AFRICAN YOUTH MATTERS: A REVIEW OF AFRICAN COUNTRIES VOLUNTARY NATIONAL REVIEWS

MASHOMBOTWA MUKWENA
National Institute of Public Administration (NIPA)

ABSTRACT

Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) are a source of rich information on countries' efforts to achieve Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). At the end of 2023, more than 200 VNRs have been published each reporting countries efforts and progress on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. Text mining offers an opportunity to review large volumes of text. This study utilized Voyant Tools to review forty-four VNRs from the African continent specifically focusing on youth matters. Assessing and accounting for vulnerable groups such as youth in the achievement of SDGs is one of the guidelines in VNR reporting. This study found low relative frequencies of youth related reporting in the VNRs. Employment was found to be the common discussion when reporting on youth matters in all four regions (Southern, Eastern, Western and Northern) of Africa. Results showed that texting mining tools can be utilized to monitor SDG progress as 2030 draws near.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

It is projected that by 2030, that 42% of the world's population will be below the age of 35 (Perlotto, 2019). Three quarters of these youths will be from the African continent. Youth development policies exist across the world. However, the monitoring and evaluation of policy targeted at the youth demographic is scanty (United Nations, 2018). Moreover, youth specific indicators of development are sparse. As 2030 draws closer, it is important to take stock of the current methods of how the African continent accounts for youth matters.

Despite making up a large proportion, youth often do not get visibility in policies. Youth policies are often short-term reactive approaches that fail to main-stream youth into legislation. Main-streaming youth into legislation requires an understanding of the conditions needed for their well-being. Youth well-being differs from other demographics and it is multidimensional especially at the local level. Moreover, even within the youth demographic, variations in adolescent and adult youth development needs exist. Despite the many SDG indicators, youth focused indicators are few and far between. The United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs states that 90 out of the 232 SDG indicators are related to youth development.

It has been highlighted that some SDG indicators lack age disaggregated data. This leaves youth-related needs and vulnerabilities invisible to policy makers (Guglielmi & Jones, 2019). Lack of sufficient youth-related data monitoring and evaluation makes youth-targeted policy difficult as often what gets measured provides evidence for policy making.

Regular measurement and reporting of the UN 2030 SDGs progress keeps countries focused on the tracking and attainment of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Once a

country decides to measure and report their progress through the publication of VNRs, the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) provides guidelines of reporting and preparatory support. Despite being voluntary, countries are encouraged to adhere to the VNR guidelines to ensure comparability across countries. Through the VNRs, countries report their progress, successes, challenges and lessons learned in the implementation process of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (Sebestyén et al., 2020). There is a broad principle of Leaving No One Behind (LNOB) and the VNR guidelines encourage the reporting of progress for vulnerable groups such as youth.

This study will critique the youth-related indicators available and review the African continents VNRs with relation to youth matters. While seventeen SDGs exist, not all are reported in countries' VNRs. Priority SDGs per country differ including the comprehensiveness of reporting (Mabry et al., 2024). Countries such as Kenya actively seek out the vulnerable groups such as youth when carrying out their VNR reporting (Chisika & Yeom, 2024). The critique of VNRs contributes to their external review which in the past has contributed to improvements in the VNR reporting guidelines such as the published handbook by the UN Secretary General in 2017 (Chisika & Yeom, 2024).

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Youth Indicator Tools

The last African Youth Summit held in 2022 concluded that more participation of youth is required in the implementation of the SDGs and that policies must be adaptive to the fast-changing world and youth-driven by placing youths at the centre of policy making. These recommendations speak towards a change from a top-down policy making to bottom-up policy making that is centred around youth in order to meet the 2030 Agenda (SDGs). There are eighteen SDG indicators that specifically disaggregate data according to age in order to give youth data-rich indicators (Guglielmi & Jones, 2019).

