

The Role of Youths in the Global Agenda: Case-studies from Africa

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Abstract

This paper examines the role of African youths in the global agenda. Youths are the powerhouse and future of any economy, so it is pertinent to explore the contributions of youth initiatives to achieving sustainable development goals (SDGs). The paper adopts the Social Change Theory, which reveals the evolution of societies. Five underlying processes of this theory are developed to understand the SDGs: systems thinking, agency and structure, power and inequalities, social movements and collective action, and cultural change. Also, the paper evaluates the youth initiatives across Africa. These initiatives include Youths for Green Action Kenya, Nigeria Youth SDGs Network, The Egypt Network for Integrated Development (ENID) project, and the South African Youth Council. The initiatives aim to reduce poverty and unemployment, improve healthcare access, and promote sustainable cities and communities. Finally, this paper reported the challenges hindering active participation by African youths. These include Gender inequality, Limited access to learning facilities and opportunities, and Political exclusion.

Keywords: Development Goals, Youths, Africa, Contributions

Introduction

The youths are the most energetic and ever-transforming generation in any given society. Their potential in catalyzing positive change is great in societies. As the United Nations reiterates, "Empowered youth are crucial for a peaceful and sustainable future" (UN, 2023). This paper discusses the critical role played by youth empowerment in promoting peace and

development, which is a matter of inquiry into how empowering the youth can contribute to addressing global challenges, fostering social cohesion, and building resilient communities. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) estimates that the global youth population, now estimated at 1.45 billion people between the ages of 18 and 29, is the largest single cohort of youth ever and has begun profoundly impacting the physical world. With unprecedented levels of digital connectivity and strong commitments toward creating change, this generation of young people is increasingly pushing innovation in social, political, and economic spheres at the local and international levels. This advancement emphasizes the necessity of involving youth in governance, empowerment, and initiatives for community development. Acknowledging the crucial contribution of young individuals in promoting peace, the United Nations Security Council has formulated a framework aimed at their incorporation into peace-building activities. Five primary domains have been identified as critical for enhancing youth involvement: (1) participation, (2) protection, (3) prevention, (4) partnerships, and (5) disengagement and reintegration. This resolution would allow youth to become agents of peace, better equipped to prevent conflicts, build lasting peace, and effect meaningful positive change in their communities. According to the African Development Bank Group report (2023), the youth population in Africa is growing rapidly, and it is estimated that by 2050, there will be over 1.2 billion young people living on the continent. This demographic shift portends some inherent risks, particularly when not fruitfully engaged.

However, it also presents a unique opportunity for the continent, as the energy and creativity of its youth can be harnessed to drive socio-economic growth and development. There are challenges that need to be addressed. Many young Africans are unemployed, lack access to education and healthcare, and are vulnerable to exploitation. In order to realize the potential of youths, Africa needs to invest in their education, skills development, and employment opportunities. There are some case studies from Africa that demonstrate the positive impact that young people can have on the global agenda. In Kenya, for example, young people have been at the forefront of the fight against climate change. They have organized protests, lobbied for government action, and developed innovative solutions to address the challenges posed by climate change and other vagaries.

Social Change Theory and SDGs

Social change theory represents a broad paradigm applied to understanding and analyzing the processes through which societies evolve with time. It forms the core basis of much knowledge regarding intricate dynamics related to sustainable development. This theory explains the underlying processes driving societal transformation, placing it as a key tool in understanding and achieving the SDGs.

Key links between Social Change Theory and SDGs

Systems Thinking: Both social change theory and the SDGs emphasize a systems approach to problem-solving. They recognize that societal issues are interconnected and require holistic solutions. This perspective is essential for addressing the complex challenges of sustainable development, such as climate change, poverty, and inequality.

Agency and Structure: The theory of social change indicates that personal agency must work in tandem with the structural factors in society. The important point in the SDGs is the emphasis that, while individual efforts may be influential, systemic changes are needed if sustainable development goals are to be realized. In addition, giving people the agency and responsibility to make sustainable choices has to be matched by equally enabling policy and infrastructure.

Power and Inequality: One of the focuses of any social change theory is power and inequality. Most of the challenges faced by countries in the developing world are based on unequal power relations and systemic injustices, which the SDGs are addressing for sustainable development.

