

Policy Briefing

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Strengthening Youth Participation in Climate-Related Policymaking

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Recommendations

- It is necessary to redefine what meaningful youth engagement and participation looks like within policymaking processes and to move away from tokenistic initiatives, particularly in Africa. Literature on how to meaningfully advance participation is lacking and what does exist is dominated by voices outside of the continent, particularly on climate change related engagement.
- Policymakers need to consider young people as important stakeholders, ensuring that their needs, vulnerabilities, rights and agency are reflected not only in the policies themselves, but in the policymaking process.
- Working collectively in groups and networks is essential to building a sustainable movement and achieving lasting change. Policymakers are encouraged to reach out to civil society organisations, school and university clubs and other youth networks.
- Education and capacity building programmes should move beyond simply providing environmental or climate-related information. Curriculum reform from primary through to post-secondary studies can mainstream climate change in national education strategies and help develop climate-conscious citizens.

Executive summary

Increasing meaningful youth participation in policy and decision-making processes in Africa is crucial to ensuring more ambitious climate action and implementation. Youth need to be seen as more than simply beneficiaries and rather as key stakeholders and active participants in policy development and implementation processes. Policy participation and formation, supporting groups and networks, and education and capacity building are areas of potential focus for policymakers and civil society to develop more effective youth engagement.

Introduction

Across Africa young people are increasingly raising their voices and advocating for climate action. These climate leaders bring an important lens to the global discourse: intersectionality. While climate discourse has tended to focus on the science and technical elements of climate change, there is growing recognition that climate change profoundly impacts human society. As such, further insight is needed into how different individuals and groups relate to climate change, depending on their situatedness within power structures based on social and context specific categorisations.

As the demographic most impacted by climate change, and the one set to manage a climatically changed future, young people play a vital role in developing these insights further. Young people tend to start their climate activism at a local level, focusing on the issues most relevant to their local contexts and situations. In addition, their activism tends to focus on issues of social justice – the wave of youth-led climate action in Africa encompasses issues of social justice that range from electricity access for all, water management, bridging the digital divide, employment and livelihoods, to women and girls' empowerment and food security. In this way, young people are demonstrating the need for intersectional approaches to climate action that consider poverty, inequality, racism, decolonisation, gender disparities and building a foundation for a just transition to a more sustainable future for all. This makes their approach more relevant to all citizens, from the grassroots up. There is a growing feeling that securing environmentally sustainable development, while at the same time promoting just and sustainable economic and social development, ought to receive more attention from the public and in government interventions.

Africa's youth, defined by the [African Youth Charter](#) as young people between the ages of 15-35¹, are making it clear that they are knowledgeable, passionate and active. Their meaningful participation and inclusion in climate-related policymaking spaces and processes, however, remains a major challenge. This stems from multiple factors. First,

¹ AU, *African Youth Charter*, 2 July 20016 (Banjul: AU, 2006), <https://www.refworld.org/docid/493fe0b72.html>.

although climate change understanding is growing, there remains a need for more comprehensive climate change education and capacity building which embraces local knowledge while contextualising global change and how these impacts are and will be experienced at a local level. Much of the discourse is still focused at a high level and more needs to be done to make links to the lived experiences of the average young person and their communities. Second, the decision-making spaces are still largely inaccessible to young people, as they are primarily constructed to accommodate older working people. These spaces do not always account for constraints to participation faced by youth, such as lack of transport, timing of events, study needs or even basic access to information. Where spaces are accessible, they are often limited to tokenistic or surface-level engagements that do not promote deeper, continuous youth involvement, instead approaching youth participation as a ‘tick-box’ exercise. Third, differences in needs and experiences between ‘younger’ youth (15–24) and ‘older’ youth (25–35) are not always appreciated nor accounted for in consultative or public participation processes. Young people are often broadly categorised into a ‘youth’ demographic without fully appreciating the potential range of lived experiences within this group. Overcoming these challenges is paramount for improving youth participation and contributing to more effective and ambitious climate policies and implementation.

In late 2020, young researchers contributed to the development of a report *Youth Climate Advocacy in Africa: Emerging Insights* that highlighted emerging good practice in youth participation for climate action from selected countries in Africa. Drawing on the experiences of grassroots initiatives and case studies from different regions across Africa, the report highlighted a series of recommendations to contribute to a much-needed discourse on youth climate advocacy and participation in Africa. This policy briefing outlines the key messages of the report and is framed around the role of African youth in climate-related policymaking with a specific focus on policy participation and formation, supporting groups and networks, and education and capacity building.

Policy participation and formation

Redefining what meaningful youth engagement and participation looks like within policymaking is crucial and important to unpack in varying African contexts which consider both local and national processes. With the majority of the population being children and youth, Africa is young.² Policymakers need to consider youth as important stakeholders, beneficiaries, agents of change and communicators of good practice. It is important to ensure that the needs, vulnerabilities, rights and agency of young people are reflected not only in policies themselves, but also in policymaking processes.