Various frameworks exist to govern SDG implementation and attainment. At policy development level, the consequential framework states that policy should be measured by its consequences utilizing parameters such as utility, pain and perceived pleasure (Chater, 2022). Often the choice between two policy directions will depend on which policy "wins" in terms of welfare economics. SDG goals often reflect the bigger picture in terms of outcomes. However, the attainment of the bigger goal requires smaller steps of action which can only be monitored through disaggregated data. Disaggregation is the breakdown of observations within the same branch of hierarchy to get more detailed observations. For example, age disaggregation would ensure each age group's condition is observed and analyzed. This ensures that the national goal is assessed by knowing the full detailed picture of each smaller demographic. More than half of SDGs are related to a particular population (Qiu et al., 2022). Qiu et al, (2022), states that disaggregation of data in SDG indicators is required to ensure no demographic, especially youth, is left behind. Demographics are not homogenous in their needs (Szetey et al., 2021) and therefore disaggregation of data allows for a clear way to track every demographic during the implementation of SDG initiatives. The Inter-Agency and Expert Group on SDG Indicators (IAEG-SDG) has been tasked to ensure indicators are disaggregated by income, sex, age, race, ethnicity, migratory status, disability and geographic location.

Created in 2017, the IAEG-SDG has eight African countries as members. In Africa, the disaggregation of data according to age also can cure the lack of data on indigenous youth which is currently sparse (Davis, 2016). Davis (2016) states that in countries where disaggregated data exists, large disparities are seen between indigenous and non-indigenous youth development exists. Without data, policy-making is not evidence based and monitoring and evaluation indicators are vague. Continental efforts to address data issues have included proposals such as a Geographic Information System (GIS). The GIS platform allows for tracking of SDG progress according to location and offers opportunity for evidence-based future policy making in specific areas (Mhangara et al., 2019).

The European Youth Forum formulated a toolkit to measure the quality of youth targeted policy utilizing eight standards. These standards state that youth focused policy must be evidence-based, participatory, cross-sectional and multilevel inclusive of all relevant public authorities from local, regional, national and continental levels. Additionally, youth focused policy must be strategic, inclusive of all youth rights with political commitment and accountability. Lastly, resources must be available in order to attain the goals of youth focused policy. Resource allocation can only take place if youth focused data is available. Broader national policies and budgets must be able to disaggregate to isolate youth focused budget lines.

Another toolkit (Youth Development Index) was formulated by the Commonwealth Secretariat to measure youth development in 183 countries where Zambia was ranked 154 in its 2020 Index. The Youth Development Index utilizes 8 indicators relating to education, health and well-being, employment and opportunity, and civic and political participation. The UNICEF toolkit Adolescent Country Tracker (ACT) focuses on five domains of adolescents namely health and wellbeing, education and learning, protection, transition to work and policy engagement and participation.

The African Union Commission (AUC) youth researchers created The Status of African Youth Report (SoAYR) indicators following the AUC's development of the African Union Demographic Dividend (AUDD) Roadmap. To accelerate youth development on the African continent, the AUDD utilizes four key pillars of: Employment and entrepreneurship; Education and skills development; Health and well-being; and Rights, governance, and empowerment. (SoAYR) indicators aligned with the Commonwealth National and Regional Youth Development Index (YDI) toolkit and co-opted the African Countries National Statistics Offices (NSOs) to collect data required especially disaggregated data to capture the youth demographic. The African Youth Charter (AYC) states that the youth demographic constitutes the age group 15-35-year-old.

