

YOUTH PARTICIPATION IN UN CLIMATE CHANGE CONFERENCES: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

KEY MESSAGES

- Provide financial and logistical support for young people's participation.** In contrast to many "adult" delegates to UNFCCC conferences, whose participation is funded by the governments or organisations they represent, the majority of youth participants attending UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) conferences are unpaid volunteers. Anyone seeking to include youth voices in their climate events and activities must carefully consider young people's need for financial and logistical support. This may include provision of travel and accommodation bursaries, visas, vaccinations, supervision for under-18 youth, and translation services. This is necessary to ensure youth participants' safety and wellbeing during conference attendance.
- Proactively engage with marginalised young people who are often unheard.** "Youth" is often perceived as a homogenous group within the UNFCCC, its constituency of youth NGOs "YOUNGO" expected to speak with one voice on behalf of an entire generation. This overlooks the heterogeneity of youth as a category which includes a vast proportion of the world's population whose age intersects with nationality, gender, race, class and many other factors. This creates diverse experiences, priorities and needs, giving young people unique local knowledge to contribute to climate change mitigation and adaptation. To ensure that all youth voices are adequately represented, there is an urgent need for proactive engagement with marginalised youth at all levels of climate governance.
- Avoid tokenism, instrumentalisation and "youth washing".** It is important to distinguish between conference attendees who are young and those who actively and freely share young people's perspectives, priorities and advocate for their rights. Meaningful youth engagement requires that process facilitators empower youth representatives to participate in the ways they want to, rather than being co-opted for the purposes of more powerful actors.

Tokenism: symbolically including a small number of representatives from a marginalised group to make an event appear inclusive without sharing any decision-making power with that group;

Instrumentalisation: (in this context) asking a less powerful group to perform unpaid labour such as preparing promotional/protest materials and social media content without enabling them to participate as equals in discussions and decisions about the content being produced;

Youth-washing: using images of youth to promote your brand/campaign without their consent, or asking young people to join your event panel but expecting them to repeat the messaging of more powerful NGOs and governments rather than supporting them to share their own perspectives, even if they contradict yours.

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WHY THIS MATTERS

It is increasingly recognised that younger generations have an important role to play in climate change governance. The global youth population is large and growing, offering significant potential for mobilisation on climate action. However, children and youth are recognised by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) as particularly vulnerable to climate impacts and require tailored support to ensure their safety and protection of their rights. Young people around the world are engaging in movements such as Fridays for Future, expressing concerns about how a changing climate affects them and demonstrating their leadership in mitigation and adaptation efforts.

Decision-makers around the world are increasing efforts to facilitate youth participation, designing new initiatives to harness the momentum of the global youth climate movement. However, there has been limited reflection on how best to support youth participants, resulting in discontent as young people feel tokenised and instrumentalised with widespread “youth-washing” in climate change initiatives.

As scholars who have been working on youth participation in climate change governance for several years, we feel compelled to share our reflections on some of the challenges youth participants face and offer a series of recommendations for policymakers and practitioners to ameliorate youth participation and equitably empower youth voices in global climate change governance.



Youth climate activists at the People’s Climate March on September 21, 2014, ahead of the United Nations General Assembly, in New York City. Photo: Leehi Yona

BACKGROUND – YOUTH PARTICIPATION IN THE UNFCCC

Parties to the UNFCCC have established a strong mandate for non-state actor participation in climate change policies and programmes at all levels. Enshrined in Article 6 of the Convention and reiterated in Article 12 of the Paris Agreement, the role of non-state actors is recognised as critical to ensuring the efficiency, effectiveness and equity of climate change governance. Over the years, many UNFCCC decisions have emphasised that youth are a key stakeholder in implementing Action for Climate Empowerment (ACE).

Youth participants have been engaging in United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) conferences for over a decade, although their contributions and experiences have received limited attention to date. As “observers” to the intergovernmental climate negotiations, it is often assumed that youth participants experience the same opportunities and challenges as all non-state actors. However, while youth participants are limited by the same restrictions which differentiate between the access offered to government “parties” and non-governmental “observers”, they also face unique challenges. These are largely underpinned by their lack of resources, recognition and power. A more nuanced focus is necessary as policy-makers design new initiatives to engage this dynamic age group.

