

Thinking Policy Together

Enhancing Youth Inclusion and Representation in Climate Action in Africa

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Key Highlights

If the current levels of global warming and greenhouse gas emissions continue to rise unabated, youth and children will be the most impacted social group, with lifelong environmental, health, social, economic, and political consequences of adverse climate changes and biodiversity loss. With this vulnerability, along with the sheer global population size, youth engagement is not just an imperative but a right that secures their future and advances climate justice. This policy brief looks at the importance of youth inclusion in climate change, key barriers to their participation, and proposes policy interventions to address the barriers. Key highlights include:

- i) Youth under-representation in climate change activities. In Africa and globally, youth are grossly under-represented in programmes and initiatives addressing climate change, but gradual progress has been made, with youth being given a platform during COP27 for the first time. The key barriers to youth participation are limited information, visibility, technical expertise for

effective engagement in climate change matters, and access to resources to facilitate their participation.

- ii) Limited opportunities and under-utilization of youth potential. Existing institutional, programmatic, and policy frameworks for youth engagement do not reflect the huge potential by youth as the largest demographic group in Africa to contribute innovative, climate-smart, and sustainable initiatives that can accelerate climate action scale-ups in the continent.
- iii) Limited youth capacity development and funding. Harnessing African youth potential for effective climate action calls for well-designed capacity building programmes to equip the youth with technical expertise for engagement with policy makers and climate experts. Joint or collaborative programmes between experts and youth-led organizations could transfer essential skills and knowledge and bolster young people's contributions. Furthermore, dedicated resource mobilization for youth to participate in Conference of Parties (COP) and other global engagements could greatly promote youth inclusion in climate action.

Introduction

As the world continues to experience varying dynamics of the climate change crisis, youth exclusion and under-representation in significant decisions on climate change has emerged as a concern for three main reasons. Firstly, youth represent a large proportion of the world's population. Today, young people aged between 10 and 24 years make up 1.8 billion of the world's population, which represents 16 percent of the global population, while in developing countries they constitute up to 80 per cent of the population (UNDP, 2022). Secondly, this demographic will inherit the effects of climate change caused by actions of past and current generations and, consequently, there are growing calls for meaningful youth engagement (African Youth Climate Assembly Declaration, 2023; UNDP, 2022). Meaningful youth participation in climate action is "making young people a real priority in policies and policy making, recognizing their efforts and impact to date, and promoting and enabling their participation in climate politics. It is also about securing their rightful place in climate governance structures across all levels, and empowering and collaborating with them in the implementation of solutions" (UNDP, 2022:12). This definition acknowledges that young people are key drivers of climate change advocacy, innovation, and sustainability (UNDP, 2022), but several factors have led to their exclusion from climate

action matters, including limited information on climate change, inadequate visibility of youth-led climate action initiatives, limited technical expertise in policy making processes, and limited resources to promote and enhance their participation. Thirdly, youth participation is now considered a rights issue (UNDP, 2022), and hence their exclusion constitutes a climate injustice.

Similarly, in Kenya, the youth population is nearly 13 million but their participation in climate action is low. A recent mapping of youth-led climate initiatives documents only 694 networks and originations representing a total of 119,714 children and youth, which is less than one per cent (0.92%) of the youth in Kenya (Ministry of Environment and Forestry, 2023). Some of the activities these youth organizations and networks engaged in include raising climate change awareness (576 institutions); forestry-related actions (477); climate action adaptation (495); capacity Building (407); climate action advocacy (392); policy and research (158); and the least focus areas were climate change finance (96) and regulation (59) (Ministry of Environment and Forestry, 2023).

Aspiration 6 of Agenda 2063 calls for Africa's Development to be driven by its people and reliance on the potential offered by African People, especially its women, youth, and children (African Union-AU, 2013). Therefore, the

marginalization of young people can be a hinderance to the continent's ability to harness the innovation and the energy of its youth in addressing climate challenges (UNDP, 2022). Overall, the Agenda 2063 framework has been instrumental in addressing youth marginalization. Several African countries have established youth empowerment policies and programmes and some, such as Kenya, Uganda, and Seychelles have initiated mechanisms for engaging young people in policy development, including climate matters (Benkenstein et al., 2020). However, current efforts are not enough, with advocates calling them tokenistic initiatives and pushing for real youth contributions to be fully entrenched in all climate governance processes and outcomes at local, national, and global levels (UNDP, 2022). Advocacy in this area is gradually yielding traction. The UNDP argues that with its support to the 120 countries that are part of its Climate Promise Agenda, 80 per cent of the second generation of Nationally Determined Commitments (NDCs) to the Paris Agreement consider youth and children compared to 40 per cent of the first generation NDCs (UNDP, 2022). In at least 60 per cent of the countries, preparation of the NDCs had included consultations with children and youth as part of the civil society engagements (UNDP, 2022)). Similarly, until 2022, global engagements under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) such as the Conference of Parties (COP) limited youth participation in official engagements. Notably, COP27 marked unprecedented strides in youth inclusion by introducing the first-ever youth-led climate forum and establishing a Children and Youth Pavilion. There will be need to measure the extent to which such changes enable youth to influence important global governance on climate action.

