

Beyond Tokenism:

Making Youth Participation Count in Africa's Development

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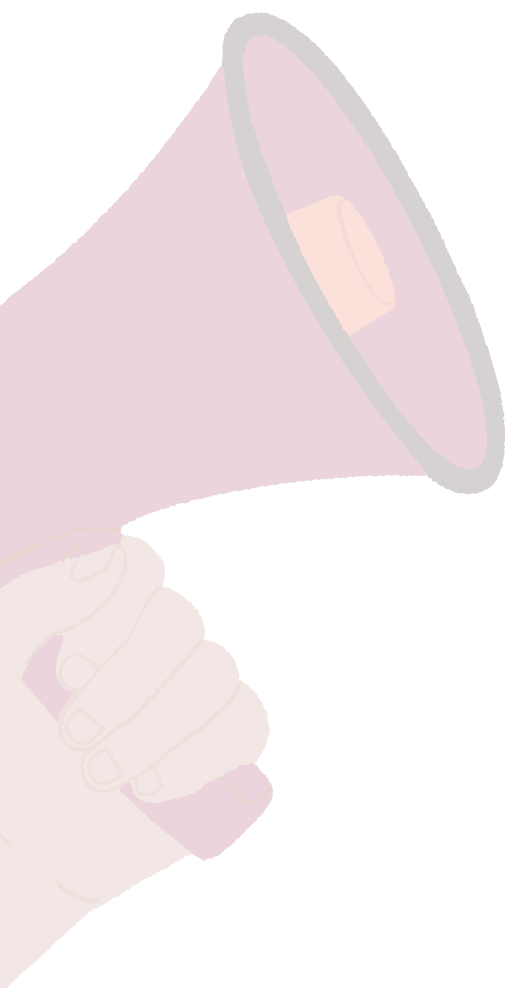
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1.Executive Summary

This youth-led continental study synthesises findings from a trilogy of interconnected papers that each delve into critical aspects of youth development in Africa. The research explores: (1) Meaningful Youth Participation in governance and policymaking; (2) Youth Entrepreneurship and Green Jobs; and (3) Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR). Conducted across 14 African countries and implemented by 27 young researchers, the study amplifies diverse youth perspectives gathered through surveys, focus groups, and key informant interviews. The findings underscore persistent systemic barriers, financial exclusion, misaligned education systems, sociocultural stigma, bureaucratic constraints, and political tokenism that impede young people's ability to contribute to sustainable development. Key insights reveal strong youth interest in entrepreneurship as a pathway to economic independence, emerging but limited awareness of green jobs, widespread myths and stigma hindering SRHR uptake, and largely symbolic participation in formal decision-making spaces.

The trilogy proposes cross-cutting recommendations: expanding youth-friendly finance and entrepreneurship education; institutionalising youth representation with enforceable accountability; scaling comprehensive, culturally sensitive SRHR education and services; and leveraging digital platforms and intergenerational dialogue to amplify youth co-creation. These evidence-based recommendations are aligned with the AU–EU Joint Vision for 2030 and aim to transform youth insights into impactful policy and programming, recognising young Africans as active co-designers of their futures rather than passive beneficiaries.

Therefore, this paper spotlights Meaningful youth participation, which empowers young people with skills, confidence, and a sense of belonging while improving services and decisions that affect them. For comprehensive insights into related areas, readers are encouraged to explore the accompanying papers focusing on SRHR <https://restlessdevelopment.org/?s=research> and Youth Entrepreneurship <https://restlessdevelopment.org/?s=research>, which together offer a holistic understanding of the challenges and opportunities facing youth across the continent



2. Research Design and Methodology

This study is a continental youth-led research initiative that employed a mixed-methods, participatory design grounded in Restless Development’s six-step youth-led methodology. The overarching aim of the research was to inform advocacy priorities guiding regional and cross-continental efforts related to the AU-EU partnership, with a particular focus on identifying the needs, obstacles, and priorities of young Africans under the AU-EU Joint Vision for 2030, which emphasises investment, peace, health, climate action, and youth inclusion (African Union and European Union, 2022). A systematic literature review informed the identification of three key thematic areas: meaningful youth participation in policymaking, youth-led entrepreneurship, and sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR). These areas were selected to address identified gaps and challenges, and to contribute evidence for continental Youth Power Hackathons focused on youth-led accountability, campaigning, and advocacy.

