

African youth voices matter in shaping climate policies

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Abstract

In the discourse on climate change, the year 2023 marked a pivotal moment with record-breaking temperatures and substantial investments in activities with negative environmental impacts. Central to addressing this global challenge is the engagement of youth, who bring diverse perspectives and innovative solutions. Despite obstacles such as resource constraints and institutional boundaries, their involvement is crucial. With over one billion youth living in climate-vulnerable regions globally, urgent action is imperative to mitigate future risks. Efforts to integrate youth into climate policymaking underscore the need for enhanced inclusion and recognition. In Africa, beyond activism, youth contribute valuable insights and community resilience efforts, advocating for sustainable solutions. In this article, the influence of African youth from diverse regions, highlighting their pivotal role in shaping climate policies and advancing a sustainable future for the continent was explored.

Keywords : Climate Policy, African Youth, Climate Change

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Introduction

In Africa and the world over, discourse on climate change is steeped in facts, figures, and a parlance that has taken on a life of its own. The conversation, largely punctuated by the existential nature of the threat, has been dominated by mandated international institutions and international civil society—including media, academia, and nongovernmental organisations [5]. The following examples will illustrate the point :

- 2023 was billed as the hottest year on record—1.48 degrees warmer than the long-term average [1];
- Around 7% of global GDP was invested in activities with direct negative environmental impacts [2];
- Global wildfire carbon emissions increased by 30% [3];
- Military forces accounted for 5.5% of greenhouse gas emissions [4];

Under current commitments temperatures will rise by between 2.4 and 2.6 degrees, which will subject millions more to catastrophes.

From the above figures, it is more than apparent that we face an existential threat. Engaging young people in the understanding of climate change can result in enhanced knowledge and skill development, critical awareness, and opportunities for positive health behaviors and policy change. Yet, involving young people in various initiatives can pose challenges, and it's important to understand that there isn't a single approach that works for every situation [5].

Globally, approximately 1 billion youth live in countries particularly vulnerable to climate change impacts [6], with projections indicating that by 2050, all children worldwide will face regular heatwaves [7]. Alarmingly, extreme weather events are displacing millions of children, underlining the urgent need for proactive climate action [8].

Political participation is an indispensable factor in a healthy democratic society; however, it is not always easy for citizens, especially young people, to engage in politics due to resource constraints and institutional boundaries [9]. Efforts to integrate youth into political and social spheres offer valuable insights into prevailing perceptions of their roles, highlighting the need for enhanced inclusion and recognition.

Youth, however, offer more than protests; they bring fresh perspectives and innovative solutions, from technology-driven initiatives to community resilience efforts [10]. To maximize their impact, young people must strive to access decision-making forums and dismantle adult-centric perspectives, becoming proactive voices for the present and advocates for future generations [11].

This article will reflect on how African youth can influence climate policies from different regions across the African continent, showcasing the diverse and impactful contributions of young people in shaping a sustainable future for all.

Morocco and North Africa Perspectives

North Africa is considered as a climate change hot spot. Existing studies either focus on the physical aspects of climate change or discuss the social ones, but never on how the engagement of youth can be of value. Questions are increasingly being raised regarding the extent to which

current education and learning experiences are equipping young people, who constitute key stakeholders, decision-makers and leaders of future society, with the skills to efficiently manage such contemporary and long-term complexities [12]. Scholars are increasingly emphasizing the importance of informal educational spaces and social learning and networking platforms for enhancing understanding of sustainable development and promoting collective and collaborative action on sustainability.

Going back to December 2010, the self-immolation of a young Tunisian fruit vendor sparked what has come to be termed the “Arab Spring”. What first appeared as an isolated act of protest against local authorities quickly gained broader significance, as it was followed by a series of demonstrations that has shaken the grip of autocratic regimes across the Arab world. A year later, three longstanding dictators—Zine El Abidine Ben Ali of Tunisia, Hosni Mubarak of Egypt, and Muammar al-Qaddafi of Libya—were ousted, after varying degrees of violence. Syria, Yemen, and Bahrain have all witnessed extensive turmoil, raising serious questions about the legitimacy and survival of their rulers. Elsewhere, the political leaders of Morocco, Algeria, and Jordan have also been pressured into enacting reforms to try to assuage public demands [13].

The Arab Spring showed a rapid reaction to the revolution, highlighting the role of young people in planning and leading the revolution [14]. In fact, a vast body of evidence confirms that individuals with a higher educational attainment consistently exhibit a greater propensity to participate in the full spectrum of political activities, from milder forms of engagement such as voting or discussing politics to more public forms of mobilization such as demonstrations . Indeed, some authors claim with some justification that education is “the best individual-level predictor of political participation.” [10,13].

Youth Engagement and the Boundaries of Institutional Recognition : Insights from Morocco's Constitutional Reform

Morocco's transformative constitutional reform in 2011, which was spurred by the resounding protests of the 20 February Movement and thoughtfully outlined under the guidance of King Mohammed VI, signifies an escalating dedication to the cause of youth empowerment. Orchestrated by a panel of experts appointed by the monarch, and following extensive consultations with a spectrum of political factions and associations, the newly enacted Constitution profoundly underscores the pivotal role of youth participation across multiple dimensions of national development, active civic engagement, and expanded access to education, culture, and technology. A momentous stride in this direction is the establishment of the Consultative Council of Youth and Associative Action, a crucial vehicle to advance these overarching objectives [11].

