



Youth Participation in Climate Action in Sub-Saharan Africa: Challenges, Gaps and Prospects



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ABSTRACT

This study explores the intricate barriers and potential pathways to achieving meaningful youth engagement in climate action across Sub-Saharan Africa. The aim was to critically examine the socio-structural factors that either hinder or facilitate effective participation. Employing a comprehensive desktop study methodology, this research synthesizes and analyzes a broad range of existing academic literature, policy reports, and documented case studies from the region. The key findings indicate that young people encounter a multifaceted set of barriers, including a significant lack of awareness of climate change processes and institutional frameworks, inadequate access to funding and knowledge resources and a severe reduction in their adaptive capacities. This is because they are among the most vulnerable groups, experiencing direct impacts on their health, food security and livelihoods. The discussion suggests that these interconnected challenges create a cycle of exclusion that hinders equitable participation in climate governance. Consequently, NGOs, governments and research institutions should move beyond symbolic consultation and actively collaborate to co-create inclusive platforms, provide dedicated resources, and integrate youth directly into the design, implementation, and monitoring of adaptation and mitigation strategies. This study's primary contribution to scholarship is a synthesized, critical framework that explicitly frames youth exclusion as a core climate justice issue within the African context, offering a foundation for future empirical research and equitable policy development.

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INTRODUCTION

Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) is among the sub-regions most vulnerable to the effects of climate change, despite its minimal contribution to global greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. The region has encountered numerous environmental challenges, including rising temperatures, shifting rainfall patterns, and increasingly frequent and severe droughts, floods, and other climate-related events. Within this context, the youth population, which makes up a significant portion of the region, is both the most vulnerable and the most capable demographic for driving meaningful climate action.¹ However, despite their potential, the full integration of youth into climate action efforts in SSA is hindered by various structural, social, and economic factors.² Youth participation is crucial to addressing the adverse effects of climate change in sub-Saharan Africa, where global warming impacts, such as extreme weather patterns, droughts, and

¹ United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)., "Elevating Meaningful Youth Engagement for Climate Action," *Climate Promise*, 2022.

² S. R. Fisher, "The Emerging Role of Youth in Global Climate Governance," *Global Environmental Politics* 19, no. 3 (2019): 1–10.

flooding, disproportionately affect vulnerable communities.³ Young individuals are not only the most affected by climate change but also have the potential to play a pivotal role in advancing sustainable development and climate action.⁴

Nevertheless, despite the clear necessity for youth engagement, several challenges hinder their full participation, particularly in terms of policy, education, and resource availability.⁵ Sub-Saharan Africa is experiencing a rapid increase in its youth population. According to the United Nations, nearly 60% of Africa's population is under the age of 25, making it one of the youngest regions globally.⁶ This demographic shift presents both opportunities and challenges. Young people are more likely to be innovative and open to new approaches in addressing climate change.⁷ They possess the energy, creativity, and adaptability needed to drive the transition to a sustainable, low-carbon economy. Youth involvement is crucial for shaping future agricultural practices, energy systems, and urban planning to tackle climate change while promoting sustainable development.⁸

The demographic makeup of Sub-Saharan Africa is especially relevant when considering youth involvement in climate action. With over 60% of Africa's population under the age of 25,⁹ the continent is experiencing a swift demographic shift. Young people have the potential to drive innovation and sustainable practices, yet they are often sidelined in discussions about climate change policy and decision-making. Climate change poses a significant threat to the future livelihoods of this generation, particularly in agriculture-dependent societies where unpredictable weather patterns jeopardize food security.¹⁰ In addition, youth unemployment in SSA presents a major challenge, and this lack of economic opportunities further heightens their vulnerability to climate impacts.¹¹

According to the African Development Bank, involving youth in decision-making processes is vital for developing long-term resilience and adaptation strategies.¹² Despite the significant potential of the youth demographic, several barriers hinder their active participation in climate action across sub-Saharan Africa. Climate change threatens the sustainable youth development agenda, making their active involvement in this region crucial for climate action, as they are a valuable resource for driving transformative change. Although African youth have the potential to make substantial contributions to climate change initiatives, they face numerous challenges that impede their efforts. This study explores both the conceptual and practical aspects of effective youth involvement in climate action, highlighting existing gaps and challenges, as well as opportunities for innovation and development in this field.

Youth Participation: A Conceptual Note

Youth is typically defined as individuals aged 15 to 35.¹³ However, the concept of youth can vary across different contexts, often referring to those aged 15 to 25 who are transitioning from adolescence to adulthood.¹⁴ Youth participation involves young people, either individually or collectively, expressing their opinions and proposing solutions that align with the systemic changes needed to achieve climate-

³ R. Barros et al., *Models of Youth Participation Handbook*, 2020.

⁴ Yingxin Zhang et al., "Youth Participation in Cultural Heritage Management: A Conceptual Framework," *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 30, no. 1 (2024): 56–80.

⁵ United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), "SELECT Project Report: Youth Participation to Sustain Peace during Electoral Processes 2021–2024," 2023.

⁶ UN, *The State of Youth and Climate Change in Sub-Saharan Africa* (United Nations: Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2020).

⁷ M. Boko et al., "'Africa.' In *Climate Change 2007: Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability. Contribution of Working Group II to the Fourth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change*," ed. M.L. Parry et al. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 433–67.

⁸ Luxon Nhamo et al., "The Water-Energy-Food Nexus as an Adaptation Strategy for Achieving Sustainable Livelihoods at a Local Level," *Sustainability* 12, no. 20 (October 16, 2020): 8582, <https://doi.org/10.3390/su12208582>.

⁹ UN, *The State of Youth and Climate Change in Sub-Saharan Africa*.

¹⁰ Boko et al., "'Africa.' In *Climate Change 2007: Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability. Contribution of Working Group II to the Fourth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change*."