There are many individuals attending UNFCCC conferences who belong to the youth age bracket (which is loosely defined as 16-30 years old). This includes young representatives of governments and other UNFCCC constituencies such as Indigenous Peoples Organisations, Women and Gender, Environmental NGOs and Farmers.

This policy brief makes an important distinction between young conference participants, and youth advocates who are proactively representing the unique priorities and perspectives of young people around the world. While the former may increase the visual diversity of conference panels, it is only through meaningful engagement of the latter that younger generations are heard, respected and empowered.

Youth NGOs (YOUNGO) received provisional status as a UNFCCC constituency in 2009 and official constituency status in 2011. This recognition bestows procedural privileges such as the ability to hold side-events and exhibits at UNFCCC conferences, make interventions and submissions, receive information from the UNFCCC Secretariat and meet with high-level UNFCCC officials. Youth participation has been rising steadily ever since (Thew, 2018) and there are now over 70 YOUNGO affiliated organisations

(UNFCCC, 2019), ranging from large transnational networks to small groups of students or community organisers (Thew, 2018; Yona et al., 2020).

Heterogeneous in nature, youth NGOs possess a wide range of local and expert knowledge and skills to address the climate crisis (Hall & Dowdell, 2018; Mackay et al. 2020; Thew et al., 2020; Yona et al., 2020). In addition to their geographical and demographic diversity, YOUNGO brings together a heterogeneous set of youth organizations and activists with a wide range of priorities. While some come to the negotiations to observe and learn, others actively engage in the negotiations and develop more long-term engagements with UN climate diplomacy. Others come to UNFCCC conferences to resist and challenge dominant climate discourses and practices by organizing direct action, often guided by principles of climate justice (Foran et al. 2017). Their heterogeneity notwithstanding, we propose that there are several recurring challenges faced by the majority of youth participants in UNFCCC conferences which we outline in this policy brief, along with recommendations on how to address them.

KEY CHALLENGES

1. Many youth participants lack access to UNFCCC conferences and those who attend often lack the financial/logistical support needed to ensure their safety and wellbeing

The majority of youth participants to the UNFCCC are unpaid volunteers (Thew, 2018; Yona et al., 2020). In order to attend events, this means that young people must either have sufficient finances of their own or have friends and family who are willing to cover the required costs of attending the event. This can create several problems. Firstly, due to the expenses incurred, young people who are physically attending events are less likely to be from a lower socio-economic background or from communities including Ethnic Minority communities, meaning that many young voices remain unheard. Secondly, a lack of finance can cause logistical restrictions and difficulties for youth participants. For example, youth participants often can't afford accommodation in the host city of a COP when prices are highly inflated. This leads to young people travelling long distances late at night at the end of long conference days which can expose them to a series of risks, particularly for young women and non-binary people. Young people with additional access requirements may have to look even further afield for suitable, affordable accommodation.

There are several practical steps that the UNFCCC, COP Presidencies and others can take to ensure all young people have the logistical support and additional resources needed to participate. The most significant would be to offer bursaries for youth participants from underrepresented regions and social groups. This would build YOUNGO's capacity to increase representation, enabling a more diverse set of delegates to contribute to UNFCCC events. It would also aid the participation of young people under the age of 16 whose cost of attendance is increased by the need to be accompanied by a chaperone. According to Mackay et al., (2020) a dual ticket system, whereby entrance passes are issued to both the young person and their chaperone under the same application, could facilitate intergenerational conversations and vertical knowledge sharing. This can lead to meaningful horizontal exchanges between different groups of young people and the acknowledgment that their voices can contribute as much to discussions as learning from them. As well as providing tickets to both young people and their chaperones, conference facilitators should ensure that visas are provided on entry for all COP participants.

This enables them to overcome potentially barring visa restrictions, and thus further widen the diversity of participation. With more young people in attendance from overseas, formal and informal spaces for youth participants to engage with their peers is paramount. By creating space for the voices of those from the most vulnerable communities to be heard, urban and rural, north and south, the experience of young people will inevitably be perceived as less homogenous and will create more meaningful engagement in negotiations. Our final recommendation to improve access for young people to UNFCCC events is to increase opportunities for online participation. Specifically, organisers must create more youth friendly online information dissemination, while at the same time acknowledging that some marginalised groups lack reliable internet access and may need more adaptive ways of learning and sharing.