3.0 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In order to gain insight on the youth-related matters in African countries VNR submissions, this study utilized a data mining technique. Guidelines for VNR reporting are lenient and have no standardized structure. Some studies such as Chisika and Yeom (2024) opted for content analysis through identifying themes in the VNRs of East African countries. Another study by Mabry et al. (2024) tracked the occurrence of 60 health related SDGs in 195 VNRs. Mabry et al.'s study also utilized thematic analysis. These qualitative approaches are tedious and prone to subjectivity. A few have opted to utilize technology for the analysis of the VNRs vast
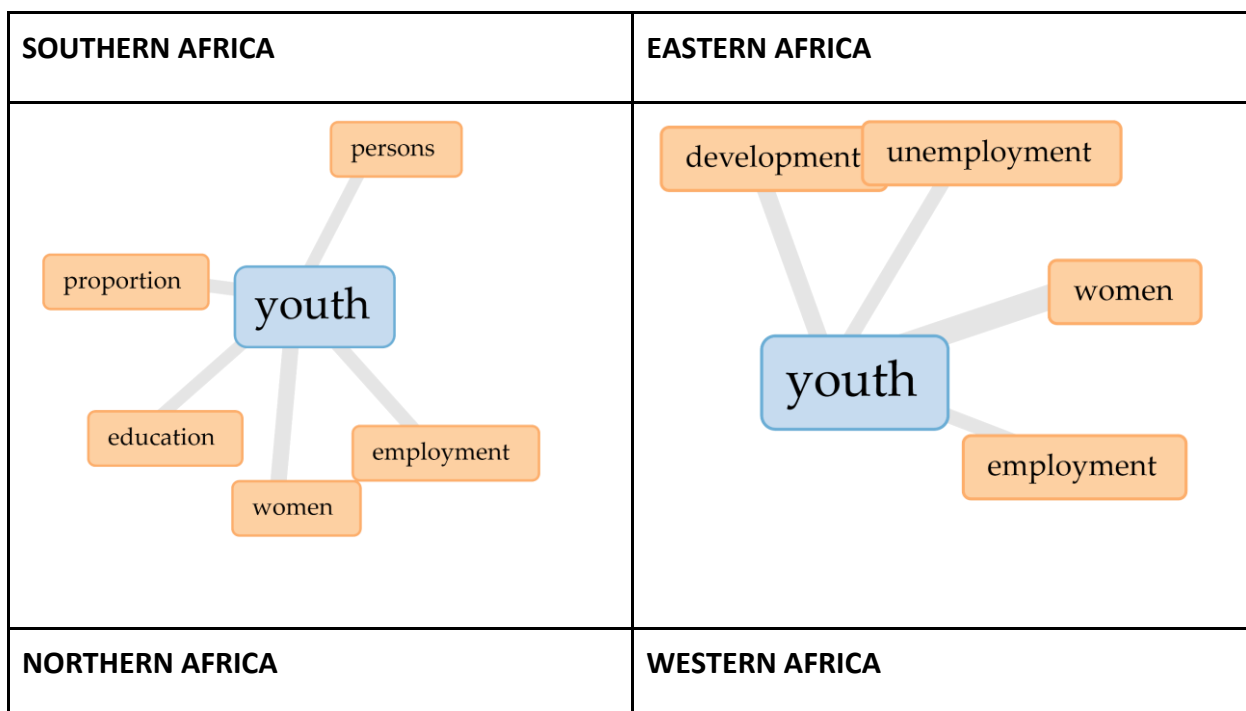
content. Therefore, text mining is an ideal tool for the extraction and analysis of VNR data. Various studies have utilized text mining techniques such as Sebestyén et al (2020) who utilized text-mining to cluster countries 2018 VNR submission to see common challenges that were reported by countries and extract the common development strategies countries are utilizing. The study found gender equality to be the most prevalent goal in the 2018 VNR. Rivera et al. (2014) utilized text-mining of news reports to tract SDG initiatives for monitoring purposes.
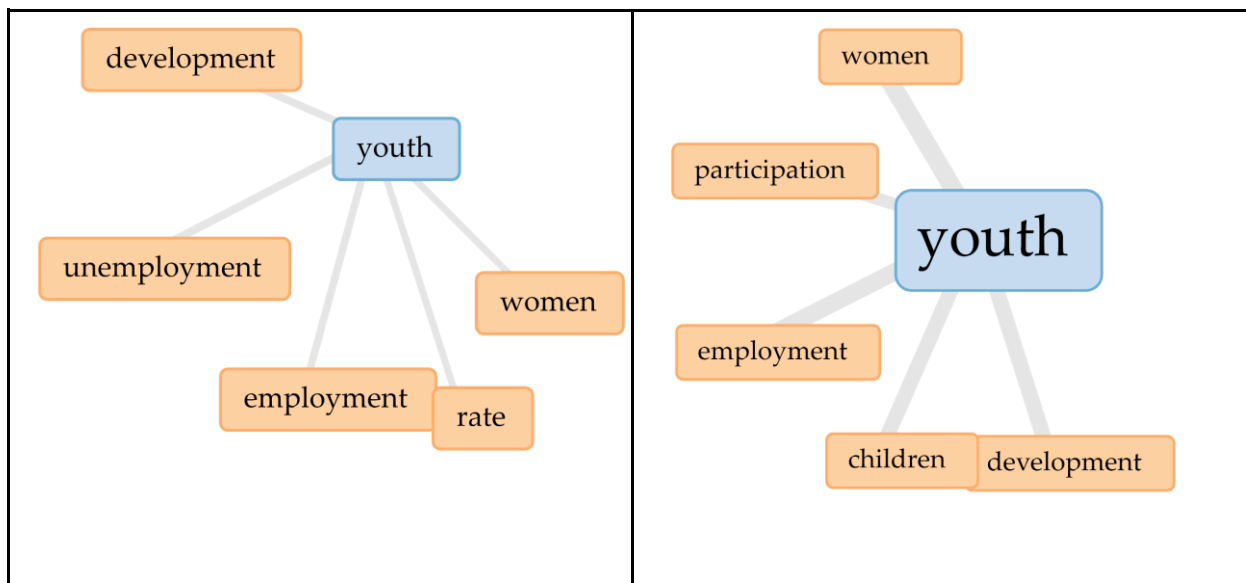
In order to mine data on youth related matters, this study took all English written VNR reports by African countries between 2016 to 2024. A total of forty-four reviews were sampled and uploaded on the Voyant Tools data mining tool. The forty-four reviews were grouped into the four regions of the African continent.