Social Movements and Collective Action: Social change theory underlines the role of social movements and collective action in bringing societal change. This specifically relates to the SDGs since many challenges necessitate coordinated action at the level of individuals, communities, and governments. Grassroots movements, for instance, may be fundamental in advocating for sustainable policies and practices.

Cultural Change: The social change theories manifest that cultural change is always associated with societal changes. In that regard, with the SDGs, sustainable development often means significant changes in cultural norms

and value systems. For instance, sustainable consumption patterns or reduced waste generation require cultural change.

In South Africa, young people have been using social media to raise awareness of social issues such as gender-based violence and HIV/AIDS. They have also used technology to create new businesses and employment opportunities (World Bank Group, 2013). In Nigeria, the Future African Leaders Foundation is a non-profit organization that provides young people with leadership training and opportunities to participate in development projects.

Youth Initiatives around Africa

The African continent, characterized by an abundance of youthful dynamism and promise, is currently experiencing a notable increase in initiatives spearheaded by its youth, transforming its societal framework. This ranges from local community endeavors to groundbreaking technological innovations, young Africans are assuming leadership roles and facilitating constructive advancements. This article explores the lively domain of youth initiatives throughout the continent, emphasizing their effects, obstacles, and the future possibilities they represent for the development of Africa.

East Africa

East African youths have contributed immensely to Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) through various initiatives like promoting education, climate action, gender equality, and entrepreneurship, which have, in turn, brought about positive change in their communities. According to the UNDP 2024 report, the contribution by youth-led organizations through active awareness raising, sensitization efforts, grassroots community development, and climate action in sustainable development initiatives has resulted in positive contributions regarding public perceptions of achieving goals within specific contexts. They use social media platforms to create awareness about societal issues and mobilize their peers for collective action. These inspiring young leaders are making a significant impact and inspiring others to join the movement for a better future. They organized youth-led projects to reduce poverty, improve healthcare access, and promote sustainable cities and communities. They also use their creativity and tech skills to develop innovative solutions for

environmental challenges. Whether through volunteering, advocacy, or entrepreneurship, East African youths are making a significant impact. For instance, Youths for Green Action Kenya, in a project tagged "Future in a Million Trees," is expected to have significant environmental and social impacts. The planting of 100,000 trees will contribute towards the restoration of degraded lands, enhance ecosystem services, and help mitigate the impacts of climate change. Additionally, the campaign will provide job opportunities for local communities and raise awareness about the importance of environmental conservation. The following are some case studies of programmes geared towards the SDGs and organized by East African youths.

Education for All is a youth-led initiative to provide access to quality education, such as setting up libraries, tutoring programmes, and scholarships for underprivileged students. The Green Schools Initiative and Girls Empowerment Network were organized in Kenya, and the program promoted environmental sustainability in schools through waste management, tree planting, and renewable energy projects (Lorentzen, 2020). The initiative aimed to provide education, mentorship, and life skills training to empower young girls and promote gender equality.

Next, there have been some youth-led climate change awareness campaigns, tree planting drives, and renewable energy projects to reduce carbon emissions and promote sustainable practices. In Tanzania, a program tagged "Youth for Sustainable Cities" was organized and centered on sustainable urban development through initiatives like waste management, community gardens, and clean energy projects (MICPD, 2022).

Additionally, there have been youth-led health campaigns addressing health and well-being issues such as HIV/AIDS prevention, reproductive health education, and access to healthcare services in marginalized communities. For instance, a Health Champions campaign was organized in Uganda, addressing HIV/AIDS prevention, reproductive health, and hygiene practices (UAC, 2019).

Finally, youth-led incubators and startup accelerators to support young entrepreneurs in developing innovative solutions to social and environmental challenges are rife in the region. In Rwanda, Youth Climate Ambassadors raise awareness about climate change, promote sustainable practices, and advocate for environmental protection (Prevention Web,

2021). Also, Digital Skills for All is a program that provides digital literacy training to empower youths with essential skills and bridge the digital divide

West African Youths' Contributions to Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

Youths in West Africa serve as crucial catalysts for transformative change in pursuing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Their capacity for innovation, entrepreneurial vigor, and deep-seated local knowledge enable them to tackle significant challenges effectively. This article examines their diverse contributions across multiple sectors, emphasizing their influence and the opportunities for enhanced advancement toward a sustainable future.

