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State of Youth Stakeholder Participation - 2025

1. Executive Summary

This report provides a comprehensive assessment of global youth engagement, analyzing both progress and persistent challenges in achieving meaningful participation across all levels of governance. Focusing on the United Nations system, national policies, and grassroots movements, the study examines structural barriers while highlighting innovative approaches that demonstrate the transformative potential of genuine youth inclusion. The analysis draws on policy documents, case studies, and quantitative data to present actionable recommendations for institutional reform.

Key findings reveal significant disparities between policy commitments and implementation. While frameworks like the UN Youth Strategy (Youth2030) and Security Council Resolution 2250 on Youth, Peace and Security represent important advances, only 2.2% of parliamentarians globally are under 30 years old.¹ Financial and structural barriers continue to limit access, with 94% of youth receiving no support for participation in governance processes.² Marginalized groups - including indigenous youth, young people with disabilities, and those from conflict-affected regions - face compounded exclusion due to intersecting forms of discrimination.

The report presents concrete recommendations to transform youth engagement from symbolic consultation to substantive partnership. These recommendations are supported by successful models from diverse contexts, including Rwanda's nationally institutionalized youth councils and the European Union's Youth Empowerment Fund. The report concludes that meaningful youth engagement requires systemic changes to governance structures, adequate resourcing of youth-led initiatives, and a fundamental shift in institutional mindsets. By implementing these reforms, policymakers can harness the innovation and energy of the world's largest youth population to address global challenges and achieve Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in the United Nations 2030 Development Agenda.

2. Introduction

The United Nations' current definition of youth as persons aged 15-24 was first articulated by the Secretary-General in 1981 through the report to the General Assembly on International Youth Year (A/36/215, para. 8 of the annex) and subsequently reaffirmed in later reports

¹ Inter-Parliamentary Union. (2023). *Youth Participation in National Parliaments: 2023*. Available at: <https://www.ipu.org/resources/publications/reports/2023-10/youth-participation-in-national-parliaments-2023>

² United Nations. (2023). *Youth2030: Progress Report 2023*. Available at: <https://www.unyouth2030.com/progressreport23>

(A/40/256, para. 19 of the annex).³ While establishing this standardized age range for statistical consistency, the Secretary-General simultaneously acknowledged that the conceptual understanding of 'youth' varies significantly across different cultural and societal contexts worldwide.

This definition was formally institutionalized when the General Assembly, through resolution 50/81 in 1995, adopted the World Programme of Action for Youth (WPAY) to the Year 2000 and beyond. This global strategy aims to better address youth challenges and expand their opportunities for societal engagement.

The international community has repeatedly affirmed its support for youth involvement. UN General Assembly Resolution 58/133 emphasizes the necessity of full and meaningful participation by young people and youth organizations at all levels, including: local, national, regional, and international, to advance the WPAY's goals, assess progress, and identify obstacles.⁴ Later resolutions have further reinforced policies and programs that empower youth, promoting their role in social and economic development.

Intergenerational dialogue represents a powerful approach to sustainable development and multilateralism, combining the wisdom of experience with the energy of innovation. At its core is the recognition that youth must have authentic voices, agency, and influence in decisions that shape their lives and futures.

Substantive youth engagement transcends token participation. It requires valuing young people's contributions as essential to positive development, creating spaces where their perspectives are seriously considered, and fostering their sense of purpose and belonging. Research shows this approach not only leads to more relevant policies but also serves as protective factor against negative outcomes by strengthening youth connection to their communities.

True engagement must be inclusive by design, actively incorporating diverse young voices, especially from marginalized groups. It demands institutional mechanisms that treat youth as partners rather than beneficiaries, with sustained opportunities for participation beyond singular events. This includes transparent feedback channels and recognition of youth contributions.

The past decade has witnessed remarkable advances in integrating youth voices across the multilateral system. This evolution reflects an international consensus that meaningful youth participation is essential to effective global governance. As the cornerstone of multilateralism, the United Nations has spearheaded these efforts by establishing frameworks and platforms to institutionalize youth engagement. Initiatives such as the UN Youth Strategy, the ECOSOC Youth Forum, and the formal inclusion of youth representatives in major global summits have provided essential spaces for young people to contribute to policy discussions.

³ United Nations. (1981). *International Youth Year: Participation, Development, Peace. Report of the Secretary-General to the General Assembly (A/36/215, para. 8 of the annex)*. See also: United Nations. (1985). *International Youth Year: Participation, Development, Peace. Report of the Secretary-General to the General Assembly (A/40/256, para. 19 of the annex)*. Available at: <https://undocs.org/en/A/36/215> and <https://undocs.org/en/A/40/256>

⁴ United Nations General Assembly. (2003). *Resolution 58/133: Promotion of youth involvement in the implementation of the World Programme of Action for Youth*. Adopted 22 December 2003. Available at: <https://undocs.org/en/A/RES/58/133>

Yet despite these important strides, critical challenges persist. The international community continues to grapple with ensuring that youth participation remains equitable, impactful, and sustained. Equity remains a significant concern, as opportunities for engagement often favor youth from privileged backgrounds, leaving behind those from marginalized communities, the Global South, and conflict-affected areas. Impact also presents a challenge, with many youth consultations and forums serving as symbolic exercises rather than mechanisms that translate participation into tangible policy influence. Lastly, the issue of sustainability underscores the need for long-term structural integration of youth voices rather than short-term, ad-hoc engagement.

To move forward, these gaps must be addressed through comprehensive reforms that go beyond tokenistic inclusion. Strengthening institutional mechanisms, ensuring adequate funding for youth-led initiatives, and fostering intergenerational collaboration are critical steps to embedding youth perspectives at the heart of decision-making processes. While significant progress has been made, the work of transforming governance systems to fully harness the potential of the world's largest youth population remains unfinished.

3. The Current Status Quo of Youth Stakeholder Participation

3.1. Youth Participation within UN Frameworks

Over the past decade, the multilateral system has made significant strides in institutionalizing youth participation, recognizing the essential role of young people in shaping global governance. The United Nations has played a pivotal role in this transformation, establishing mechanisms and policies to move youth engagement from symbolic inclusion to meaningful influence in decision-making processes.

A key milestone in this evolution was the 2011 UN High-Level Meeting on Youth, which resulted in a Joint Statement by the Inter-Agency Network on Youth Development calling for full and effective youth participation. The Outcome Document of the Meeting (A/RES/65/312) reinforced this commitment by emphasizing the need to include marginalized youth, such as indigenous youth, young people with disabilities, migrants, and those affected by humanitarian crises.⁵ It also underscored the importance of holding the UN system accountable for addressing youth issues through structured engagement.

