



Reimagining Pan-Africanism in South Africa, Zambia, and Zimbabwe: An Analysis of Youth Perspectives

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Abstract

This paper examines how youth in South Africa, Zambia, and Zimbabwe are redefining Pan-Africanism in the twenty-first century. Moving beyond traditional state-led approaches, youth are advancing new forms of solidarity through activism, digital expression, entrepreneurship, and cultural production. Comparative analysis reveals that while political and economic conditions vary across the three countries, shared struggles against inequality, unemployment, and exclusion unite youth in their pursuit of justice, dignity, and African self-determination. South African youth channel Pan-African ideals through social movements and cultural activism; Zambian youth through digital innovation and entrepreneurship; and Zimbabwean youth through art and informal networks that resist repression. Together, these experiences signal a shift from Pan-Africanism as an elite political project to a grassroots movement driven by youth agency and creativity. The study concludes that for Pan-Africanism to remain relevant, governments and regional institutions must recognise and support youth as central actors in shaping Africa's collective future.

Keywords: Contemporary Pan-Africanism, youth activism, regional integration, South Africa, Zambia, Zimbabwe, cultural politics, informal economy, African Union

INTRODUCTION

A new generation is reimagining Pan-Africanism. Having deep roots in the history of liberation and independence movements, Pan-Africanism faces the challenge of remaining relevant in the modern era and must be rethought for contemporary realities. With most of Africa's population under the age of thirty, youth represent a powerful force for transformation. Yet, in many countries, they remain excluded from decision-making, regional planning, and formal politics. Institutions such as the African Union (AU) and the Southern African Development Community (SADC) discuss youth inclusion, but these efforts often fail to translate into genuine influence or opportunity.

This paper examines youth engagement in South Africa, Zambia, and Zimbabwe – three countries with shared liberation histories but distinct post-colonial trajectories. It explores how youth are shaping new forms of participation in the twenty-first century through activism, social media, entrepreneurship, and cultural production. The central research question guiding this study is: *How are youth in South Africa, Zambia, and Zimbabwe contributing to Pan-Africanism and regional integration, and what structural conditions enable or constrain their engagement?*

The findings reveal that youth in the three countries are actively redefining Pan-Africanism according to their social and political realities. In South Africa, youth continue a legacy of liberation-era activism through organised movements, cultural initiatives, and regional forums. Zambian youth use technology and business to connect across borders, while in Zimbabwe, participation often occurs informally through art and cultural exchange, despite political repression. Across all three, most engagement happens outside formal government structures – particularly online and through creative or protest-based spaces. Despite facing unemployment, limited political access, and generational exclusion, youth are developing flexible, creative, and grounded interpretations of Pan-Africanism.

This paper proceeds with a review of existing literature on Pan-Africanism and youth participation in South Africa, Zambia, and Zimbabwe, followed by an explanation of the methodological approach. The findings section explores country-

specific patterns of youth engagement, while the analysis compares political, economic, and cultural participation across the three contexts. The paper concludes with key insights, policy recommendations, and directions for future research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Understanding how youth in South Africa, Zambia, and Zimbabwe engage with Pan-Africanism and regional integration requires a consideration of multiple interrelated factors. This literature review traces the historical foundations of Pan-Africanism and examines the evolving role of youth in political, social, and cultural transformation across Southern Africa. It analyses contemporary expressions of Pan-Africanism through digital technologies, creative industries, and entrepreneurial activity while identifying the structural constraints, such as inadequate institutional support, limited educational opportunities, and exclusion from policy processes that impede meaningful participation. Finally, it highlights existing research gaps and outlines areas that require further scholarly attention.

Foundations and Trajectories of Pan-Africanism

Pan-Africanism emerged as a response to the historical legacies of slavery, colonialism, and racial subjugation, particularly among Africans in the diaspora who associated the continent with liberation and self-determination (Malisa and Nhengeze, 2018, p. 2). Foundational thinkers such as W.E.B. Du Bois and Kwame Nkrumah advocated for African unity and self-governance, framing political independence as incomplete without continental solidarity (Logan, 1965, pp. 91-92; Afari-Gyan, 1991, p. 6). However, the pursuit of national interests and regional rivalries frequently constrained these aspirations (Logan, 1965, p. 104).

