



Deutsche Afrika Stiftung e.V.
Fondation Allemande pour l'Afrique
German Africa Foundation

Summary

Next Generation Democracy – Impulses from Zimbabwe, Lessons for International Cooperation

24 November 2025, Berlin

Background

In many African countries, young people are increasingly campaigning for democratic participation, the rule of law, and good governance. Despite facing structural barriers, limited scope for action and challenging political contexts, innovative approaches from civil society are emerging to strengthen the political participation of the so-called Gen Z.

Where and how are new opportunities for young people's political participation emerging in Africa – and how can these be protected? What are the greatest challenges facing young Africans in their struggle for a voice in decision-making and the rule of law? How can international partnerships successfully contribute to the promotion of democracy against this backdrop? And what can Africa and Europe learn from one another in order to shape sustainable democracies?

These and other questions were the focus of the discussion organised by the German Africa Foundation (DAS) and the Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom (FNF).

Highlights

- Young people are actively involved in democratic processes, yet they often face structural barriers to accessing political institutions. It is therefore crucial to forge stronger links between civic engagement and formal political participation.
- Greater political participation by young people and women requires more than just quota systems. Sustainable representation requires structural and institutional reforms that enable genuine access to political decision-making processes.
- International cooperation to strengthen democratic resilience should be seen as a long-term partnership based on solidarity, mutual respect and support for local actors.
- Democratic resilience is built up over the long term through investment in education and critical thinking. Education lays the foundations for people to understand, question and actively shape democratic processes.

Welcome remarks

Inge Herbert

Regional Director for Sub-Saharan-Africa, FNF

Discussion

Sarah Bernardy

Director for Sub-Saharan Africa, the African Union, Southern Africa and the Great Lakes, Federal Foreign Office

Namatai Kwekweza

Laureate of the German Africa Award 2025; Founder WELEAD Africa

Prof Dr Anja Osei

Director of Centre for Comparative Political Science, Freie Universität Berlin

Bettina

Stark-Watzinger

Former Federal Minister for Education and Research

Moderation

Larissa Pflüger

Programme Officer Southern Africa, DAS

Closing remarks

Sabine Odhiambo

Secretary General, DAS



Discussion

On the creation and defence of spaces for civil society in Zimbabwe

The discussion began with the question of how spaces for young women within civil society can be created and secured in the long term. Namatai Kwekweza described the solidarity shown by the feminist movement, civil society and international partners as a vital source of support for the work of WELEAD Africa. The organisation builds on the achievements of previous generations of female activists who, despite difficult circumstances, created spaces for social engagement. At the same time, she emphasised that such success stories should not remain the exception: more institutions are needed in which young women can take on leadership roles and develop their skills in a targeted manner.

Greater representation requires structural reforms

The discussion showed that, whilst quotas can contribute to greater representation, they cannot, on their own, guarantee equal political participation. Kwekweza and Prof Dr Anja Osei emphasised that young people and women remain significantly under-represented in political institutions. Osei pointed out that the average member of parliament in African parliaments is considerably older and more often male than the continent's population as a whole. Quotas could be an important tool for improving representation, but would need to be complemented by further reforms.

Using Zimbabwe as an example, Kwekweza explained the limitations of existing quota systems. Parliament has a youth quota of ten seats and a women's quota of 60 seats, of which only 20 are allocated to young women. In her view, these regulations do not adequately reflect the actual composition of the population and could perpetuate existing power structures. For example, she noted that young people from political elites have entered parliament via the youth quota, whilst independent candidates and young people with disabilities are scarcely considered. With regard to the women's quota, too, it has become apparent that formal representation does not automatically lead to greater participation by young women in political decision-making processes.

Therefore, according to Kwekweza, structural reforms are necessary to strengthen political participation in the long term. These include, amongst other things, limits on election campaign spending to ensure a level playing field between candidates, as well as changes within political parties to give young people better access to candidacies and decision-making positions. Constitutional provisions would also need to be reviewed. Kwekweza pointed out, for instance, that in Zimbabwe one can only stand as a presidential candidate from the age of 40, even though younger people are able and willing to take on political responsibility.

From protest to political participation

Namatai Kwekweza referred to current Gen Z protest movements in places such as Madagascar, Nepal and Morocco. These, she noted, are characterised by demands for greater accountability and a fairer distribution of social resources. Many young people are faced with rising living costs and limited economic prospects, whilst at the same time overall social prosperity is increasing. Against this backdrop, the discussion centred on how young people's engagement in civil society can be more closely linked to formal political structures. Prof Dr Osei emphasised that the connection between protest movements and political participation, in particular, requires further research. Bettina Stark-Watzinger highlighted the role of political parties' youth organisations as potential spaces where young people can gain political experience, engage in debate and take on responsibility.



Partnership for democratic resilience

International partners should view their cooperation more as a long-term partnership based on solidarity, respect and an understanding of historical contexts, according to Kwekweza. It is crucial, she said, that local actors are able to bring their own priorities and narratives to the fore to a greater extent. International support must therefore not only provide financial resources, but also help to create opportunities for young leaders and civil society engagement. At the same time, she emphasised that international partners should not scale back their support in favour of short-term economic or geopolitical interests. Whilst diplomacy must take different interests into account, values such as democracy, the rule of law and human rights – which many young people on the African continent also hold dear – remain central pillars of cooperation.

Sarah Bernardy emphasised that Germany regards strengthening democratic resilience as a long-term and complex task. The Federal Government's guidelines on Africa policy provide a strategic framework for this, identifying democratic resilience, education, science and innovation as key areas for action. As examples of Germany's commitment, Bernardy cited, amongst other things, support for the African Women Leaders Network and the Africa Election Fund, developed in collaboration with the UNDP to strengthen electoral processes. At the same time, Bernardy highlighted the challenge of coordinating international support more effectively and ensuring it is geared towards the long term. Given the large number of existing programmes, she said, it was important to avoid supporting individual organisations or thematic areas in isolation. Instead, an integrated approach involving various international and African partners is needed.

Long-term investment in democratic resilience

Bernardy pointed out that budgetary constraints pose a growing challenge to programmes aimed at strengthening democratic resilience. Measures to support civil society, political participation or human rights work are often perceived as less of a security priority, even though, in her view, they are essential for the long-term stability of democratic societies.

Meanwhile, Prof Dr Osei emphasised that democratic transformation is not a short-term process, but requires ongoing commitment and strategic perseverance. According to Stark-Wartinger, this also includes long-term investment in education to promote critical thinking and social participation. Here, too, she pointed out areas where there is scope for closer cooperation between European and African partners.