Building on this foundation, in 2013, the appointment of the first UN Secretary-General's Envoy on Youth marked a turning point in youth inclusion efforts. This role was designed to advocate for young people's rights and strengthen collaboration between the UN and youth organizations worldwide.⁶ That same year, the UN Secretary-General's Five-Year Action Agenda placed youth at the center of the UN's global development strategy, prioritizing their inclusion in areas such as employment, education, political participation, and reproductive rights.⁷ Key initiatives included the launch of a youth volunteer program under UN Volunteers and the development of a UN Youth Action Plan.

⁵ United Nations General Assembly. (2011). *Outcome Document of the High-level Meeting of the General Assembly on Youth: Dialogue and Mutual Understanding (A/RES/65/312)*. Adopted 20 September 2011. Available at: <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/710074>

⁶ United Nations Secretary-General. (2013). *Secretary-General Appoints First-Ever Envoy on Youth*. Retrieved from <https://press.un.org/en/2013/sgsm14858.doc.htm>

⁷ *The Secretary-General's Five-Year Action Agenda*. Retrieved from <https://www.un.org/sg/sites/www.un.org.sg/files/atoms/files/SGs%205-Year%20Action%20Agenda.pdf>

The institutionalization of youth engagement took a significant step forward in 2018 with the launch of Youth2030, the UN Youth Strategy, the first system-wide framework for working with and for young people.⁸ This strategy aligns youth participation with the UN's core mandates on peace and security, human rights, and sustainable development. It also strengthens collaboration among UN agencies to ensure that youth concerns are systematically integrated across global agendas.

Beyond policy commitments, various youth advisory bodies, delegate programs, and consultation processes have been established to facilitate structured youth participation. The UN Youth Delegate Programme provides young representatives with direct access to UN negotiations, particularly within the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) and the General Assembly. Similarly, the ECOSOC Youth Forum has emerged as a leading platform for young people to contribute to global discussions on the Sustainable Development Goals.

In addition to formal UN mechanisms, youth engagement has been strengthened through thematic frameworks and intergovernmental processes. The adoption of the Youth, Peace, and Security (YPS) Agenda through UN Security Council Resolutions 2250 (2015), 2419 (2018), and 2535 (2020) has formally recognized young people as critical actors in conflict prevention and sustainable peace.⁹ A landmark development in institutionalizing youth participation came in 2023 with the establishment of the UN Youth Office and the appointment of the first-ever Assistant Secretary-General for Youth Affairs. This new office signals an increased commitment to mainstreaming youth perspectives across UN bodies, ensuring greater coordination and impact in youth-related policies. It also aligns with Policy Brief 3 of the Secretary-General's *Our Common Agenda*, which emphasizes intergenerational collaboration and the need for youth representation in decision-making processes.¹⁰ In 2023, 74% (37 of 50) of UN entities engaged youth in their entity's processes, including strategic planning processes, at nearly the same level as the baseline of 70% (28 of 40) in 2021.¹¹

Further, youth engagement within the UN has been institutionalized through major group constituencies and networks that represent young people across multiple thematic areas. The Major Group for Children and Youth (MGCY), is the official space mandated by the UN General Assembly for children and youth engagement, plays a vital role in bridging young people and the UN system, which enables their participation in sustainable development policy-making across all levels. Through capacity building, policy advocacy, and youth-led action, MGCY ensures youth priorities are integrated into global governance. Complementing this, the Children and Youth Major Group to UNEP (CYMG) serves as the formal youth engagement mechanism for the UN Environment Programme, representing

⁸ United Nations. (2018). *Youth2030: The United Nations Youth Strategy*. New York: United Nations. Available at: <https://www.un.org/youthenvoy/youth2030/>

⁹ United Nations Security Council. (2015). *Resolution 2250 (2015) on Youth, Peace and Security*. S/RES/2250 (2015). Adopted 9 December 2015. Available at: [https://undocs.org/S/RES/2250\(2015\)](https://undocs.org/S/RES/2250(2015))

United Nations Security Council. (2018). *Resolution 2419 (2018) on Youth, Peace and Security*. S/RES/2419 (2018). Adopted 6 June 2018. Available at: [https://undocs.org/S/RES/2419\(2018\)](https://undocs.org/S/RES/2419(2018))

United Nations Security Council. (2020). *Resolution 2535 (2020) on Youth, Peace and Security*. S/RES/2535 (2020). Adopted 14 July 2020. Available at: [https://undocs.org/S/RES/2535\(2020\)](https://undocs.org/S/RES/2535(2020))

¹⁰ United Nations. (2023). *Secretary-General Appoints First Assistant Secretary-General for Youth*. UN Press Release, 14 February 2023. Available at: <https://press.un.org/en/2023/sga2207.doc.htm>

United Nations Secretary-General. (2023). *Our Common Agenda: Policy Brief 3 – Intergenerational Solidarity*. Available at: <https://www.un.org/en/content/common-agenda-report/assets/pdf/Policy-Brief-3-Intergenerational-Solidarity.pdf>

¹¹ United Nations. (2023). *Youth2030: Progress Report 2023*. Available at: <https://www.unyouth2030.com/progressreport23>

youth committed to addressing climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution. CYMG facilitates youth leadership in environmental decision-making through UNEA and other UNEP processes. Similarly, YOUNGO represents youth in climate negotiations under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), while the Global Youth Biodiversity Network (GYBN), a youth-led network active in over 170 countries, mobilizes young advocates to push for ambitious biodiversity goals within the Convention on Biological Diversity. Together, these youth constituencies ensure relevant participation and leadership of young people in environmental and sustainable development governance.

As UN Secretary-General António Guterres emphasized in 2024 through the Youth2030: Progress Report 2023, "Our work is founded on a core principle: we must work with young people as equal partners. This requires facilitating youth engagement in decision-making processes, at the United Nations and beyond; amplifying diverse young voices worldwide; and allocating dedicated resources, in particular in developing countries".¹²

Looking ahead, ensuring equitable, impactful, and sustained youth participation requires scaling up youth-inclusive policies, strengthening accountability mechanisms, and fostering intergenerational governance. The UN and its member states must commit to bridging the gap between consultation and action, ensuring that young people are not just present but actively shaping global decisions. The creation of the UN Youth Office provides a crucial opportunity to institutionalize youth perspectives at all levels of governance, but sustained political will, resources, and structural reforms will be essential in translating these commitments into lasting change.