Overall Objective: To explore the role of meaningful youth participation in policymaking, youth-led entrepreneurship, and reproductive health initiatives in advancing Africa’s socioeconomic development.

Specific Objectives

- Analyse how youth participation in policymaking and implementation contributes to socioeconomic development in African countries.
- Investigate the contribution of youth-led entrepreneurship to economic growth and diversification.
- Examine the influence of cultural and societal norms on access to and use of modern contraceptive methods among young adults.

- Propose strategies to accelerate youth participation in decision-making on reproductive health, entrepreneurship, and public policy for sustainable development.

Data collection occurred across 14 countries,¹ and was conducted in English, French, and Arabic to ensure inclusivity and cultural sensitivity. The research team, comprised of 27 young researchers, co-designed research instruments, led fieldwork, and ensured contextual appropriateness throughout the process. Data collection methods included 98 focus group discussions (n=955), 151 key informant interviews with civil society representatives, business leaders, and healthcare professionals, and 1,463 survey responses (722 women, 741 men) as indicated by Table 1. The targeted age for the research is 15-35 years.

Country	Female	Male	Prefer not to say	Grand Total
Burkina Faso	52	81	7	140
Burundi	33	74	2	109
Cameroon	49	43	17	109
Ghana	50	55		105
Kenya	46	54	2	102
Nigeria	91	57		148
Senegal	20	15		35
Sierra Leone	45	49	7	101
South Sudan	55	60	1	116
Tanzania	52	54	1	107
Tunisia	19	18		37
Uganda	46	74	12	132
Zambia	92	15		107
Zimbabwe	72	43		115
Grand Total	722	692	49	1463

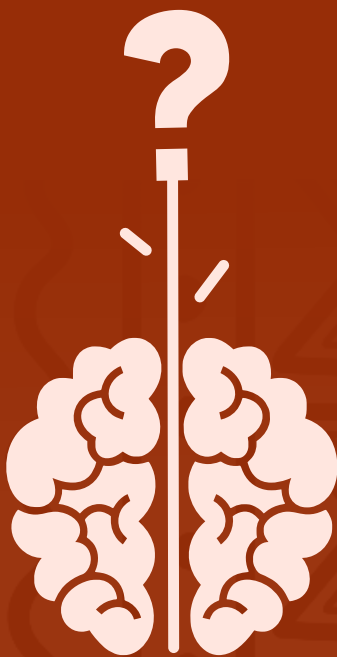
Table 1: Survey reach disaggregated by gender

Qualitative data were analysed inductively using NVivo software to identify emergent themes, while quantitative data were summarised using descriptive statistics in Excel. Ethical safeguards were rigorously implemented, including obtaining informed consent, ensuring confidentiality, using age-appropriate approaches, and carefully addressing power dynamics, particularly in SRHR-related contexts.

¹ Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cameroon, Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, South Sudan, Tanzania, Tunisia, Uganda, Zambia, Zimbabwe

Limitations

While the study acknowledges limitations such as uneven rural coverage and its cross-sectional design (which limits causal inference). Digital data collection and local partnerships helped mitigate this gap; the cross-sectional design limited causal analysis, focusing instead on associations and trends. Additional funding would enable broader geographic representation and longitudinal exploration. The tri-lingual, youth-led approach strengthens its validity by centring lived experiences, enhancing triangulation, and generating actionable evidence to inform AU–EU policy and youth-centred programming. This approach not only ensures the inclusion of diverse voices but also enhances the relevance and applicability of the findings for policymakers and stakeholders alike, ultimately contributing to more effective and youth-responsive interventions.



1. Introduction

Political instability and armed conflict in several African countries, including Sudan, South Sudan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Mali, Burkina Faso, Nigeria, Niger, Chad, the Central African Republic, Ethiopia, Somalia, Mozambique, and Libya have exacerbated the challenges faced by youth, leading to displacement, loss of livelihoods, and exposure to violence and trauma. Prolonged conflicts disrupt education systems, hinder economic development, and undermine prospects for peace and stability (UNDP, 2021). Discrimination based on factors such as gender, ethnicity, religion, or disability marginalises many African youths, limiting their opportunities for social inclusion and participation. Structural inequalities and societal norms perpetuate disparities in access to resources, decision-making processes, and civic engagement (Oxfam, 2019).

