

# Youth Time Poverty: The Overlooked Crisis

by [Abdullahi Ibrahim](#) & [Ikenna Ogbudimkpa](#) [October 2025]

MERL Unit & PAGR Unit, LEAP Africa



Image Source: Unsplash

In Africa, the most common theft is not of money or land. It's of hours. The hours lost in gridlock on the Third Mainland Bridge, the hours a student spends waiting for a bus that may never arrive, the evening stretched long because electricity vanishes just as homework begins. These are not occasional inconveniences; they are the rhythm of daily life. And when, after enduring these delays, a student finally makes it into the classroom, another kind of theft takes place: not of minutes but of voice. Lessons are dictated, questions from students are *punished*, obedience is rewarded, and silence becomes the curriculum. Hours that could have been invested in imagination dissolve quietly into endurance.

We measure poverty by wages, inflation, unemployment, or schools built. But the resource most unequally distributed is the one most invisible: time. On paper, time looks democratic. Each of us begins the day with twenty-four hours. In practice, it is governed by ruthless inequality. The wealthy purchase it back, enduring longer routes to escape traffic, backup power systems to outwit blackouts, housekeepers to reduce domestic chores, and schools that encourage voice. The poor pay for its absence in commutes, queues, chores, and classrooms that confuse discipline with silence.

Traditional monitoring and evaluation, sometimes described as *linear and extractive*, emphasises indicators defined before programmes even begin. It privileges numbers over nuance and reports over reflection. This approach often struggles to detect emerging issues in real time or to capture, beyond numbers, the lived realities of communities.

### **The Hidden Tax of Wasted Hours**

Consider the daily commute. In Lagos or Nairobi, a young person, according to [CNN](#), may spend 30 hours in traffic every week, simply moving between home and school or work. Cities have sprawled faster than their transport systems, and when new projects are announced, they often dissolve into corruption scandals, white elephants, abandoned midstream, or delivered years late at inflated costs. What appears as personal fatigue in traffic is, in fact, theft. Each wasted hour on the road is not just lost comfort. It is stolen study time, stolen rest, stolen productivity, and possibility.

Beyond the roads, there are the queues: at taps, petrol stations, and bus stops. In many communities, young people spend dawn fetching water from wells and boreholes that should have been replaced by functioning and easily accessible public systems decades ago. In the evenings, they wait for fuel to feed the generators that substitute for national grids, or lie dormant, unproductive, and robbed of valuable hours. These queues are not neutral inconveniences. They are symptoms of underfunded infrastructure, in some instances, of contracts awarded without accountability, of budgets diverted to patronage. For the most part, every hour spent in a queue is policy failure measured in minutes. Electricity tells the story in stark relief. Across the continent, billions of dollars have been poured into power reforms, contracts signed, ribbon-cuttings staged. Yet ordinary citizens still sit in darkness, waiting. When the lights go, time suspends. Homework is delayed, small businesses pause, and dreams wait in the shadows. A society that

forces its youth to spend evenings in waiting is not preparing for innovation.

Domestic burdens deepen the crisis. In households where governments fail to provide reliable water, housing, or childcare, the gap is filled not by systems but by unpaid labour. Girls, especially, spend hours cooking, cleaning, caring for siblings, and assisting in informal trade. They represent opportunities foreclosed: a book not read, a debate not joined, a dream deferred because the day was consumed by chores that society refused to redistribute. This is not cultural inevitability. It is persisting systemic neglect wearing the mask of tradition. Yet, young people press on.

### **When Silence Masquerades as Learning**

When young people finally arrive at school, their hours are often consumed, not transformed. Teachers dictate, students copy, assessments reward memorisation, and questioning is discouraged as disrespect. This hidden curriculum has roots in colonial education, designed to produce clerks who obey rather than citizens who imagine. The result is disciplined silence: youth who attend school faithfully but graduate without the practice of inquiry or the courage of voice. The theft here is profound: not only of knowledge but of possibility. What should be the most liberating use of time becomes another form of poverty.

Some argue that silence builds discipline, that endurance is character. But discipline without imagination is stagnant. Endurance without opportunity is exploitation. A continent that teaches its youth to wait and obey is not cultivating leaders. It is manufacturing resignation. And resignation is not a dividend. It is a debt.

## **Accountability as the Currency of Time**

If Africa is serious about development, it must redefine progress. Not only in GDP growth or jobs created, but in hours returned to citizens. The truest measure of a water project is how many girls no longer wake before dawn to fetch water. The truest measure of education is not enrollment, but curiosity cultivated and voices heard. If a project does not return value in time, it has failed. This is not an argument for efficiency alone. It is a demand for accountability. For decades, leaders have announced reforms, signed contracts, borrowed billions, and yet youth continue to pay in hours. Youth time poverty must be seen not as inconvenience but as political theft. Governments that waste the hours of their young are not neutral administrators. They are complicit in robbing the future.

So let us be clear: youth time poverty is not a private burden. It is the public cost of unaccountable governance. It is the test of whether development is real or rhetorical. And it is the one form of poverty that, once endured, can never be repaid. Return the hours. Restore the voices. Hold power to account. Because when youth time is stolen, Africa itself is robbed.