3.2. Levels of engagement at national, regional, and international levels

Youth engagement in governance and decision-making is increasingly institutionalized across national, regional, and international spheres, with governments and organizations implementing targeted mechanisms to ensure youth voices are represented in shaping public policy.

At the national level, youth participation is often facilitated through youth councils, advisory boards, and national youth delegate programs. These bodies serve as formal channels for young people to contribute to public discourse on issues ranging from education and employment to health and environmental governance. Countries such as Rwanda exemplify this with robust national youth councils that integrate young perspectives into local and national development planning. In Mexico, youth participation is increasingly visible through national delegate programs to global processes such as the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA), the UN Climate Change Conference of the Parties (COP), and other multilateral forums. These opportunities are often facilitated by collaboration between civil society organizations and government institutions, although consistency and institutional backing for these programs vary. Additionally, the development of national youth policies and the inclusion of youth in legislative frameworks reflect broader efforts to embed youth agency in institutional processes.

¹² United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres. (2024). *Foreword in Youth2030: Progress Report 2023*. United Nations. Available at: <https://www.unyouth2030.com/progressreport23>

At the regional level, youth engagement is supported through transnational networks and intergovernmental mechanisms that address shared challenges and promote cross-border collaboration. Institutions such as the African Union, the European Union, and the Commonwealth have established regional youth charters, councils, and platforms that enable young people to influence regional agendas. These spaces often provide technical training, leadership development, and policy forums where youth contribute to shaping strategies on migration, sustainability, and digital inclusion. Regional youth forums and summits also serve as opportunities to align national youth priorities with regional development goals, while fostering a shared sense of intergenerational responsibility and solidarity.

At the international level, the United Nations and other multilateral organizations play a pivotal role in institutionalizing youth participation in global governance. Programs such as the UN Youth Delegate Programme, administered by UN DESA¹³, enable youth to be part of national delegations at major forums including the UN General Assembly and ECOSOC Youth Forum. These platforms provide avenues for young people to advocate on global challenges such as climate change, human rights, and peacebuilding. UN agencies, including the Office of the Secretary-General's Envoy on Youth and the UN Youth Office, lead initiatives to mainstream youth perspectives across UN systems through frameworks like the Youth2030 Strategy and the Youth-SWAP.

4. Barriers to Meaningful Youth Participation

Despite growing opportunities for youth participation, many young people encounter significant barriers that limit their ability to engage meaningfully in decision-making processes. Across various platforms, youth have described their involvement as performative and tokenistic, often invited to speak, but rarely empowered to influence outcomes. This disconnect leads to frustration, as young participants seek not only to be heard, but to be recognized as active stakeholders in shaping policies that affect their lives and communities. Without real influence or follow-up, engagement efforts risk becoming symbolic rather than transformative.

A major obstacle is the lack of consistent support and resourcing for youth participation. Research indicates that 94% of youth do not receive adequate support before, during, or after their engagement in formal processes. In the absence of structured frameworks, relevant capacity building and financial aid, participation becomes accessible primarily to those with the privilege and means to contribute unpaid time and cover personal expenses. This creates an uneven playing field, reinforcing exclusion and limiting the diversity of youth voices in governance.

4.1. Institutional Barriers

¹³ Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA). (2023). *UN Youth Delegate Programme*. Available at: <https://sdgs.un.org/topics/youth/un-youth-delegate-programme>

A significant barrier to substantive youth participation is the persistent lack of youth representation in leadership positions. Despite making up a large portion of the population, young people remain underrepresented in political and civic leadership roles, globally, only about 2.2% of parliamentarians are under the age of 30, illustrating a stark gap between youth demographics and those in positions of power.¹⁴ This underrepresentation is compounded by structural barriers such as age requirements, limited access to mentorship, lack of political connections, and insufficient resources, all of which make it difficult for young people to pursue and attain leadership roles.

Few young leaders hold visible roles, perpetuating the myth that leadership is reserved for older generations. This not only perpetuates a cycle of disengagement but also deprives institutions of the innovation, adaptability, and diverse perspectives that young leaders bring. Societal biases often further devalue the contributions of young leaders, with their ideas and leadership styles sometimes viewed as signs of inexperience rather than assets.

Adding to the fact that bureaucratic complexity and limited formal mechanisms for youth input also remain important limitations to meaningful youth engagement. Policy-making processes are often highly technical, fragmented, and difficult for young people to navigate, leading many to feel their contributions have little real impact. The lack of clear, institutionalized structures for youth participation results in inconsistent opportunities and ad hoc engagement, which can further discourage sustained involvement. In many cases, youth report being included in international conferences and forums primarily for symbolic purposes, rather than as genuine partners in decision-making, leading to perceptions of tokenism and “lip service” participation.

Additionally, the absence of systematic resourcing, such as funding, training, and logistical support, means that only the most privileged youth can afford to participate, often covering their own expenses and volunteering their time. Complex application and funding procedures further restrict access, disproportionately affecting youth from marginalized or lower-income backgrounds. These challenges are compounded by limited access to timely information, insufficient guidance, and a lack of coordination across youth constituencies, all of which hinder effective engagement.

4.2. Resource and Capacity Barriers

Young people face systemic obstacles in accessing the resources and building the capacities necessary for equitable involvement in decision-making spaces. Financial constraints remain one of the most critical barriers: many youth are unable to cover travel, accommodation, and participation costs associated with attending multilateral forums. Grassroots youth-led groups, in particular, are often excluded from financial systems entirely. Over 60% of youth in sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East, and Latin America lack access to basic bank accounts, locking them out of grant applications and financial opportunities that require

¹⁴ Inter-Parliamentary Union. (2023). *Youth Participation in National Parliaments: 2023*. Available at: <https://www.ipu.org/resources/publications/reports/2023-10/youth-participation-in-national-parliaments-2023>
European Youth Forum. (2024). *European Elections 2024: Young People Never Had a Chance*. Available at: <https://www.youthforum.org/news/european-elections-2024-young-people-never-had-a-chance>
Shams, Shehzaad. (2024, May 10). *The Youth Perspective: Challenges and Opportunities in Political Leadership*. LinkedIn. <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/youth-perspective-challenges-opportunities-political-leadership-ej5ge>

formal financial infrastructure.¹⁵ Even when funding exists, young people frequently find themselves competing against larger government bodies or established NGOs for limited resources.

Moreover, donor-imposed priorities often misalign with youth needs. Available grants are typically short-term and heavily restrictive, forcing youth groups to conform to external agendas rather than empowering them to address the specific issues facing their communities. Localization efforts, intended to support domestic organizations, often inadvertently backfire: international NGOs monopolize available funds and use youth groups primarily as facilitators or subcontractors without granting them real financial autonomy or decision-making power. This undermines the very goal of building sustainable, youth-led movements.