¹¹ Daniel Miller et al., "Book Notes: *The Global Smartphone: Beyond a Youth Technology*," *European Journal of Communication* 36, no. 5 (October 6, 2021): 542–43, <https://doi.org/10.1177/02673231211045280b>.

¹² African Development Bank, *African Development Bank 2019 Annual Report: From Experience to Knowledge and Learning* (Abidjan: African Development Bank, 2019).

¹³ H. Chikova, "The Zimbabwe Youth Act: An Alternative Youth Empowerment Instrument for Real and Meaningful Development," *YETT*, 2020.

¹⁴ I. Roberts, "Rising Voices: The African Youth's Fight for a Sustainable Future," *Africa Policy Research Institute (APRI)*, 2023.

neutral and resilient futures. This participation in climate action encompasses young people's involvement in activities addressing the causes and consequences of climate change.¹⁵ Such activities range from advocacy and policy engagement to practical actions like sustainable farming, community-based adaptation, and environmental education. It is a multidimensional concept that includes various forms of engagement, both formal (policy-making, research) and informal (grassroots mobilization, digital activism).¹⁶ Scholars have highlighted the transformative potential of youth in shaping climate responses due to their innovation, energy, and long-term investment in the planet's future. According to the UNFCCC, youth are seen not only as victims of climate impacts but also as key agents of change, bringing fresh ideas, energy, and perspectives to climate action.¹⁷ Chawla and Cushing argued that, when empowered, youth have a unique ability to drive environmental change due to their adaptability and willingness to challenge existing norms.¹⁸

Youth participation is also viewed as a form of intergenerational equity, where young people's involvement is crucial to ensuring their voices are included in decisions affecting their future.¹⁹ O'Brien et al. emphasized that climate change is a long-term issue with significant implications for future generations.²⁰ Therefore, youth engagement is not just about immediate action but also about shaping a sustainable and resilient future. Furthermore, Sachs et al. stressed the role of youth in climate justice, advocating for more inclusive and equitable climate policies.²¹ They argue that youth participation enables the creation of climate policies that consider the needs and aspirations of marginalized groups, ensuring that climate action is both effective and just.²²

UNDP suggests viewing youth involvement as a process that is situated, relational, and uniquely linked to young people's individual life trajectories.²³ Youth participation is a complex matter.²⁴ According to Fisher, youth participation refers to the ways in which young people can engage in institutions, processes, and decisions that impact their lives.²⁵ It provides young people with the opportunity to express their rights, demonstrate their knowledge, and support a democratic society.²⁶ This participation occurs when young people engage in community service projects, debate and dialogue forums, junior councils, self-employment, religious events, and sports.²⁷

METHODOLOGY

This research utilized a qualitative desktop study methodology, conducting a systematic review and thematic synthesis of existing literature to develop a comprehensive understanding of youth climate participation in Sub-Saharan Africa. The study did not involve primary data collection from human participants. Instead, data were systematically gathered from a diverse array of secondary sources. These included peer-reviewed academic articles from databases such as JSTOR, Scopus, and Google Scholar, reports from international organizations (e.g., UNICEF, UNDP, IPCC), non-governmental organizations

¹⁵ Julie A Luft et al., "Literature Reviews, Theoretical Frameworks, and Conceptual Frameworks: An Introduction for New Biology Education Researchers," *CBE—Life Sciences Education* 21, no. 3 (2022): rm33.

¹⁶ UNICEF, "The Role of Youth in Climate Action," *UNICEF Policy Brief*, 2020.

¹⁷ UNFCCC, "United Nations Climate Change: Annual Report 2020. United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, the Kyoto Protocol and the Paris Agreement," 2020, <https://disasterlaw.ifrc.org/media/3327>.

¹⁸ L. Chawla and D. Cushing, "Environmental Education and Youth Activism: Paths toward a Sustainable Future," *Journal of Environmental Education* 38, no. 3 (2007): 7–12.

¹⁹ Tim Corney et al., "Youth Participation: Adulthood, Human Rights and Professional Youth Work," *Children & Society* 36, no. 4 (2022): 677–90.

²⁰ Karen O'Brien, Elin Selboe, and Bronwyn M Hayward, "Exploring Youth Activism on Climate Change," *Ecology and Society* 23, no. 3 (2018).

²¹ J. Sachs, et al. "The Role of Youth in Advancing Climate Justice," *Environmental Policy & Governance* 30, no. 2 (2020): 113–28.

²² Mi Kyoung Park, "Promoting Youth Participation in Decision-Making and Public Service Delivery through Harnessing Digital Technologies," *UN DESA Policy Brief No. 149. United Nations. Department of Economic and Social Affairs.*, 2023.

²³ United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), "SELECT Project Report: Youth Participation to Sustain Peace during Electoral Processes 2021–2024."

²⁴ Nelson Chanza and Anton De Wit, "Enhancing Climate Governance through Indigenous Knowledge: Case in Sustainability Science," *South African Journal of Science* 112, no. 3–4 (2016): 1–7.

²⁵ Fisher, "The Emerging Role of Youth in Global Climate Governance."

²⁶ United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), "SELECT Project Report: Youth Participation to Sustain Peace during Electoral Processes 2021–2024."

²⁷ Paradzai Munyede, Delis Mazambani, and Jakarasi Maja, "Enhancing Youth Participation in Local Governance: An Assessment of Urban and Rural Junior Councils in Zimbabwe," *Commonwealth Journal of Local Governance*, no. 24 (2021): 124–35.

(NGOs) operating within Africa, policy documents from African governmental bodies, and credible case studies documenting youth-led climate initiatives. Grey literature was incorporated to capture on-the-ground perspectives often absent in formal academic publishing.

