

## **Request for Proposals:**

# **Forum on Expanding Youth Learning and Opportunity Pathways in, and Linked to, West Africa**

**April 5-7, 2017, at the University of Ghana, Legon**

### **Overview of the Challenge:**

Across the globe, the phenomenon of rising income inequality is having a disproportionately negative impact on the wellbeing and social mobility of youth (defined herein as young people aged 15-24). Whether they are in poor “underdeveloped” or wealthier OECD countries, youth who live in poverty—and experience structural barriers and discrimination based on race, gender, or other forms of identity—are especially vulnerable. They face daunting obstacles to accessing education, transitioning to meaningful and decent work, engaging in civic participation, and otherwise developing to their full potential.

Another global trend that is simultaneously impacting conditions of life for, and being shaped by, youth—especially in low-income countries—is rapid urbanization. Across sub-Saharan Africa 30 to 35 percent of people live in urban areas. Africa is the world’s most youthful continent, with a youth population currently estimated at upwards of 50%, and increasing at a faster rate than any other world region. Most of sub-Saharan Africa remains rural, but the rate of urbanization, fueled by population growth and in-migration (both voluntary and involuntary), is increasing at a breakneck pace. UN Habitat estimates that between 2000 and 2030, Africa’s urban population will grow from 294 million to 742 million, an increase of 152%.

These trends, and the challenges they pose for youth, are especially pronounced in West Africa, the most populous sub-region of the world’s poorest continent. Countries with cities boasting populations exceeding 250 million, burgeoning youth populations, tertiary-level education institutions that lack capacity to meet demand, and insufficient opportunities for gainful employment epitomize the sub-region.

At the far end of the spectrum, Nigeria, the most populous country in the region and the entire continent, boasts several megacities, including Lagos with a population of roughly 21 million. Between 2009 and 2012-2013, youth unemployment in Nigeria rose from 41 percent to 50 percent, and according to current projections it continues to

increase at an annual rate of 16 percent (Dalberg, 2014). The UN estimates that by 2050, one fifth of children under 18 in Africa will live in Nigeria, and in 25 years, a majority of Nigeria's population, including youth, will dwell in cities (UNICEF, *Generation 2030 Africa*).

For the vast majority of West African youth, working poverty is the norm. Studies show that these young people labor under precarious conditions, mainly in the informal sector, without social protection and benefits, and require multiple streams of income to survive. Even for the small proportion of youth who have the advantage of secondary or postsecondary educational credentials, over time, the dearth of supported pathways for securing family-supporting incomes leads to progressively worsening employment prospects, frustrated life ambitions, and a permanent wage gap in lifetime earnings.

While these challenges are especially acute in West Africa, analyses of global data reveal that, coincident with the global expanse of inequality, in wealthy and poor countries alike, progress—if any—in affording youth greater access to postsecondary, advanced education, and skills is painfully slow.

Moreover, in addition to undermining the capacity of these youth to improve their material conditions and develop to their full potential, long-term poverty—so often associated with trauma, harmful stress, and a sense of hopelessness—imposes psychological and other burdens that can compromise the cognitive resources, mental health, and non-cognitive skills they need to pursue a satisfying life.

Absent well-conceived, strategic interventions, the likelihood is that the knowledge, skills, and experiences necessary to improve the life chances of West Africa's large and increasing economically disadvantaged and marginalized youth population will remain beyond reach for the vast majority, and for generations.

### **The Forum:**

In order to explore new research and share fresh insights on practical approaches with potential applicability across a spectrum of geographic locations within, and to a lesser extent outside, the West Africa region, Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey, Newark (Rutgers-Newark) Cornwall Center for Metropolitan Studies and Graduate School, in collaboration with the University of Ghana Business School (UGBS), Department of Public Administration and Health Services Management, and

with grant support from the Ford Foundation, is co-convening a forum on “Expanding Youth Learning and Opportunity Pathways in, and Linked to, West Africa.”

The forum will bring together up to 30 practitioners and activists, from various sectors (education, vocational and entrepreneurship training, mental health, arts and culture, NGO advocacy, public policy etc.), and scholars from a range of disciplinary (and interdisciplinary) perspectives. The gathering will facilitate in-depth exchange amongst participants who share in common an active concern with dismantling inequality and, in particular, eliminating barriers that confront economically disadvantaged urban youth in West Africa—primarily in Ghana, Nigeria, and Senegal.

The forum will also aim to facilitate the emergence of a transnational and intercontinental network of theorists and practitioners focused on providing guided and supported pathways for youth. In this regard, Rutgers-Newark will share, and draw lessons and insights from the gathering to inform, its ongoing anchor institution commitment to grappling with challenges confronting economically disadvantaged youth in the state of New Jersey’s largest and poorest city—Newark—where West Africans comprise a rapidly increasing segment of the city’s large immigrant population.