Moreover, there has been the implementation of a quota of 30 youth in the House of Representatives, which has contributed to enhancing youth representation in Parliament. However, young people continue to be underrepresented in politics at all levels in Morocco, as in most countries worldwide [15].

Botswana and Southern Africa Perspectives

In regions like Sub-Saharan Africa, where Botswana is located, extreme weather events affect agriculture, health, and livelihoods, hitting youth populations significantly. Flash floods and droughts have disrupted lives and livelihoods, impacting education, health, and economic stability among the youth. This is especially dangerous where the unemployment rate stands at 44.2% of the total labor force for people aged 15-24 [16].

In September 2023, the UN Office in Botswana held consultations to accelerate progress on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030 where 200 youth attended, underlining the importance of inclusive participation. The consultations emphasized the need for young people to have a seat at the decision-making table, recognizing their valuable insights and potential for innovation in climate action. With increased access and support, young people in Botswana can play a crucial role in shaping climate policy for a sustainable future [17].

There is a history of youth activism in Botswana which was inspired by growing frustration over high unemployment rates, inequalities, crime and corruption. The country has witnessed 3 major 'strikes' which were driven in majority by young people. The January - February 1995, Segametsi Mogomotsi riots saw more than 200 students arrested, 1 killed and others injured or paralysed, garnering concern from Amnesty International. In 2011, Botswana witnessed 'the mother of all strikes' where around 93 000 of the country's 103 000 government workers ceased working [18]. With the absence of teachers at schools during a critical time in education, students as young as 12 years old to university level, marched in protest of the deteriorating learning conditions which were caused by the strike. The Unemployment Movement strikes in 2017 shook the country, at a time when according to the World Bank, youth unemployment in Botswana stood at 33.2%. Botswana's escalating youth activism, marked by strikes and protests, demands a critical look at youth unemployment, inequality, and education. These actions signal a growing generation unwilling to accept the status quo. They also urge policymakers to address the needs of a growing generation demanding change.

The year 2019 will forever be remembered as the election year where Botswana politics saw a giant leap forward surrounding the democratic element. Should this trend continue, 2024 will be an even more competitive election year. In 2019, there were 778,343 voters. Although the Independent Electoral Commission Botswana projects a 1 700 000 million population for the 2024 elections [19], the country has received 810 974 registrations thus far [20]. Youth participation in the electoral process has increased steadily from 21% in 2004 to 41% in 2019. (21%, 29%, 40% and 41% in 2004, 2009, 2014 and 2019 respectively) [21].

We have seen evidence of trusting youth to lead in Bogola Kenewendo, during her tenure. She was the youngest Cabinet Minister in Africa and in Botswana's history and her transformation of the Ministry of Investment, Trade and Industry. She implemented reforms to significantly improve the ease of doing business, open up both domestic and international markets, and position the country to succeed in the global value chains as well as the digital economy [22]. As the Minister, Kenewendo championed and introduced policy changes and doing business reforms including: reducing cost and time to start a business in Botswana from 49 days to 7 through implementing an online business registration system, reforming licensing requirements, introducing digital economy strategy and development of ecommerce ecosystem,

introducing Supplier Development Program for SME onboarding in various value chains [23]. In her March 2019 Forbes Africa interview, Kenewendo said that “... youth leadership was the flagship of the political independence and revolution, and so it should be for the economic independence revolution that I believe our generation should lead”. When youth are trusted to lead in decision making; we create space for new, transformative and innovative ideas to take form.

Uganda and East Africa perspectives

Over the years, Ugandan young people and the population in general have been vocal and engaged in several efforts to combat the scourge of climate change and the attendant devastation it has wreaked on lives, livelihoods, and public infrastructure.

The most recent public level undertaking has East African Crude Oil Pipeline has been on the receiving end of such engagements [24] due its marked threat to ecosystems within and along the locations it will traverse. It is apparent that the project will further aggravate already existing threats to sustainable development commitments made by Uganda due to the emissions and effluent it will generate. Towards combating the threat, young people have repeatedly voiced their opposition to the project through among other actions, protest and demonstrations [25]—a number of which have, unfortunately been met with brute force and repression [26] by the sitting regime.

Notably, young people like Eron Kiiza and Anthony Odur have also utilised their legal training to advance climate justice efforts [27]. In this respect, the two have spearheaded the quest for the protection of Bungoma Forest Reserve—an expanse of a hundred thousand acres, and home to more than thirty-four species of mammals. These efforts have not been without difficulty, but have given voice and momentum to the case for sustainable development, environmental protection, and secure livelihoods (insofar as food security and biodiversity) is concerned.