Beyond financial barriers, capacity-building gaps persist, particularly regarding access to technical, legal, and policy knowledge. A recent survey indicates that 31% of youth participants report lacking the knowledge needed to engage effectively in high-level discussions. While youth often bring innovative ideas and critical lived experiences to the table, many struggle to navigate highly technical areas such as climate finance, international law, or global governance systems. Without sufficient pre-summit training in areas like negotiation, public speaking, and technical content, young participants risk having their contributions undervalued or dismissed. This perpetuates cycles of exclusion, reinforcing the perception that youth are “not ready” to engage in policymaking processes.

The scarcity of financial and capacity-building support intensifies these structural exclusions. Youth are often expected to engage voluntarily without stipends, logistical support, or recognition of the sacrifices involved, such as missing work, school, or familial responsibilities. Without deliberate investment in mentorship, technical training, and financial accessibility, youth engagement risks being restricted to those with pre-existing resources and privileges.

4.3. Social and Political Barriers

Despite growing recognition of the importance of youth participation, significant social and political barriers continue to undermine substantive engagement. Equal opportunities for all young people, regardless of gender, race, ethnicity, religion, or socio-economic background, are fundamental to genuine inclusion.

Age-based discrimination continues to be a major obstacle. Young people are often perceived as inexperienced or lacking credibility, which restricts their roles to symbolic rather than substantive participation. Many youth participants report being treated as “junior partners” in decision-making processes or included merely to satisfy diversity quotas.¹⁶ This practice, known as tokenism, refers to making only a superficial or symbolic effort to include members of marginalized groups without granting them real influence or power. Rather than being valued as essential stakeholders, youth are too often relegated to performative roles, undermining the depth and authenticity of their contributions.

¹⁵ World Bank. (2018). *The Little Data Book on Financial Inclusion 2018*. Washington, DC: World Bank. <https://documents.worldbank.org/pt/publication/documents-reports/documentdetail/425641548843338355/banking-on-the-future-youth-and-digital-financial-services-in-sub-saharan-africa>

¹⁶ United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). (2020). *Youth Participation in Decision-Making: From Tokenism to Meaningful Engagement*. New York: UNDP. Available at: <https://www.undp.org/publications/youth-participation-decision-making-tokenism-meaningful-engagement>

Access to decision-makers and critical resources is also uneven, frequently shaped by a participant's country of origin, language skills, and existing international networks. Youth from the Global South and marginalized communities face systemic exclusion due to a lack of accessible, multilingual information about participation opportunities and complex, opaque selection processes. Multilateral spaces thus continue to privilege a narrow, elite subset of the youth population, weakening the diversity, legitimacy, and effectiveness of youth engagement.

In addition to these challenges, visa and international travel regulations present formidable barriers. Many young people, especially from low- and middle-income countries, are unable to secure the necessary documentation to attend global forums, even when selected. Complicated, costly, and often discriminatory visa processes exclude large numbers of youth, further deepening inequalities in participation. Even when youth manage to secure funding or sponsorship, bureaucratic hurdles related to travel permissions can prevent them from exercising their right to engage on the international stage.

Political pressures further stifle open youth participation. Many young people report feeling unable to freely express their opinions in international spaces, often expected to align with their national government's official positions rather than presenting independent perspectives. This dynamic silences dissenting voices, diminishes the authenticity of youth dialogue, and reduces the impact of youth contributions in shaping policies.

Even when youth are invited to global forums, 81% of participants feel that equitable involvement in decision-making remains rare. Many view their participation as tokenistic: an invitation to occupy space without genuine influence over outcomes.¹⁷ Invitations to international events are often isolated, one-time experiences that lack continuity, follow-up, or formal recognition at national levels. Consequently, young people struggle to translate international experiences into tangible influence or long-term advocacy opportunities in their own countries.

Youth engagement is also frequently relegated to segregated spaces, with limited direct interaction with policymakers. While young people are often asked to share ideas or draft proposals, these contributions frequently remain confined to "youth sessions" rather than being integrated into the main decision-making processes. Approximately 35% of youth participants express frustration over the lack of meaningful dialogue with decision-makers, citing a lack of structured feedback loops or accountability mechanisms to ensure that youth inputs are considered seriously.¹⁸ Without systemic reforms, youth engagement risks remaining a largely performative exercise rather than serving as a pathway toward genuine transformation and inclusion.

4.4. Structural and Accessibility Barriers

Despite the growing emphasis on youth participation in global and local decision-making spaces, persistent structural and accessibility barriers continue to limit relevant engagement.

¹⁷ United Nations Major Group for Children and Youth (UN MGCY). (2022). *Youth Participation in Global Governance: Challenges and Opportunities*. Available at: <https://www.unmgcy.org/youth-participation-global-governance-report-2022>

¹⁸ United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). (2021). *Youth Engagement and Participation: Bridging the Gap Between Youth and Decision-Makers*. New York: UNDP. Available at: <https://www.undp.org/publications/youth-engagement-participation-bridging-gap>

These barriers are deeply rooted in institutional design, social inequities, and infrastructural shortcomings, making participation a privilege rather than a right for many young people.

At the forefront, language barriers and the lack of accessible formats for engagement pose significant challenges. Many youth participants observed that attendees at international forums predominantly came from major urban centers, prestigious universities, and professionalized backgrounds, often speaking English fluently. As a result, voices from rural communities, Indigenous groups, differently-abled youth, and those from underprivileged socio-economic backgrounds were largely absent. Even when efforts are made to diversify participation, the absence of multilingual materials, real-time translation services, and accessible engagement formats (such as braille, audio options, or closed captions) systematically excludes many. Youth participants with disabilities reported feeling overlooked, noting that engagement often focused more on their identity as disabled individuals than on valuing their substantive contributions. This reinforces tokenism, defined as the practice of making only a superficial effort to include marginalized individuals without granting them real power or influence.

The digital divide further exacerbates inequalities in participation. Although the shift to virtual platforms during and after the pandemic has enabled broader geographic outreach, it has also deepened existing exclusions. Many young people, particularly those from marginalized or rural communities, lack reliable internet access, digital devices, or the technological literacy needed to engage meaningfully. Poor connectivity, outdated equipment, and limited access to digital platforms mean that even when virtual engagement opportunities exist, they are inaccessible to significant segments of the global youth population. This digital exclusion reinforces pre-existing disparities, disproportionately affecting youth from the Global South, Indigenous backgrounds, and low-income communities.