Youth Access to Climate Change Information

Information empowers and promotes informed youth participation. Well-informed young people can make substantial contributions and influence climate actions. However, most young people are unaware of the engagement opportunities available to them (Chan et al., 2021), which diminishes their participation capacity and renders them passive stakeholders in climate action. Information sharing can thus significantly influence the quality of youth participation in climate action globally, but many have little or no access to climate change information despite continuing to witness on-going climate change crises. A survey by UNESCO shows that 70 per cent of young people globally have concerns about climate change, but their depth of knowledge on the subject varies considerably (UNESCO, 2023). In the UNESCO survey covering 166 countries, 27 per cent of the youths had little knowledge about climate change, 41 per cent had a deeper understanding of climate change, and 2 per cent were totally ignorant of the existence of climate change (UNESCO, 2023). The UNDP survey (People's Climate Vote) also noted that one out of every three respondents aged 14 to 18 years believe that climate change is a global emergency requiring urgent action (UNDP, 2022). Among G20 countries, respondents below 18 years were more supportive of implementation of bold climate policies to reduce greenhouse gas emissions compared to adults (UNDP, 2022).

In Africa, climate literacy levels stand at between 23 and 66 per cent, with huge variations between countries (Simpson et al., 2021). Further affirming the low literacy levels, a 2019

Afrobarometer study states that one in every 10 Africans have a full understanding of what climate action is and its consequences, but while the vast majority can explain changing weather patterns, they do not directly attribute them to climate change (Maluleke, 2021). However, there are higher levels of knowledge among youth who are directly engaged in climate action, although this is a small representation proportional to the youth in Africa as reflected in the mapped Kenyan youth organizations. This means that a lot more work is needed to educate young people on climate change threats and responses.

Several policy frameworks exist that champion youth access to information, skills, and knowledge at regional and global levels. The Sustainable Development Goal No. 4 (SDG4) addresses the need for an inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting lifelong learning for all. This goal has been interpreted by UNESCO, which leads its implementation as education for sustainable development (ESD). ESD enables young people to access skills that help them navigate their world as an interconnected ecosystem of work, social life, and care for the environment. The African Union, through The Youth Decade Plan of Action has a key priority on education and skills development geared towards climate change and the environment. Though such frameworks and institutions support youth education, climate change literacy levels remain low, thus hindering effective youth inclusion and participation in climate action (UNESCO, 2023).

Visibility of the Youth-led Organizations in Climate Change Initiatives

There is evidence that on-going youth advocacy for inclusion is gaining traction on several platforms regionally and globally, allowing for youth to participate in climate change action. During COP 27, the first ever Youth Pavilion and Youth Climate dialogue was hosted. Similarly, the first ever Africa Climate Summit held in Nairobi in September 2023 also had the first ever youth climate assembly as a pre-event to the summit. This enabled the assembling of African youth for deliberations on youth-informed policies and programmes and led to the African Youth in Climate Assembly (AYCA) declaration, which calls for greater inclusion and support to youth in climate engagements. In the incoming COP28 in the United Arab Emirates, the programme has also incorporated the youth.

While acknowledging some efforts to involve the youth in important conferences and events at COP, more could be done to ensure meaningful participation and balanced inclusion of youth as a large segment of the African population, which requires greater resource commitments. According to the World Food Programme (2022), the COP27 delegation under-represented young people due to the expensive costs associated with attending high-ranking conferences. This points to a need for financial support from both local and international governments to sponsor more young people to attend such meetings. Even the acclaimed Africa Climate Summit, which hosted 30,000 delegates from across the globe, had only 3,000 young people in the youth assembly. This accounted for only 10 per cent representation. The level of youth involvement is still below expectations, diminishing their presence and influence in important decision-making platforms.

Inclusion should go beyond events at COP to include the youth in intervention programmes. At the global level, the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals target

16.7 calls for responsive, inclusive, participatory, and representative decision-making at all levels. The Africa Youth Commission aims to change power structures to enable the youth to participate and engage in platforms at the global and regional levels. However, the commission does not highlight exclusively how the youth should be included in climate action deliberations at the regional and international levels. To address this, the African Youth in Climate Action (AYCA) Declaration called on the African Union to establish a Youth Division within its social programmes and incorporate youth in programmes within their Department for Sustainable Development and the Blue Economy (African Youth in Climate Action Declaration, 2023). Further, post-COP27 youth advocacy efforts resulted in the appointment of a COP27 Youth Climate Envoy, who served as an ambassador for the COP27 presidency. This role has been extended into COP28, an expanded mandate of Flagship within the COP presidency leadership team. In addition, the envoy undertakes two years of consultations with the COP presidency, acts as a liaison with the presidency, which has elevated the place of youth in global governance engagements and garnered support towards greater COP investments in capacity building, strengthening youth voices and improving resource mobilization for youth initiatives. Such measures will go a long way in addressing youth exclusion and ensuring greater integration of young people in the realization of Agenda 2063.

