacha	1983-1999 (except brief transition periods)
Ghana	Military-led authoritarian rule transitioning to electoral democracy	Jerry Rawlings	1981-1992 (military rule), then elected presidency
Liberia	Military dictatorship and warlord rule	Samuel Doe, Charles Taylor	1980-1997
Sierra Leone	One-party state and military rule	Siaka Stevens, Joseph Momoh, military juntas	1978-1996
Guinea	Military dictatorship	Lansana Conte	1984-2008
The Gambia	Dominant-party authoritarianism	Dawda Jawara	Until 1994
The Gambia	Military dictatorship	Yahya Jammeh	From 1994
Togo	Military-backed one-party rule	Gnassingbe Eyadema	1967-2005
Burkina Faso	Revolutionary and military rule	Thomas Sankara, Blaise Compaore	1983-1991 (military/revolutionary), dominant-party rule thereafter
Mali	Military dictatorship	Moussa Traore	Until 1991
Niger	Military and one-party rule	Seyni Kountche, Ali Saibou	1974-1991
Mauritania	Military rule	Multiple military leaders including Maaouya Ould Sid'Ahmed Taya	1978-2005
Cote d'Ivoire	De facto one-party state	Felix Houphouet-Boigny	Until multiparty reforms in 1990
Benin	Marxist-Leninist one-party state	Mathieu Kerekou	1972-1990
Guinea-Bissau	One-party authoritarian rule	Joao Bernardo Vieira	1980-1994

Note. This table is an illustrative historical synthesis. The regime labels and dates reflect widely documented political developments across the period and should be read alongside country histories and democracy datasets (Freedom House, 2025; V-Dem Institute, 2025).

Youth, especially students and young trade union leaders, played important roles in anti-military and pro-democracy movements in countries such as Nigeria, Ghana, Togo, Benin, and Liberia. In some cases, younger military officers also led reformist or populist interventions, as seen in Burkina Faso under Thomas Sankara (1983-1987) and later political developments in The Gambia (*Chuku, 2018; Freedom House, 2025*).

Table 2. Timeline of Democratization in West Africa

Country	Year(s) of transition	Major democratic transition
Benin	1990-1991	National Conference ended Marxist-Leninist rule and introduced multiparty elections.
Mali	1991-1992	Popular uprising overthrew military ruler Moussa Traore; democratic constitution adopted.
Niger	1991-1993	National Conference and multiparty elections ended military rule.
Ghana	1992	New constitution and multiparty elections under Jerry Rawlings.
Burkina Faso	1991	Multiparty constitution introduced, although democratic competition remained limited.
Cote d'Ivoire	1990	Legalization of opposition parties and first competitive elections.
Guinea-Bissau	1994	First multiparty elections after years of one-party rule.
Cape Verde	1990-1991	Peaceful transition from one-party rule to multiparty democracy.
Nigeria	1999	Return to civilian rule after prolonged military dictatorship.
Sierra Leone	1996	Multiparty elections held during civil war.
Liberia	1997, 2005	Elections after civil war; democratic consolidation strengthened after 2005.
The Gambia	2016-2017	Democratic transfer of power ended Yahya Jammeh's authoritarian rule.
Togo	Partial, 1991 onward	Multiparty reforms introduced but authoritarian practices persisted.
Guinea	Partial, 1993 onward	Multiparty elections introduced but democratic consolidation remained weak.

Note. Exact transition dates sometimes vary slightly across sources. This table summarizes the broad democratization trajectory documented in regional democracy reports and country histories (Freedom House, 2025; V-Dem Institute, 2025).

Youth participation differed across countries. In Nigeria, the student movement was central to the anti-military campaigns of the 1980s and 1990s; in Ghana, youth activism remained prominent in broader pro-democracy struggles and continued to shape democratic participation after the return to constitutional rule (*Van Gyampo, 2013*). In Burkina Faso, youth mobilization was partly absorbed into a military-revolutionary project under Thomas Sankara, although subsequent authoritarian rule under Blaise Compaore closed that political opening.

2.1.3 Arab Spring and Occupy Movement Era

A major phase in youth activism emerged between 2010 and 2013, when the Arab Spring swept across North Africa and the Middle East and inspired mobilization elsewhere. In the same period, Occupy movements in North America and Europe helped normalize a new repertoire of protest centered on public squares, digital networks, and loosely organized coalitions. Across Africa, and especially in West Africa, youth activism increasingly relied on online tools, rapid mobilization, and visible street demonstrations (*Nartey & Yu, 2023; Wolfsfeld et al., 2013*).

These movements were largely inspired and populated by young people, even when they were not formally labeled as youth movements. Their demands for jobs, education, an end to police brutality, security, and accountable government reflected the demographic character of the activism. They also tended to reject traditional movement structures based on established student unions, trade unions, or political parties, instead relying on social media, ad hoc coalitions, and emergency organizing (*Nartey & Yu, 2023*).

In Nigeria, for example, the Occupy Nigeria protests of 2012 were shaped by social media and student participation. Scholarship on the protests shows that digital platforms helped organize the campaign and expand its reach beyond conventional media channels (*Chiluwa, 2015; Uwalaka, 2018*).

Although the protests cannot be reduced to a single electoral outcome, they contributed to broader public dissatisfaction with governance and energy policy.

2.1.4 Post-COVID-19 Era

A new phase in youth activism emerged after the COVID-19 pandemic. This phase is characterized by heavier reliance on social media, sharper rejection of traditional institutions, a more explicitly youth-led leadership style, and a strong emphasis on accountability and economic relief. We now have highly networked, leaderless, youth-led protest movements that can transnationally inspire one another (*Lawal & Ibrahim 2026*).

The pandemic also normalized digital tools in everyday life, making them central to mobilization, advocacy, and political contestation (*Freedom House, 2024*).

Social media platforms now sit at the center of discussion, mobilization, and international solidarity. At the same time, digital technologies expose activists to surveillance, misinformation, and internet shutdowns, which makes online organizing both powerful and vulnerable (*Freedom House, 2024*).

2.2 Contributions of Youth Activism

Youth activism has made visible political, social, and civic contributions across West Africa. From anti-colonial mobilization and independence struggles to anti-authoritarian and anti-corruption campaigns, youth activism has helped move society forward. Its major contributions include the following:

- Helping to secure reforms during the colonial period;
- Contributing to the struggle for independence in African countries;
- Supporting the defeat of apartheid and institutionalized racist rule in

Southern Africa;

- Playing an important role in democratization in West Africa;
- Mobilizing for reforms in social protection, anti-corruption, transparency, and public services; and
- Leading resistance to democratic backsliding, shrinking civic space, and economic mismanagement.

2.3 Classification of Youth Activism/Protest Movements

Broadly speaking, youth activism in the current era can be grouped into three overlapping categories: pro-democracy movements, anti-corruption and governance movements, and economic justice movements. These categories are useful analytically, but in practice they often overlap. A protest that begins with police abuse or corruption may quickly broaden into a wider demand for democratic reform, while an economic hardship campaign may evolve into a critique of the political system as a whole.

2.3.1 Pro-Democracy Movements

Pro-democracy youth movements focus on free and fair elections, term limits, constitutionalism, civil liberties, and the peaceful transfer of power. In West Africa, they often emerge when incumbents try to extend their time in office or weaken electoral competition. Their typical tools include civic education, voter mobilization, coalition-building, music and popular culture, and digital campaigning rather than conventional party politics.

Y'en a Marre in Senegal is one of the best-known examples. Founded in 2011 by rappers and journalists, it used hip-hop, civic education, and social media to mobilize young voters and defend democratic transition (Sajnani, 2016). The movement was widely seen as part of the broader social pressure that weakened President Abdoulaye Wade's bid for a third term and energized political participation among young people.

Le Balai Citoyen in Burkina Faso followed a similar path. Established in 2013 by musicians and civic actors, it used music, public education, and

street mobilization to oppose Blaise Compaore's attempt to extend his rule. The movement became a symbol of civic resistance and helped reshape political debate in the country (*Kofi Annan Foundation, 2025*).

The strength of pro-democracy movements is that they connect youth politics to the legitimacy of the entire political order. Their weakness is that they often face repression, including arrests, intimidation, violence, and criminalization, especially when they challenge term limits or military-backed transitions. Even when they do not immediately achieve institutional change, they often leave behind stronger civic networks and a more politically engaged youth population.