Physical and logistical barriers compound these challenges. Engagement opportunities are often centralized in major cities, requiring participants to have private transportation or financial means to attend. Venues are frequently inaccessible to persons with disabilities, and few accommodations are made to ensure equitable participation. Even for virtual events, time zone differences, platform accessibility, and a lack of technical support continue to hinder inclusive engagement.

Institutional structures further reinforce these barriers. Selection processes for youth engagement are often opaque, heavily favoring individuals with higher education degrees, fluent English skills, or professional experience, effectively locking out youth whose lived experiences and grassroots knowledge are critically needed. Cultural norms and implicit biases also influence who is heard and valued. Youth from Indigenous, racial minority, rural, and gender-diverse communities frequently face systemic exclusion or active dismissal in policy dialogues.

5. Solutions and Best Practices

Meaningful youth participation can be enhanced by actively involving young people in all stages of development, including the design, implementation, monitoring, reporting, and evaluation of policies and initiatives. To further improve engagement, targeted approaches such as education and capacity-building programs should be implemented. Youth-friendly resources and materials should be developed in collaboration with young people themselves, utilizing both traditional and innovative digital platforms.

An inclusive approach to youth participation must prioritize gender equality, with a particular emphasis on increasing young women's involvement. Additionally, special attention should be given to marginalized groups, including youth with disabilities, indigenous youth, migrants, those affected by conflict and post-conflict situations, and young people living with HIV. To ensure equitable and gender-sensitive participation, systemic barriers, including social, economic, and cultural obstacles, must be dismantled.

5.1. Strengthening Institutional Mechanisms

Institutionalizing youth participation requires intentional strategies that ensure equity, inclusion, accessibility, and transparency at every stage of the process. This involves the establishment of dedicated structures and mechanisms, such as youth advisory councils, civic engagement networks, and inclusive platforms, that empower young people to actively contribute to decision-making processes that directly affect their lives. To be truly effective, these mechanisms must be rooted in an intersectional approach that recognize and address the multiple, overlapping forms of discrimination faced by youth based on gender, race, ethnicity, disability, geography, and socio-economic status. Only by embedding equity and representation at the core can we build sustainable systems of youth engagement that reflect the full diversity of young people's experiences.

Under Youth2030, mobilizing stakeholders, advocating, and communicating on youth issues remains a significant area of focus. UN efforts span a variety of platforms, including:

- Advocacy in global and regional forums, summits, and conferences, ensuring youth issues are elevated within intergovernmental dialogues;
- Advocacy events that promote youth-relevant international days, raising awareness and rallying support for critical causes;
- Communication campaigns, including social media and digital outreach, to engage broad audiences and amplify youth voices.

According to the Youth2030 Scorecards, which include specific indicators to monitor advocacy and communication efforts, in 2023, 94% (45 of 48) of UN entities reported supporting advocacy events related to youth issues in intergovernmental forums, global summits, and conferences. This reflects a sustained commitment, comparable to the 97% baseline recorded in 2021 (36 of 37 entities).¹⁹

Examples of best practices in mobilization and advocacy are:

- The UN International Youth Day: annually highlights key youth issues, mobilizes global action, and fosters dialogue among governments, civil society, and young people.
- The Global Forum on Youth, Peace, and Security: provides a platform for young peacebuilders, policymakers, and UN representatives to collaborate and advance youth-led peace initiatives.
- The UN Secretary-General's Annual Reports on Youth: track progress on youth inclusion, identify gaps, and offer recommendations for enhancing impact.

¹⁹ United Nations. (2023). *Youth2030: Progress Report 2023*. Available at: <https://www.unyouth2030.com/progressreport23>

In addition to advocacy, significant strides are being made to improve digital and linguistic accessibility. Recognizing that language and digital divides can exclude many young people, particularly from marginalized and underrepresented communities, UN agencies are increasingly prioritizing:

- The translation of materials and interpretation services across multiple languages to facilitate broader participation;
- The development of accessible formats, such as braille, closed captions, and easy-to-read materials, for youth with disabilities;
- Digital inclusion initiatives that expand access to online platforms, resources, and virtual engagement spaces for youth in underserved regions.

However, to achieve true accountability, it is essential not only to increase access but also to socialize information, transparently report outcomes, and ensure youth inputs lead to tangible impacts. Transparent reporting mechanisms, such as public progress reports, evaluations, and youth scorecards, help close feedback loops, allowing young participants to see how their contributions are reflected in decision-making processes.

Institutionalizing inclusive and transparent mechanisms for accountability is essential to move youth engagement beyond symbolic participation. By embedding consistent practices of monitoring, evaluation, and public reporting, such as youth scorecards, progress updates, and participatory assessments, institutions can ensure that youth contributions translate into tangible outcomes. Open and responsive feedback channels further empower young people to see how their voices shape decisions, strengthening mutual trust. An inclusive, accessible, and accountable approach to youth engagement not only strengthens the legitimacy of institutional processes but also ensures that youth are empowered as full partners in shaping policies, programs, and actions that affect their lives and communities.

5.2. Capacity Building & Resources

Expanding support for youth-led initiatives and strengthening training programs to build technical and policy expertise are essential pillars of meaningful youth engagement. Building the capacity of young people, as well as the institutions that work with them, remains a strategic priority under Youth2030.

UN entities enhance stakeholder capacity in several interconnected ways: maintaining knowledge portals with updated information relevant to youth issues; offering e-learning courses to provide accessible online training and certification on youth-related topics; investing in capacity-building initiatives for both duty bearers and rights holders, ensuring stakeholders are equipped to promote youth rights; and facilitating knowledge exchange through platforms that enable cross-regional learning, best practice sharing, and community building among youth advocates.

According to the Youth2030 Scorecard, strong performance continues in this area. In 2023, 88% (37 of 42) of UN entities maintained knowledge portals containing information relevant to youth, maintaining the high baseline level of 83% (30 of 36) from 2021. Within UN Country Teams (UNCTs), there has also been a notable improvement in the integration of

youth issues into knowledge-exchange plans, with a growing emphasis on ensuring these activities receive dedicated funding.²⁰

Empowering young people and the institutions that support them requires targeted investments in training, mentorship, and resources. Several key initiatives demonstrate best practices in this space:

- The UN Major Group for Children and Youth (UNMGCY) offers regular capacity-building sessions that train young advocates on how to effectively participate in UN processes, influence policy-making, and navigate multilateral spaces.
- The ECOSOC Youth Forum serves as a platform for young leaders, policy-makers, and UN officials to engage in intergenerational dialogue and co-create strategies to advance the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).
- The UN System Staff College (UNSSC) Youth Leadership Training provides specialized courses focused on youth participation in governance, climate action, peacebuilding, building technical skills and policy expertise.