The study established clear criteria to ensure the collection of focused and relevant data. The included publications were: 1) published in English between 2015-2024, 2) specifically focused on Sub-Saharan Africa, 3) addressing themes of youth engagement, climate action, environmental justice, or civic participation, and 4) from credible institutional or academic sources. The exclusion criteria were: 1) focusing on other regions without a substantive link to Sub-Saharan Africa, 2) discussing youth or climate change in overly general terms without addressing participation, and 3) publications from sources lacking clear authorship or methodological transparency. As a desk-based study, it avoided direct ethical concerns related to human-subject interactions. However, robust ethical principles were maintained. All sources were meticulously cited to avoid plagiarism and ensure academic integrity. The synthesis of the findings aimed for balanced representation, acknowledging the limitations and potential biases inherent in the original sources. The research consciously amplified marginalized voices by prioritizing literature from African authors and institutions where possible, avoiding a Western epistemological perspective on the issue.

DISCUSSION

This part of the article presents the findings and discussion of the study using a qualitative themes approach.

Why youth participation matters in climate action

Youth participation is essential in climate action to ensure equitable climate actions that address the needs of youth in the design of mitigation and adaptation strategies.²⁸ Young people are a powerful force in the fight against climate change and have the potential to influence the development of climate-resilient policies and procedures.²⁹ Participation by young people is crucial because it allows them to exercise their rights as citizens, utilize their experiences, and build a more democratic society. Furthermore, it contributes to personal growth and equips individuals with valuable knowledge and skills.³⁰ When young people participate, they not only empower themselves but also make invaluable contributions to their communities.³¹ Kenya provides an example of youth-driven climate activism with a global reach. One notable youth leader is Elizabeth Wathuti, whose Green Generation Initiative aims to promote reforestation and sustainable environmental practices.³² Wathuti's advocacy highlights the role of youth in climate leadership by highlighting the importance of forest restoration in local and international climate conversations.³³ Her activism demonstrates the capacity of youth to drive impactful climate change advocacy at both grassroots and global levels.³⁴

Akintola et al. assert that with over 450 million youths between the ages of 15 and 35, Africa has the largest youth population in the world, and this population is expected to grow significantly by 2030, accounting for 42% of the global youth population and 75% of the continent's total population.³⁵ Due to the large youth population, their participation is crucial to climate change. Thomaes et al. contended that communities are largely composed of young adults who are extremely sensitive to environmental changes.³⁶ Hence, it is necessary for them to participate in climate actions to ensure that their needs are

²⁸ E. Wathuti, "Green Generation Initiative: A Youth-Led Solution to Climate Change in Kenya," *Nairobi Environmental Journal* 8, no. 1 (2021): 24–37.

²⁹ Roberts, "Rising Voices: The African Youth's Fight for a Sustainable Future."

³⁰ Usue Lorenz, "Enhancing Young People's Individual Skills and Knowledge. The Case of Vulnerable Youth Participating in Co-Creative Policymaking in Housing in the City of Barakaldo," *Frontiers in Sustainable Cities* 5 (2023): 1098313.

³¹ United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), "Five Ways Young People Are Contributing to Their Communities," 2023.

³² Wathuti, "Green Generation Initiative: A Youth-Led Solution to Climate Change in Kenya."

³³ United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), "Elevating Meaningful Youth Engagement for Climate Action."

³⁴ Wathuti, "Green Generation Initiative: A Youth-Led Solution to Climate Change in Kenya."

³⁵ L. Akintola et al., "African Youth at the Crossroads of Climate Change Mobility," *IOM UN Migration*, 2024.

³⁶ Sander Thomaes et al., "Green Teens: Understanding and Promoting Adolescents' Sustainable Engagement," *One Earth* 6, no. 4 (2023): 352–61.

addressed. Young people in Africa can advocate for informed policies and are in a favorable position to spearhead green initiatives and promote sustainable solutions.³⁷

Youths in Africa are proficient in technology and cognizant of their potential to create new opportunities and facilitate a cleaner and more environmentally sustainable world.³⁸ The informal social safety net in Africa is significantly enhanced by the contributions of young people, underscoring the importance of youth participation in climate action.³⁹ As most actions are required at the community level, it is imperative for youth, leaders, and policymakers to engage in these efforts. The youth of Africa can no longer remain passive observers, whereas others determine their fate. It is crucial for leaders and young people to recognize the ways in which issues such as climate change impact everyone, whether directly or indirectly.⁴⁰ The South African Youth Climate Coalition (SAYCC) has spearheaded campaigns such as #CoalMustFall, which advocates for a transition to clean energy. This movement emphasizes the significance of energy independence, environmental justice, and economic sustainability, which are key issues for the younger generation facing the dual challenges of climate change and high unemployment.

Ingaruca contends that effective investment and local and regional economic and environmental benefits will result from more widespread and transparent engagement with young people across their diversity, including men, women, and individuals with various (dis)abilities and other characteristics.⁴¹ Chan et al. argued that engaging youth effectively is crucial, as they contribute unique strengths to current adaptation actions through their social media skills, cross-boundary connections, and innovative thinking.⁴² Furthermore, young people are most affected by the adverse effects of climate change, particularly in Africa, where extreme weather events are disproportionately experienced by the youth.⁴³

Impact of climate change on youth livelihood prospects

Young individuals in contemporary society represent one of the most vulnerable and exposed demographic groups, relying on successful adaptation strategies to mitigate climate-related losses and damage, including economic and non-economic effects on nutrition, education, physical and mental health, livelihoods, social cohesion, and natural ecosystems. Jafino et al. argued that, in most cases, climate change has led people, ranging from 32 million to 132 million, to poverty, especially in Africa.⁴⁴ The World Bank estimates that, due to the impacts of climate change, about 68 to 135 million people, including youth, will be pushed into poverty.⁴⁵

Omotoso and Omotayo asserted that most countries in which youth constitute a significant portion of the population rely heavily on agriculture, a sector that is particularly vulnerable to the effects of climate change.⁴⁶ Youth employment is severely and negatively affected by climate change, and as the majority of young people in Africa are employed in agriculture, the industry is most likely to be affected by climate change.⁴⁷ Water scarcity, exacerbated by climate change, is a major issue in South Africa. Climate models predict that parts of the country will experience increased temperatures and reduced rainfall, leading to prolonged droughts and a diminishing water supply.⁴⁸ Youths, particularly in rural and peri-urban areas, are profoundly affected by a lack of access to clean water for drinking, sanitation, and agriculture. Youths

³⁷ Lotanna E Emediegwu, Ada Wossink, and Alastair Hall, "The Impacts of Climate Change on Agriculture in Sub-Saharan Africa: A Spatial Panel Data Approach," *World Development* 158 (2022): 105967; Akintola et al., "African Youth at the Crossroads of Climate Change Mobility."