The concept of the African Renaissance, championed by Thabo Mbeki, reinvigorated Pan-African discourse by emphasising African epistemologies, languages, and values as foundations for sustainable development. This vision recognised the limitations of both capitalist and Marxist frameworks in fostering continental transformation (Malisa and Nhengeze, 2018, p. 11). Similarly, the African Union's *Agenda 2063* positions youth as pivotal agents of change in advancing

regional integration and social renewal (African Union, 2020, p. 10). These ideological continuities form the historical and intellectual backdrop for understanding contemporary youth activism.

Youth and Pan-African Engagement in Southern Africa

Historically, youth have been at the forefront of political transformation across Southern Africa. In South Africa, their activism has shaped national discourse, from the 1976 Soweto Uprising to the more recent #FeesMustFall movement (Lekalake, 2016, p. 1; African Union, 2020, pp. 99-100). In Zambia and Zimbabwe, youth were instrumental in nationalist struggles and post-independence democratic movements (Musonda, 2022, pp. 1-2). Yet, participation has often been episodic, intensifying during political crises but rarely institutionalised in governance structures (Musonda, 2022, p. 19).

Despite their historic contributions, youth today remain marginalised in decision-making processes. Older political elites often view them as inexperienced or disruptive rather than as legitimate partners in governance (Dzimiri, 2014, p. 443; African Union, 2020, p. xiv). In more repressive contexts such as Zimbabwe, political leaders have at times instrumentalised youth to perpetrate violence, distorting their role as agents of progress (Dzimiri, 2014, pp. 441-442). These dynamics underscore the need to distinguish genuine participation from tokenism and political manipulation.

Southern African Youth's View on Pan-Africanism and Regional Integration

The South African National Youth Commission Act (1996) defines youth as individuals aged 14 to 35. This demographic faces significant socioeconomic challenges, with unemployment reaching 45.5% in 2024 (Statistics South Africa, 2024). Economic precarity has contributed to tensions between local and migrant youth, particularly toward peers from Zimbabwe and Zambia, perceived as competitors in a constrained job market. This has, at times, generated ambivalence toward regional integration and Pan-African solidarity (Kornegay, 2006, pp. 26-29; Crush, 2022, pp. 14-16; Uwah, Dlamini and Cheteni, 2025, pp. 1-5).

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these attitudes. School and university-based programmes, both short-term and long-term, have been shown to foster intercultural understanding and reinforce Pan-African values (Ammah, Walls and Walls, 2022, pp. 1-8; Dziki and Leonard, 2016, pp. 1-10). Such initiatives enhance youth awareness of continental issues and encourage regional cooperation, though their sustainability is often hindered by financial constraints (Dziki and Leonard, 2016, pp. 1-10).

Youth Involvement and Participation in Decision-making

The imperative of youth participation is particularly evident in post-apartheid South Africa. Under the former system of parliamentary sovereignty, decision-making authority was concentrated in parliament, excluding public, and particularly youth voices. The transition to democracy introduced new participatory frameworks that recognise youth as stakeholders in governance.

Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child affirms the right of youth to express their views on matters affecting them and

calls for institutional mechanisms to facilitate such participation (United Nations, 1990). Mampame (2019) argues that meaningful youth inclusion enhances policy relevance and democratic accountability, fostering a generation of active and responsible citizens.

Digital, Cultural, and Entrepreneurial Pan-Africanism

Today's youth are pioneering new forms of Pan-Africanism through digital technologies, cultural production, and entrepreneurial initiatives. The internet and social media have enabled youth to circumvent traditional barriers to expression and create networks of solidarity, allowing them to challenge governments and mobilise for reform (African Union, 2020, pp. 12, 30). Cultural fields, especially music, fashion, and art, are also key spaces of continental identity-building, as youth blend local styles with global trends to craft a distinctly African cultural narrative (African Union, 2020, p. 9).

Entrepreneurship, particularly in Zambia, is increasingly viewed as a viable path to economic participation, even though access to capital and infrastructure remains limited (Bhorat et al., 2015, p. 2). Incubators like *BongoHive* exemplify emerging models that integrate digital skills with business training (Bhorat et al., 2015, p. 30). Yet, despite these innovations, youth-led initiatives often lack state support and operate in unstable conditions, surviving on personal resources and informal networks (African Union, 2020, p. 30).

