

Kigali, 10<sup>th</sup> August, 2018

The African Democracy Forum joins the rest of the world in celebrating International Youth Day. This is a day for awareness, recognizing young people across the globe and empowering them so that they can contribute to their communities and countries. On this day we celebrate the effort youth puts into conflict prevention, participation in both decision-making, political processes and social justice.

This year's International Youth Day's theme is *Safe Spaces for Youth*. Young people need safe spaces where they can all come together and participate in activities which relate to their needs and interests. Through these spaces they also get to participate in decision-making processes as well as expressing their views. There are civic spaces, public spaces and digital spaces. These encourage the youth to engage in governance related issues, participate in community activities and help them interact with others across borders. They also ensure safety to those who are vulnerable to marginalization or violence.

Over time, what has made it difficult for youth to be engaged is the fact that African countries have struggled with the lack of political will, postcolonial and dictatorial mentality and influence of culture among others. It has been a challenge for young people to participate in their respective countries' social and political systems. Young Africans need safe spaces where they can voice their issues that affect their present as well as their future. These spaces can enable them to discuss the main drivers of integration and development in Africa which are democracy, governance, justice, rule of law and the respect for human rights.

The African Democracy Forum recognizes that without these safe spaces, young people from different countries, race groups, ethnicities, religious affiliation, cultural background and gender, may feel intimidated or uncomfortable to contribute to their communities or nations. With safe spaces that are effective, they can contribute to development, peace and social cohesion. These safe spaces need to be inclusive and ensure that youth from all communities are aware of their self-worth and that their needs are heard, met and respected. These spaces are crucial if youth are to engage in political and social matters.

Happy Youth Day!