In addition to training programs, direct financial support, mentorship, and accessible funding mechanisms are essential to expand the impact of youth-led initiatives and sustain meaningful advocacy efforts. The UN Youth Fund provides seed funding to youth-led organizations working in fields such as peacebuilding, gender equality, and human rights, helping to scale grassroots action. Similarly, UNESCO's Participation Programme funds youth-driven projects across education, science, culture, and communication, amplifying young voices in diverse sectors. The Global Youth Mobilization Initiative, co-led by the Big 6 youth organizations and supported by WHO and the UN Foundation, offers flexible grants and support to youth-led solutions responding to COVID-19's impacts. In Latin America, regional youth scholarships provide young leaders with mentorship, policy training, and funding to strengthen their leadership skills and expand their advocacy both locally and internationally.

Other initiatives like the European Union & Global Youth Mobilization's Youth Empowerment Fund (YEF) offer direct financial and technical support to youth-led projects globally, ensuring that resources reach young changemakers in their communities. Additionally, FRIDA (The Young Feminist Fund) operates a participatory grant-making model where young feminist groups collectively decide on funding allocations, empowering marginalized voices, particularly young women and LGBTQ+ youth, to have direct control over the resources needed for their activism.

Beyond advocacy, significant progress is being made to improve digital and linguistic accessibility. Recognizing that language and digital divides can exclude many young people, particularly those from marginalized and underrepresented communities, UN agencies are prioritizing the translation of materials and interpretation services across multiple languages. They are also producing materials in accessible formats such as braille, closed captions, and easy-to-read documents to ensure inclusion for youth with disabilities. At the same time, digital inclusion initiatives are being scaled up to expand access to online platforms, learning resources, and virtual engagement spaces for young people in underserved regions.

²⁰ United Nations. (2023). *Youth2030: Progress Report 2023*. Available at: <https://www.unyouth2030.com/progressreport23>

For instance, the United Nations Youth Office's Local 2030 Initiative supports local youth hubs around the world that are tailored to their communities' cultural and linguistic needs, while prioritizing access to tools, training, and digital platforms for youth organizing in remote or low-connectivity areas. Similarly, the Voices of Youth initiative by UNICEF creates accessible storytelling and advocacy spaces for youth globally, offering multilingual platforms that uplift the lived experiences of underrepresented young people and equip them to influence public discourse.

5.3. Youth-Led and Multi-Stakeholder Partnerships

Strengthening youth-led and multi-stakeholder partnerships is critical to ensuring that young people are not only beneficiaries but also active architects. The UN has made significant strides in creating initiatives, funds, and networks that directly support young leaders and youth-led organizations, focusing on capacity-building, leadership development, and youth-driven action.

The UN employs a diverse range of institutional frameworks to address youth priorities and development challenges. These approaches include the establishment of joint programs and multistakeholder initiatives, forging strategic partnerships and investments for youth innovations, and pioneering mechanisms for direct funding to youth-led organizations. Historically, while the UN has engaged in partnerships with youth movements for several years, providing direct financial support to youth-led groups posed logistical and administrative challenges. However, in recent years, UN entities and UN Country Teams (UNCTs) have increasingly developed innovative methods to allocate essential human, financial, technical, and technological resources, enabling youth-led organizations to incubate and scale solutions to developmental challenges.

Recent data reflects this positive evolution: in 2023, 95% of UN entities (37 of 39) supported joint programs or multistakeholder initiatives on youth, marking a significant increase from 68% in 2021. Additionally, 97% of UN entities (32 of 33) established partnerships or funded innovations led by youth, particularly across sustainable development, human rights, peace and security, and humanitarian sectors. These trends demonstrate a growing institutional recognition that youth participation must be structurally embedded across governance processes, not treated as ancillary.²¹

Several key initiatives exemplify the UN's commitment to substantive youth engagement. The UN Youth Delegate Programme enables young representatives to actively participate in UN General Assembly and ECOSOC sessions, bringing diverse youth voices into global policy discussions. Similarly, the UNDP Youth Global Programme for Sustainable Development and Peace (Youth-GPS) funds and supports youth participation in governance, climate action, and peacebuilding processes, strengthening youth-led contributions to the 2030 Agenda.²² Additionally, Generation Unlimited (GenU), spearheaded by UNICEF, connects governments, businesses, and youth organizations to accelerate access to education, skills, and employment opportunities for young people worldwide.²³

²¹ United Nations. (2023). *Youth2030: Progress Report 2023*. Available at: <https://www.unyouth2030.com/progressreport23>

²² United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). (n.d.). *Youth Global Programme for Sustainable Development and Peace (Youth-GPS)*. Available at: <https://www.undp.org/youth-gps>

²³ UNICEF. (n.d.). *Generation Unlimited (GenU)*. Available at: <https://www.unicef.org/education/generation-unlimited>

Across successful models of youth engagement, several key components consistently emerge. Intergenerational dialogue is critical, fostering mutual understanding between youth and policymakers, breaking down stereotypes, and building trust-based relationships. Structured dialogue frameworks institutionalize regular, thematic engagement between young people and senior decision-makers, ensuring that youth are consulted beyond ad-hoc or tokenistic participation. Finally, strategic partnerships link youth-led organizations with governments, civil society actors, and international bodies, fostering holistic, multi-stakeholder approaches to problem-solving.

Several case studies demonstrate how these principles are translated into practice:

- The Youth Engagement Series in the Euro-Mediterranean region exemplifies an effective multi-stakeholder model. Through a series of online meetings involving policy-makers, youth-led civil society organizations (CSOs), and international bodies, young people engaged directly on issues such as climate action, education, and social inclusion. This initiative developed actionable pathways for embedding youth participation in decision-making structures, emphasizing the value of sustained intergenerational dialogue and capacity building.
- The Angus Youth Engagement Strategy in Scotland shows how localized youth participation can be systematized. Young people were integral to the co-production of a sustainable youth engagement strategy, with practical support mechanisms to overcome barriers such as rural isolation. The initiative successfully aligned with the National Standards for Community Engagement, offering a replicable model for other regions seeking to institutionalize youth voice at the community level.
- In health research partnerships across sub-Saharan Africa, young people were engaged as partners in shaping health research priorities and processes. Utilizing a youth engagement framework that emphasized dimensions such as purpose, process, and power relations, this initiative demonstrated alignment with the Global Consensus Statement on Meaningful Youth Engagement. However, it also surfaced important lessons, including the need for targeted strategies to ensure the inclusion of marginalized youth populations who often face systemic barriers to participation.
- Lebanese youth-led organizations offer a compelling example of how young people can drive social innovation. Through the strategic use of technology and grassroots community engagement, these organizations catalyzed service innovations that enhanced community resilience and sustainability. This case highlights the transformative potential of youth-led organizations in linking personal empowerment with broader community development goals.