³⁸ I Malo and G. Nwamadu, "Green Technology and Youth Employment in Africa: A Transformative Opportunity [Internet]. AFRI," 2024.

³⁹ Udeh, "The Nigerian Youth Climate Coalition: Advocacy and Impact on Policy."

⁴⁰ Roberts, "Rising Voices: The African Youth's Fight for a Sustainable Future."

⁴¹ M. Ingaruca, "Aiming Higher: Elevating Meaningful Youth Engagement for Climate Action," *UNDP*, 2022.

⁴² S. Chan et al., "Young People and Drivers and Barriers to Climate Adaptation Action," *Report. Global Center on Adaptation (GCA), Centre for Environment Education (CEE), Kai Analytics, Foundation for Environmental Education (FEE)* (Rotterdam, Ahmedabad, Vancouver, Copenhagen, 2021).

⁴³ United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), "SELECT Project Report: Youth Participation to Sustain Peace during Electoral Processes 2021–2024."

⁴⁴ Bramka Arga Jafino et al., "Revised Estimates of the Impact of Climate Change on Extreme Poverty by 2030," 2020.

⁴⁵ C. Guivarch, N. Taconet, and A. Mejean, "Linking Climate Change and Inequality. Finance and Development Magazine," *IMF*, 2021.

⁴⁶ A. B. Omotoso and A. O. Omotayo, "Climate Change and Farming: Economists Warn More Needs to Be Done to Adapt in Sub-Saharan Africa," *Prevention Web*, 2023.

⁴⁷ E. Ijjasz-Vasquez and A.U. Ordu, "Breaking Silos between Think Tanks and Youth Groups for Climate Change Action in Africa," *Brookings*, 2022.

⁴⁸ Mulugetta, "Youth Participation in Climate Policy in South Africa: The Role of Youth-Led Initiatives in Sustainable Development."

from Africa's coastal communities' employment prospects will be seriously jeopardized by climate change, and the loss of livelihood will result in multigenerational poverty.⁴⁹

Ogunleye emphasizes that sub-Saharan Africa has a low enrollment rate in higher education, which was approximately 9% in 2018. He further suggests that the effects of climate change have exacerbated this situation in Africa.⁵⁰ According to UNICEF, many children and young people displaced by climate change will be unable to access education because of social, legal, systemic, and economic barriers.⁵¹ Farmers in rural areas have experienced dramatic changes due to extreme weather, increasing sea levels, and altered precipitation patterns, which have driven many young people to seek employment in urban areas.⁵² D'Amico further noted that the younger generation migrates as a coping strategy in search of better opportunities in urban environments as climate-related hardships continue to affect rural livelihoods.⁵³ Halder suggested that the escalation of climate change may cause the migration of approximately 216 million people, including the youth, by 2050.⁵⁴ In countries such as Chad, Mali, and Niger, young people are often left with limited options, but migrate in search of more viable living conditions. This has led to an increase in refugees within the region, creating socioeconomic challenges and increasing youth vulnerability. According to a report by the International Organization for Migration (IOM), young migrants are particularly at risk of exploitation, trafficking, and unemployment as they often migrate without adequate skills or resources.⁵⁵

Shamiso et al. highlighted that Omranj, the COP 27 Youth Envoy, asserts that climate change has affected the health and well-being of over 200 million young people in Africa.⁵⁶ Climate change also poses a significant threat to youth well-being, as it exacerbates food insecurity and malnutrition, devastates ecosystems, and destroys safe living environments, leading to poor health and displacement.⁵⁷ Sasu stated that more than 730,000 individuals, including youth, have died in Africa as a result of climate-related hazards since 1970.⁵⁸ In regions such as Turkana and Garissa, young farmers who are crucial for maintaining food security in their communities struggle to adapt to extreme drought conditions. The loss of livelihood due to diminished agricultural productivity has led to food insecurity, compelling young people to migrate to urban areas in search of better opportunities. The inability to sustain agricultural production impacts youth in SSA, pushing them into poverty, unemployment, and migration, while also limiting their opportunities for education and personal development.⁵⁹

Climate-related disasters are likely to cause anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).⁶⁰ Barford et al. argued that climate change has caused emotional distress in young people in sub-Saharan Africa.⁶¹ Viswanathan posited that natural disasters caused by climate change have negative implications for the mental health of adolescents and youth, including trauma and anxiety.⁶² Pereznieto et al. contended that domestic violence rates rise in Africa due to household stressors brought about by climate events such as drought.⁶³ In Gambia, a small coastal nation in West Africa, rising sea levels due

⁴⁹ D. Willima and D. Naidoo, "Youth and the Rising Climate Threat to Africa's Coastal Communities," *Institute for Security Studies (ISS)*, 2024.

⁵⁰ E.K. Ogunleye, "Leveraging Potentials of the Youth for Inclusive, Green and Sustainable Development in Africa," *African Development Institute (ADI)*, 2023.

⁵¹ UNICEF, "Children Displaced in a Changing Climate. Preparing for a Future Already Underway," 2023.

⁵² E. D'Amico, "Stitching a Sustainable Future: Policy Interventions for Youth, Migration, and Climate Change in Bangladesh's Garment Industry," *IOM UN Migration*, 2024.

⁵³ D'Amico, "Stitching a Sustainable Future: Policy Interventions for Youth, Migration, and Climate Change in Bangladesh's Garment Industry."