2.3.2 Anti-Corruption and Governance Movements

Anti-corruption and governance movements are broader than pro-democracy movements. They target abuse of office, police brutality, public-sector mismanagement, elite impunity, weak service delivery, and the everyday experience of being governed badly. These movements usually begin with one visible grievance but quickly expand into a wider critique of the state.

#EndSARS in Nigeria is the clearest case. The movement began as a reaction to police brutality by the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) and quickly grew into a national campaign against arbitrary violence and impunity. Social media, especially Twitter/X, became central to mobilization, while the state's heavy-handed response further intensified public anger (*Lawal and Ibrahim, 2021*). Amnesty International reported that at least 56 people were killed during the protest wave (*Amnesty International, 2021*).

In Ghana, *#FixTheCountry* began in 2021 as a non-partisan youth-led civic movement that used Twitter/X to protest hardship and demand a better society. The campaign articulated anger over unemployment, inadequate social amenities, poor infrastructure, and a high cost of living (*Nartey & Yu, 2023*). Its significance lies in the fact that it widens the meaning of anti-corruption

beyond stolen money to include the failure of the state to function effectively. These movements gain public support because their grievances are easy to recognize in everyday life: police extortion, broken promises, waste of public resources, and weak institutions. Their limitation is that corruption is difficult to solve through protest alone. Governments may dismiss a few officials, announce reforms, or use force, while the deeper culture of impunity remains unchanged.

2.3.3 Economic Justice Movements

Economic justice movements are driven by material survival: food prices, unemployment, wage stagnation, fuel prices, removal of subsidies, debt, and the cost of living. In West Africa, these movements are increasingly youth-led because young people often feel the effects of inflation first and benefit from growth last, especially in labor markets dominated by informality (*International Labour Organization, 2024*).

Nigeria's *#EndBadGovernance* protests in 2024 are the sharpest recent example. The demonstrations reflected widespread frustration with the cost of living, economic hardship, and the perception that state policy was failing ordinary citizens. The protests were met with a heavy security response, which deepened anger and reinforced the view that economic grievances were being handled as security problems rather than governance issues.

Nigeria's Occupy Nigeria protests in 2012 also illustrated how economic grievances can broaden into wider questions of legitimacy. The protests began with opposition to fuel subsidy removal, drew a large youth presence, and later expanded into criticism of corruption and governance failure (*Chiluwa, 2015; Uwalaka, 2018*).

Liberia and Sierra Leone show the same logic. In both countries, youth frustration has been tied to unemployment and poverty, so protest becomes a form of economic citizenship: a claim that young people

deserve a viable future, not only speeches about national recovery. For example, on *June 7, 2019* the ‘Save the State’ protest shook Liberia. Even though, this was a broad based civic mobilization against corruption and bad governance, the participation of young people cannot be denied.

The strength of economic justice movements is their broad appeal; their weakness is that governments can sometimes blunt them with temporary relief, cash transfers, or repression while avoiding deeper reforms.

Youth activism in West Africa is best understood as a long historical process shaped by colonial rule, post-independence disappointment, democratization struggles, digital mobilization, and economic grievances. Across each phase, young people have repeatedly transformed social frustration into political action. The region’s development prospects therefore depend not only on creating jobs and services, but also on expanding civic space, strengthening institutions, and treating youth as genuine partners in governance.



CHAPTER 3

CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES

Despite the positive contributions of youth activism to the political and social climate in West Africa, several challenges have created setbacks and limited what might otherwise have been achieved. Some of these challenges are external, arising from state and institutional responses. Others are internal, stemming from limitations within the movement itself. Across Africa, civic space remains highly constrained: CIVICUS currently rates 44 of 49 countries on the continent as obstructed, repressed, or closed, underscoring the difficult context in which youth-led civic engagement takes place (*CIVICUS, 2025*).

External challenges include political and institutional repression, economic hardship, weak institutions, and insecurity. Internal challenges include the intergenerational gap, organizational crisis, and digital media misuse.

3.1 External Challenges

3.1.1. Political and institutional repression

One of the biggest problems faced by youth activists is the violent response of governments, their institutions, and political actors to youth activism that seeks peaceful and constructive change. In the survey conducted for this report, more than 80 percent of youth activists polled across West Africa considered political repression a major challenge for youth activism, trailing only economic hardship (*see Chapter Four for full analysis*).

When the state appropriates power for a select few, the majority are reduced to passive participants in the democratic process, consulted only every few years during elections (Venter, 2023). Civil society, of which the youth movement is an integral part, becomes essential to preventing the over-centralization of political power and to making the democratic system more participatory.

This is especially important for young people, who constitute a large share of the population, are more affected by public policies and political decisions, and remain among the most politically marginalized groups. Their future depends heavily on the choices made by political actors, which gives youth a strong stake in sustaining a vibrant civil society that can serve as a check on state actors and institutions (*UN DESA, 2024; UN OHRLLS, 2024*).

Yet political actors often perceive youth activism as a threat to their power and privileges rather than as a partner in the democratic project. Repressive actions against youth activists date back to the colonial era and have continued since then. Although decades of democratization in some West African countries should have deepened civic space and strengthened democratic tolerance, especially among state actors, this has not happened consistently. At the same time, digital media has expanded public scrutiny and made it easier for governments to feel the pulse of public opinion, which should, in principle, deepen accountability, transparency, and efficiency (*Freedom House, 2024*).

Despite this, states and political actors across West Africa have adopted repressive attitudes toward youth activism. In country after country, states have devised means of curtailing civic space, especially digital space. Having realized that the new center of youth activism is the digital sphere, some states first tried to contain and control it by mobilizing online supporters, establishing social media units, and responding quickly to online complaints. However, these approaches often encourage further activism because young people continue to press for deeper and more far-reaching reforms, many of which the state is unwilling to deliver.

This has led to the use of censorship, restrictions on civic space, arbitrary arrests, and harassment, all of which undermine democratic participation. The *#EndSARS protests* in Nigeria in 2020 showed both the potential of youth activism, especially when powered by digital media, and the extent to which the state may go to repress and suppress it (*Lawal and Ibrahim, 2021*).

Amnesty International documented that at least 12 peaceful protesters were killed by security forces at the Lekki Toll Gate and Alausa on 20 October 2020 (*Amnesty International, 2020*). The later suspension of Twitter/X in Nigeria and the crackdown on online civic dissent fit into the same broader pattern of digital repression (*Reuters, 2021*). The *#EndBadGovernance* protests of 2024, which were organized largely online and drew heavily on youth participation, further demonstrated how economic and political grievances can quickly translate into digital-to-street mobilization (*Reuters, 2024; Amnesty International, 2024*)



Fig 1.0: A strong visual representing politics, leadership, democracy, public opinion, and the voice of the people.

Table 3: Recent cases of attacks on civic space across West Africa

Date/Year	Country	Event / Civic Space Abuse
October 2020	Nigeria	Security forces violently dispersed the #EndSARS protests, including the shooting of peaceful protesters at the Lekki Toll Gate, alongside arbitrary arrests, torture and intimidation of activists.
October–November 2020	Guinea	Security forces used excessive force against protesters opposing President Alpha Condé's third-term bid. Dozens were killed, hundreds arrested, and pro-democracy activists subjected to judicial harassment.
2020	Niger	Anti-corruption activists, journalists and civil society leaders were arrested following peaceful protests over military procurement corruption. Demonstrations were repeatedly banned.
2020	Togo	Authorities blocked social media, revoked election observer accreditation, restricted public protests, and continued using restrictive cybersecurity laws to silence critics during the presidential election.
April–May 2021	Benin	Following the presidential election, security forces used live ammunition against protesters, resulting in deaths, injuries and arbitrary arrests of demonstrators and opposition supporters.
2022–2025	Mali	Following the military takeover, authorities suspended political activities, restricted civil society organizations, intimidated journalists, and detained government critics under the guise of national security.
September 2022–2025	Burkina Faso	The military authorities intensified restrictions on civic space through media censorship, arrests of journalists, suspension of media outlets and NGOs, enforced disappearances, and intimidation of critics.
2023–2024	Senegal	Authorities responded to protests linked to opposition leader Ousmane Sonko with excessive force, internet shutdowns, arbitrary arrests of protesters and journalists, and restrictions on public assembly.
July 2024	Guinea	Prominent pro-democracy activists Oumar Sylla (Foniké Menguè) and Mamadou Billo Bah were forcibly disappeared after being abducted ahead of planned protests demanding a return to civilian rule.
2024–2025	Niger	Under military rule, journalists and human rights defenders—including Moussa Tchangari and Samira Sabou —were arbitrarily arrested, unlawfully detained, or disappeared as authorities intensified repression of dissent.