Nigeria Youth SDGs Network, registered as the Network of Youth for Sustainable Initiative, is a youth-led and youth-serving civil society organization that is localizing the UN SDGs. The Network was launched in April 2017 (Blueprint, 2017). According to NGYouthSDGS (2024), the organization, with funding from the United Nations Department of Economics and Social Affairs, worked with the International Labour Organization and the Federal Ministry of Youth and Sports towards the revision of the Nigeria Youth Employment Action Plan (2021-2024). The organization, launched in August 2020, conducted a survey to understand the decent work aspirations of young Nigerians in the light of COVID-19 and how they want policymakers to support them (Akomolafe, 2021). More than 100,000 young people responded to the survey over six weeks. This was followed by a youth validation workshop held across the 36 states of Nigeria and the Federal Capital Territory. The Nigeria Youth Employment Action Plan was launched in September 2021 and is estimated to meet the decent work aspirations of 3.5 million young Nigerians (ILO, 2021). The Nigerian Youth Employment Action Plan (NIYEAP) for the period 2019-2024 is a confirmation of Nigeria's commitment to tackle youth employment and contribute to national and global development goals (ILO, 2024). It complements and operates in the context of existing policies, frameworks, and strategies such as the Economic Recovery and Growth Plan, the National Youth Policy, the National Employment Policy, the United Nations Development Partnership Framework, and the Call for Action. The NIYEAP aims to address the youth employment challenge in a comprehensive and coordinated manner by guiding the work of relevant institutions of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, civil society, youth organizations and development partners in the promotion of decent jobs for youths and intends

to inform the development of related programmes, initiatives, and budgets in a complementary and sustained manner (ILO, 2021).

Next, She Leads Africa provides women with the support, knowledge, and motivation they require to live a fruitful life. With 700,000 active female members throughout Africa, it claims to be a major contributor to reducing gender inequality by fostering networking, goal-achieving, and lifelong partnerships (SLA, 2024). Motherland Mogul Insider, a private online community for young African female professionals and entrepreneurs hoping to reach their objectives, is one of their two main programs. Through this initiative and its programs, the platform has transformed members' businesses positively, increasing productivity and women's participation in job creation and income generation.

SDSN Youth Nigeria is the Nigerian node of The Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN) Youth, the youth arm of the SDSN, launched by the former UN Secretary-General, Ban Ki-moon. It serves as a platform for youths to use their creativity and knowledge to pioneer innovative solutions towards attaining the SDGs (SDSN, 2024). The Network commenced activities in 2015 and has embarked on a number of initiatives. One of the signature programs is the SDG Advocates Programme, which has taught youths about various aspects of the SDGs. These include the Age of Sustainable Development Goals, Pillars, Principles, and Dimensions of the Agenda 2030, Innovation and Technology for Sustainable Development, Climate Solutions and Sustainable Energy, Circular Economy, Consumption and Production, Design Thinking and Innovation Process, Project Management/Community Development, Achieving and Measuring the SDGs, and Advancing Sustainable Development through Governance and Partnership. Through the Community Development projects, over 230 secondary schools and 100,000 secondary school students in 27 states of the federation were trained on SDGs, and 80 community groups were impacted via the training-of-trainers model. The SDSN Youth Nigeria Report 2022 shows that the program's impact has increased the spread of SDGs in Nigeria, particularly among the youth, which has led them to take action (MSME Africa, 2022).

The Future African Leaders Foundation's goal is to investigate and enhance Africa's capacity for leadership. It recognizes, honours, and provides support to young Africans who have exhibited outstanding leadership by positively influencing their generation via mentoring,

education, and other initiatives that help develop the next generation of leaders and set them up for success (The Future Africa Leaders, 2024).

The goal of educating school-age girls about gender-based violence and adolescent pregnancy is achieved through a multitude of verified reports. Through several of her projects, Gifty Nordzi has assisted marginalized girls in realizing their full economic and social rights (UNESCO, 2019). The concept of establishing an organization to advance girls' education in Africa was born out of a debate among five female attendees during a 1992 conference of African Ministers and Deputy Ministers of Education situated in Manchester.