Young people also experience negative impacts to their wellbeing when engaging in UNFCCC events. This ranges from eco-anxiety, to stress relating to securing safe accommodation, to personal safety in the conference venues themselves. The youth constituency has received several reports from young people who have experienced sexual harassment while attending COPs, leading to members of YOUNGO working with members of the Women and Gender constituency to create a sexual harassment protocol. This is an unacceptable and avoidable problem that requires closer attention from conference facilitators.

To begin to address these problems and reduce the material and psychological risks relating to the protection of youth, we recommend that engagement on issues of wellbeing begin as far in advance of the conference as possible. This must include liaising with young people and other constituencies to identify any safety and wellbeing challenges they perceive and deliberate over how these can be addressed, while also taking into consideration how these might change year to year depending on where the conferences are held.

Practical solutions can be implemented as soon as conference dates are confirmed. For example, when reservations are made for government staff accommodation, it would be beneficial to reserve safe, low cost accommodation close to the conference venue for youth participation. This should include options for private accommodation, accessible access, gendered spaces and rooms for prayer/meditation. Moreover, the provision of space for communal working within accommodation is essential for young people, as a sense of community and connectedness to those in a similar situation can help youth participants to process eco-anxiety (Mackay et al., 2020; Yona, 2019; Yona et al., 2020). Host governments must similarly consider the practical aspects of transportation to the conference venue from areas across the host cities and to local transport hubs. They should provide free, safe transport for all participants, paying particular attention to the safety of women and non-binary people at night.

2. Marginalised young voices are often unheard.

“Youth” participants are regularly expected to speak with one voice on behalf of an entire generation. As a result, the heterogeneity of youth, which includes a vast proportion of the world’s population whose age intersects with nationality, gender, race, class and many other factors, is overlooked. To begin to address this problem, conference organisers must take proactive steps to increase youth participation (not just attendance) by creating ways for young people to meaningfully contribute to climate change governance.

A necessary first step is for incumbent power holders to recognise young people as diverse individuals with unique local knowledge, experiences and skills which can add value to decision making processes. Rather than positioning youth participants as “global citizens,” a phrase which limits young people to sharing “universal” knowledge, organisers need to appreciate the opportunity young people represent in transmitting ideas and information specific to their communities. Organisers must do so in a manner which is empowering and sustainable without fear of judgement (Yona et al., 2020). This approach will not only increase the overall wellbeing of young people

but be conducive to more effective and equitable climate action. In a practical sense, this kind of engagement might include creating sustainable relationships with youth representatives over time rather than one-off opportunities; acknowledging and minimizing as much as possible any power imbalances; and co-producing (Jagannathan et al., 2020) policy with youth rather than for youth. “Making room and moving over” for Indigenous youth would be particularly important (Latulippe and Klenk, 2020).

Secondly, the UNFCCC must actively work on a strategy to ensure the opinions and ideas of marginalised young people are considered as valuable as their more senior colleagues. In spaces such as negotiating rooms (which are typically non inclusive), external encouragement is essential to empowering the perspectives of marginalised youth delegates who are often anxious about the worthiness of their contributions (Mackay et al., 2020). Similarly, young people whose education and professional experience qualify expertise in climate change negotiations, require uplifting as many are disregarded as non-specialist on account of their age (Thew, 2020). Their ability to offer a fresh perspective on climate injustices can offer new and invaluable approaches to historic issues. To address this imbalance, Mackay et al. (2020) suggest that organisers must celebrate young people’s knowledge of their own communities, building young people’s confidence through workshops and encouraging storytelling sessions. This can be a powerful motivator for sharing land-based knowledge which, as one of our research participants commented, is “not easily googleable” (Mackay et al., 2020, p8).