Sources: Amnesty International Reports (2020 – 2022); Amnesty International. Guinea Human Rights Reports (2022–2025); CIVICUS Monitor; Amnesty International. Burkina Faso Human Rights Reports (2023–2025).

Beyond surveillance and online trolling, the state has also gone further by invoking national security arguments to criminalize youth activism, especially in digital spaces. Governments enact national security and cyber security laws with broad, undefined, or loosely defined boundaries that allow the routine arrest, detention, and prosecution of youth activists, opposition figures, and journalists. In Nigeria, Freedom House notes that authorities continue to crack down on protesters, online activists, and journalists who publish content that portrays powerful individuals negatively (*Freedom House, 2024*). In some cases, politicians and influential citizens also use these laws to conceal wrongdoing and avoid public scrutiny.

All of this weakens public institutions and civic space while also damaging the credibility of the political system and the democratic process. When citizens who are already underrepresented in state affairs are prevented from using peaceful activism, they are less likely to see the political system as useful or democratic participation as worthwhile.

3.1.2. Economic hardship

Another major challenge facing youth activism is economic hardship, including unemployment, underemployment, a high cost of living, low incomes, and limited access to basic social services and opportunities. While economic hardship can be a mobilizing factor for youth activism, it can also be destabilizing. When young people face severe economic constraints, they may initially seek political and policy change through collective action with their peers. However, when such change takes too long, individuals often have to prioritize survival. More than 90 percent of respondents to our survey of youth activists across West Africa identified economic hardship as the biggest challenge to youth organizing (see Chapter Four for full analysis).

Across sub-Saharan Africa, the lack of productive and decent jobs remains the largest labour market challenge for young people.

The ILO reported that youth (aged 15 - 24 years) unemployment in sub-Saharan Africa stood at 8.9 percent in 2023, while the youth NEET rate was 21.9 percent, well above the global average (*ILO, 2024*). Economic insecurity often forces young activists to prioritize survival over sustained civic engagement. In some cases, financial vulnerability also makes youth movements susceptible to political manipulation, co-option, or patronage.

The informalization of the economy, which pushes a large share of the working population into informal work, also demobilizes activism. The ILO and UNDP have both noted that about 83 percent of employment in Africa and about 85 percent in sub-Saharan Africa is informal, absorbing many young job seekers and limiting the time and stability needed for sustained organizing (*ILO, 2022; UNDP, 2022*). When people must earn a daily income to meet basic needs, the time available to participate in or support activism remains limited.

Informal work and economic hardship make long-term organizing difficult. Digital tools can reduce some of these constraints, but they also mean that youth activism may have to concentrate more on short-term issues that can be won quickly, unlike earlier eras of activism where organizational building, popular education, and long-term demands were central features. Youth activists will therefore need to combine short-term campaigning with long-term organizing in order to respond to immediate movement needs while also overcoming the structural challenges posed by economic hardship and informality over time.

Governments and political actors must work to improve the economy, guarantee decent jobs and decent living conditions for the majority, and avoid weaponizing economic deprivation as a political tool against the populace. They must also recognize that the alternatives to youth activism are often violent extremism, organized crime, bigotry, and dangerous individualism that undermine a peaceful civil society.

UNDP's research on violent extremism in Africa shows that governance failure, marginalization, and limited economic opportunity are recurrent conditions in pathways to recruitment, especially among young people (*UNDP, 2023*).

3.1.3. Weak institutions

One of the rallying points of youth activism is the demand for institutional accountability and transparency. This means that one of the core issues facing youth activism is the weakness and failure of democratic and political institutions, many of which are manipulated. Yet those same institutions are often used to undermine youth activism. From security agencies that selectively enforce the law, to legislatures used as rubber stamps for laws that punish government critics and shrink civic space, to judicial institutions that interpret laws in ways that safeguard the political class, youth activists face widespread institutionalized oppression. The problem is often reinforced by patronage systems that shape recruitment and selection through political favoritism and nepotism (*World Bank, n.d.; WJP, 2024*).

Weak institutions make it difficult to implement needed changes or consolidate victories already won. Even when youth activism successfully raises awareness or mobilizes public support, weak institutions often lack the capacity or political will to implement reforms. For example, anti-corruption campaigns and demands for electoral transparency frequently encounter institutional resistance, resulting in limited policy outcomes. The World Justice Project's Rule of Law Index and the World Bank's Worldwide Governance Indicators both show that constraints on government powers, rule of law, and control of corruption remain major governance concerns in many countries across the region (*World Bank, 2019.; WJP, 2024*).

Many countries in the region continue to struggle with ineffective judicial systems, weak legislatures, electoral irregularities, and limited accountability mechanisms.

This is a real impediment to vibrant youth activism. It is therefore not surprising that more than 70 percent of youth activists polled across West Africa in a survey for this report identified weak institutions as a major hindrance to effective youth activism (*see Chapter Four for full analysis*).

3.1.4. Insecurity

Most West African countries face some form of conflict or social unrest. In Mali and Burkina Faso, jihadist violence remains active, while Burkina Faso alone had more than 2 million internally displaced persons at the end of 2024 (*UNHCR, 2025*). In this milieu, activism and civil society become vulnerable, and activists demanding better governance face heightened threats from both the state and violent non-state actors (*ACLED, 2024; UNHCR, 2025*).

Pervasive insecurity means that civic space is curtailed under the guise of national security. In addition to the general climate of fear that compels citizens to prioritize self-preservation, governments may also use insecurity to shield themselves from scrutiny, accountability, and criticism. Moreover, many young people who should be engaged in youth activism are instead drawn into conflict, extremism, or local security responses. In this scenario, youth activism on broader political, economic, and governance issues is pushed to the background. UNDP's study on violent extremism in Africa shows that marginalized youth are often drawn into extremist networks through a mix of insecurity, weak governance, and unmet socioeconomic expectations (*UNDP, 2023*).

It is therefore no accident that societies affected by widespread violence and conflict in West Africa have the least civic space and the weakest civil society activism. This is also reflected in our survey, in which more than 70 percent of respondents identified insecurity as a major threat to youth activism (*see Chapter Four for full analysis*).

3.2 Internal Challenges

3.2.1 Intergenerational gap

As noted earlier, youth activism has a long and rich history in West Africa stretching back to the colonial era. This means that youth activism holds deep reservoirs of experience, knowledge, and learning that can benefit later generations of activists. Although economic, social, and political conditions differ across generations, each new generation still has something to learn from the previous one. In fact, the need for intergenerational dialogue is now widely recognized in global youth participation frameworks (*OHCHR, 2023*).

Technological advances, especially digital media technologies, were not available to earlier generations in the colonial, post-independence, and pro-democracy periods. At the same time, democratic culture has expanded across West Africa in the last two decades, meaning that many young people today have mostly been exposed to civilian and democratic rule. This contrasts with earlier generations, when democratic culture was either absent or still nascent. In addition, population growth and higher literacy rates should, in principle, make mobilization easier than in previous eras (*UN DESA, 2024*).

Despite all this, mass mobilization and output in earlier generations appear to have been greater than today. Organizational building and long-term activism were also common features of earlier youth movements. The newer generations therefore have much to gain from the experience of older generations, especially in learning how earlier activists surmounted challenges that are often taken for granted today.

Unfortunately, there appears to be a gap between older and younger generations of activists, especially in terms of knowledge-sharing, experience-sharing, and moral and material support. Younger generations, rightly or wrongly, often believe that older generations contributed to the current economic malaise and dysfunctional society. Older generations, in turn, often believe that younger generations are too impatient to learn and too interested in easier routes.

This mutual mistrust has deprived young activists of opportunities to advance their cause, while also preventing older generations from passing on the best lessons of their era. The result is a loss for the whole society.