⁵⁴ A. Halder, *The Role of Youth in Mitigating Climate Risk* (IOM, 2024).

⁵⁵ International Organization for Migration (IOM), "Youth Migration and Climate Change in the Sahel: Challenges and Opportunities," *International Organization for Migration*, 2021.

⁵⁶ M Shamiso, A Karishina, and E Gulugulu, "African Youth Needs for Climate Action Report," *Bonn: YOUNGO. Available Online [Pdf](Accessed 29 February 2024)*, 2023.

⁵⁷ P. Mugambi, "Climate Change and Youth Livelihoods in Kenya: The Role of Youth in Agricultural Adaptation," *Nairobi Environmental Journal* 8, no. 3 (2020): 45–59.

⁵⁸ D. D. Sasu, *Climate Change in Africa-Statistics and Facts* (Statista, 2024).

⁵⁹ International Organization for Migration (IOM), "Youth Migration and Climate Change in the Sahel: Challenges and Opportunities."

⁶⁰ Annika Walinski et al., "The Effects of Climate Change on Mental Health," *Deutsches Ärzteblatt International* 120, no. 8 (2023): 117.

⁶¹ A. Barford et al., "Young People and Climate Change," *The British Academy COP26 Briefings*, 2021.

⁶² G. Viswanathan, "Climate Change Can Have Lifelong Impacts on Young People's Mental Health," *CNN*, 2023.

⁶³ P. Pereznieto, J. Rivett, and V. le Masson, *Ending Violence against Children While Addressing the Global Climate Crisis* (London: Overseas Development Institute, 2020).

to climate change have caused significant erosion that threatens communities along the coastline. Youths living in these communities face increased vulnerability as their homes and livelihoods are at risk.⁶⁴ Coastal erosion affects the youth by limiting access to fisheries, which depend on food and income. This has far-reaching implications for mental and financial well-being.⁶⁵

Factors that contribute to or inhibit youth engagement in climate action

Young individuals frequently encounter challenges due to insufficient awareness of and access to institutions and processes, limited knowledge and capacities, constrained resources at their disposal, and adverse impacts of climate change coupled with limited adaptive and coping capacities. The primary barriers impeding young people's active participation in climate action initiatives are inadequate funding, insufficient knowledge and comprehension, and a lack of political support.⁶⁶ Justice posited that one of the obstacles to engaging youth in climate action is a lack of awareness regarding issues affecting their communities.⁶⁷ Education and awareness are among the most significant factors driving youth participation in climate action. In Southern Africa, young people who are educated about climate change are more likely to engage in climate-related activities, understand risks, and advocate for change. For instance, in South Africa, the South African Youth Climate Coalition (SAYCC) has been instrumental in raising young people's awareness of climate change. By providing climate education and organizing youth-led campaigns, the SAYCC empowered youth to take active roles in climate action. The importance of education in shaping climate-conscious youth is highlighted in the case of Zimbabwe, where initiatives such as the Zimbabwe Environmental Lawyers Association (ZELA) have introduced climate change education in schools, aiming to cultivate a generation of youth leaders who are not only informed but also equipped to act on climate challenges.⁶⁸

Amponsem et al. argue that low levels of education present an obstacle to young people becoming aware of climate change, engaging with it, and receiving the training necessary to acquire the skills required for a more environmentally conscious labor market.⁶⁹ The Population Council and Women Deliver asserted that young people in Bangladesh, Guatemala, and Nigeria reported taking local action against climate change in all three countries; however, they expressed dissatisfaction with local government initiatives as well as a lack of structural and financial support for youth-led organizations or initiatives.⁷⁰

Other obstacles that youth encounter in climate adaptability and resilience include low levels of financial literacy, limited access to markets, and restricted access to financial services.⁷¹ Dupar et al., posit that there are numerous unmet needs and opportunities to fund more locally relevant climate-smart education, vocational and technical training, and opportunities for young people in the drylands of East and West Africa.⁷² Nyathi et al argue that land, credit, and insurance barriers affect young people differently and further limit their capacity to adapt. Certain cultures in the global north and global south, such as the African Traditional Religion (ATR), suppress youth voices, hindering their contribution to climate change.⁷³ Kosciulek asserted that although young people are already involved in many climate

⁶⁴ UN, *The State of Youth and Climate Change in Sub-Saharan Africa*.

⁶⁵ I. Bamba, et al. "Coastal Erosion and Climate Change: Youth-Led Initiatives in The Gambia," *West African Environmental Journal* 9, no. 2 (2020): 104–17.

⁶⁶ Shamiso, Karishina, and Gulugulu, "African Youth Needs for Climate Action Report."

⁶⁷ A.O. Justice, "Increasing Youth Participation in Climate Action," *United Nations*, 2020.

⁶⁸ Dadirai Matarira, Onesimo Mutanga, and Timothy Dube, "Landscape Scale Land Degradation Mapping in the Semi-Arid Areas of the Save Catchment, Zimbabwe," *South African Geographical Journal* 103, no. 2 (April 6, 2021): 183–203, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03736245.2020.1717588>.

⁶⁹ Amponsem J. et al., *Adapt for Our Future: Youth and Climate Change Adaptation* (Rotterdam and Washington, DC., 2019).

⁷⁰ Population Council and Women Deliver, *How Climate Change Is Shaping Young People's Livelihoods and Educational Opportunities*, Policy Brief No. 1. (New York: Population Council, 2023).

⁷¹ P. Zetterli, "Climate Adaptation, Resilience and Financial Inclusion: A New Agenda.," *CGAP. Research and Analysis*, 2023.

⁷² Mairi Dupar et al., "Resilient Generation: Supporting Young People's Prospects for Decent Work in the Drylands of East and West Africa," *Overseas Development Institute, London, UK*, 2021.