Selected presentations from the forum will be published in a special issue of the AROCSA (“The Association for Research on Civil Society in Africa”) online journal. With AROCSA taking the lead, the forum will also produce a provisional plan for a scholar-practitioner network devoted to information-sharing and collaboration on youth postsecondary educational and employment pathways.

### **Agenda:**

The forum agenda focus is on urban-based, West African youth, primarily in Ghana, Nigeria, and Senegal, in the 15 to 24 age bracket, regardless of their level of schooling. In every world region, economically disadvantaged and marginalized youth at this pivotal stage of life—conventionally thought of as encompassing the beginning and end of secondary school and transition toward adulthood—share characteristics and challenges in common. Among these characteristics and challenges are high drop-out rates, lack of gainful unemployment, “at risk” behaviors, intensive utilization of mobile technology, and exposure to the internet and social media, to a degree sometimes considered harmful. From a policy perspective, there is also a widespread

tendency to view youth in conflicting terms, on the one hand as harbingers of urban economic progress, and on the other as threats to social cohesion and stability.

The forum agenda will reflect the heterogeneity of urban conditions and youth populations, and variety of urbanizing spaces and dynamics, within the West Africa sub-region. Moreover, even as it selectively brings into simultaneous view the circumstances of urban youth outside the sub-region—(specifically in Newark, New Jersey where Rutgers-Newark is based), the agenda will emphasize distinguishing features of the West Africa region—e.g., the more expansive definition of “youth,” massive scale of youth underemployment (participation in the informal sector), lack of capacity of higher education systems to meet demand, and low gross enrollment ratios at all education levels (for instance, it is estimated that just two-thirds of African students make the transition from primary to secondary education).

The agenda will also provide room for discussion of conventional interventions related to education and skills (e.g. scholarships and mentoring, combined with family supports; vocational and technical apprenticeships sponsored by employers, etc.), two areas widely considered key to strengthening youth learning and economic opportunities.

But the primary goal will be to examine and discuss new data and research findings that fill critical information gaps and offer fresh insights—theories and practices that present unconventional views and approaches refute dominant discourses about the circumstances of West African youth, practical strategies to provide them with clear and supported learning and economic opportunity pathways, nurture and unleash their capabilities, and provide them with greater voice.

### **Request for Proposals:**

The forum invites proposals describing completed or ongoing work on the **overarching theme** of youth learning and opportunity pathways in West Africa—with emphasis on Ghana, Nigeria, and Senegal—that:

- Address current challenges confronting urban-based West African youth, aged 15 to 24, and are solution-oriented;
- Provide context (historical, sociological, cultural, etc.) for understanding trends in this field;
- Illuminate innovative and best practices;

- Stimulate and provoke discussion;
- Present new data and evidence of causes and outcomes, supported by research;
- Can speak to a broad range of concerned audiences—including youth and their parents and extended families, activists and practitioners, and theorists.

Proposals that incorporate **arts and culture and multimedia approaches** are welcome.

Within the overarching theme of youth learning and opportunity pathways in West Africa, priority will be given to proposals that focus on one or a combination of these **main topics**:

- Counter-narratives – theories and analyses, supported by evidence, that refute dominant discourses and widely accepted theories;
- Migration – as a rite of passage, survival strategy, form of protest, etc. that can lead to homelessness, refugee status, etc.;
- Non-cognitive skills – traits, goals, character, motivations, etc. required for successful functioning and well-being; and
- Education and training – strategies to increase access and attainment, skills, and employment opportunities;

Additionally, priority will be given to proposals that, along with focusing on a subset of the foregoing main topics, address applicable aspects of these **cross-cutting concerns**:

- Gender, racial, and ethnic identity – particular challenges confronting female, male, and LGBTQ youth, and youth who are members of marginalized racial and ethnic minority groups;
- Disability status and health and safety – physical, mental, and emotional health and vulnerability to exploitation (including criminalization) and violence;
- Attitudes and aspirations – documented evidence of youth perspectives on education, employment and entrepreneurship, civic participation, and other dimensions of transitioning from youth to adulthood.

## **Eligibility**

All applicants proposing to present research findings must have a Ph.D. or comparable terminal degree that establishes their ability to conduct high-level, peer-reviewed scholarly research.

All applicants proposing to present innovative or best-practice programs or strategies, need not have a graduate or professional degree, but must be affiliated with a verifiable, legally registered NGO and/or other entity or institution.

Submissions can be in the form of PowerPoint presentations, or theoretical and empirical research papers, or case studies. Theoretical and empirical research papers, or case studies should be double-spaced, with **2,000 or fewer words**.

## **Dates & Deadlines:**

The on-line proposal submission system will open **December 2, 2016** and close at 11:59 EDT, **January 15, 2017**.

Applicants will be notified by **February, 15, 2017**.

To submit a proposal, please go to <https://www.cornwall.rutgers.edu/forum-opportunity-pathways> and click "[Submit a Proposal](#)"

## **Contact Information**

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