Another angle is the gap between the political class and youth in terms of demographic composition (*Adebayo, 2018*). In Nigeria for instance, majority of political leaders in the mainstream political parties contesting in the 2027 general elections have been in politics since the early 2000, as party leaders, elected officials or appointees; with a sprinkle of youth. Some even trace their political journey to early 1990s. Yet, this is not a Nigerian problem, rather a continental crisis. In this scenario, how can such leaders, who grew up in a different era, understand the plight and conditions of youth in this age.

These differences need to be addressed through continuous intergenerational dialogue, engagement, and conversation. This is clearly reflected in the key informant interviews conducted among younger and older activists in a number of West African countries (*see details in Chapter Four*).

3.2.2 Organizational Crisis

The new generation of activists have access to new technologies, which is making mobilization easier and faster. Yet youth activists in this era are not building sustainable organizational structures that can outlive immediate demands. While they do create organizations when needed, there is a widespread view among the current generation that too much organization slows action and hinders results. As a result, many organizations are formed only for immediate or ad hoc needs rather than as long-term institutions.

Although this may have some advantages, it limits the ability to sustain long-term activism and can make state repression more effective. In Nigeria, for example, the #EndSARS protests were massive, but there were no enduring organizations or structured leadership to carry the movement forward.

By the time the protests subsided, there were no organizations to follow up on the demands, especially regarding police and judicial reform. The later #EndBadGovernance protests, which were organized online and drew heavily on youth participation, could have benefited significantly from organizational structures that emerged from #EndSARS (Amnesty International, 2020; Reuters, 2024).

There are a few organizations, such as the Take It Back Movement and Youth Rights Campaign, among others, but these remain relatively small and developing. Meanwhile, traditional youth organizations such as student unions, youth associations and councils have often been absorbed into official platforms constrained by government policies, making them less able to serve as vehicles for social activism. This is one reason many young people are rejecting structured organization. Yet without such organizations, youth activism is forced to start from scratch each time (*CIVICUS*, 2018).

3.2.3 Digital Media Misuse

Digital media has helped youth activism across Africa, and West Africa in particular, evade some forms of state repression, reduce the cost of mobilization, connect across borders, and attract global attention. If used effectively, digital tools can play a vital role in governance reform and long-term activism. However, digital participation does not automatically overcome structural barriers, and online activism still faces hidden costs and inequalities (*Freedom House*, 2024; *ILO*, 2024).

There is, however, another side to digital media: misuse and abuse. Misinformation and disinformation can seriously undermine social media activism. There is also a thin boundary between the free speech and expression social media can offer, on the one hand, and defamation and violations of privacy, on the other. While governments across the region use legal and security measures to censor social media and cyberspace, youth activists must also remain above board by avoiding misinformation, disinformation, cyberstalking, bullying, defamation, and privacy violations.

There have been many cases of activists being arrested and prosecuted for abuses of social and digital media. While many of these cases are politically motivated, they also highlight the need for activists to master digital tools well enough to advance their cause without going overboard (*Freedom House, 2024*).

Another aspect of digital media is the artificial generation of traction and trends, sometimes called farming. While this may help activism by generating awareness and mobilization, it can also be used to derail youth activism by governments and political actors. In addition, surveillance technology has become increasingly sophisticated, making it easier to track activists even when they are offline. These realities challenge activists not just to use digital platforms, but to understand the changing digital environment. Beyond this, there is a need to build enduring organizations with physical presence alongside digital activism. This remains one of the best ways to undercut the impact of surveillance and the negative uses of social media (*Freedom House, 2024; OHCHR, 2024*).

CHAPTER 4

STAKEHOLDERS' ENGAGEMENTS

As part of the validation process to enrich this report, we engaged with stakeholders in the civil society sector, particularly youth activists, civic space defenders, and civil society practitioners. The aim of the engagements is to seek the informed views of practitioners and actors in the youth movement (both past and present) and civil society on the current state of youth activism, the generational trends and differences, the challenges, and the way forward for youth activism in this contemporary time.

4.1 Survey

4.1.1. Methodology

We employed both survey and key informant interviews.

The survey, which was conducted via a questionnaire, focused primarily on youth activists in West Africa. The aim of the survey is to understand the current state of youth activism and the challenges facing it, from the point of view of real actors. The survey sought to know:

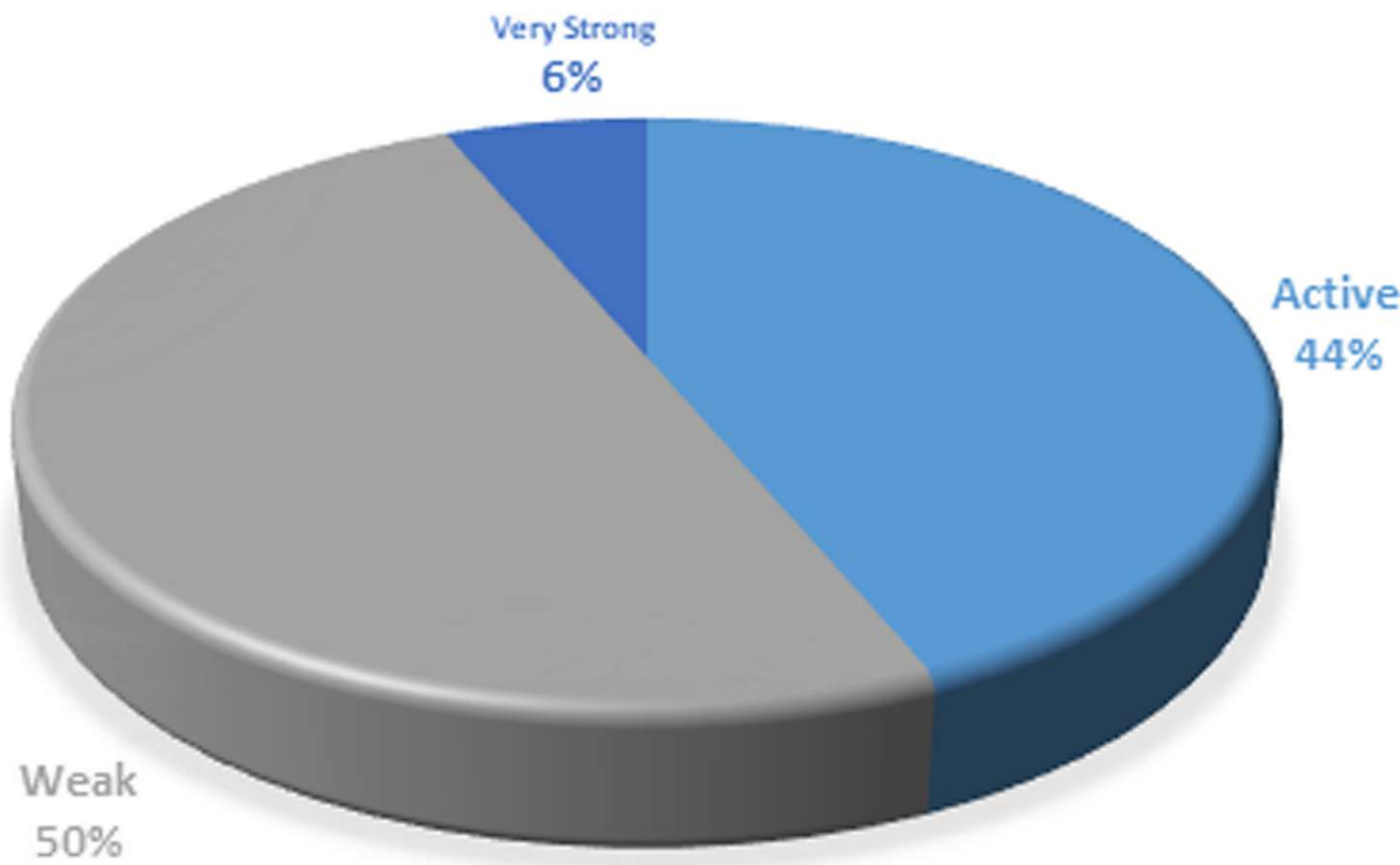
- The state of youth activism in West African countries (whether weak or strong).
- The major focus and demands of youth activists in the contemporary period.
- State responses to youth activism and its demands.
- Major challenges facing youth activism and activists in West Africa (economic, political, social, institutional).
- Recommendations on how to make youth activism more effective and result-oriented.