Taken together, these initiatives illustrate that successful youth engagement requires more than goodwill or ad-hoc participation: it demands the creation of structured spaces, investment in youth capacity, and the establishment of genuine intergenerational partnerships that value the expertise and leadership of young people.

6. Recommendations and Way Forward

Despite notable progress in advancing youth participation across global, national, and local governance spaces, persistent gaps in representation, resources, and accountability continue to undermine the potential of youth engagement. To move from commitment to impact, it is

critical to embed youth inclusion within the very structures of policy, programming, and decision-making. This requires sustained investment, structural reform, and robust mechanisms for monitoring and accountability. Strengthening financial and technical support for youth-led initiatives, enforcing inclusive youth policies, and ensuring equitable representation, particularly from historically marginalized communities, are foundational to this shift. The following recommendations, directed at key stakeholder groups, provide a roadmap for transforming youth engagement from aspirational rhetoric into meaningful, system-wide practice.

6.1. For UN Agencies and Global Governance Institutions

To move beyond symbolic youth inclusion, UN Agencies and global governance institutions must adopt an intentional and transformative approach. Youth participation must be embedded as a core principle of governance and development, not treated as peripheral or optional.

A. Prioritize Holistic Support Across the Participation Journey

Meaningful engagement does not begin or end at the consultation table. UN entities must offer comprehensive support; including financial resources, logistical facilitation (such as visas, translation, accessibility tools), and capacity-building training, before, during, and after youth participation processes. Providing young people with the technical, policy, and procedural literacy needed to engage on equal footing with senior stakeholders is critical to leveling asymmetric power dynamics.

B. Institutionalize Inclusive and Accountable Engagement Mechanisms

Youth-led organizations must be seen and treated as legitimate political actors. Inclusivity must be structurally guaranteed, not left to chance. This requires proactively reaching out to underrepresented youth, including skeptical groups who may distrust multilateral processes, and ensuring that no engagement opportunity is limited to an "elite few". Words without resources amount to little. The UN must proactively recognize, fund, and platform youth-led initiatives, particularly from historically marginalized regions and communities, including rural, indigenous, LGBTQIA+, and conflict-affected youth. To build enabling and legitimate ecosystems for youth leadership also means elevating youth-led movements at intergovernmental forums, ensuring their visibility, credibility, and direct influence over decision-making. Establishing clear accountability frameworks, such as a Youth Participation Index ranking countries and agencies on youth engagement quality and transparency, can drive cultural and operational shifts across institutions. Designating permanent youth seats in decision-making bodies, with full voting rights and budgetary influence.

C. Foster Intergenerational Collaboration as a Core Principle

Intergenerational dialogue must be more than symbolic encounters. It should be institutionalized through mentorship networks, professional exchanges, and joint policymaking spaces. Young people should co-design agendas, set measurable objectives, and be involved in ongoing governance, not just during youth-specific events. Follow-up mechanisms, regular feedback loops, and independent youth-led evaluation processes must be implemented to guarantee accountability.

D. Embedding Youth Inclusion and Representation Across the UN System

Youth engagement must be embedded across the entire UN system, not relegated to isolated "youth desks" or tokenistic initiatives. This requires hiring and training full-time and part-time youth officers within both UN Country Teams and headquarters structures to ensure consistent, equitable involvement at all levels. Internal coordination on youth-related issues should be strengthened through cross-sectoral thematic groups, moving beyond the reliance on individual focal points. Knowledge-sharing platforms must also be updated and made accessible to youth specialists working across areas such as peacebuilding, humanitarian response, education, and climate action. Additionally, the UN must prioritize building the capacity of its staff to understand and implement youth-centered policy programming, ensuring that engagement with young people is not only consistent but transformative.

The UN must reflect that commitment within its own workforce by developing intentional youth hiring strategies and creating career pipelines that allow young professionals to enter, grow, and lead within the system. Setting measurable targets for youth representation at entry, mid, and senior levels is essential, as is tracking and publishing disaggregated data on youth employment within the UN. Furthermore, transparency and feedback mechanisms must be embedded into hiring and promotion processes to ensure young professionals have access to mentorship, support, and clear pathways toward influence and leadership. Youth representation within the UN workforce must not be symbolic, it must be structural, strategic, and sustained.

E. Democratizing Participation and Advancing Youth Rights in Global Governance

Youth engagement cannot be confined to those with privileged access to resources or elite platforms. To ensure global youth representation is equitable and impactful, we must create accessible entry points that reach young people in all their diversity, particularly those from the Global South, refugee populations, rural areas, and historically marginalized communities. This requires intentionally designing participation mechanisms such as local consultations, regional hubs, and hybrid models that allow for meaningful inclusion regardless of geography or socioeconomic status. While digital platforms offer great potential for bridging distances and amplifying voices, they must be accompanied by investments in cyber-literacy, infrastructure, and digital inclusion efforts to avoid deepening existing inequalities.

At the same time, youth engagement must go beyond participation to fully enshrining youth rights in global governance. Institutions like the UN, must transition from simply convening young people to actively enabling and defending their rights. This includes mainstreaming youth rights language into UN resolutions, declarations, and the processes that guide the SDGs. Participation must be institutionalized as a standard component of decision-making, integrated into policy cycles, implementation strategies, and evaluation mechanisms, not treated as optional or symbolic. Supporting the development of an international legal framework that recognizes and protects youth participation rights is essential to making this shift permanent and enforceable.

6.2. For National Governments and Policymakers

For national governments and policymakers, institutionalizing meaningful youth engagement is no longer optional, it is a democratic imperative for building resilient, equitable societies. Young people must be recognized not only as stakeholders but as co-creators of policy, innovation, and governance.

A. Establish and Formalize Youth Engagement Mechanisms Across All Governance Levels

Governments must commit to expanding and strengthening youth participation at local, national, regional, and global levels. This means going beyond ad-hoc consultations toward institutionalized engagement frameworks that are mandated, resourced, and accountable. A key step is the establishment of national youth consultative bodies or councils, permanent, representative structures with a clear legal mandate to participate in policy-making. These bodies should be diverse, intersectional, and empowered with the necessary financial and logistical support to function effectively, influencing national development plans, legislative processes, and international representation strategies.