⁷³ Douglas Nyathi et al., "The Dynamics of Promoting Youth Participation in Smallholder Agriculture for Sustainable Food Security in Lupane District, Zimbabwe," 2022, 245–58, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-98617-9_15.

projects and initiatives across Africa, they are not always perceived as potential partners in the implementation of climate policies and plans.⁷⁴

Some of the key gaps and needs for youth engagement in adaptation include limited youth participation in government decision-making and other national processes, a lack of awareness and capacity among youth, and high vulnerability to climate change impacts, particularly among rural dwellers. Simons emphasized that young people are often excluded from current social systems.⁷⁵ The failure to include young people in policy processes remains an obstacle to youth engagement in climate action. When given the opportunity, young people actively contribute to decision-making, creating their own avenues and promoting the value of intergenerational justice and equity.⁷⁶ Contemporary youth lack decision-making authority and have lower coping capacities, which limit their engagement in climate action.⁷⁷ Many regions, including Sub-Saharan Africa, Asia, and parts of Europe, merely classify young people as vulnerable, along with the elderly, disabled, and other societal groups, despite their ability and potential of young people to contribute as active partners in climate action.

The Role of young people in climate change adaptation

Youths are actively engaged in climate change mitigation and adaptation efforts in most parts of Africa.⁷⁸ Their diverse initiatives encompass educational programs, awareness-raising campaigns, and behavioral change interventions. Moyer and Sinclair highlighted how young people in Africa, including Zimbabwe and Malawi, use education and advocacy to drive climate change. Scholars further suggest that youth participate in climate change projects within various national and international organizations.⁷⁹ Bassey and Nath posited that young people are responsible for ensuring that an intersectional approach is used to address environmental mobility.⁸⁰ According to Ogunleye, young individuals play a significant role in addressing climate change through advocacy, entrepreneurship, and technological innovations.⁸¹ Malawi, one of the poorest countries in Southern Africa, is highly vulnerable to climate change owing to its dependence on rain-fed agriculture. Extreme weather events such as droughts and floods have increasingly disrupted crop production, impacting youth livelihoods in rural areas. However, youth in Malawi are taking proactive steps to adapt to these changes by implementing sustainable farming practices. According to Chitundu et al, youth in Malawi are increasingly using technology, such as mobile apps and weather forecasting systems, to access climate information, make informed decisions, and improve their agricultural productivity.⁸² This is an example of how youth in Malawi integrate technological innovation into their climate-change adaptation strategies. Young people in Nigeria and Uganda play a critical role in integrating indigenous knowledge with modern technology to address climate challenges.⁸³

Young people's experiences are of considerable importance to their role in effectively advocating sustainable practices and innovative solutions.⁸⁴ The United Nations highlights the crucial role of youth in combating climate change and collaborating with youth-led and youth-centered organizations worldwide, leveraging the Joint Framework Initiative to amplify youth voices and accelerate youth-led solutions⁸⁵. Young individuals drive movements toward climate justice through activism, education, and

⁷⁴ D. Kosciulek, "Strengthening Youth Participation in Climate-Related Policymaking," *Policy Briefing 225* (South African Institute of International Affairs (SAIIA), 2020).

⁷⁵ A Simons, "Enhancing the Capacity of Youth to Adapt to Climate Change Impacts and Other Development Calamities in Africa. Climate Change Adaptation Framework and Youth Entrepreneurship in West Africa" (Springer Nature, 2022).

⁷⁶ Chan et al., "Young People and Drivers and Barriers to Climate Adaptation Action."

⁷⁷ Amponsem J. et al., *Adapt for Our Future: Youth and Climate Change Adaptation*.

⁷⁸ J. Moyer and A. J. Sinclair, "Learning for Sustainability: The Role of Education in Shaping Youth Engagement with Climate Change," *Environmental Education Research* 26, no. 2 (2020): 153–69.

⁷⁹ Moyer and Sinclair, "Learning for Sustainability: The Role of Education in Shaping Youth Engagement with Climate Change."

⁸⁰ R. Bassey and S. Nath, "How Disasters Have Gendered Impacts on the Climate Migration and What Youth Can Do about It: The Case of Pakistan," *IOM UN Migration*, 2024.

⁸¹ Ogunleye, "Leveraging Potentials of the Youth for Inclusive, Green and Sustainable Development in Africa."

⁸² Kabwe Chitundu, Lonia Mwape, and Concepta Kwalevela, "Community Attitudes towards Child Sexual Abuse: A Case of Chawama Lusaka, Zambia," *Open Journal of Psychiatry* 10, no. 01 (2020): 25–37, <https://doi.org/10.4236/ojpsych.2020.101004>.

⁸³ O C Ajayi and P L Mafongoya, *Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Climate Change Management in Africa* (CTA, 2017).

⁸⁴ D'Amico, "Stitching a Sustainable Future: Policy Interventions for Youth, Migration, and Climate Change in Bangladesh's Garment Industry."

⁸⁵ United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), "SELECT Project Report: Youth Participation to Sustain Peace during Electoral Processes 2021–2024."

legal action.⁸⁶ Shamiso et al. contended that the role of African youth is to collaborate with governments and organizations on climate initiatives, participate in research and education related to climate change, contribute new ideas and perspectives, and support environmental policies.⁸⁷ The Malawi Youth Network for Climate Change (MYNCC) is a prominent youth organization that works on climate adaptation. MYNCC empowers young people with the knowledge and skills needed to adopt climate-smart agricultural practices such as conservation agriculture, which helps retain moisture in the soil and reduces the impact of droughts.⁸⁸ Youth groups have also been promoting agroforestry, which combines trees with crops to improve soil fertility and provide alternative sources of income, thereby enhancing young farmers' resilience to climate-related shocks.