4.1.2. Result and Outcome

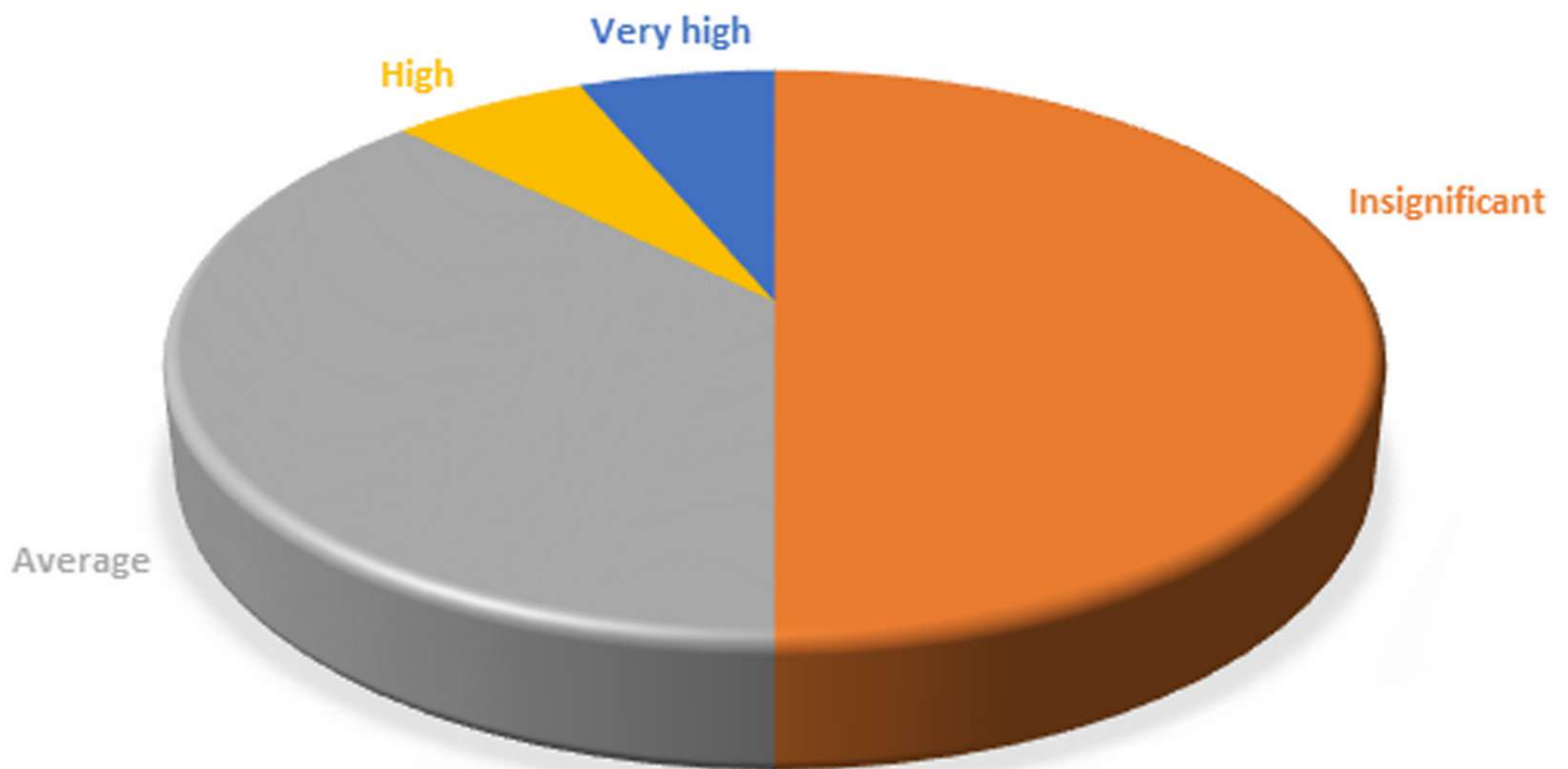
Forty-five (45) youth activists from six West African countries (Nigeria, Togo, Ghana, Sierra Leone, Liberia, and the Republic of Benin) were surveyed using a questionnaire. A preponderance of respondents (60 percent) are from Nigeria, which also reflects the demographic reality of West Africa.

The summary of the responses is provided below:

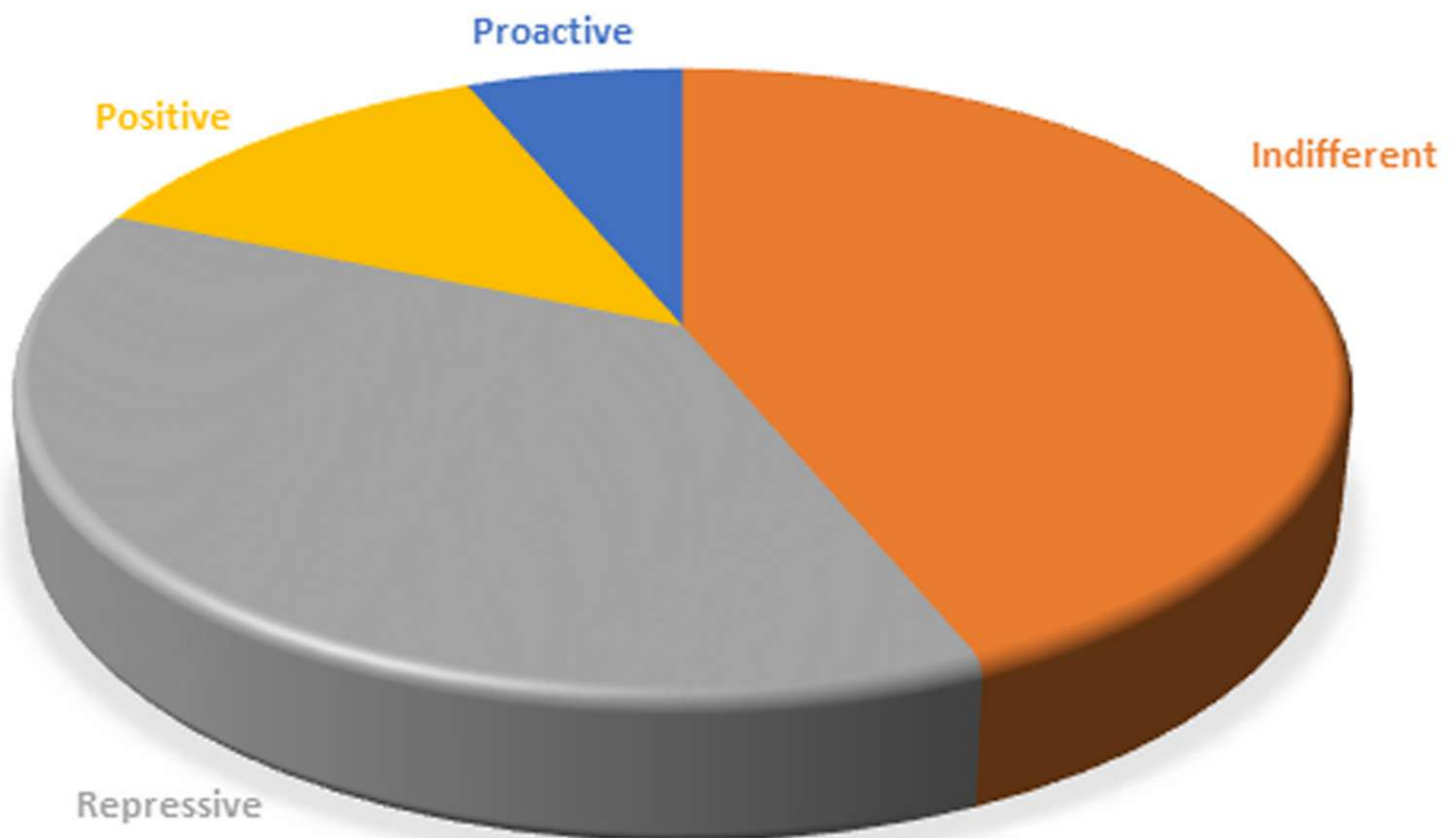
1. We asked the respondents about the strength of the youth movement/activism in their country. The responses were varied: 50 percent considered youth activism as being weak; 44 percent considered it active; while only about 6 percent considered it very strong.