Young people have also assumed national and global leadership of climate justice efforts by making their voices heard through public awareness campaigns, music, poetry, writing, and theatre. Participants in this dimension include Vanessa Nakate [28] and Hillary Taylor. Other young Ugandans have used their leadership positions to innovate sustainable approaches to manufacturing and processing. In this respect, Bernard Odoi [29] the Member of Parliament for Youth Eastern Region, has undertaken initiatives on recycling, refuse processing, and creating eco-friendly jobs. He has also used his position in the House to advocate climate-friendly public policy and legislation.

Further, Enjer Ashraf and Ismael Tamale, founders of the *My Tree Initiative* [30], have mobilized hundreds of volunteers to plant and care for native trees, hoping to reach the “million tree” milestone by 2023. This is especially important because Uganda loses hundreds of hectares of forest every year to population pressures and illegal logging. These efforts rekindle memories of a major civic effort that occurred more than a decade ago.

In 2007, following an improper allocation of Mabira Forest, one of Uganda’s and indeed East Africa’s most important biodiverse ecological feature, the National Association of Professional Environmentalists (NAPE) in conjunction with other civil society groups in Kampala formed [31] a pressure group and codenamed it 'Save Mabira Crusade' (SMC) to protest the forest give-way. The group spearheaded by NAPE mobilised [32] Ugandans across the country and beyond to protest the forest de-

gazettement plan. Multiple, simultaneous demonstrations broke out and, despite the highhanded crackdown, government was forced to capitulate and the move was halted.

This, like subsequent efforts, was a watershed moment, whose ripples can still be felt across the terrain of climate justice endeavours in the country and beyond.

Ghana and West Africa Perspectives

In Ghana, the impacts are evident in erratic rainfall patterns, declining agricultural productivity, and coastal erosion. These challenges threaten livelihoods, food security, and economic stability, particularly in rural communities. Climate change presents an existential threat to humanity, requiring urgent and concerted action. In this context, the role of youth, particularly in countries like Ghana, is pivotal.

Ghana boasts a vibrant youth population, with approximately 57% of its citizens under the age of 25 [33]. This demographic dividend presents a unique opportunity to harness the energy and innovation of young people in addressing climate change. Empowering Ghanaian youth involves providing them with education, resources, and platforms to engage meaningfully in climate action.

Youth-led Solutions :

Youth-led solutions are instrumental in driving climate action at the grassroots level. These solutions embrace modern technologies to provide innovative solutions to climate change challenges. In Ghana, youth organizations such as Grandhedge International, Green Africa Youth Organization, among others, are actively involved in environmental conservation, renewable energy development, tree planting, and advocacy campaigns. These initiatives empower young people to take ownership of sustainability projects in their communities. Also, young entrepreneurs are driving sustainable development, from developing solar-powered solutions to creating mobile apps for environmental monitoring. Initiatives like the Ghana Climate Innovation Center (GCIC) support youth-led startups in developing climate-resilient technologies and business models [34].

Youth Participation in climate decisions:

Youth participation in policy-making processes is essential for ensuring that their voices are heard and their perspectives are integrated into climate strategies [35]. Ghanaian youth can also leverage international cooperation and exchange programs to broaden their perspectives and build partnerships for climate action. Initiatives such as the African Youth Climate Hub and youth delegations to international conferences like the UN Climate Change Conference (COP) enable young Ghanaians to connect with their peers globally, share best practices, and advocate for collective action on climate change. The Youth Climate Council Youth Climate Negotiators' training helps young people to build capacity to negotiate for Ghana during COP. This helps young people have a voice in climate negotiations [36].

Challenges and Opportunities:

While Ghanaian youth have immense potential to accelerate climate action, they face several challenges, including limited access to resources, inadequate support structures, and socio-economic barriers. Addressing these challenges requires concerted efforts from government, civil society, and the private sector to invest in youth empowerment, education, and capacity-building initiatives. By overcoming these obstacles, Ghana can unlock the full potential of its youth population as catalysts for sustainable development.

Conclusion

Despite extensive efforts at various levels, including country, regional, and COP engagements, the challenge of climate change persists, posing a growing threat to lives and livelihoods. While Africa's comparatively low contribution to greenhouse gas emissions may have led to a perception of limited activism, particularly among the youth, it is imperative to recognize the pivotal role that young people can and should play in driving climate action.

This article underscores the importance of empowering young people to lead discussions that delve into the structural and systemic origins of climate change challenges. By highlighting past successes, such as the Soweto Uprising in South Africa and the Arab Spring in North Africa, it is evident that youth-led movements have the potential to instigate meaningful change across the continent.

As exemplified by individuals like Bogolo Kenewendo, the scope of climate action extends beyond mere protest to encompass policy advocacy and influence. Furthermore, there is a pressing need for governments to support youth-led initiatives aimed at developing climate-resilient technologies and business models, as evidenced by initiatives like the Ghana Climate Innovation Center (GCIC).

Moving forward, our focus remains on addressing the structural issues outlined in this article and advocating for solutions that prioritize equitable and accessible regulatory measures, reaching down to grassroots communities. It is essential to provide young people with the necessary platforms and support to effectively contribute to the formulation and implementation of climate policies that benefit all.

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