Youth using business and digital tools to connect across borders are doing more than just making money. They are also building networks that challenge national borders and push for unity, fairness, and shared African identity. Their businesses and creative work are part of a larger political effort to imagine a future led by African youth.

Institutions, Education and Policy Frameworks

Institutional and educational systems are both enablers and barriers to youth empowerment. The African Youth Charter (AYC) and Agenda 2063 offer frameworks for integrating youth into policy and governance, but these commitments often remain unfulfilled or unimplemented (African Union, 2020, pp. ii, xxv). National youth policies, though widespread, are sometimes drafted without

meaningful youth consultation and frequently lack the resources to be effective (African Union, 2020, p. 14).

Education systems in the region are often misaligned with labour market needs. In Zambia and Zimbabwe, curricula are criticised for being overly theoretical and failing to equip students with practical or entrepreneurial skills (Ahmimed, 2019, p. 38; Maulani and Agwanda, 2020, p. 240). Disparities in access to quality education, especially for rural youth and marginalised groups, further entrench inequality (Ahmimed, 2019, pp. 30, 39). The result is widespread youth unemployment and a growing skills mismatch, which undermines both national development and regional integration.

Many plans to include youth in government and policy do not work well. One reason is that there are not enough spaces where youth and older leaders can talk and learn from each other. On top of that, different institutions often do not work together, and there is not enough money to support youth-focused programmes (Amupanda, 2018, p. 81; African Union, 2020, pp. 65-66).

Comparative National and Regional Dynamics

South Africa, Zambia, and Zimbabwe illustrate distinct yet interconnected challenges to youth engagement in Pan-Africanism. In Zimbabwe, youth participation is undermined by political repression and the instrumentalisation of youth by ruling elites (Dzimiri, 2014, pp. 447-448). Zambian youth face systemic exclusion from formal institutions despite high political engagement during elections (Musonda, 2022, p. 27). In South Africa, tensions persist between the dynamism of student activism and broader apathy toward formal politics (Lekalake, 2016, p. 1).

At the regional level, the Southern African Development Community (SADC) has established youth employment strategies, yet implementation remains limited and symbolic (Mkombe et al., 2021, p. 864). Many youths remain unaware of or disengaged from continental institutions such as the African Union, reflecting a disconnection between rhetoric and lived experience (African Union, 2020, p. 82).

Gaps in the Literature

Much research highlights the importance of youth to Africa's future but often focuses on their

historical activism or symbolic inclusion in policy frameworks. There is limited exploration of how youth themselves understand and reimagine Pan-Africanism today – through everyday practices, digital cultures, or economic innovation. Most studies also overlook how national contexts, such as political culture, education systems, or civil society, shape different opportunities for youth engagement in regional integration.

There is a lack of research that divides youth by country, class, and identity. Rural youth, LGBTQ+ youth, and working-class youth in South Africa, Zambia, and Zimbabwe are often underrepresented, and their unique perspectives on Pan-Africanism and integration remain poorly documented. Comparative studies that address these intersections could offer more nuanced insights into how diverse youth populations relate to continental agendas.

There is also little empirical work that centres youth voices in defining what regional integration should look like. Although institutions like the AU mention youth in official strategies, these rarely reflect the lived experiences or priorities of young Africans. This highlights the need for youth-centred research and more participatory policy processes.

Existing studies often overlook the perspectives of marginalized youth, such as LGBTQ+, rural, and working-class groups whose experiences reveal important variations in how Pan-African ideals are understood and lived.

Key Insights

The literature shows that youth in South Africa, Zambia, and Zimbabwe have played – and continue to play – important roles in shaping political change, cultural identity, and regional cooperation. Their activism builds on a long history of Pan-African thinking, from the early visions of leaders like W.E.B. Du Bois and Kwame Nkrumah to modern calls for unity through Agenda 2063 (Malisa and Nhengeze, 2018, p. 2; African Union, 2020, p. 10).

