Chapter 9
African Youth’s Democratic Rights Awareness and Participation in Continental Governance: A Case Study of Zimbabwe

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ABSTRACT
This chapter explored the democratic rights awareness among the youth in Zimbabwe. The youth who live in urban and peri-urban spaces are relatively aware of their democratic rights and a significant number do participate in governance processes in the country, although their participation is largely defined by political party affiliation. There are those youths who are in rural and farming communities who have limited understanding of their democratic rights and responsibilities and most of them believe that participation in governance is simply about voting during national plebiscites and nothing more. The study also found that the development of rights awareness among the youths in Zimbabwe is state-centric and thus undermining the efforts towards effective youth participation. There are some civil society organizations in Zimbabwe that have worked to empower the youth in the country and to create awareness, but this has met with many challenges owing to the hegemonic influences of the ruling political elites and the general political polarization prevailing in the country.

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INTRODUCTION

The youth in Africa constitute a significant portion of over sixty per cent (60%) of the overall population on the continent (United Nations Development Programme 2017). The African continent is referred to as a growing population because of the high number of the youthful population. However, the UNDP (2017) noted that “the continent remains stubbornly inhospitable – politically, economically, and socially – to young people. The success of African governments’ efforts to address this will be the single most important factor determining whether the continent prospers or suffers in the coming decades.” The quest for democratic governance and participation involving all groups in society inspired the author to look critically into the discourse around youth participation in continental governance initiatives. A considerable number volume of literature has been generated on issues relating to the challenges facing the youths on the African continent, their role in conflict and violence and even their role in peacebuilding. However, there has been a limited discourse on the critical enablers of youth participation especially on issues relating to awareness of their own democratic rights. This chapter explored the awareness levels of the youths in Zimbabwe. The main objectives of the chapter were to;

- To explore the concept of democratic rights and participation in governance processes in Zimbabwe and Africa in general.
- To examine the legal and institutional framework providing for youth democratic participation in Zimbabwe and the African continent.
- To analyse the extent to which the youths in Zimbabwe are aware of their democratic rights and how they have exercised them.
- To propose strategies for effective youth participation in governance processes in Zimbabwe and the African continent.

BACKGROUND

The quest for youth participation and empowerment continues to be an enduring theme in many developing countries, especially on the African continent. Some progress has been made over the past few decades but there is still a continued outcry in terms of what is still lacking towards providing effective spaces for participation in the governance and development of the continent. The African Youth Charter of 2006 is evidence of how the continent has continued to seek sustainable ways of harnessing the youth resource. The African Union (2009) at its Assembly of Heads of State and Government declared the period 2009-2019 as the Decade of Youth Development in Africa. The overall objective of the document was to mainstream
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