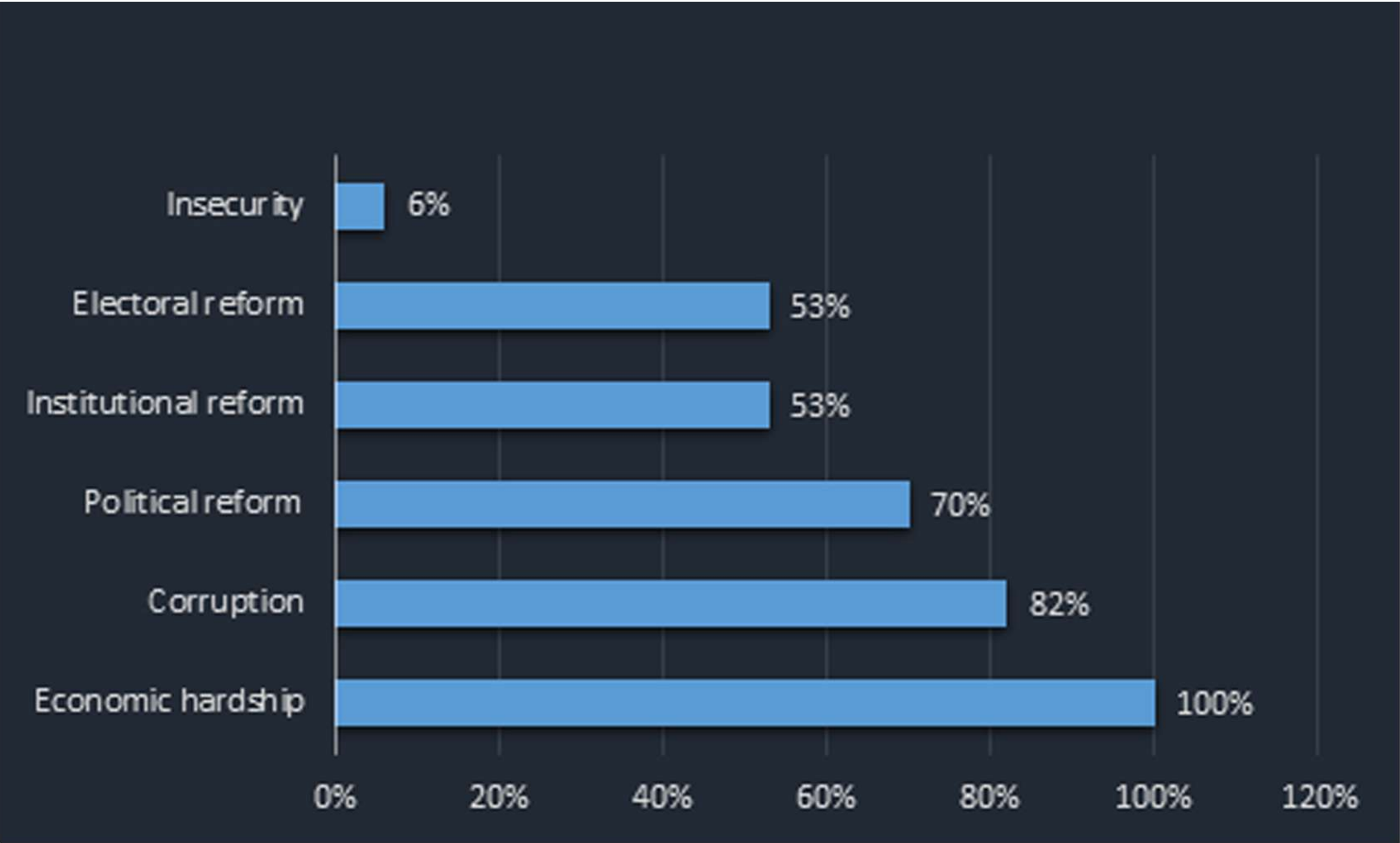
2. We asked if youth are involved in governance, either in elective or appointive positions, in their country: About 12 percent said youth involvement in governance was strong or very strong. About 43 percent said it was insignificant, while 41 percent considered youth involvement to be average.



3. We asked whether governments' responses to youth activism and demands are positive, proactive, indifferent, or repressive: Only 6 percent and 13 percent considered governments' responses as proactive and positive, respectively. However, 44 percent and 37 percent of respondents considered government responses to be indifferent and repressive.

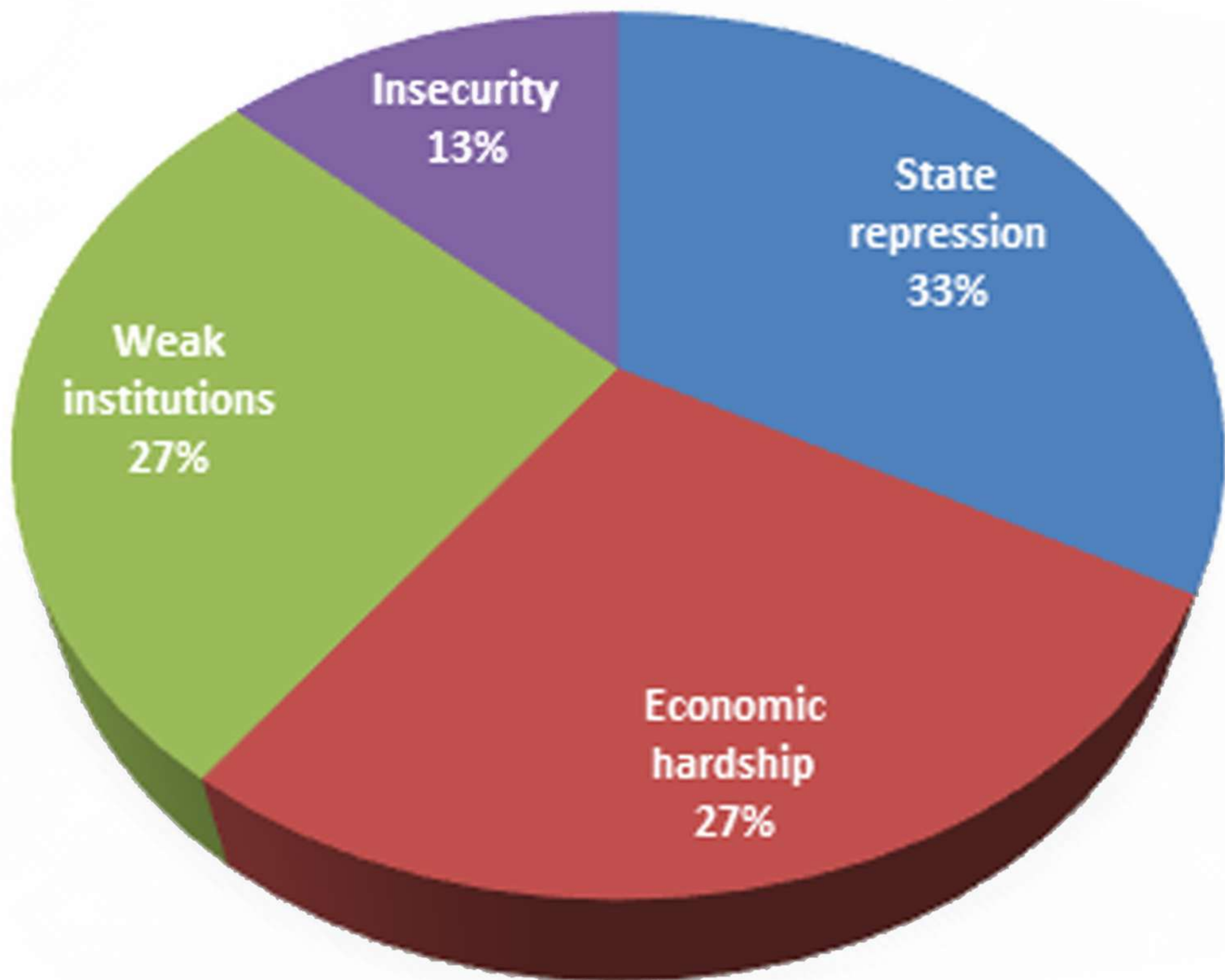


4. When asked to identify major and recurring issues for youth activism (through multiple-choice entries), the respondents shared different perspectives. 100 percent of respondents identified economic hardship; 82 percent said corruption; 70 percent said political reform; 53 percent said electoral reform; 53 percent said institutional reform; while 6 percent identified insecurity.