Across all three countries, youth are engaging with Pan-Africanism in new ways. Through digital platforms, music, art, and entrepreneurship, they are building networks, expressing African identities, and creating alternatives to mainstream politics and economics (African Union, 2020, pp. 9, 30). In Zambia; for example, innovation hubs

like *BongoHive* support digital start-ups, while in South Africa, student movements have challenged inequality and exclusion in higher education (Bhorat et al., 2015, p. 30; Lekalake, 2016, p. 1).

Despite this energy and creativity, major structural barriers persist. Youth are often left out of meaningful decision-making and consulted only symbolically. Education systems are outdated and fail to prepare youth for real-world opportunities, especially in Zimbabwe and Zambia (Ahmimed, 2019, p. 38; Maulani and Agwanda, 2020, p. 240). Rural youth, working-class youth, and LGBTQ+ youth are especially underrepresented in research and policymaking.

There is also a tension between regional ideals and local realities. While Pan-Africanism promotes unity, some youth view regional migration as a threat to jobs, which weakens their support for integration (Crush, 2022, pp. 14-16). This points to a gap between what institutions say and what youth truly experience.

Taken together, the literature makes clear that youth are not passive – they are finding new ways to be heard. However, without serious institutional support, inclusive education, and spaces for youth voices, their contributions to Pan-Africanism and regional integration remain limited. Future research should centre on youth perspectives, compare how national contexts shape engagement, and explore what genuine participation could look like.

METHODS AND DATA

Research Paradigm

This study follows a pragmatic paradigm, choosing methods and data that are most useful for answering the central research question. Rather than being tied to a single method or theory, the study draws from a range of sources, including academic literature, policy documents, reports, and examples of youth-led initiatives. Pragmatism supports both objective data and subjective interpretation, allowing for a balanced and context-aware analysis that is grounded in real-world relevance (Maarouf, 2019; Turin et al., 2024).

Why Focus on South Africa, Zambia, and Zimbabwe?

South Africa, Zambia, and Zimbabwe are the focus of this study for several important reasons. There is

a shared history, as all three countries were deeply involved in Africa's liberation movements and have strong Pan-African connections. Although South Africa, Zambia, and Zimbabwe are all part of the same regional group (SADC), they are vastly different in terms of economy, politics, and youth opportunities, this regional variety provides room for meaningful comparisons. All three countries have a large youth population and high youth unemployment, with youth migrating across borders in search of work, making them key players in regional integration. There is also a substantial amount of existing research and documentation relating to these countries, strengthening our study.

Research Design and Approach

This research is best described as a comparative desk study. It does not involve primary fieldwork, interviews, or ethnographic engagement, but instead synthesises secondary sources to understand youth-led Pan-Africanism in the region. The approach is qualitative and exploratory, using interpretive methods to examine how Pan-Africanism is understood, enacted, and challenged by youth in different national contexts.

This design supports the research goal of identifying patterns, contrasts, and shared experiences among youth in the three countries. It also allows for rich thematic insights without requiring direct access to participants (Creswell, 2013; Bhangu, 2023).

Data Collection and Analysis

Background theories and existing debates are collected from academic literature found on online databases that hold studies and articles relevant to our topic. Policy documents from the AU, SADC, and government websites are used to discover what policies say about youth and Pan-Africanism. Publications and reports from relevant organisations provide real-world data on youth education, employment, etc. Each country will be individually studied before completing a comparative analysis to find patterns in differences and alignments on key issues. The data will then be analysed using thematic analysis, a method that identifies and examines patterns and themes within data (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Creswell, 2013). This analysis method is well-suited to studies that seek to draw meaning from complex, qualitative material. While this study does not include direct

fieldwork, it centres youth perspectives by focusing on youth-led movements, public statements, social media campaigns, youth policy submissions, and existing youth-focused research in each country.

Limitations and Ethical Considerations

By focusing on only three countries, we cannot speak for the entire continent. As a desk study, this research is limited by its reliance on existing documents and data. It cannot fully represent all youth experiences, especially those in rural or undocumented settings. The study also does not involve direct youth participation, which is a limitation in capturing real-life experiences. However, efforts have been made to centre youth perspectives wherever available.

Ethically, the study is minimal risk, but care is taken to ensure that interpretations remain culturally respectful and contextually grounded in South Africa, Zambia, and Zimbabwe.