Between 2015 and 2025, Africa's youth, who make up approximately 60% of the continent's population, have remained considerably underrepresented in government structures. Despite the median age being just over 18, a significant portion of African leaders are over 70, highlighting a stark generational gap in political representation (Neliaki, 2023). As of June 2025, in South Africa, individuals aged 18–34 held only 8.5% of the seats in the National Assembly, while the most populous age group was 45–54, accounting for 26.9% of MPs (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2025). Kenya has made progress in youth political participation. By 2022, young people represented 35% of political party membership, and the current parliament comprises 6.5% of young members, with their representation at 19% in local county assemblies (The Youth Cafe, 2022). According to the National Assembly of Nigeria (2018), the Not Too Young to Run movement led to a constitutional amendment that lowered age requirements for various political positions. However, the actual number of young women and men under 35 elected to office has remained limited.

Ghana implemented the National Youth Parliament concept to provide a formal structure for youth to deliberate on matters of importance and hold duty bearers accountable, with the aim of preparing them for future leadership roles (Youth Policy Governance and Leadership).

To address underrepresentation, several African countries have implemented quota systems designed to enhance youth participation in governance. These quotas typically reserve a specific number of parliamentary seats or mandate a minimum percentage of young candidates on electoral lists. For example, Kenya's constitution provides for 12 members nominated by political parties to represent special interest groups, including youth, persons with disabilities, and workers, with the list composed of alternating male and female candidates (Constitution of Kenya, 2010). Uganda reserves five parliamentary seats for individuals under 30, one of whom must be a woman (ACE Electoral Knowledge Network, 2021). Rwanda's Chamber of Deputies includes two members elected by the National Youth Council to represent young people (ACE Electoral Knowledge Network, 2021).

In Uganda, parliament reserves 1.3% of seats for young adults under the age of 30, aiming to enhance youth representation, while in North Africa, Morocco introduced youth quotas in 2011, followed by Tunisia in 2014, both of which aimed to increase youth representation in their legislatures (De Paredes & Desrues, 2021). While these quota systems have modestly increased the number of young parliamentarians, challenges remain in ensuring that youth participation translates into meaningful influence within governance structures. Critics argue that quotas may result in symbolic representation without substantial power, and that young representatives often face systemic barriers that limit their effectiveness (Aalen, Orre and Muriaas, 2019).

In 2021, Zimbabwe amended its Constitution to introduce a youth quota system to enhance representation in the National Assembly. This system reserves 10 seats for individuals aged 21 to 35, with one seat allocated to each of the country's 10 provinces. These youth representatives are elected through a party-list system of proportional representation, based on votes cast for political parties in general elections (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2025).

Therefore, while quotas are a step toward inclusivity, they must form part of broader strategies that address structural inequalities and empower young people to participate actively in political processes. Developing sustainable strategies to address the challenges youth face across the continent requires a clear understanding of the context, issues, and potential solutions.

2. Definition of Meaningful Youth Participation in Policymaking

The understanding of meaningful youth participation varies significantly across different national contexts, reflecting distinct priorities and challenges. In Tunisia, respondents predominantly associate meaningful participation with active involvement in decision-making processes. A male participant in a focus group discussion (FGD) stated, “Meaningful youth participation means involving young people in decision-making processes, ensuring their voices are heard.” Quantitative data indicate that 35% of responses from Tunisia support this view, highlighting a strong desire among youth to not only participate but also to influence policy outcomes. This emphasis underscores the recognition of youth as essential contributors to the development of policies that directly affect their lives. In Kenya, the focus shifts toward empowerment and access.



“Meaningful youth participation involves providing young people access to discussions at the decision-making table.”
“Our contributions should be valued and reflected in the outcomes of policies that affect us.” Male participant.

This perspective emphasises the importance of creating platforms that facilitate dialogue and empower young people to actively influence policymaking. Gender considerations are also prominent; a young female respondent highlighted,

“Young women need to be included in these discussions, as their perspectives are often overlooked.” Female respondent



The quote emphasises the importance of intersectionality in meaningful youth participation, particularly actively engaging women to ensure their experiences and view points are represented. Similarly, in Cameroon, the emphasis lies on representation and inclusivity. A female respondent from the western regions articulated, “Youth should be given opportunities to be part of decision-making,” emphasising that visibility within policymaking processes is crucial for ensuring youth interests are adequately represented. Additionally, a young female participant stressed, “For women, participation is even more critical; we need to ensure our voices are at the table as we tackle issues affecting us.” Several respondents emphasised that youth should not only have a presence but also actively shape decisions impacting their lives, advocating for a participatory approach that ensures their contributions influence outcomes.