Youths play an essential role in facilitating the transformation of societies into low-carbon climate-resilient entities in the future.⁸⁹ Modeer and Otieno assert that youth continue to play a major role in influencing, supporting, and advocating responsible climate behavior.⁹⁰ The distinct perspectives and attributes of youth are vital to building a sustainable future, and they play a critical role in the fight against climate change.⁹¹ Youths are key drivers of the green transition and have the potential to generate approximately 8.4 million jobs by 2030, provided they acquire the necessary skills in the green economy.⁹² For instance, in the semi-arid regions of northern Tanzania, young people are involved in the construction of small-scale rainwater-harvesting systems to mitigate the effects of drought. These systems are particularly beneficial for households in rural areas, where access to water is limited.⁹³ Mbegu noted that youth groups in Tanzania have advocated for better water governance, ensuring that water resources are equally distributed, especially in areas affected by climate change.

The Focus Areas for Youth Engagement in Climate Change Adaptation

Implementing youth-led projects is essential to enhance youth engagement in climate change adaptation, awareness and training, capacity-building and empowerment, decision-making, and advocacy implementing youth-led projects is essential.⁹⁴ Young individuals who are proficient in climate literacy will not only be exposed to the realities of climate change but will also be better equipped to recognize their own roles in advocating for climate justice and sustainable solutions in Africa.⁹⁵ Kosciulek asserts that, for many young people, environmental education programs provide a solid foundation; however, additional education and capacity-building initiatives are required to transcend the mere dissemination of facts about the environment or climate.⁹⁶

To achieve climate justice, it is imperative to acknowledge youth and other marginalized groups as legitimate stakeholders and holders of rights, given the severity of the climate crisis.⁹⁷ Mugeere et al. contended that with the deteriorating effects of climate change and ongoing population growth, youth-informed interventions are required to support young people's economic resilience and adaptive capacity.⁹⁸ According to Shamiso et al., informative workshops and networking opportunities should be established to motivate young people to take greater action against climate change.⁹⁹ Scholars further note that African youth urgently need to be empowered and provided with the knowledge and skills necessary to address environmental catastrophes. Empowering discussions with youth and allowing them to take the

⁸⁶ S. Rashid, "Rising up: How Youth Are Leading the Charge for Climate Justice," *UNDP*, 2023.

⁸⁷ Shamiso, Karishina, and Gulugulu, "African Youth Needs for Climate Action Report."

⁸⁸ Chitundu, Mwape, and Kwaleyela, "Community Attitudes towards Child Sexual Abuse: A Case of Chawama Lusaka, Zambia."

⁸⁹ Chan et al., "Young People and Drivers and Barriers to Climate Adaptation Action."

⁹⁰ U. Modeer and V.W. Otieno, "Tapping into the Power of Young People for Climate Action," *UNDP*, 2022.

⁹¹ Tellus, "Increased Brand Responsibility & Transparency. Following Sustainability," *What Can YOU Do?*, August 14, 2023, <https://whatcanyoudo.earth/tellus-blog/increased-brand-responsibility-transparency-following-sustainability/>.

⁹² Halder, *The Role of Youth in Mitigating Climate Risk*.

⁹³ Stewart Mbegu, "The Role of Professionalism in Managing Conflict at the Workplace," *OALib* 05, no. 11 (2018): 1–5, <https://doi.org/10.4236/oalib.1105014>.

⁹⁴ Moyer and Sinclair, "Learning for Sustainability: The Role of Education in Shaping Youth Engagement with Climate Change."

⁹⁵ OECD, *OECD Economic Outlook, Volume 2024 Issue 1*, vol. 2024 (OECD Publishing, 2024), <https://doi.org/10.1787/69a0c310-en>.

⁹⁶ Kosciulek, "Strengthening Youth Participation in Climate-Related Policymaking."

⁹⁷ Rashid, "Rising up: How Youth Are Leading the Charge for Climate Justice."

⁹⁸ A. Mugeere, A. Barford, and P. Magimbi, "Climate Change and Young People in Uganda: A Literature Review," *The Journal of Environment & Development* 30, no. 4 (2021): 344–68.

⁹⁹ Shamiso, Karishina, and Gulugulu, "African Youth Needs for Climate Action Report."

lead by exposing them to the concepts, challenges, and solutions related to climate change will enhance their focus on and awareness of climate change issues.¹⁰⁰

Ampaire et al asserted that young people must be involved in more equitable terms in the creation, monitoring, and evaluation of climate change policies, as this will foster a greater sense of investment in the process.¹⁰¹ Increased youth action integration is required at national and regional levels to facilitate knowledge exchange and replication when feasible.¹⁰² Incorporating youth perspectives into the current decision-making processes and measures to empower them is essential. Policymakers must impart knowledge to all generations, not only about the nature and consequences of climate change but also about mitigation and conservation strategies.¹⁰³ Tellus indicated that encouraging youth to take the lead in addressing climate change could be achieved through the creation and support of youth-led initiatives.¹⁰⁴ These initiatives can include campaigns and activism led by young people, as well as projects centered on sustainability, renewable energy, and other climate solutions. Mackey et al. posited that youth must be included in low-carbon lifestyles and socioeconomic activities, as they will shape the future of humanity.¹⁰⁵

Governance, Youth Inclusion and Adaptation

The USAID indicates that governance encompasses the structures and procedures for distributing and utilizing power to influence decisions.¹⁰⁶ UNESCAP contends that good governance is frequently characterized as inclusive, responsive, transparent, accountable, participatory, consensus-oriented, equitable, and law-abiding.¹⁰⁷ Shamiso et al. posited that the government's engagement with youth in the climate space is inadequate, necessitating governmental action to address the needs of youth in adaptation and implement significant improvements.¹⁰⁸ Governments play a substantial role in formulating strategies for climate adaptation.¹⁰⁹ Mpungose asserted that youth inclusion emphasizes and acknowledges the diversity of young people; consequently, it is imperative that policies and programs intentionally address the diverse needs and identities of the youth.¹¹⁰

Rahmaty and Roesch argued that governments and multilateral organizations must transition toward inclusive governance structures that incorporate and empower youth to effectively combat climate change and promote peace.¹¹¹ Involving young people in governance processes promotes diversity and inclusivity, ensuring that all societal voices are represented.¹¹² Adams further noted that governments, civil society organizations, and other stakeholders must establish inclusive spaces and procedures to facilitate youth participation in governance processes and climate adaptation.¹¹³ According to the UNDP, adaptation is the process by which natural or human systems are modified to mitigate harm or capitalize on advantageous opportunities in response to present or predicted climatic stimuli or their impacts.¹¹⁴ Frank asserted that governments must employ more inclusive strategies in policy processes.¹¹⁵

¹⁰⁰ Moyer and Sinclair, "Learning for Sustainability: The Role of Education in Shaping Youth Engagement with Climate Change"; Ana Bonell et al., "Grassroots and Youth-Led Climate Solutions from the Gambia," *Frontiers in Public Health* 10 (2022): 784915.