² UNICEF, *Generation 2030 Africa 2.0, Prioritizing investments in children to reap the demographic divide*, (UNICEF, 2017), <https://data.unicef.org/resources/generation-2030-africa-2-0/>.

Including youth in policy development should be seen as mutually beneficial: strengthening the capacity of young people and that of policymakers to engage more effectively with their constituencies. Time, training and financing is required to build the capacity of young people to effectively participate in policy and decision-making processes. Policymakers and civil society organisations should continue to develop capacity building initiatives to ensure youth are ready and able to effectively understand and participate in these processes. While effective engagement in policy processes can be challenging, it has been demonstrated that young people thrive within these environments when they have both the skills and opportunity to do so. While there is often a focus on 'older' youth (25-35), attention should also be placed on engaging with the younger demographic, specifically high school age students.

Youth advocacy is often targeted at national or multilateral policy processes and negotiations (eg, UN Framework Convention of Climate Change Conference of the Parties (COP) processes), yet there is a broader range of opportunities for youth to engage in governance processes related to climate change. Government institutions should explore innovative mechanisms for youth engagement on climate change and look to integrate the climate change agenda within existing structures (youth parliaments, youth councils, etc.). While it is important for youth to be included within climate change policy processes, it is also important for other policy processes to be accessible to youth, recognising the intersectionality of climate change and youth-related interests.

Intergenerational equity and appreciation for the growing African youth demographic should be made more explicit in climate policy and nationally determined contributions. National youth policies should consider climate change and the potential impacts on areas like education, employment and the overall well-being and development of youth in society. National policies must also take gender into consideration. Climate action that is gender-sensitive, gender-responsive and gender-transformative can bring about the systems-level change needed, not only to eliminate gender inequality, but also to achieve a sustainable, just, equitable and fair society.

Finally, government also needs to demonstrate how the views of young people have been considered and are reflected in the decisions made. Demonstrating how youth voices have been incorporated into policies and initiatives increases more meaningful engagement and shows governments' commitment to transparency and inclusiveness, which can open the door for youth participation in policy implementation.

Supporting groups and networks

There is no doubt that individual activists, leaders and actors are crucial to climate advocacy, but working collectively in groups and networks is essential to building a sustainable movement and achieving lasting change on the continent. Government institutions should seek to work not only with individual young leaders, but also with

and through networks, institutions, organisations, schools and other stakeholders. This will help to facilitate broader youth participation in climate policy development and implementation. Working with groups and networks makes way for a greater diversity of youth voices and experiences to be considered in decision-making processes.

Education and capacity building

Environmental education programmes serve as an important foundation for many young people, but there is an increasing need for education and capacity building programmes to move beyond simply providing environmental or climate-related information. Curriculum reform from primary through to post-secondary studies is necessary to mainstream climate change in education strategies and to encourage climate-conscious citizens. The climate crisis needs to be integrated across subjects and at all levels of education, recognising the intersectionality of climate change.

Teachers also need to be equipped to manage these changes to the education curricula. They need capacity building and training activities to improve their ability to teach climate change and integrate it into all elements of education. Natural and physical science teachers should not be the only ones discussing climate change issues – more can be done to involve social sciences, maths, technology, and arts and culture educators to provide social, economic and cultural understandings of the climate crisis, and to develop potential solutions or approaches to dealing with this global change.

Finally, education programmes should include leadership and skills development that focus on capacitating young people to engage effectively in different processes – young people need to be equipped for present and future realities. Wherever possible, youth should not just be participants in climate change programmes, they should also be organisers, researchers, writers, managers and coordinators. Providing work and research opportunities, practical experiences and project implementation experience is essential to building capacity.

Conclusion

An active and motivated youth demographic is essential to tackling the climate crisis. Education and capacity building programmes need to incorporate an intersectional approach to climate change across subjects that build skills for a changing world. Educators also need to be supported and upskilled with the necessary capacity to teach climate change in their relevant subject areas, and ultimately be able to situate global change impacts in their local and national context.

More should be done to acknowledge Africa's young climate leaders, while also encouraging greater involvement of groups and networks for more sustained societal

action. Youth participation should be positioned as not only a 'nice to have' tick box or tokenistic activity, but as a vital part of any consultation or public participation process. This is important for all youth, but particularly for younger, school-age youth, as their voices might otherwise be excluded.

More research is needed on climate change-related youth participation in policymaking, especially in Africa. Having a clearer understanding and definition of what meaningful engagement looks like is essential for youth and decision-makers alike. Doing so would allow for the development of better practices and consultative processes that would in turn lead to more effective policy uptake and implementation.

Youth are already implementers of countless climate projects and initiatives throughout the continent, but are not always considered as possible implementing partners for climate policies and plans. Youth have demonstrated that they do not just want to be project beneficiaries – it is time to reposition them as valued stakeholders that can drive change at a local, national and regional levels.

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Cover image

Children carrying a coffin and crosses during the Global Climate Strike March on October 02, 2020 in Durban, South Africa (Darren Stewart/Gallo Images via Getty Images)

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