In Zimbabwe, the concept of meaningful youth participation is linked to addressing systemic barriers. A male respondent remarked, “Corruption and lack of accountability hinder genuine youth engagement,” underscoring the need for structural reforms to facilitate authentic involvement in policymaking.

Gender disparities are also acknowledged; a female respondent noted, “ Women often face additional challenge s that prevent them from engaging fully in policymaking.” These responses reflect an awareness that systemic issues, such as corruption, lack of accountability, and gender -based obstacles, significantly hinder meaningful participation. Overall, the meaning of meaningful youth participation, as perceived by the young people, is summarised in Figure 1.



Figure 1: Young people’s definition of Meaningful Youth Participation

3. Barriers to meaningful youth participation in Policymaking

3.1 Structural Barriers to Meaningful Participation

Meaningful participation between youth and institutional decision-makers is often hindered by deeply embedded structural barriers that perpetuate exclusion rather than foster genuine partnership.

Figure 2 illustrates how young people are excluded from policy-making spaces and initiatives. Across the fourteen countries surveyed, the majority of respondents indicated that they are rarely consulted, while very few reported being consulted. Countries such as Cameroon, Zambia, and Tunisia report the lowest frequency of youth engagement, whereas Sierra Leone and Tanzania show relatively higher levels of consultation.

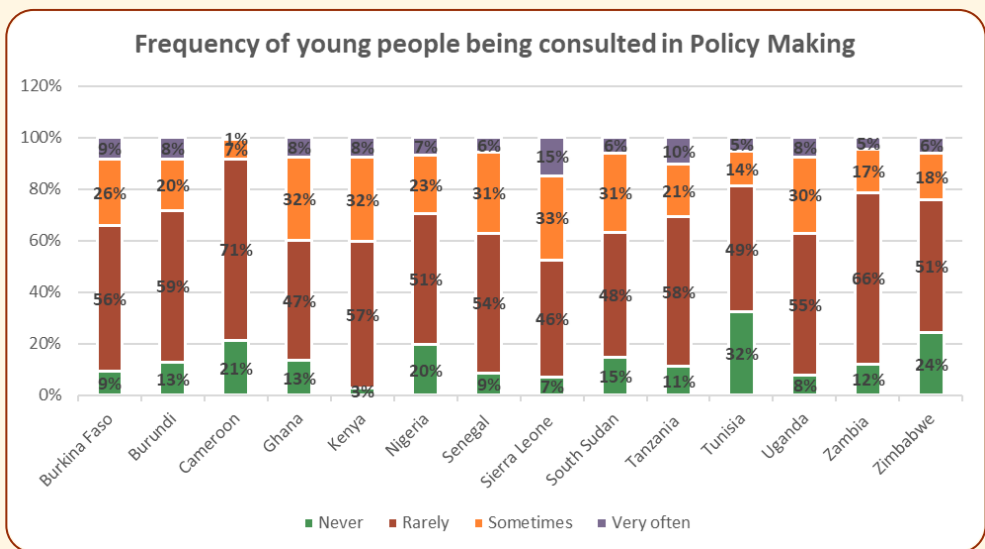


Figure 2: Frequency of young people being consulted in policy-making, disaggregated by Country

A critical obstacle is the hierarchical nature of policy-making spaces, where youth are treated as passive beneficiaries rather than equal partners. The study uncovered deeply entrenched systemic barriers that prevent authentic youth–adult partnerships in governance.



You might be able to share your views, but it often feels like giving a written speech. Even when you make suggestions, they do not really go far. And even if you have voting rights, you see that young people are underrepresented.”
Female respondent.



This reflects a systemic issue in which youth engagement is performative, limited to token appearances in pre-scripted forums rather than substantive involvement in agenda-setting or decision-making. Although the African Union (AU) has established robust frameworks to promote meaningful youth engagement, enforcement failures allow many member states to perpetuate tokenistic participation. Instruments such as the African Youth Charter (2006) set clear expectations. Article 11 demands “genuine youth participation” beyond ceremonial roles, while Article 26 calls for “effective and equitable representation” in political bodies. These principles are reinforced by Agenda 2063 (Aspiration 6), which advocates for “active and substantive engagement,” and the 2017 Malabo Decision, which promotes 30% youth quotas in the public sector. The AU’s 2020 Youth Political Participation Guidelines explicitly warn against “photo-op participation” and recommend concrete measures, such as reserved youth seats in legislatures (African Union Commission, 2020).