FINDINGS

Youth in South Africa, Zambia, and Zimbabwe engage in Pan-Africanism and regional integration in diverse ways. Their level of involvement depends on the political, economic, and social situation in each country. While South African youth tend to be more active and visible, Zambian and Zimbabwean youth often face bigger barriers. This section explains what youth are doing in each country, gives examples of youth-led projects, and compares their strengths and challenges.

South Africa

South African youth have played a strong role in Pan-African and anti-colonial movements, both in the past and today. In the 1950s, 34-year-old Robert Sobukwe helped start the Pan-Africanist Congress (PAC), and in 1976, students led the Soweto Uprising, which brought international attention to the fight against apartheid (Rodwell, 2024). These moments helped build a strong political awareness among youth, linked to African unity and liberation.

In recent years, student protests such as *#FeesMustFall* and *#RhodesMustFall* have focused on making education fairer and more African. These movements were not only about local issues - they also connected to broader Pan-African goals like decolonisation and social justice (Karadag, 2025). The ideas spread across borders and inspired

similar protests in other African countries (African Union, 2020).

South African youth also use art, music, and digital platforms to share Pan-African messages. For example, the 2015 People's March Against Xenophobia brought together youth groups like the SAIYA Youth Policy Committee and Students for Law and Justice to stand up for African unity (Section27, 2015). Online spaces give youth a way to connect with others across the continent and share their views (African Union, 2020).

Still, there are challenges. Most youth activism is based in cities and universities. Many youth are unemployed or disconnected from politics. Sometimes, tensions over immigration lead to xenophobia, which goes against Pan-African values (Kornegay, 2006; Crush, 2022).

Zambia

In Zambia, youth took part in early nationalist struggles and have been active in elections, but today their involvement in Pan-African efforts is more scattered (Musonda, 2022). Many face barriers like limited political access and few platforms to share their views. However, youth are finding new ways to contribute, especially through technology and business.

For example, tech hubs like *BongoHive* help young entrepreneurs build businesses that connect across the region. This shows a kind of "economic Pan-Africanism" where youth use digital tools to build regional networks (Bhorat et al., 2015). But not all youth can access these opportunities - those outside cities or without funding are often left out (African Union, 2020).

Zambian youth also take part in protests. One example is the 2021 Chingola mineworker protest, where many youth demanded fair payments from a foreign company. These actions show frustration with economic injustice and foreign control ideas often linked to Pan-African thinking (IndustriALL, 2021). Still, high youth unemployment and weak civic education limit long-term participation in regional projects (Mazimba et al., 2024).

Zimbabwe

In Zimbabwe, youth involvement in Pan-Africanism is affected by the country's troubled political past and current economic crisis. While youth helped during the liberation struggle, today

many feel excluded or disillusioned (Musonda, 2022; Dzimiri, 2014).

Government programmes like the National Youth Service (NYS) were meant to teach Pan-African values but became linked with political violence and election manipulation (Duri, 2018). Zimbabwean youth have become hesitant about Pan-Africanism as the ruling party and therefore the government strongly identify themselves with Pan-Africanism, yet are associated with oppression, human rights violations, corruption, and nepotism (Oosterom and Gukurume, 2023, pp. 3).

Still, youth find other ways to connect with Pan-African ideas. They use art, music, and informal trade to express their identity and connect across borders. However, problems like poor access to education, unemployment, and migration make it hard for many to participate in more formal ways (Wangotse, 2025; Ndlovu, 2023).

Comparison Across Countries

Looking at all three countries, South African youth are the most visible and organised when it comes to Pan-Africanism. Their history of activism, better access to education, and urban networks give them more platforms to express themselves (Lekalake, 2016, p. 1). In Zambia, youth face more barriers but are beginning to build new pathways, especially through tech and business (Bhorat et al., 2015, p. 30). In Zimbabwe, youth are often shut out of formal politics and distrust Pan-African messages from the state, but still express solidarity through culture and informal work (Dzimiri, 2014).

Across all three, youth are limited by a lack of resources, few platforms to engage with older leaders, and economic struggles (African Union, 2020). Still, they are finding new ways, especially online, in culture, and through business to promote African unity. These informal and creative forms of Pan-Africanism are important and deserve more attention and support from governments and regional bodies.

