

**(MFI) The main theme of the 23rd Africa-France Summit is "African youth – its vitality, its creativity and its aspirations." Will the leaders assembled in Bamako keep this in focus?**

*"It has a huge potential. It may also turn into a significant menace – if this youth has no other horizon than recruitment by a rebellion or radical indoctrination. It's imperative to provide it with other perspectives."* These remarks by French Foreign Minister Philippe Douste-Blazy in an interview last August in the newspaper *Le Parisien* provide the motivations for the Summit theme. At the initiative of Mali, the host country, the Summit will be preceded in mid-November by an African Youth Forum which will bring together 53 young people – one from each country represented – as well as about one hundred others, from all parts of Mali, as well as a delegation of Franco-Africans. The Forum – a first – will submit to the Heads of State and Government a declaration highlighting five issues that will be key to the participants' future: training and employment, social and political integration, health challenges, culture and new technology, the Franco-African Diaspora.

There is an emergency, judging from the *"solemn, distressed and pressing"* appeal presented to Heads of State of the African Union in 2004 by representatives of African Young Leaders: *"Our States are deprived of resources and diverted from their prerogatives. Education is no longer considered as a right for African children, but rather as a luxury. No more right to employment, health, housing, or a healthy environment. In sum, the young are left to themselves."* African youth has become the biggest challenge faced by Africa.

### Two-thirds of Africans are less than 30 years old

More than half of Africa's population is aged less than 21 years, and two-thirds less than 30 years. In the continent, the term "young" (the 15-24 age bracket according to the United Nations) applies to unmarried or economically dependent individuals. The "old" people still hold on to knowledge and power, especially in the rural areas. After the wave of democratisation, parents were hoping for a better future for their children. They are leaving them a heavy heritage. The new generations of countries subjected for two decades to the drastic terms of structural adjustment plans have experienced the disappearance of the welfare state and the disintegration of the colonial education model, and have, in the end, faced an extreme worsening of their living conditions.

Per capita income in half of Africa's economies is now less than it was two decades ago, according to the UN Development Programme (UNDP). Millions of Africans go hungry and nearly half live on less than a dollar a day. In 2004, Sub-Saharan Africa recorded an illiteracy rate of 35.9 percent for adults (aged above 15) and a somewhat lower 20.1 percent for the young (aged 15-24)<sup>1</sup>. At the present slow pace of school enrolment growth, the region will not achieve universal primary education before 2150 or so. And nearly half the countries will be unable to achieve gender parity in education by 2015.

The AU Commission recommended to African leaders at the Ouagadougou summit on employment and poverty eradication that they should act quickly to place the emphasis on education, apprenticeship, professional training and the transformation of the informal economy, the means of survival of a large part of the urban youth. Nearly half of the young are still employed in agriculture, and education remains an absolute priority in rural areas, according to the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO). In 2003, Sub-Saharan Africa recorded one of the highest youth unemployment rates (21 percent) while the region is headed for the sharpest ever increase in its active population by 2015 – an additional 30 million young people. Their future will depend on economic growth, but above all on its contents in terms of jobs. No more than *"five to ten percent of the new arrivals in the*

<sup>1</sup> African Economic Outlook 2004-2005, OECD/AfDB

labour market will be able to enter the formal economy," says the International Labour Office (ILO) which estimates that Africa would increase its GDP by 12 to 19 percent" if decent jobs were created for the young.

### **Energy, innovative capacity and creativity all round**

The lack of employment triggers feelings of exclusion and uselessness that entail violence, drug addiction and extremism. Tired of wasting their time, the young make their governments the targets of their frustrations. Looking for a way out, they demonstrate in the streets, clash on the campuses and make up the majority of rioting crowds. Some leaders – political and religious – exploit these tendencies and mobilise the young along militaristic lines, "*relaying the recruitment to the ancient single parties*", in the view of Tshikala K. Biaya<sup>2</sup>, a researcher. The existence of young Africans is thus marked by instability and uncertainties. A majority among Africa's six million refugees and displaced persons are young people – traumatised as victims or combatants. Nearly two million children died in Central Africa's wars in the past ten years. More than 120,000 child soldiers have been registered in a dozen countries. Another tragedy: the millions of youths infected by HIV/AIDS – and the others, who have had to assume responsibility for their families because their parents have been killed by the disease, which has left some 12 million orphans.

"African governments must find solutions for this juvenile majority which is becoming poorer, more discontented and, sometimes, more militant," the Economic Commission for Africa said in 2004, calling for viable policies to be worked out in cooperation with the young. "*The energy, innovative capacity and aspirations of youth constitute a capital that no society can afford to waste,*" says the ILO. They show creativity all round – in music, theatre, painting... Not to mention their keen interest in the new information and communication technologies. "*You want all to turn out right, you want everything to change, but are you ready for a fight?*" runs a song by The Brigade, a mixed-blood group of rappers. Young Africans and Franco-Africans have deep in their minds the image of young Africans at Melilla and Ceuta who describe themselves as being *closer to death than to life*" and whose "*waves of attack*" – as the media have called their desperate attempts at clearing the barriers surrounding the two Spanish enclaves – in the direction of Fortress Europe are ascribed to poverty and hunger in sub-Saharan Africa. Can they not hope for a more human future?

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<sup>2</sup> *Youth and Street Culture in Urban Africa. Addis-Ababa, Dakar, Kinshasa*, in *Politique Africaine*, no. 80, December 2000, pp 12-31