Despite these commitments, young people across Africa report deeply frustrating experiences of superficial inclusion. Their contributions are often ignored or erased, reflecting a broader pattern of late-stage consultations where youth are invited to provide feedback only after key decisions have already been made. Even when physically present in policy spaces, their inclusion is frequently reduced to performative gestures, such as being featured in promotional materials, without any real influence over outcomes. These practices illustrate how institutions utilise youth perspectives to cultivate an appearance of inclusivity while preserving exclusionary decision-making frameworks.



“I was part of a campaign to raise awareness about a youth employment policy in Kano. We were mobilising communities and printing flyers, but when we asked how the policy was designed, none of us had been consulted. It was clear we were there to execute, not to shape or question the policy.” Female respondent.



Tokenism is further evident in the appointment of youth representatives who hold titles but lack authority, budgetary control, voting rights, or meaningful roles in shaping policy. Without enforceable accountability mechanisms, these superficial engagements reinforce disillusionment, as young people recognise their participation serves only as symbolic compliance rather than genuine engagement. In some cases, governments manipulate youth involvement to deflect criticism rather than enact reform. Even in relatively democratic settings, youth engagement is often reduced to branding exercises, where policymakers prioritise public relations over substantive input.



“At conferences, they say they are inviting young people, but even when youth attend, they are never given the floor. The moderator keeps giving it to the older people, and in the end, they still claim youth participated.” Male respondent.



Administrative control hurdles further restrict youth participation. Complex application processes for advisory roles or funding opportunities tend to favour educated, urban, and well-connected youth, while marginalising those from rural or low-income backgrounds. This barrier also extends to grassroots youth organisations, which often feel excluded from funding streams. Without intentional efforts to democratise access, participation remains an exclusive privilege rather than an inclusive practice.



“The youth in the city are better off. Even if they don’t get involved, there are still opportunities and many things to do. But in the villages, we don’t know anything about politics at all.” Male respondent.



I grew up in a rural area in Kogi State before moving to Abuja for university. The difference is huge. In the city, there are youth summits, town halls, and policy dialogues almost every other week. In the village, we barely hear about any of these things. Even if something is happening at the state level, no one comes to the village to sensitise us or gather our views.” Male respondent



These patterns reveal an institutional resistance to sharing real power with young people, despite constitutional provisions for youth participation (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2025).

3.2 Political Repression and Youth Participation

The understanding of meaningful youth participation varies significantly across different national contexts, reflecting distinct priorities and challenges. In Tunisia, respondents predominantly associate meaningful participation with active involvement in decision-making processes. A male participant in a focus group discussion (FGD) stated, "Meaningful youth participation means involving young people in decision-making processes, ensuring their voices are heard." Quantitative data indicate that 35% of responses from Tunisia support this view, highlighting a strong desire among youth to not only participate but also to influence policy outcomes. This emphasis underscores the recognition of youth as essential contributors to the development of policies that directly affect their lives. In Kenya, the focus shifts toward empowerment and access.

“Under the new cybercrime law, any Facebook post criticising the president can land you in jail for five years. Last month, they sentenced a 19-year-old to prison for sharing a meme.”
Female respondent



Institutionalised repression has created generational trauma, with many respondents reporting self-censorship. The research also exposed how ostensibly neutral institutions actively facilitate youth marginalisation through bureaucratic violence. Most disturbingly, respondents described how security forces institutionalise fear. A respondent shared:

“They have created a youth WhatsApp group ‘for peacebuilding’ that’s monitored by military intelligence. Two members who discussed land rights disappeared last month.”
Male respondent.



These patterns create what one respondent termed “participation theatre” youth structures that exist as democratic facades while actual dissent is criminalised.



“The state uses anti-terror laws against protestors. You cannot celebrate youth demographics while jailing young thinkers.” -
Female respondent

Yet, the African Youth Charter (2006) and the African Charter on Democracy, Elections, and Governance (2007) affirm young people’s rights to free expression and protection from violence and abuse. The African Youth Charter mandates states to safeguard youth expression and shield young people from violence, while the African Charter calls for zero tolerance of fear-based suppression. Additionally, Agenda 2063 promotes inclusive governance where youth can participate “without fear of retribution” (AU Monitor Report, 2023).