Youth-led Definitions of Pan-Africanism Today

In recent years, African youth have redefined Pan-Africanism beyond its traditional political roots. Rather than focusing only on state-led unity or historical liberation struggles, youth are shaping a lived, everyday Pan-Africanism that includes digital activism, creative collaboration, and cross-border solidarity.

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This youth-led Pan-Africanism is often informal, practical, and issue-driven. It emerges through online campaigns that promote shared African identity, cross-border cultural movements in music, fashion, and art, afro-entrepreneurship that links youth in different countries through digital platforms and Pan-African solidarity in protests and movements around democracy, education, and justice.

For many youth, Pan-Africanism means recognising shared struggles and using those connections to build something new — whether that is a business, a cultural movement, or a protest network. This version of Pan-Africanism is flexible and generationally distinct, placing more emphasis on real-life experiences than on institutional declarations.

ANALYSIS

Youth in South Africa, Zambia, and Zimbabwe contribute to Pan-Africanism and regional integration in diverse ways. Their involvement depends on opportunities available in politics, the economy, and culture. This section explores how youth engage across these three areas, what stops them from doing more, and what can be learned by comparing the countries.

The study reveals that the interest and involvement of youth in South Africa, Zimbabwe, and Zambia is shaped by factors such as institutional trust and credibility, the political environment, as well as economic and social development.

Political Participation

In South Africa, youth have more space to get involved in political activism, especially through protests and student-led campaigns. Movements like *#RhodesMustFall* and *#FeesMustFall* show how youth use political organising to push for social justice and African unity (Karadag, 2025). Although these protests focused on universities, they sparked wider debates across Africa. Youth are also part of civil society organisations and sometimes influence policy, although few are part of formal political decision-making (African Union, 2020, p. 99).

In Zambia, youth vote and take part in elections, but are often under-represented in political spaces. Many do not trust political leaders or feel that they have little influence over decisions. Some youth engage through protest or informal activism, like the 2021 mineworker demonstration (IndustriALL, 2021). However, a lack of civic education and few youth-led political platforms mean their involvement is limited (Mazimba et al., 2024).

Zimbabwean youth face even more serious barriers. Though the state promotes Pan-Africanism in speeches and youth programmes like the National Youth Service, these efforts are often tied to political manipulation (Duri, 2018). As a result, youth may feel alienated from politics and distrust messages about African unity. Political repression and fear also discourage open activism (Musonda, 2022, p. 19).

South African youth are politically active and visible, while Zambian youth are present but disconnected from leadership. In Zimbabwe, political engagement is stifled by fear and lack of trust, as well as being controlled by political forces.

Economic Participation

Youth in all three countries face high unemployment and limited economic opportunity, which affects how they engage with Pan-African goals. In Zambia, digital entrepreneurship is growing, supported by spaces like *BongoHive* which gives youth the tools to build businesses with regional connections (Bhorat et al., 2015, p. 30). This kind of

economic participation allows youth to contribute to regional integration in practical ways, especially in tech and trade.

In South Africa, some youths are also involved in Pan-African trade and creative industries, though the overall youth unemployment rate is extremely high, standing at 45.5% (Statistics South Africa, 2024). Economic inequality and limited access to resources reduce the ability of many to take part in regional projects.

In Zimbabwe, the economic crisis has pushed youth into the informal sector. Although this allows for cross-border trade and cultural exchange, it is mostly done out of necessity, not by choice. The collapse of the formal economy has reduced long-term opportunities for regional cooperation (Wangotse, 2025).

Zambia shows some promise in youth entrepreneurship with a regional focus, while South African and Zimbabwean youth face more economic exclusion. In all three, lack of funding, support, and job security holds youth back from deeper Pan-African economic engagement.

Economic disparities between South Africa and its neighbours continue to shape opportunities for regional collaboration. While South African youth often access better infrastructure and funding, their Zambian and Zimbabwean counterparts rely on informal and cross-border economies. These imbalances may hinder equal participation in regional integration unless addressed through coordinated youth economic policies.

Cultural Participation

Cultural expression is one of the most dynamic ways youths connect with Pan-Africanism. In South Africa, protests like *#RhodesMustFall* had a strong cultural message, calling for decolonisation of education and an African-centred identity. Youth use music, art, social media, and protests to promote African unity and challenge colonial legacies (African Union, 2020, p. 12).