B. Expand and Strengthen the United Nations Youth Delegate Programme

Member States should significantly broaden participation in the UN Youth Delegate Programme, ensuring it covers a wider range of intergovernmental processes beyond the General Assembly. Youth Delegates must be given real negotiating spaces, rather than purely observational roles, and supported with preparatory training and financial resources. Special attention must be given to enabling participation from youth in low- and middle-income countries, ensuring global representativeness.

C. Systematically Resource Youth Engagement Efforts

Sustainable youth participation requires dedicated financial investments. Governments should allocate resources specifically for:

- Supporting national and local youth councils and assemblies.
- Funding youth participation in international platforms, particularly for youth from developing countries and vulnerable communities.
- Backing youth-led monitoring and accountability initiatives that track government commitments on youth engagement.

D. Create Monitoring and Accountability Mechanisms for Youth Engagement Commitments

A commitment without accountability risks becoming performative. Governments must develop national monitoring frameworks to track youth engagement commitments, reporting regularly to national parliaments and to international bodies. Progress should be measured not only by numbers of young participants but by the influence and outcomes of their engagement. Establishing independent, youth-led evaluations of these frameworks will further ensure transparency and legitimacy.

6.3. For Civil Society and Youth Organizations

Civil society and youth-led organizations are foundational to driving social transformation. However, to deepen the impact of youth advocacy globally, these actors must move beyond fragmented efforts and commit to intentional coalition-building, power-sharing, and long-term investment in youth leadership.

A. Co-Create Inclusive Advocacy Spaces

Inclusion must go beyond visibility, it must translate into influence. Civil society must ensure that advocacy spaces reflect the full spectrum of youth identities and experiences by actively centering the leadership of young women, LGBTQIA+ youth, Indigenous youth, youth with disabilities, and those from historically excluded communities. This means not only inviting youth into the room but building the room together. Inclusive advisory bodies at every level,

local, national, and international, must be co-designed to ensure that youth voices hold real decision-making power. When advocacy is grounded in lived experience, it becomes more relevant, responsive, and effective.

B. Invest in Leadership and Capacity Development

Sustainable advocacy cannot exist without sustainable leadership. Investing in youth requires more than hosting occasional training; it involves creating long-term capacity-building ecosystems that nurture leadership from the ground up. Youth-led organizations need access to leadership labs, advocacy bootcamps, peer exchange networks, and mentorship programs that value intergenerational learning while preserving youth agency. Experienced civil society actors must act as allies and enablers, amplifying youth leadership without co-opting it. Capacity development must be a process of mutual growth rooted in trust and shared purpose.

C. Bridge Silos Through Cross-Sector and Intergenerational Collaboration

No movement can thrive in isolation. Building collaborative ecosystems across civil society, academia, media, the private sector, and international institutions is essential. Multi-stakeholder dialogues should bring these sectors together with youth-led organizations to co-design holistic solutions. Just as importantly, local movements must be meaningfully linked with global platforms, allowing for a two-way flow of knowledge, resources, and solidarity. Global conversations must be informed by grassroots realities, and local actions must be supported by international frameworks, creating a loop of relevance and impact.

D. Design Safe, Accessible, and Empowering Environments

Youth engagement must be rooted in environments that are safe, accessible, and empowering. Whether online or offline, engagement spaces should prioritize digital safety, language inclusion, cultural relevance, and usability. Equally important is ensuring clarity of purpose: youth must understand their roles, rights, and responsibilities in any participatory process. When expectations are clear and feedback mechanisms are built in, young participants are empowered to contribute authentically, avoiding the common pitfalls of tokenism and performative inclusion.

E. Resource Youth Advocacy as Essential Labor

Youth advocacy is labor—strategic, creative, and emotionally intensive. Yet too often it is undervalued or unpaid. Civil society must recognize that passion is not a substitute for sustainable livelihoods. Dedicated funding stream, particularly flexible micro-grants, are essential to support youth-led initiatives. These funds must cover not only logistics and outreach but also the labor behind the work: organizing, facilitating, storytelling, and campaigning. Compensation is not only about fairness, it's about enabling young people to continue doing this vital work without burning out or opting out.

F. Embed Youth Within Decision-Making Structures

To move from engagement to transformation, youth must not only be heard, they must share in governance. Civil society should integrate youth into all stages of decision-making: from agenda-setting to policy development, implementation, and evaluation. Shared leadership models must be institutionalized, not improvised. Equally critical is supporting youth-led accountability mechanisms that allow young people to monitor commitments, evaluate impact, and hold duty-bearers to their promises. Embedding youth into governance is not a symbolic act, it is a structural shift toward justice and intergenerational equity.

7. Conclusion

As this report has demonstrated, meaningful youth engagement is neither a charitable concession nor a box-ticking exercise, it is the bedrock of legitimate, future-ready governance. The evidence is unequivocal: when young people are authentically empowered as partners rather than passive beneficiaries, policies become more innovative, institutions more accountable, and societies more resilient. Yet across multilateral forums, national governments, and local communities, we continue to see the same paradox, unprecedented youth activism coexisting with systemic exclusion.

The path forward demands nothing less than a structural reimagining of participation towards a more sustainable, equitable and inclusive model. Institutional mechanisms must evolve from token consultations to co-governance models where youth share real decision-making power. Financial barriers must be dismantled through dedicated funding streams that reach grassroots organizers directly. Capacity building should be redefined as a two-way street, where young people gain technical skills while institutions learn to value lived experience as expertise. And critically, we must confront the uncomfortable truth that many exclusionary practices, from age restrictions to visa denials, are choices masquerading as inevitabilities.

The examples highlighted in this report prove change is possible. From Rwanda's legislated youth councils to the UN's Youth2030 strategy, we see glimpses of what happens when systems dare to redistribute power. But these remain exceptions rather than norms. Closing this implementation gap requires measurable commitments; transcend quotas for youth representation, deploy and strengthen participatory budgeting processes, and transparent tracking of how youth input shapes outcomes. It requires intergenerational partnerships built on humility, where seasoned policymakers recognize that youth are not just leaders of tomorrow, but indispensable collaborators today.

To those who would argue that systemic transformation takes time, young climate activists, peacebuilders, and human rights defenders offer a powerful rebuttal: the future cannot wait. With half the world's population under 30, the question is no longer whether youth should be included, but how institutions will adapt to their irreplaceable role as architects of change. This is not about lowering standards, it's about raising ambition.

As we stand at this crossroads, let us remember that youth engagement is not a peripheral "issue" to address, but the very lens through which all progress must be assessed. The policies we craft today will determine whether we entrench intergenerational inequity or pioneer a new paradigm of shared stewardship.

"Nothing about us without us."