3.3 Intersectional Barriers to Meaningful Youth Participation

This research revealed how overlapping systems of discrimination, including gender, class, disability, and rural-urban divides, create compounded and mutually reinforcing obstacles for already vulnerable youth populations seeking to engage in policymaking. Young women from rural areas, for instance, face triple exclusion: barred by patriarchal norms that deem politics a “male domain,” economically disadvantaged by the costs of travelling to urban-centred policy forums, and linguistically marginalised when deliberations occur only in colonial languages rather than local dialects.

“Even when they invite ‘youth,’ they mean educated men from the capital. My village has no roads to reach these meetings, and if I go, they laugh at my Fulfulde accent when I speak French.” Female respondent.



Youth with disabilities face both physical and systemic barriers, such as wheelchair-inaccessible government buildings, insufficient sign language interpreters at consultations, and widespread stereotypes that deem them “unfit” for leadership. This highlights how intersectional stigma silences marginalised voices even within progressive movements. Meanwhile, class and digital divides exclude under-resourced youth from virtual consultations. As respondents noted:



“You need data to be heard, but no one pays us for the data to speak.” Male respondent.

According to the respondent, basic mobile data costs Tshs 110,000 per month (approximately USD 44). The average cost of living is Tshs 450,000 per month (approximately USD 180) per individual, compared to Zimbabwe, where data costs average USD 20 per month. These barriers are not additive; they are multiplicative. Institutional complicity perpetuates these exclusions. Policymakers often tokenise one dimension of identity (e.g. appointing an urban, educated woman to “represent gender”) while ignoring how her privilege erases economically deprived, differently abled, or queer youth. Young women across all regions reported systematic exclusion from decision-making spaces. A female respondent shared:

At the sub-county youth meeting, the chairman told me ‘your place is in the kitchen, not politics’ when I tried to speak about our water crisis. The male youth leader later took credit for my proposal.” Female respondent.



Cultural norms actively suppress young women's participation. As a Muslim youth organiser explained:

“

They schedule all important meetings during evening prayers, then blame us for 'low female turnout.' When we request alternative times, they say traditions cannot change.” Female respondent.

”



Youth with disabilities described institutionalised neglect. A wheelchair user from Lira recounted:

“

The district advertised a 'youth parliament' in a building with 30 steps and no ramp. When I protested, the youth officer said, 'God will heal your legs first.'" Male respondent.

”

These barriers often reinforce each other. A girl from a rural area with hearing impairment summarised:

“

They exclude me for being female, disabled, and village-born. My opinions die in three graves before reaching decision-makers.” Female respondent.

”



The research exposed how current youth engagement frameworks systematically privilege urban, educated, non-disabled males. These patterns reveal what one respondent termed “participation apartheid” systems that maintain inequality by filtering out marginalised voices while performing inclusivity through tokenistic representatives. A respondent highlighted a parallel exclusion:

“

“All youth programs use Arabic only, though we are Berber speakers. When we demand translation, they accuse us of 'dividing the nation.'" Female respondent.

”



Language and literacy barriers also marginalise youth, particularly in rural areas where policy documents are drafted in complex legal or bureaucratic language, making them inaccessible. Yet, the African Youth Charter (2006) addresses exclusion by mandating equal opportunities for youth with disabilities, rural youth, and conflict-affected youth under Article 14, while Article 17 emphasises young women’s participation and challenges patriarchal norms. The 2018 Disability Protocol (Article 8) calls for removing barriers for disabled youth, and the AU Gender Equality Strategy (2018–2028) highlights the “double burden” of gender and age bias faced by young women (African Union Commission, 2018).

3.4 Political Favouritism: Gatekeeping and Elite Capture

Political favouritism and elite capture remain significant barriers to meaningful youth participation. In many contexts, youth structures are co-opted by ruling parties, serving as extensions of political patronage rather than independent platforms. Youth wings are frequently mobilised to campaign on behalf of ruling elites, with little space for dissenting voices.

In the western countries, respondents described how youth councils were dominated by party loyalists, with appointments made on the basis of allegiance rather than merit. Such practices undermine the credibility of youth representation and reinforce perceptions of tokenism.

“They appoint youth leaders who are sons of ministers. We ordinary youth cannot even enter the meeting hall. Male respondent



Youth respondents in the West reported that government-funded youth programs were distributed selectively to politically aligned groups. Opposition-aligned youth were systematically excluded.



“If you are not in the ruling party, you will never get the youth livelihood fund. Female respondent.

