

Statement by Ms. Aya Chebbi, AU Youth Envoy, delivered at the African Regional High-Level Conference on Counter-Terrorism and the Prevention of Violent Extremism Conducive to Terrorism

July 10, 2019

Your Excellency Uhuru Kenyatta, President of the Republic of Kenya
Your Excellency António Guterres, Secretary-General of the United Nations
Your Excellency Moussa Faki, Chairperson of the African Union Commission

Excellencies,
Distinguished Guests,
Young people,
Ladies and gentlemen,

Ni heshima kubwa kwangu binafsi, hasa kwa vijana kutoka bara la Afrika, kuungaana nanyi hivi leo, na, kuhutubiia kongamano hili kuu, kuhusu maswala muhimu, kwetu vijana wa Afrika,

Thank you Excellencies for convening us today on this crucial issue that is at the heart of the realities and challenges that we face as African youth, especially the most vulnerable in our communities, especially refugees and migrants. This high level conference, and what has gone into making it a success shows that our hearts are in the right place.

I wish to also commend his Excellency the President of Kenya, whose government that has passed into law, policies that deal with some of the root causes leading to violent extremism, including the anti-hate speech laws, the nyum-ba kumi initiative for community vigilance and also the establishment of the National Counter Terrorism Center under the able leadership of Amb. Martin Ki-maani. The government of Kenya has additionally ensured that issues of peace and security are at the core of the National Youth Policy which is almost being finalised.

I also look forward to the National Youth Index which will help track youth development in all counties in the country, and ensure a more holistic and

meaningful engagement, even as the government mobilises youth to be a key actors in actualising the Big Four agenda.

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is important to acknowledge that the tendency toward violent extremism does not emerge from a vacuum. The socio-economic and political marginalization, and disaffection of youth on the African continent and around the world are catalysts for joining violent extremism.

In 2013, my cousin was radicalized by *Daesh* at the age of 22 and he decided to go to Syria, at the time he just graduated from university with an engineering degree. It was a tough experience to go through with the family which made me think, why youth like my cousin would choose this path while I have chosen non-violent activism and we both grow up with the same education and background.

An accurate understanding of the factors leading to radicalisation is essential in developing an effective African and global policy response. We need to prevent radicalisation in the first place and address the need for youth to find nonviolent social and political identities.

- First and foremost this is a question of narrative; unfortunately, when African youth get the world's leaders attention they are spoken about as perpetrators of violence, as a dangerous class, as a number of unemployment, as migrants dying in the Mediterranean, as a youth bulge. But they are not spoken about as the generation of peacebuilders, changemakers, that changed the course of history, that revolutionized technology, that inspired new ways of activism and citizen engagement. African youth do not resign themselves to the hardships of their situation but they are using their agency and creativity to build the Africa We Want.

Young people like Fatma, founder of the Horn of Africa Development Initiative, who has done amazing work in using sports for peace, or Carine of Footprints for Change, working with youth on civic engagement, peacebuilding and leadership development, and Christian who has done significant work in his home country of Cameroon, these are a few examples to note as badass agents for peace and many more have been organizing in various grassroots peace networks.

Narratives become a place of belonging and identity to many of our youth. So there is a danger of the victimization disempowering narrative that overlooks

youth agency and it's used by violent groups to recruit. Many young people have internalised the idea that they are marginalised with no voice and now perceived to be heroic when they join these extremist groups.

Therefore, our definition of demographic dividend should be about youth as the human capital, talent, energy and creativity, the driving force of our continent.

We must change the narrative about African youth. Let us see young people as a collective positive actor amongst the most informed, resilient, educated and energetic generation Africa has ever seen, and the coolest generation!

- Then, There is a question of waithood, - waiting for adulthood - we have a generation trapped in the state of waiting because they are in constant negotiation to find their political and financial freedom. It's about the livelihoods of our young people who are barely surviving, and who do not understand the contradictions of our time, to be the most youthful population 60 per cent under 30 and yet the most insecure and marginalized. Do not understand why governments extend retirement age, while a large part of our population are young. When individuals are deprived of their political socio-economic rights, they are more likely to feel rewarded when they join violent groups.
- This is also very linked to the question of dignity and inequality; while unemployment is often emblematic of systemic sources of marginalisation, it's not the status of unemployment itself that leads to youth radicalization, but the perception of injustice. Unemployment needs to be addressed more seriously on the continent, but jobs alone do not address deep-seated awareness and experiences of injustice. When injustice is perceived, young people look upon violent groups as legitimate fighters rather than perpetrators of violence.