4.0 DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

The Voyant Tools analysis utilizing the Links feature allowed for the search of the key word "youth" and the terms associated (collocation) with it. The forty-four reviews were grouped regionally and their "youth" collocate graphs produced.

Figure 1: Collocation of the word "youth" in Voluntary National Reviews

SOUTHERN AFRICA	EASTERN AFRICA
NORTHERN AFRICA	WESTERN AFRICA

The collocate graphs of all regions showed a regional commonality that all regions reporting on youth matters focused around the issue of employment for youth. Additionally, all regions reported on women and youth matters indicating a regional interest in the young female gender. The above is unable to assess the nature of the reporting however its presence in all regions suggests a keen interest in gender disparity issues even amongst the youth population. Youth and development reporting was frequent in Eastern, Western and Northern Africa, while youth and education was prominent in Southern Africa.

The relative frequency feature of Voyant Tools allowed for the occurrence of the word "youth" in the VNRs. Overall in all the reviews the mention of youth matters was very low as illustrated in the following table. Two counties (Tanzania 2023 and Liberia 2022) had no mention of the word youth in their VNR. This analysis shows only the occurrence of the word "youth" and it cannot be assumed that the two VNR do not take account for any matters relating to the youth of the country. This is despite the UN Handbook on VNR reporting guiding that the report should outline mechanism utilized to engage vulnerable groups such as youth. However, the absence of the word indicates the two countries focus to be none-youth targeted matters. From all the forty-four VNRs sampled, Ghana's 2019 VNR had the highest relative frequency indicating that youth matters accounted for 0.372% of the VNR discussion. Southern Africa saw the country of Lesotho have the highest relative frequency from its 2019 VNR. In Eastern Africa, Sudan's 2022 VNR had the highest relative frequency of youth matters discussion.

Table 1: Relative frequency of the word "youth" in Voluntary National Reviews for Southern and Eastern Africa

	Ranked highest to lowest			
	Southern Africa		Eastern Africa	
	Country	Relative frequency %	Country	Relative frequency %
1	Lesotho 2019	0.257	Sudan 2022	0.179

	Country	Relative frequency	Country	Relative frequency
2	Malawi 2020	0.198	Ethiopia 2017	0.154
3	Lesotho 2022	0.168	Rwanda 2023	0.148
4	Malawi 2022	0.140	Eritrea 2022	0.098
5	Swaziland 2019	0.133	Kenya 2017	0.097
6	Swaziland 2022	0.109	Kenya 2020	0.097
7	Zimbabwe 2017	0.105	Sudan 2018	0.079
8	Zimbabwe 2021	0.097	Rwanda 2019	0.054
9	Zambia 2023	0.096	Uganda 2016	0.041
10	Tanzania 2019	0.078	Uganda 2020	0.040
11	Mauritius 2019	0.077	Ethiopia 2022	0.035
12	Namibia 2018	0.075	Tanzania 2023	0.000
13	Seychelles 2020	0.070		
14	Botswana 2017	0.061		
15	Zambia 2020	0.060		
16	south Africa 2019	0.044		
17	Angola 2021	0.041		
18	Mozambique 2020	0.018		
19	Namibia 2021	0.009		
	Western Africa		**Northern Africa**	
	Country	**Relative frequency**	**Country**	**Relative frequency**
1	Ghana 2019	0.372	Egypt 2016	0.110
2	Gambia 2022	0.233	Egypt 2020	0.055
3	Nigeria 2017	0.168	Egypt 2018	0.036
4	Ghana 2022	0.144		
5	Gambia 2020	0.139		
6	Nigeria 2020	0.118		
7	Liberia 2020	0.091		
8	Sierra Leone 2019	0.051		
9	Liberia 2022	0.041		