This pattern of elite capture extends beyond national politics. In Northern Africa, respondents noted that international donor programs often relied on government-approved youth organisations, sidelining grassroots groups. Such reliance creates a cycle where politically connected youth monopolise opportunities, while marginalised voices remain unheard.

“We applied three times for donor funding, but they only give it to the youth organisations close to the ministry. Female respondent.





Figure 3: Sentiments shared by the respondents

3.5 The Civic Education Gap: A Systemic Blind Spot

Civic education remains a critical gap in youth participation. In many African countries, civic education is either absent or inconsistently delivered, undermining young people’s ability to understand governance processes, rights, and responsibilities. In Uganda, respondents noted that civic education programs were largely limited to election periods, focusing narrowly on voting procedures rather than broader democratic engagement. Such episodic approaches leave youth ill-equipped to engage meaningfully in policy debates or hold leaders accountable.

“We only hear about civic education when elections come. They tell us how to tick the ballot, but not how to question leaders.” Female respondent.

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We only hear about civic education when elections come. They tell us how to tick the ballot, but not how to question leaders.” Female respondent. In Nigeria, youth respondents highlighted that school civic education curricula were outdated, failing to address contemporary issues such as digital rights, climate governance, and gender equality. Teachers frequently skip civic lessons due to inadequate training.

“Our civic education class was about colonial history. Nothing about social media or how to engage government today.” Male respondent. In Tunisia, even the educated urban youth lack policy literacy, as they expressed a lack of skills to analyse draft bills and policies.

This gap perpetuates a cycle where youth remain dependent on elites for information, reinforcing exclusion. Without systematic civic education, youth participation becomes symbolic rather than substantive. Young people's concerns are illustrated in Figure 4.

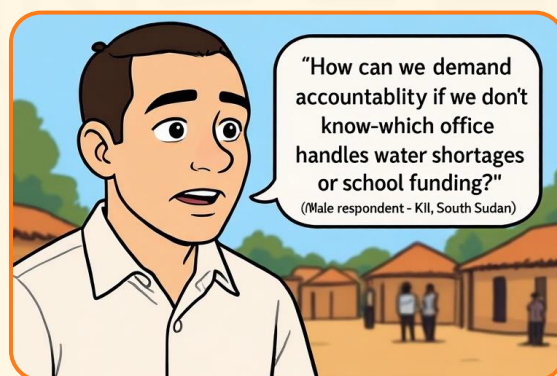


Figure 4: Sentiments from a key Informant on civic education

4. Strategies to Ensure Youth Participation Is Impactful in Enhancing Africa's Socio-Economic Development

4.1 Institutional and Systemic Solutions

4.1.1 Equitable and Meaningful Participation

One of the most prominent findings was the need for structured and legally backed youth representation in policymaking bodies. Across multiple countries, respondents emphasised the importance of moving beyond symbolic representation.

A female respondent shared:

“We need mechanisms like youth quotas in policy committees, mandatory inclusion in development plans, and legal backing for youth councils.”

This perspective was echoed in South Sudan, where a female respondent stated:

“There should be a mandatory youth quota in policymaking, especially in the legislative. Without it, we are gambling with generational survival.”

In Ghana, a male respondent suggested revisiting the Constitution to integrate specific quotas for youth representation. These legal frameworks ensure that youth inclusion is systemic, consistent, and enforceable, not dependent on the goodwill of individual leaders.

Survey findings support this view: 47% of respondents identified greater youth representation in government bodies as a key strategy (see Figure 5).