5. We asked about the major challenges to youth activism in their country: 82 percent of respondents identified state repressive actions; 94 percent identified economic hardship and job informality; while 76 percent each identified insecurity and weak institutions as major challenges to youth activism.

6. When asked how strongly the factors identified in (5) above impact youth activism, 33 percent considered state repression as strong; 27 percent each considered economic hardship/job informality and weak institutions as strong; while 13 percent considered insecurity as a strong factor.



4.1.3. Summary of Recommendations

1. Majority of respondents called for the strengthening of cross regional unity, accountability, and inclusive leadership. Respondents emphasized the need for youth activists to be more united across ethnic and religious divides, demonstrate integrity, transparency, ethical leadership, gender inclusion, and lead by example in order to build credible and effective movements.

2. Build knowledge, capacity, and strategic coordination: At least half of the respondents called for greater political and civic education, studying history, strengthening leadership skills, mentoring young leaders, using evidence-based advocacy, and improving collaboration and coordination among youth organizations.

3. Respondents also emphasized the need to promote sustainable, community-driven action. Respondents urged youth activists to move beyond protest by developing practical solutions, engaging in community service, building alternative initiatives, and maintaining consistent advocacy that delivers long-term social and political impact.

4.2 Key Informant Interviews

4.2.1. Methodology

KIIs were conducted through interviews, primarily with old-generation youth activists and civil society practitioners in the region. We define old-generation activists as those above forty years of age who spent their youthful lives between the anti-colonial era (1940s to 1960s) and the pro-democracy era (1980s to early 2000s). The goal of the KIIs is to engage older activists and civil society practitioners on the current state of youth activism, with the benefit of insights from the past and broader perspectives on civil society. In practical terms, the interviews centred on:

- Understanding the differences between old-generation youth activism and current-generation youth activism, and what can be learned from them.
- Gaining insights into how to make youth activism in West Africa more effective, drawing from the experiences of old-generation activists and civil society practitioners.
- Understanding how youth activism can benefit from wider civil and social movements, and what contributions youth activism can make to wider civil society.

4.2.2. Result and Outcome

We conducted detailed interviews with ten (10) old-generation activists from Nigeria, Ghana, Benin, Sierra Leone, and Liberia. Sixty percent of those interviewed are from Nigeria, reflecting the regional demographic balance.

Summary

The summary of the interviews is shown below:

- a. The interviews suggest a broad unanimity among old-generation activists that youth activism in West Africa has undergone significant transformation but has not disappeared. Contemporary youth protests can be interpreted as evidence that political mobilization has not disappeared; its ideological foundations, organizational structures and demands have changed.
- b. There is a broad yet strong understanding that earlier generations of youth activism were characterized by strong ideological commitment, organizational building and discipline, and collective struggles against colonialism, military rule, and authoritarian governance. However, contemporary activism is viewed as more fragmented, less ideologically grounded, and increasingly shaped by economic hardship and technological change.
- c. The majority of those interviewed suggested that structural conditions have weakened youth movements over time. They attributed this decline to the repression of student movements during military rule, the erosion of radical political organizations, the commercialization of politics, and the collapse of ideological platforms that once provided political education and mentorship. These developments have left many young people vulnerable to political manipulation, sycophancy, and short-term economic incentives.
- d. A preponderant observation was that worsening socioeconomic conditions such as unemployment, rising living costs, expensive education, and widespread poverty have fundamentally altered the motivation and capacity of young people to engage in sustained civic action.

The daily struggle for survival increasingly clashes with collective political engagement, making many youths susceptible to co-optation by political elites or disengagement from activism altogether.

i. The majority of those interviewed recognized digital technologies and social media as powerful tools for civic mobilization, information sharing, and organization, as recent waves of protest movements and online activism have shown. Yet, respondents emphasized that **digital activism alone is insufficient without ideological education, strategic organization, and effective leadership capable of transforming online mobilization into sustained collective action.**

“The youths of today are better placed for a better and quality activism on the basis of availability of social media, if only they can acquire the knowledge and the many ways, social media platforms can be effectively used to teach, inform and articulate their position and mobilise the population for it, like they did during EndSars movement, Good Governance protest, protest against bad governance and hardship. Mass movement against demolition etc.”

– Adeola Soetan (civil society actor, and veteran youth activist)

ii. Another recurring suggestion is the importance of rebuilding institutions that nurture political consciousness. Respondents advocated renewed commitment to civic education, ideological training, youth mentorship, and the revitalization of independent student and youth organizations. These are considered essential for producing politically informed, socially conscious, and resilient youth activists and leaders.

“We need to revive radical teaching and learning of radical thoughts/ideology. In addition to resuscitation of radical left groups especially in the face of the apparent failure of neo-liberal ideas and thoughts, the platforms for the training and mentorship of youths and youth groups must also be a priority.”

- Oluajo Babatunde (civil society actor, and veteran youth activist)

iii. Some of those interviewed called on youth to be politically active by using their numerical and demographic strength to demand good leadership. This should be done not by becoming willing tools for political sycophancy but by joining other progressives, civil society, and social movements to build political platforms with clearly defined manifestoes, programmes, ethics and modus operandi, and a political philosophy anchored on developmental programmes and poverty eradication.

“Youth must be politically involved by joining others in the labour movement and civil society to build political alternative in the interest of the youth and common people.”

- Abiodun Falodun (former Youth leader)

4.2.3 Inter-generational Dialogue

1. On intergenerational engagement, most respondents believe that dialogue between older activists and younger generations can strengthen youth movements by facilitating the transfer of historical experience, organizational knowledge, and strategic lessons. Such engagement, however, should be collaborative rather than paternalistic, allowing younger activists to adapt past experiences to contemporary realities.

“Inter-generational conversations will be critical to achieving these goals and restoring the vibrancy of youth political participation.”

– Yinka Ibrahim (civil society actor, and veteran youth activist)

2. However, a minority of respondents expressed skepticism, maintaining that the degeneration of social values, material incentives, and the perceived decline in integrity among both current youths and some former activists may limit the effectiveness of intergenerational dialogue.

“Intergenerational dialogue is only as strong as the values that underpin it. The erosion of social values, material incentives, and declining integrity among some young people and former activists may limit its ability to create meaningful change..”

– Thomas, Former Youth Leader, Burkina Faso

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are suggested for youth activists, old-generation activists, civil society, regional bodies, international NGOs and governments in West Africa. They reflect the report's desktop research and feedbacks from field studies and engagements with key stakeholders. They are however not exhaustive, and we welcome improvements and further conversations. The recommendations are anchored on the central conclusion that sustainable youth activism requires not only stronger youth movements but also enabling political, economic, and institutional environments supported by governments, civil society, regional organizations, and international partners.

1. Youth Activists

Youth activists of this generation, among other things need to:

- Build sustainable, democratic, and accountable youth-led network and coalitions capable of sustaining advocacy beyond episodic protests.
- Strengthen internal transparency, ethical leadership, gender inclusion, and financial accountability in organizations to enhance public trust.
- Commit themselves to civic education, especially as it relate to policy literacy, research, negotiation, and evidence-based advocacy.
- Develop stronger regional networks that facilitate learning, solidarity, and coordinated responses across West African countries.
- Combine digital activism with community organizing, grassroots mobilization, and offline civic engagement.
- Promote intergenerational learning by engaging experienced activists as mentors while preserving youth leadership.
- Adopt responsible digital practices by combating misinformation, protecting digital security, respecting privacy, and strengthening cyber-security capacity.
- Expand activism beyond protest by developing practical community initiatives, policy alternatives, and citizen-led development projects.
- Build alliances with labour unions, professional associations, women's organizations, faith groups, and student organizations to broaden civic influence.
- Prioritize long-term institutional reforms rather than short-term political victories.