5.0 CONCLUSION

VNRs are rich sources of SDG initiatives that countries are undertaking, therefore they must be viewed extensively. As the SDGs deadlines draw near, the African continent must take stock of how its large youth demographic has been catered for in SDGs initiatives. While this study took on a data mining approach, a gap exists in the use of more rigorous data mining techniques that can shed more insight and ensure that the SDG overarching goal of Leaving No One Behind is achieved.

REFERENCES

African Union (AU), 2018. AU Roadmap on Harnessing the Demographic Dividend Through Investments in Youth. Available at: https://wcaro.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/AU%202017%20DD%20ROADMAP%20Final%20-%20EN.pdf [Accessed: 8 June 2024].

Chater, N., 2022. What is the point of behavioral public policy? A contractarian approach. Behavioural Public Policy, pp. 1-15.

Chisika, S.N. and Yeom, C., 2024. Voluntary National Reviews on Implementation of Sustainable Development Goals: Key Lessons from East African Member States. SAGE Open, 14(2), p. 21582440241257319.

Davis, M., 2016. Data and the United Nations declaration on the rights of indigenous peoples. Indigenous Data Sovereignty: Toward an Agenda, 38, pp. 25-38.

FAO, 2021. Guidelines on Data Disaggregation for SDG Indicators Using Survey Data. Rome. Available at: https://doi.org/10.4060/cb3253en.

Guglielmi, S. and Jones, N., 2019. The Invisibility of Adolescents within the SDGs: Assessing Gaps in Gender and Age Disaggregation to Leave No Adolescent Behind. London, United Kingdom: Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence.

Mabry, R., Doctor, H., Khair, M., Abdelgalil, M. and Rashidian, A., 2024. Measuring progress on health and well-being in the Eastern Mediterranean Region via voluntary national reviews, 2016-2021: what does the data reveal? medRxiv, pp. 2024-01.

Mhangara, P., Lamba, A., Mapurisa, W. and Mudau, N., 2019. Towards the development of Agenda 2063 geo-portal to support sustainable development in Africa. ISPRS International Journal of Geo-Information, 8(9), p. 399.

Perlotto, S., 2019. Africa's Future: Youth and the Data Defining Their Lives. Population Reference Bureau.

Qiu, Y., Zhao, X., Fan, D., Li, S. and Zhao, Y., 2022. Disaggregating population data for assessing progress of SDGs: methods and applications. International Journal of Digital Earth, 15(1), pp. 2-29.

Rivera, S.J., Minsker, B.S., Work, D.B. and Roth, D., 2014. A text mining framework for advancing sustainability indicators. Environmental Modelling & Software, 62, pp. 128-138.

Sebestyén, V., Domokos, E. and Abonyi, J., 2020. Focal points for sustainable development strategies—Text mining-based comparative analysis of voluntary national reviews. Journal of Environmental Management, 263, p. 110414.

Szetey, K., Moallemi, E.A., Ashton, E., Butcher, M., Sprunt, B. and Bryan, B.A., 2021. Co-creating local socioeconomic pathways for achieving the sustainable development goals. Sustainability Science, 16, pp. 1251-1268.

United Nations. Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2018. World Youth Report: Youth and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. United Nations Publications.

United Nations, 2024. Handbook for the Preparation of Voluntary National Reviews. New York: United Nations. Available at: https://hlpf.un.org/sites/default/files/vnrs/handbook/VNR%20Handbook%202024%20EN_0.pdf [Accessed: 20 September 2024].