Youth Technical Expertise for Effective Participation in Climate Action

For meaningful inclusion, the youth must be equipped with the right technical skills for policy making and technological innovations revolving around climate action. Insufficient technical expertise has significantly contributed to the exclusion of young people from climate action deliberations. According to a survey by Plan International (2022), only 29 per cent of young people are confident in their global technical skills for climate action. As the world rapidly transitions to a green economy, there are enormous opportunities for the youth to contribute to economic development and in seeking solutions to the current climate crises.

Article 13, part 4 of the AU Africa Youth Charter (2009) reiterates the importance of youth participation and training in science and technology, and that equally, training centres should be equally accessible to encourage youth participation. Given the climate crises, there is recognition that education and training must equip the youth with green skills for the green economy. Several African governments have initiated the journey of equipping young people with skills to participate in a green economy. For instance, the Liberian Government has launched a School of Environmental Studies and Climate Change where 120 students are already enrolled (UNDP Climate, 2022). Moreover, the Ugandan government is actively funding youth-led climate-smart agricultural groups through grants (UNDP Climate, 2022). South Africa is supporting over 150 high school students to undergo a robotics programme aimed at solving climate issues. Similarly, through the Green Economy Youth Activator Programme, Kenya is actively collaborating with young people to leverage technology for the green economy (UNDP Climate, 2022). Development partners have also been proactive in this area. For instance, the USAID Youth in Development Policy has implemented measures to ensure access to opportunities to build the skills the youth

needs (UNDP Climate, 2022). While the current initiatives promote technical skills, there is need for greater access to information on the availability of current opportunities, while the training scope must include knowledge in the areas of policy making, collaboration, presentation, and negotiation expertise for climate change action.

Resource Mobilization for Effective Participation

It is acknowledged that the overall engagement of youth in climate-related platforms is constrained by limited funding and the high financial costs associated with participation in high-level forums such as COP. These financial responsibilities encompass accreditation, air travel, accommodation, meals, and day-to-day living expenses throughout the event, which present an obstacle significant to youth participation. Despite deliberate efforts to encourage youth attendance, participation remains low both at the regional level (for example the Africa Climate Summit) and globally at COP and other related events. While COP27 marked a new beginning for youths, COP funding and accreditation to attend these events remains a challenge for youths. Only a handful receive sponsorship from civil society organizations and funders outside the COP official delegation (Benkenstein et al., 2020). Though no data is available yet, still a very small percentage of Kenya youth possess the means to self-sponsor and fully participate in the upcoming COP28 despite attempts to support youth-led organizations to mobilize resources.

To effectively harness youth creativity, knowledge, and skills, it will be necessary to undertake a comprehensive reassessment of strategies that can facilitate youth involvement in high-level conferences, where their voices are needed more today than ever. This entails addressing the economic challenges that impede youth inclusion, thereby unlocking their potential contribution to the discourse on climate change.

Policy Recommendations

- (i) African governments through the ministries responsible for implementing education programmes and policies can put in place public education programmes that would enhance access to information on the causes and impacts of climate change to improve skills development and knowledge acquisition among young African learners. This could be achieved by supporting the development of digital platforms that offer climate change news and ensure credible and up-to-date information on climate change reaches as many young people as possible. These communication channels need to be accessible to all young people regardless of their geographical location.
- (ii) African governments, international and regional bodies, and development partners and institutions can bolster youth engagement by recognizing climate efforts by youth-led organizations and putting in place resources and strategies to promote the effective inclusion, representation, and participation of young people in significant decision-making processes on climate action. These youth groups should be empowered and have the right resources available to ensure sustainable climate action. Through these organizations, young people will also be able to access employment opportunities and create employment themselves.

- (iii) To implement the AYCA Declaration of 2023, the African Union should create a Youth Division and Youth Council within its structure and integrate youth in their sustainable development and blue economy programmes.
- (iv) Policy makers can underline collaboration with young people in a bid to build their capacity in policy formulation, negotiation, and implementation. Through this kind of meaningful engagement with institutions, including the Africa Group of Negotiators and the Kenya Institute for Public Policy Research and Analysis, young people will gain the technical expertise required in approaching policies that play an integral part in climate action and eliminate the gap of youth inclusion in policy making.
- (v) An exclusive funding mechanism under COP, UNFCCC, African Union, and other international bodies such as International Monetary Fund and World Bank could be created to ensure that young people get timely and sufficient funding to participate in local and international decision-making activities. This will increase the number of young people engaging in international deliberations and boost their confidence in climate change advocacy.
- (vi) Along with (v) above, national governments together with other state and non-state agencies that work closely with the youth on climate change matters can consider establishing dedicated resource mobilization programmes to support youth representative to participate in COPs and other events by UNFCC subsidiary bodies engaged in global climate governance matters.

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Endnotes

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KIPPRA Policy Briefs are aimed at a wide dissemination of the Institute's policy research findings. The findings are expected to stimulate discussion and also build capacity in the public policy making process in Kenya.

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