

AFRICAN YOUTH OVERVIEW

Any discussion of African youth must begin with something about Africa. It is a huge continent; a journey across it or from north to south is exciting and exhausting. Any generalizations about Africa and Africans are misleading. For most people Africa is sub-Saharan Africa. North Africa is quite distinct and separated by a vast expanse of desert. It is also primarily Arab.

Sub-Saharan Africa can be generally divided into West Africa, East Africa, and Southern Africa—with obvious subdivisions.

Those who travel in Africa and most Africans, love the continent and its countries for their natural beauty, the diversity, warmth and hospitality of cultures and peoples, for rich and varied wild life, and much more.

Africa is rich in natural resources, which all too often have been exploited, externally and internally, without benefit to common citizens.

Most Africans, and particularly its women, are hard working. A [Gallup International Association](#) found Africans, despite hardships and terrible calamities, to be the most optimistic people in the world.

War continues to rage in parts of Africa with kidnapped child soldiers, wanton rape, mutilations and killing; there are wide pockets of extreme poverty; drought, famine and disease afflict some areas, and HIV/AIDS is rampant across the continent. A wave of suicides is part of the slow trials and recovery of the [genocide in Rwanda](#). Yet, Africans have not given up hope. According to [Lydia Polgreen](#), who recently traveled Africa spending considerable time in war-torn Liberia and with the Sudanese refugees in Chad, and has studied the Gallup survey:

... one glance at the statistical profile of the continent's 900 million people will tell you that Africans can expect to live the shortest lives, earn the lowest incomes and suffer some of the worst misrule on the planet. They are more likely than anyone on earth to bury their children before the age of 5, to become infected with HIV, to die from malaria and tuberculosis, to require food aid.

Yet a recent survey by Gallup International Association of 50,000 people across the world found that Africans are the most optimistic people. Asked whether 2006 would be better than 2007, 57 percent said yes. Asked if they would be more prosperous this year than last, 55 percent said yes.

These data bear out what I see all the time as I travel across sub-Saharan Africa as a correspondent: that every single day lived here, each birth, wedding, graduation, sunrise and sunset is, in ways large and small, a daily triumph of hope over experience. Hope, it seems is Africa's most abundant harvest.

Secretary general of Gallup International that conducted the survey, [Meril James](#), said Africa's optimism may reflect a reality so grim that things can only get better. "There is a sense that when things can't get worse you've reached rock bottom, so things must improve." That may be true, but others point to a lively and hopeful African spirit and a deep religious faith. The Rev. Joseph Ezeugo of [Immaculate Heart Parish](#) in Onitsha, Nigeria commented: "We can find hope in faith even if there is darkness all around us."

Africans are realistic about corruption and misrule in their governments; "8 out of 10 said 'political leaders are dishonest'; three-quarters 'deemed them to have too much power and responsibility'; while 7 out of 10 'think politicians behave unethically.'" Only 34 percent think their elections were fair. Still, along with North Americans, according to this survey, "87 percent said they believed that democracy was the best form of government for them." Africans and Americans, by the same percentage, agree to that view above all other people in the world.

[Benedict Newon](#) is a Liberian forced to join a rebel group as a young boy. Growing up, war was the only life he knew. He now lives with hundreds of other former soldiers as squatters in a huge abandoned building on the outskirts of Monrovia. Somehow even having been forced to spend his late childhood and adolescence killing, and as an unemployed 19-year old, he still dreams and believes in peace.

We are going to have jobs, water, light, and food. We are never going to see war again. Liberia is going to change. ([Misery Loves Optimism in Africa](#), New York Times)

African youth are generally friendly, eager, curious, energetic and appreciative of outside interest, encouragement, and cooperation. They are truly the hope of Africa.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. To what extent have you traveled in or studied Africa?
2. What are your thoughts, opinions and feelings about Africa's situation in today's world? What do you see as the cause of its many problems?
3. What do you see as the responsibility of African countries, the Organization of African States (OAS), and the African people, on the one hand, and world agencies, other countries, and workers from the outside world, on the other hand, to relieve Africa's difficulties and work for the development of its agriculture, infrastructure and business?

IMPLICATIONS

1. In a globalized and "flattened" world, the woes of people and countries on earth affect all others. Besides compassion, there are reasons of self-interest that challenge us to relieve human suffering and national catastrophes.
2. Over centuries Africa has been exploited by the outside world. Still today, aid and trade come with conditions often at a disadvantage to Africans. Much, if not most, of the funds and supplies coming to Africa find their way into the hands of the rich rather than the poor who need it.
3. Africans have much to share with us and to teach us. Africa has also become a center of religious, especially Christian, faith and renewal with the youth playing a significant role.