The Climate Leadership Programme for Women in West Africa (WAFriCLP) is hosted by the West African Service Centre on Climate Change and Adapted Land Use of the University Félix Houphouët-Boigny Cote d'Ivoire's Doctoral School in Biodiversity-African Centre of Excellence on Climate Change, Biodiversity and Sustainable Agriculture (USAID, 2023). This is noteworthy because Côte d'Ivoire has one of the most significant land management and climate change institutions. Female scientists, innovators, analysts, and editors will have access to this center's training, research, education, and experimental opportunities, among other things. Another program that is being carried out in Côte d'Ivoire is called Youth Impact for the SDGs. It is a \$118,500 project partially sponsored by Microsoft and carried out in association with AIESEC, UNESCO, and United Nations Volunteers (UN Volunteers, 2018). The initiative resulted from a September 2016 workshop held by the UNV Regional Office for West and Central Africa (ROWCA) in Dakar, Senegal, on utilizing youth volunteerism to help accomplish the Sustainable Development Goals. It seeks to guarantee the widespread participation of young people between 18 and 39 while improving access to information and communication technology (ICT) training. The project integrates information and communication technology with hands-on training in entrepreneurship. The nation was also the first to introduce the Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) Youth Network, which unites 37 youth organizations and 5,000 young people to work on sustainable development, nutrition, and food. The goal is to carry out initiatives to address hunger and malnutrition to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals.

Contributions from North Africa

In Morocco, the Youth Action for Zero Road Fatalities is one of the noteworthy programs being carried out. It implements the Global Plan for Road Safety 2021–2030 recommendations, citing Morocco's youths as key stakeholders who must be involved in decision-making (Cherif, 2021). The National Road Safety Agency (NARSA), the Ministry of Transportation, the Ministry of the Interior, civil society organizations, and other decision-making bodies are among the organizations targeted by its toolset. The tool wills the objective of creating a safer future for mobility in Morocco with the sustainable development goals of health and well-being, sustainable cities and communities, and decreased inequalities. The Sustainable Development's Youth Association Morocco is fueled by the desire to make Morocco a pioneer in achieving the Global Goals. Launching a nationwide campaign to promote the SDGs while giving civil society organizations training and guidance to put specific SDG solutions into practice was a first for the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region (SDG Action Award, 2024). This organization was inspired by the inaugural UN SDG Global Festival of Action.

Since 2012, The Egypt Network for Integrated Development (ENID) project has embarked on a collaborative effort with the Ministry of International Cooperation and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) (UNDP, 2024). With a strong goal that was in line with Egypt's goal 2030 and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), ENID set out to empower women and young people. The project leveraged the potential of skill formation for employability and job creation, focusing on socio-economic empowerment. A platform called Sustainable Development Ambassadors is also in place with the goal of educating young people about the SDGs and helping them to become reality. It has links with the Egypt Vision 2030 Program, among other things (Daily News Egypt, 2020).

Tunisian youths have started working on environmentally friendly projects such as garbage recycling, organic farm development, processing of local fishery products, eco-tourism, and plant distillation. In addition to helping to maintain the Ghar El Melh ecosystem's distinctive natural and cultural value, these efforts have the potential to provide economic value and increase job opportunities for young people. In addition to being a wetland of international significance for its biological worth, the Ghar El-Melh is where youth emigration is frequently fuelled by the area's comparatively low

economic chances. Future economic activity, youth employment, and environmental sustainability are all greatly encouraged by the enthusiasm that young people have shown in developing and implementing green company concepts through the sustainable use of the wetlands' resources.

The World Wildlife Fund (WWF)-North Africa and Global Water Partnership (GWP)-Mediterranean supported the development of these admirable initiatives into tangible, self-sustaining enterprises. In order to support the Ghar El Melh's sociocultural, ecological, and economic growth, the "Conservation and Sustainable Development of Coastal Wetlands with High Ecological Value" (GEMWET) Project was created. This wetland area is renowned for its biological and historical richness (it is a Ramsar wetland and the first city in North Africa and the Arab world to be recognized as a Ramsar city). A Ramsar site is a wetland of international importance under the Ramsar Convention, which is also known as the 'Convention on Wetlands' – an intergovernmental environmental treaty established by UNESCO in 1971 and named after the city of Ramsar in Iran, where the convention was signed that year. Nevertheless, it is under pressure to grow due to various factors, most notably the effects of climate change and its fragility (GWP, 2020).