2. Old-Generation Activists

Old-generation activists should:

- Institutionalize mentorship programmes that transfer organizational knowledge, movement history, and strategic leadership skills.
- Live above board in their chosen field and public responsibilities so as to serve as good example for younger generations.
- Support rather than dominate contemporary youth movements by respecting youth autonomy and innovation.
- Facilitate regular intergenerational dialogue platforms for knowledge exchange across West Africa.
- Share experiences in coalition building, negotiation, nonviolent resistance, and organizational sustainability.
- Assist young activists in developing ideological clarity, political education, and strategic planning.
- Help mobilize legal, financial, and institutional support during periods of repression.
- Encourage documentation of historical struggles to preserve institutional memory for future generations

3. Civil Society Organizations

The broader civil society have important roles to play in advancing a better and more effective youth movement. These roles include:

- Expanding leadership development programmes specifically targeting young civic leaders.
- Providing legal aid, digital security support, psychosocial services, and emergency protection for threatened activists.
- Strengthening youth participation in organizational governance and decision-making structures.
- Facilitating cross-country collaboration among youth organizations throughout West Africa.

- Supporting policy research and evidence generation that strengthens advocacy campaigns.
- Promoting civic education programmes in schools, universities, and communities.
- Establishing rapid response mechanisms to monitor and respond to violations of civic freedoms.
- Creating sustainable funding opportunities for locally led youth organizations.

4. International NGOs and Development Partners

International NGOs and Development Partners should also support youth activism in West Africa by:

- Increasing long-term institutional funding for locally led youth organizations like the West African Youth Protection and Advocacy Network (WAYPAN) instead of short project cycles.
- Supporting leadership development, digital security, organizational management, and advocacy training.
- Investing in research, innovation, and data systems that improve evidence-based youth policy.
- Expanding emergency protection programmes for activists facing threats or judicial harassment.
- Facilitating regional and international exchanges that expose young leaders to global best practices.
- Promoting locally driven programme design to ensure sustainability and ownership.
- Supporting technology solutions that strengthen civic participation while protecting activists from surveillance.
- Encouraging collaboration among governments, civil society, academia, and youth movements.

5. Regional Bodies (ECOWAS, AES, AU, etc.)

Regional bodies in West Africa should help to:

- Strengthen implementation of regional commitments on youth participation, democratic governance, and civic freedoms.

- Establish a Regional Youth Civic Participation and Protection Monitor and Lab to monitor youth engagement and civic space protection across member states.
- Develop regional early warning systems on violations against youth activists.
- Mainstream youth representation within regional governance institutions and policy processes.
- Support regional exchanges, fellowships, and leadership academies for young civic actors.
- Promote harmonization of laws protecting freedom of association, peaceful assembly, and digital rights.
- Integrate youth participation indicators into democratic governance assessments.
- Encourage peer review mechanisms that recognize countries making progress in youth inclusion.

6. Governments in West Africa

i. Civic Space and Democratic Governance

- Protect constitutional rights to peaceful assembly, association, and freedom of expression.
- End arbitrary arrests, harassment, intimidation, and excessive use of force against peaceful activists.
- Review laws governing cybercrime, national security, and public order to ensure compliance with international human rights standards.
- Strengthen judicial independence and accountability institutions.

ii. Youth Participation

- Institutionalize meaningful youth participation in policymaking at national and local levels.
- Establish permanent youth advisory councils linked directly to executive and legislative institutions.

iii. Economic Inclusion

- Prioritize youth employment through economic expansion, entrepreneurship support, vocational training, industrial development, and digital economy initiatives.

- Expand access to affordable education, innovation financing, and decent work opportunities.
- Strengthen social protection programmes for vulnerable young people.

iv. Institutional Reform

- Improve transparency, anti-corruption systems, and public accountability.
- Invest in responsive public institutions capable of addressing youth concerns.
- Strengthen electoral integrity and public participation mechanisms.

v. Digital Governance

- Avoid internet shutdowns and restrictions on digital civic engagement.
- Promote digital literacy while combating misinformation through transparent and rights-based approaches.

CONCLUSION

The paper also highlights important internal challenges within the youth movement itself. These include fragmentation, weak ideological grounding, limited strategic coordination, and a growing disconnect between younger and older generations of activists. While digital activism has made mobilization easier, it has not always translated into sustained organization, long-term leadership development, or policy influence. The findings from the survey and key informant interviews reinforce this reality: respondents consistently pointed to economic hardship, state repression, weak institutions, and insecurity as major barriers, while also calling for greater accountability, unity, civic education, and intergenerational learning within the movement. This suggests that the effectiveness of youth activism depends not only on the energy of young people, but also on the quality of the structures, values, and alliances that sustain their engagement.



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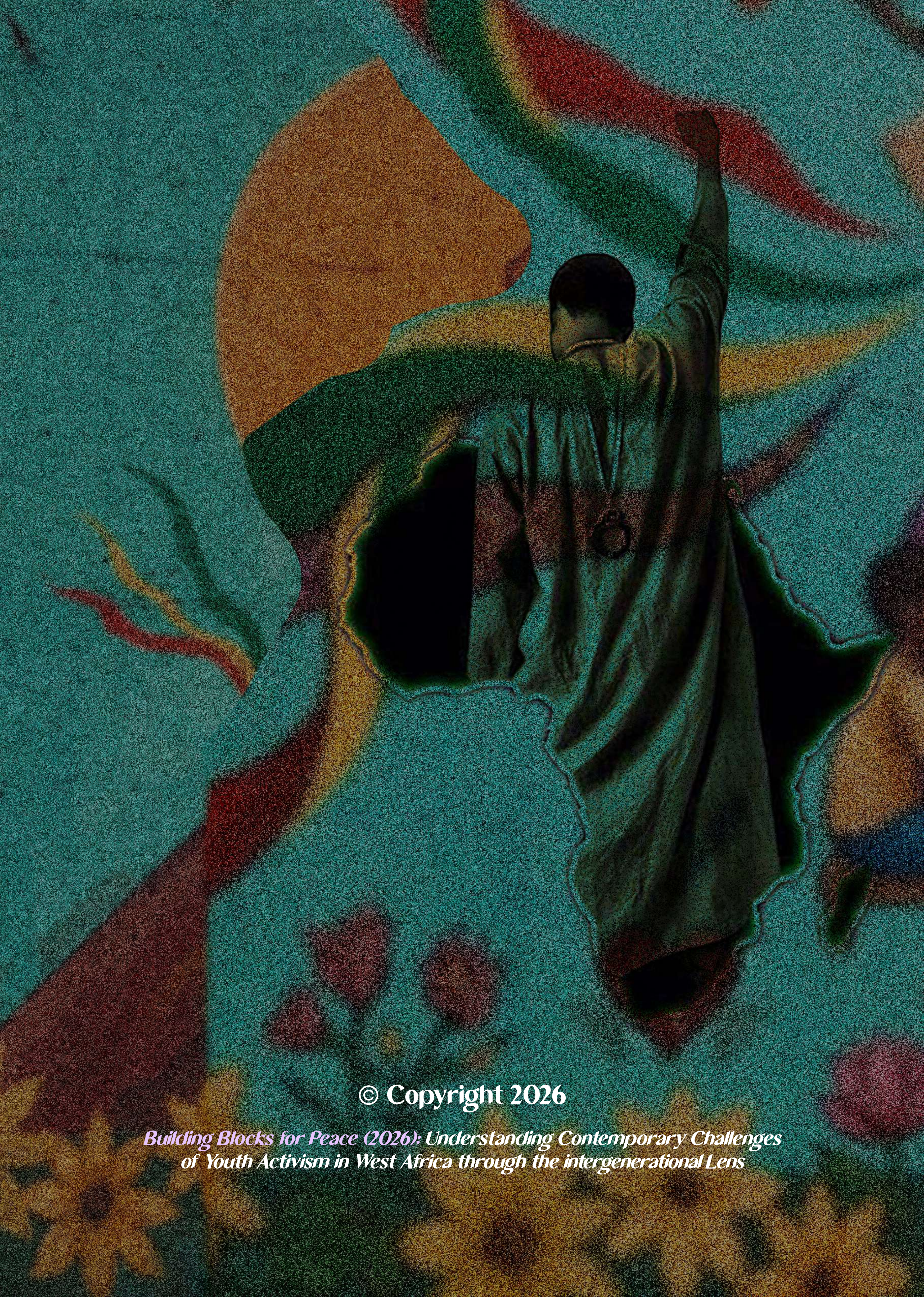
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