In Zimbabwe, youth use art, music, and informal platforms to express regional solidarity, even if they avoid formal political spaces. Culture becomes a safer outlet for Pan-African ideas when politics is repressive (Dzimiri, 2014, p. 443).

Zambian youth are less visible in Pan-African cultural activism but are participating in digital

spaces and entrepreneurship that reflect Pan-African values. However, cultural platforms for youth are not well developed, and there is limited state or institutional support for Pan-African creative expression.

South African youth are most active in Pan-African cultural activism, followed by Zimbabwean youth in informal spaces. Zambian youth are less culturally engaged due to fewer platforms and visibility. Social media remains a crucial site for youth-led Pan-Africanism, allowing rapid mobilisation, cross-border solidarity, and the spread of cultural movements. As digital spaces evolve, they will likely determine how youth define and sustain Pan-African networks beyond traditional political channels.

Barriers Across All Countries

Across all three countries, youth face major challenges that limit their ability to shape Pan-Africanism:

- **Lack of institutional support:** Youth-led initiatives often go unsupported by government or regional bodies (African Union, 2020, pp. 65-66).
- **High unemployment:** Economic hardship distracts youth from long-term activism or regional engagement.
- **Poor political representation:** Youth are often excluded from formal leadership and decision-making.
- **Distrust and repression:** In countries like Zimbabwe, political mistrust and state violence discourage youth participation.

Despite these issues, youth are redefining Pan-Africanism through new forms - digital activism, entrepreneurship, protest art, and cross-border exchange. These actions may not always fit formal definitions of regional integration, but they represent a grassroots and modern version of African unity.

Table 1 shows a side-by-side thematic country comparison of the themes discussed in this section.

CONCLUSION

Youth in South Africa, Zambia, and Zimbabwe are reimagining Pan-Africanism through everyday practices that extend beyond state institutions. Despite facing unemployment, exclusion, and limited support, they continue to express

Table 1: **Summarised Thematic Analysis by Country**

THEME	South Africa	Zambia	Zimbabwe
Political	Highly visible but often co-opted by parties	Significant youth turnout; frustration post-election	Energetic activism under repression
Economic	Precarity despite political expression	NGO-based opportunities; limited systemic change	Informal economy; deep structural poverty
Cultural	Rich digital and creative culture	Strong community-based identity	Diaspora-driven cultural activism
Digital Platforms	Social media is central to activism	Used for issue awareness	Used for mobilisation, despite restrictions
Pan-African Vision	Aspirational, connected to the past and the future	Practical and community-grounded	Resilient, often framed through diaspora lenses

Pan-African ideals through activism, art, entrepreneurship, and digital connection. South African youth remain prominent in political and cultural spaces, though still constrained by inequality and xenophobia. Zambian youth are leveraging digital tools and entrepreneurship to connect regionally, while Zimbabwean youth, despite repression, channel Pan-African values through informal and creative avenues.

Together, these experiences reveal that Pan-Africanism today is not confined to official declarations or policy documents, it is being lived and redefined by young Africans themselves. To realise the full potential of this transformation, governments, regional institutions, and civil society must create supportive environments that value youth perspectives and leadership.

The African Union and SADC should institutionalise youth participation by creating youth policy co-design units and allocating budgetary quotas for youth-led initiatives. This would transform youth from policy subjects into policy co-authors, ensuring regional decisions reflect their priorities. To strengthen youth contributions to Pan-Africanism and regional integration, the following steps should be taken:

Include youth in policymaking: Governments and regional organisations such as the AU and SADC should establish genuine participatory mechanisms for youth, ensuring that their involvement moves beyond symbolic consultation. — **South Africa:** Strengthen local and national

youth councils by mandating youth representation in municipal forums and national advisory boards. Build on existing structures like the National Youth Development Agency (NYDA) by linking them to African Union (AU) and Southern African Development Community (SADC) youth networks.

- **Zambia:** Establish youth consultative platforms at the district and provincial levels to inform national development plans. Partner with universities and innovation hubs to channel youth policy proposals into formal decision-making.
- **Zimbabwe:** Rebuild trust in youth structures by reforming the National Youth Service and creating non-partisan youth forums that include independent youth leaders, cultural workers, and entrepreneurs.