Our fight against violent extremism must begin with dismantling and ending inequality in achieving our sustainable development goals and Agenda 2063. We must invest in entrepreneurial spirit not just entrepreneurship for job

creation but in the space of innovation. The future of work needs to be about dignity, because young people don't want just jobs but jobs with dignity.

- So the Peace, security and development nexus is crucial in addressing violent extremism which has to be a bottom-up approach, with grassroots focus and a commitment to inclusion and centring development around people most marginalized by poverty and injustice. We need a world that is collaborative and emotionally intelligent centred on human development and empowerment by prioritizing basic provisions for citizens and strengthening communities which will become the biggest defences against Violent extremism. We must work with youth-led grassroots community organizations doing CVE work. This issue requires partnership across sectors and organization sizes, requires building trust and solid bridges with the most affected communities.
- Our topic today is also a question of governance, that should deliver the health, education and the services that our citizens deserve because where there is an absence of these services, violent extremist groups become economic and social actors.

It is also very legitimate to ask for greater affirmative action towards youth representation in mainstream government and appointments. This was the secret of the independence generation: our key leaders joined governments when they were in their youth, and had a chance to learn the ropes and be mentored. This intergenerational collaboration is key, it is time for young people to also lead.

Our leaders, you must engage the youth and listen to their grievances. Defining youth as age cohort is particularly problematic as it deliberately excludes them. It asserts that the youth are of tomorrow rather than today, denying them participation in governance. We need to address the political demands of African youth across the continent who peacefully rising up for their rights. Our governments need to develop a holistic socio-economic response where youth are at the heart of policy making and reform, taking decisions that affect their lives.

- We also need to promote a Pan-African transnational identity and global citizenship, when youth think pan-African and global, it offers them a place of belonging, it allows new imagination of the individual and the community. that's why we have to promote the Africa We Want as a borderless transnational multilingual multicultural community.

Our Pan-African policies at the African Union will create the dynamism needed through the African Continental Free Trade Area, intra-trade, single market, e-governance, open borders, Pan-African universities, and so on and so forth, the only way to fight violence in our continent is to unite our youth around the pan-african vision and space of exchange, knowledge and solidarity.

- Our education should instil pride and empower the African child in their African identity and knowledge being produced on the Continent. Critical thinking has to remain a necessary skill going forward because, without it, one will not be able to challenge the false ideologies that are at the heart of the problem.
- And this time we have to get this right and pay attention to the fact that youth are facing unprecedented levels of anxiety and depression from our challenging times. Adding more onto that by putting the burden on the millennials to save the world and fix all its problems, be leaders, be entrepreneurs, be this, and be that. Just let the youth be whatever they want to be and invest in their mental health. Create spaces for them to exist and be empowered and they will come up with the solutions and contribute positively to society.

Excellencies, African and global leaders, we should not let fear drive our decisions around the world but more than ever we need a leadership of courage that is not just responsive but empowering.

Projecting into the public imagination a rhetoric of fear to justify the treatment of youth as potential terror suspects is not the solution. Translating this perception of fear into a collective punishment of African youth through discriminatory policies is not the solution and can even add to their grievances and further radicalize disaffected youth.

The solution is in intergenerational cooperation in sustainable partnership with communities and youth. This is not the time for exclusion and marginalization, it is not time for polarization, This is the time for intergenerational co-leadership, honest governance, and young peacebuilders making the headlines.

In 2013, my cousin was de-radicalised through our family and community support as well as local government engaging him in municipal activities. He started a gym project in our village because he wanted to make a difference and inspire the unemployed youth of his community to believe in themselves and serve their community.

Excellencies, the youth are calling attention to their being and becoming. To build their trust in institutions, we need to reframe the radicalisation debate so they can be perceived as part of the solution, not the problem.

We need to articulate a story of hope and can't find better than the words of a Tunisian Poet, Abu Al Kacem Chebbi, who expresses in his poem The Will of Life this hope, the freedom and willingness to live and contribute to society;

نحتاج إلى التعبير عن قصة أمل ولا يمكنني أن أجد أفضل من كلمات الشاعر التونسي ، أبو القاسم الشابي ، الذي يعبر في قصيدته "إرادة الحياة" عن هذا الأمل ، الحرية والرغبة في العيش والمساهمة في المجتمع ويقول

إِذَا الشَّعْبُ يَوْمًا أَرَادَ الْحَيَاةَ فَلَا بُدَّ أَنْ يَسْتَجِيبَ الْقَدْرَ
وَلَا بُدَّ لِلَّيْلِ أَنْ يَنْجَلِيَ وَلَا بُدَّ لِلْقَيْدِ أَنْ يَنْكَسِرَ

Asante Sana

Ms. Aya Chebbi
Special Envoy on Youth
African Union Commission