¹⁰¹ Edidah L. Ampaire et al., "Institutional Challenges to Climate Change Adaptation: A Case Study on Policy Action Gaps in Uganda," *Environmental Science & Policy* 75 (September 2017): 81–90, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.envsci.2017.05.013>.

¹⁰² Amponsem J. et al., *Adapt for Our Future: Youth and Climate Change Adaptation*.

¹⁰³ N. K. Chintom and S. Frohlich, "Africa's Youth Demand More Climate Action," *Nature and Environment*, 2023.

¹⁰⁴ Tellus, "Increased Brand Responsibility & Transparency. Following Sustainability."

¹⁰⁵ M. Mackey, B. Parlee, and C. Karsgaard, "Youth Engagement in Climate Change Action. Case Study of Indigenous Youth at COP24," *Sustainability, MDPI* 12, no. 16 (2022): 6299.

¹⁰⁶ United States Agency International Development (USAID), "Adaptation and Governance," *ARCC*, 2014.

¹⁰⁷ United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP), "What Is Good Governance?," 2009.

¹⁰⁸ Shamiso, Karishina, and Gulugulu, "African Youth Needs for Climate Action Report."

¹⁰⁹ Amponsem J. et al., *Adapt for Our Future: Youth and Climate Change Adaptation*.

¹¹⁰ L. Mpungose, "Africa's Diverging Approaches to Youth Inclusion and Participation," *South African Institute of International Affairs (SAIIA)*, 2020.

¹¹¹ Masooma Rahmaty and Jimena Leiva Roesch, "Youth Participation in Global Governance for Sustaining Peace and Climate Action," *International Peace Institute (IPI)*, 2021.

¹¹² S. Adams, "The Vital Role of Young People in Governance Processes," *Accountability*, 2023.

¹¹³ Adams, "The Vital Role of Young People in Governance Processes."

¹¹⁴ United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), "What Is Climate Change Adaptation and Why Is It Crucial," 2024.

¹¹⁵ M. Frank, "Creating Inclusive Policies: A Guide for Effective Development. Inclusion and Diversity Acceleration," *Emberin*, 2024.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To bridge the gap in youth participation, governments, NGOs, research institutions, and the private sector need to invest in building the knowledge, skills, and resources required for meaningful youth engagement. This includes providing platforms for youth to actively contribute to decision-making processes, from problem definition to solution implementation. In addition, policies and programs should be designed to recognize and address the unique vulnerabilities of youth, ensuring that adaptation and mitigation strategies are inclusive and equitable. Furthermore, youth should be viewed not only as victims of climate change but also as agents of change. Their involvement can provide fresh perspectives and innovative solutions, especially when addressing the impacts of climate change on health, agriculture, and food security. Strengthening youth engagement will also contribute to long-term resilience by empowering the next generation of leaders to combat climate change. Collaborative efforts are imperative to promote equitable youth engagement in climate change mitigation strategies. The youth climate movement, non-governmental organizations, governments, academic institutions, traditional leaders, politicians, entrepreneurs, and parents must collaborate urgently. By leveraging their respective strengths and expertise, they can enhance young people's involvement in climate action and foster their resilience and adaptability. These entities should cooperate in establishing sustainable funding sources for effective adaptation. Current and future decision makers must actively involve young people in their decision-making processes. Rather than diminishing their contributions, it is essential to consider their views, perspectives, and experiences when formulating inclusive policies to facilitate effective climate mitigation and adaptation strategies. A policy could mandate that a minimum of 40% of members in any climate-related initiative or organization be young people, ensuring that their perspectives are addressed in policy formulation. Awareness-raising campaigns and educational workshops are crucial to equip young people with knowledge of climate change and action. The Ministry of Education should integrate climate change topics into the curriculum from the primary education through tertiary levels.

CONCLUSION

This study has explored the role of youth in climate action in sub-Saharan Africa. Youth participation in climate action is critical for effectively addressing the global climate crisis. Young people bring unique perspectives, energy, and innovation to the table, making them indispensable in the fight against climate change. Their involvement is not only a matter of intergenerational equity but also a practical necessity for achieving sustainable development. Youth play a pivotal role in raising awareness about climate change and its impact. Through schools, social media, and community programs, they educate their peers and older generations on the urgency of climate change. Youth participation in climate action is not just a moral imperative, but a practical necessity. Innovation, advocacy, and grassroots mobilization are essential for achieving sustainable development and climate resilience. As scholars have consistently shown, empowering young people with resources, education, and opportunities to participate in decision-making processes is key to effectively addressing climate crises. By investing in youth, we can achieve a sustainable and equitable future for all. Youth participation in climate action in sub-Saharan Africa is vital for fostering inclusive, sustainable, and effective climate solutions. The region's young population faces significant challenges in engaging with climate change processes, including limited access to information, insufficient capacity-building opportunities, and the disproportionate impacts of climate change on their livelihoods. These challenges are compounded by socioeconomic disparities, making it difficult for youth to fully participate in both local and global climate action efforts. Despite these obstacles, young people across sub-Saharan Africa are increasingly mobilizing, advocating for climate justice, and demonstrating resilience through grassroots initiatives and activism.

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