Finally, emphasis must be placed on decision makers to proactively engage with young people beyond the small privileged group who are able to overcome the financial barriers to attend COPs. Currently, the structure of COP is inherently disempowering for young people, from the rules around how actions (i.e. small protests and demonstrations inside the conference venue) can be held, to limitations on badge allocations and venue access (Yona et al., 2020). This structural disempowerment disproportionately exacerbates the challenges already facing historically marginalized groups, including youth, frontline and Indigenous communities, and civil society from the Global South. These issues can only be rectified by institutionalising the empowerment of marginalised youth. Organisers need to increase the flexibility around the locations of actions and the bureaucracy of approval processes as well as allocating more badges and creating venues with better access requirements. Yona et al., (2020) suggest that these practical solutions would go a long way in bringing youth back from the margins.

3. Intergenerational power dynamics perpetuate tokenization, instrumentalisation and “youth washing”.

Over the last fifteen years or so, the global youth climate movement has engaged in political debates far beyond the UNFCCC context. While the movement advocates for the implementation of the Paris Agreement and its translation into ambitious climate legislation in a bipartisan manner, it also includes more critical protestors and subgroups. These advocate for political debates and envision a radically different future society at large (Marquardt, 2020). YOUNGO brings together both moderate and radical voices with different goals, strategies and visions. This, combined with YOUNGO’s internal rules of procedure creates a space for young climate activists to receive training and to adopt responsible and diplomatic attitudes, including proactive attempts to bring a more diverse set of voices to the negotiation table.

While this professionalization of youth is central to their official recognition as a political community, the resulting ‘responsibilization’ comes at the risk of co-option. Tokenism is common with many young people reporting being chosen for a photo opportunity whilst having no avenues to express their opinions. Similarly, youth participants fall victim to instrumentalisation, where they are asked to perform manual labour such as preparing promotional or protest materials and social media content without being able to shape what is said. Within these tasks young people are often encouraged and expected to repeat the messaging of more powerful NGOs or governments rather than be supported to share the specific experiences and priorities of the young generation they are there to represent. This can lead to “youth-washing” where young people are included in events not for the merit of their ideas but solely to make an event appear diverse. Even when they are given an opportunity to engage with senior delegates there is an expectation that youth activists will have solutions to the complex socio-political barriers they themselves have not been able to overcome. Often well-meaning adults turn to young people on their panel and ask “how can we help?” This can place a burden of expectation that young people should be able to solve the problem and can cause a rise in eco-anxiety (Mackay et al., 2020). Acknowledge that although young people may be eager to contribute to climate action, they face many barriers in doing so, being careful to avoid discourses which suggest that hope for the future rests solely on young people’s shoulders. Similarly, care must be taken to avoid the transfer of hope onto the next generation without transfer of any authority/social recognition of young people’s agency and unique lived experiences.

For youth participants to act as a critical counterweight to governments, business delegates, and international organizations, event organisers should orchestrate opportunities for deliberation between state-actors and non-state actors, including the facilitation of cross-constituency collaboration and discussion. This could include regular briefings and informal meetings for all non-state actors to convene with other government delegations and high-level actors such as the chairs of the Subsidiary Body for Implementation. Engagement with the youth movement could also take place outside the UNFCCC venue and include traveling to regional locations to enable local young people to highlight issues in their communities (Yona and Lenferna, 2016) and enable those unable to travel to COP to contribute. Ahead of these deliberative meetings, organisers should offer capacity building activities to support young people’s preparation. If details of what has been discussed by previous cohorts of young people in similar meetings is shared prior to these engagements then repetitive conversations can be avoided and accountability increased (Thew et al, 2021).

This is just a brief introduction to the challenges faced by youth people who engage in UNFCCC conferences. For further information please reach out to young groups in your area to discuss their priorities and concerns and work closely with them to identify ways to provide meaningful support and opportunities to amplify their voices.



Young people participating in civil society actions at COP21 in Paris, France, in 2015. Photo: Leehi Yona.

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This policy brief is an outcome of Harriet Thew's COP26 Fellowship, funded by UKRI. This fellowship is associated with the UK COP26 Universities Network, however all opinions are those of the named authors rather than those of the network as a whole.

HOW TO CITE THIS PAPER

Thew, H; Karsgaard, C; Marquardt, J; Rist, C and Yona, L. (2021). Youth Participation in UN Climate Change Conferences: Challenges and Opportunities. COP26 Research Fellowship Policy Brief.