The event supported young people between the ages of 16 and 24 by encouraging their creativity, enhancing their entrepreneurial skills, and assisting them in coming up with creative solutions that address the social and environmental challenges in their communities. Additionally, to help youth take ownership of the universal values the UN promotes and use as a catalyst for social peace and sustainable development, UNESCO trains professionals who work with the youth, such as managers in youth organizations and specialized educators. Over 200 CEOs, both male and female, participated in this program, and about 150 of them are currently educating their peers by using a teaching kit that UNESCO created especially for this purpose. UNESCO has also trained youth educators to improve young people's media and information literacy. The educators who participated in the training now operate in the field, sometimes through the Algerian Network of Training Educators, and a guidebook has been produced in this regard. Once more, since 2019, young people in Algeria have been actively participating in a vast, nonviolent movement for democracy, justice, and dignity on an unprecedented scale. Profound reflections on the significance of environmental preservation have also occurred within this movement. This has included disputes over Algeria's

natural resource sovereignty and opposition to international oil companies' involvement in dirty sectors like hydraulic fracturing. This occurs at a time when awareness of the threats to biodiversity and climate change on a worldwide scale is growing, as is the need for Algeria to diversify its economy and take advantage of the enormous potential of solar and other renewable energy sources (UNSDG, 2020).

Contributions from South Africa

As seen in South Africa, where a network of youth associations within the South African Youth Council was established in 1997 as an independent, nonpartisan umbrella body for youth groups (Pure Portal, 2022), young people can inspire one another's feeling of civic competence. About 500 Enviro-Champs have demonstrated a solid commitment to safeguarding their local habitats in South Africa. They meticulously evaluate the condition of streams by measuring the number of particles in the water and the flow rate using a velocity plank and clarity tube. A sample of water is also taken in order to help identify and match invertebrates on a chart and further help show levels of contamination. People from all walks of life collaborate with the Enviro-Champs in their environmental activities. They interact with the community to provide ideas for problem-solving strategies. One is the removal of solid waste dumping near streams and the incineration of home garbage that degrades air quality (Fricker, 2023).

Youth Participation and Engagement: Challenges towards the SDGs Achievement in Africa

Despite their immense potential to contribute to sustainable development, many challenges and limitations hinder African youth's active participation.

Limited access to learning facilities and opportunities: Many young people across Africa are denied proper access to quality education and the acquisition of employable skills that would enable them to contribute to sustainable development actively. High unemployment rates and underemployment among African youth have been extensively linked to severe economic problems while lessening their potential to contribute to development.

Political exclusion: Youths are often marginalized from decision-making processes, limiting their influence on policies and programs related to the SDGs.

Gender inequality: Gender-based discrimination may hinder young women's contribution and participation in the process of achieving sustainable development. Cultural expectations and traditions that place restrictions on the potential roles and responsibilities of youth can serve as a barrier to their involvement in community development.

Stigmatization and discrimination: Negative perceptions or stereotypes associated with some demographics among youth—such as those living in poverty, for instance, or youth with disabilities—may ultimately bar their participation.

Resource Constraints

Insufficient financial resources: Organizations and initiatives spearheaded by youth frequently encounter difficulties in obtaining sufficient funding necessary to facilitate their operations and fulfill their objectives. Limited access to technological resources: Insufficient availability of technology and digital tools is a severe constraint to participation and interaction by the youth on virtual platforms and networks.

Governance and Policy Challenges

Corruption and mismanagement: Corruption and mismanagement within governments undermine the potency of youth participation in development projects. Youth-unfriendly policy: Governments might not have appropriate policies and programs that help youth participation and engagement for sustainable development.

Conclusion

The contribution of the youth in Africa toward the achievement of SDGs cannot be overstated. The creativity, vibrancy, dynamism, and innovative behavior of the African youths have the potential to spark changes across a wide range of sectors. They contribute significantly to reducing significant challenges to poverty, inequality, and environmental degradation through entrepreneurship, community-based initiatives, and advocacy.

Realizing this potential, however, requires concentrated collaboration by governments, civil society organizations, and the private sector. Access to education and building of skills, combined with access to financial means, will enable them to become active agents of change. What is required is an enabling environment that allows for full manifestations of innovation, entrepreneurship, and civic engagement in order to unlock the full potential of Africa.

With specific targeted investments in youth empowerment, accompanied by enabling conditions, Africa can release the pent-up potential of its young population, enabling the SDGs and creating a more sustainable, equitable, and prosperous future for all.

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