Support youth entrepreneurship and innovation: Provide funding, mentorship, and infrastructure, especially in rural and marginalised areas to enable youth to develop regional businesses and digital projects.

- **South Africa:** Expand access to microgrants and digital incubators for township and rural youth, linking them to SADC regional markets through trade fairs and online platforms.
- **Zambia:** Scale up successful models like BongoHive by integrating them into national industrialisation and innovation strategies. Provide targeted funding for youth-led enterprises that engage in cross-border trade or technology collaboration.

— **Zimbabwe:** Facilitate regional trade training and simplify border regulations for informal youth traders. Partner with NGOs to create mobile entrepreneurship training units that reach rural youth.

Invest in education that promotes African unity:

Incorporate Pan-African principles, African history, and regional languages into curricula to foster cross-border understanding and solidarity.

— **South Africa:** Embed Pan-African studies, African languages, and regional cooperation modules within secondary and tertiary curricula. Encourage student exchange programs with other SADC states.

— **Zambia:** Update technical and vocational education to include entrepreneurship and digital literacy, enabling youth to participate in regional value chains.

— **Zimbabwe:** Revise civic education curricula to separate Pan-African ideals from partisan propaganda and restore its credibility among youth.

Promote cultural exchange programmes:

Support youth-led cultural initiatives in music, art, and media that strengthen regional relationships and challenge xenophobia.

— **South Africa:** Fund youth-led arts, film, and music projects that promote African solidarity, supported by national arts councils and SADC cultural grants.

— **Zambia:** Create a national digital platform to highlight youth innovation, connecting creatives and entrepreneurs across borders.

— **Zimbabwe:** Support regional arts residencies and community radio initiatives that promote youth dialogue on migration, identity, and unity.

Address political mistrust and repression: Youth programmes must prioritise empowerment over political control, ensuring freedom of expression and participation.

— **South Africa:** Implement civic education programs focused on non-violence and social cohesion to reduce xenophobia and strengthen Pan-African values.

— **Zambia:** Introduce legal protections for youth activists and ensure that public consultations include rural and marginalised voices.

— **Zimbabwe:** Guarantee political freedoms for youth organisations and create independent

oversight mechanisms to prevent their co-optation.

Tackle xenophobia and promote regional solidarity:

Launch public awareness campaigns and youth dialogues to address anti-African sentiment and build mutual respect within regional migration zones.

Across all three countries, governments should support youth-led regional collaborations. SADC could establish a Youth Integration Fund to finance cross-border initiatives in entrepreneurship, creative industries, and civic education. Universities and civil society organisations should facilitate joint youth summits to exchange knowledge, document experiences, and co-design policies from the bottom up.

This research raises several important questions for the future:

— How can digital platforms be better used to connect youth across Africa in practical, not just symbolic, ways?

— What role can regional bodies like the African Union play in holding governments accountable to youth inclusion?

— How can informal youth-led movements – like artists, traders, and online activists – be supported without being co-opted or repressed?

— What does a truly youth-driven version of Pan-Africanism look like, and how can it shape the next generation of regional cooperation?

Future research should prioritise participatory and field-based methods to deepen understanding of youth-led Pan-Africanism. Interviews, focus groups, and workshops with youth organisations, policymakers, and creatives could reveal how young Africans interpret and enact Pan-African ideals in practice. Comparative studies that include marginalised groups, such as rural, LGBTQ+, or working-class youth would provide a more inclusive understanding of regional integration. Finally, exploring the evolving role of digital technology and diaspora youth networks could illuminate how Pan-Africanism will continue to adapt in the next decade.

Future research should also explore the growing influence of diaspora youth, who play a vital role in linking African and global Pan-African networks. Through digital media, remittances, and activism

abroad, diaspora youth are extending the reach of Pan-Africanism and reshaping its transnational dimensions. As digital access expands, online platforms are likely to become even more central to Pan-African youth engagement. Emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence, mobile finance, and virtual collaboration spaces could

further democratize participation, enabling youth across borders to co-create policy ideas, cultural projects, and economic networks in real time. Future work should adopt an intersectional lens to capture how gender, sexuality, and geography shape youth engagement in Pan-Africanism, ensuring more inclusive understandings of regional identity.

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