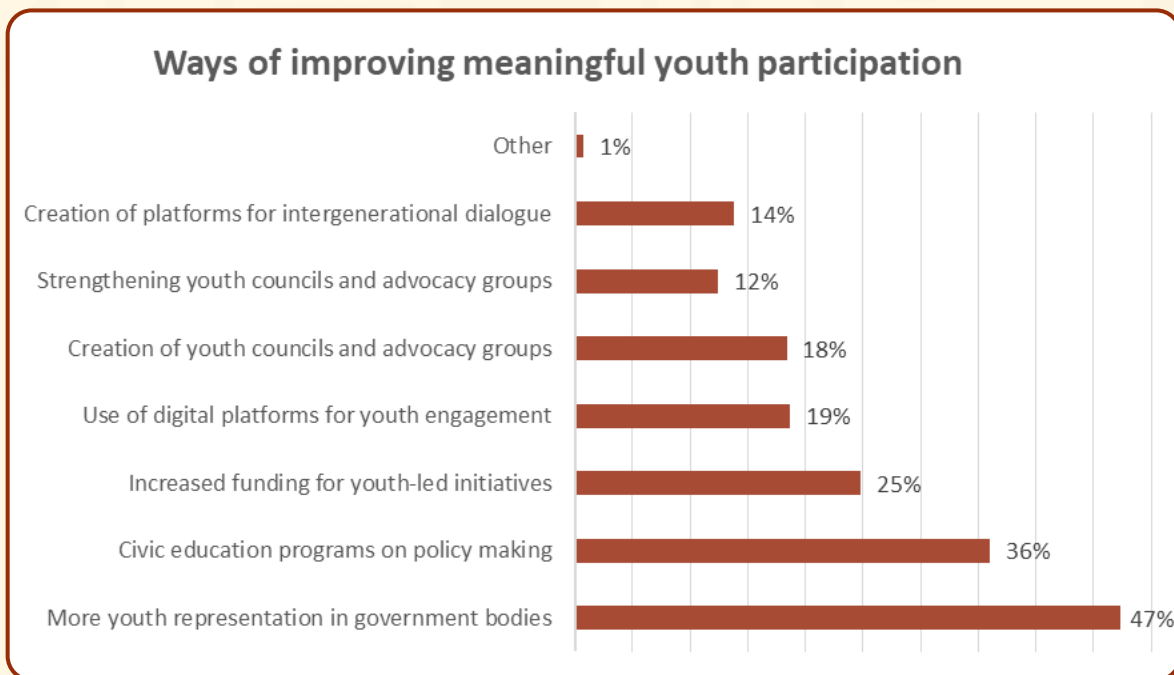


Figure 5: Ways of improving meaningful youth participation

This preference was notably strong among female respondents (26%) and respondents with disabilities (21%), underscoring intersectional barriers within youth demographics.

Youth expressed a strong desire for co-creation roles in policymaking rather than being consulted at later stages. A female respondent from Nigeria articulated this clearly: “We must move from being implementers to being co-creators.” In Northern Africa, another female respondent emphasised: ‘Participation must be impactful, not symbolic.’

This is strongly supported by the AU Continental Framework on Youth, Peace and Security (2020), which emphasises youth as co-leaders and peacebuilders, not just beneficiaries. The African Youth Charter (2006) provides legal backing for such inclusion, calling on AU member states to ensure youth are adequately represented in political and decision-making bodies (Articles 11–13). Similarly, Aspiration 6 of the African Union’s Agenda 2063 envisions “an Africa whose development is people-driven, relying on the potential of African people, especially its youth.” The Agenda 2063 Second Ten-Year Implementation Plan (2024–2033) also explicitly calls for the inclusion of youth quotas in governance and decision-making spaces.

Case studies of African nations making progress in translating AU youth policies into practice include Rwanda, Kenya and Senegal. Rwanda has set a strong example by establishing the National Youth Council (2013), which not only has consultative power but also ensures 30% of local government seats are reserved for young leaders. Senegal has created a dedicated Ministry of Youth and implemented mandatory youth quotas for electoral lists, in line with the African Youth Charter. Additionally, Kenya’s Youth Enterprise Development Fund and the constitutional two-thirds gender rule enhance youth representation, aligning with the AU’s Malabo Decision targets. However, there is a need to investigate the effectiveness of these practices and document best practices.

4.1.2 Education and Awareness

A second central theme that emerged was the crucial role of civic education and awareness in fostering meaningful youth participation. Respondents from various countries connected their ability to engage in policymaking to their understanding of governance structures and civic rights. Several respondents emphasised:

“Education plays a very pivotal role in the participation of young people in decision-making.”
Similarly, a female respondent noted:

“Capacity building to understand how local government operates is essential.”

Survey results show that Ghana (26%) and Kenya (25%) ranked civic education among their top priorities. Senegal provides a strong case study: its political party schools systematically train youth to understand and participate in political processes.

This aligns with the United Nations Agenda 2030, particularly SDG 4 (Quality Education) and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions), which advocate for inclusive, equitable education and the promotion of inclusive decision-making at all levels. Furthermore, the AU’s Manual on Youth Participation in Political and Electoral Processes (2021) calls for capacity-building initiatives across African countries to empower youth as informed civic actors, rather than just voters. Findings suggest that governance education should begin at the secondary level, coupled with mentorship programs and inclusive capacity-building efforts that account for rural youth, young women, and youth with disabilities

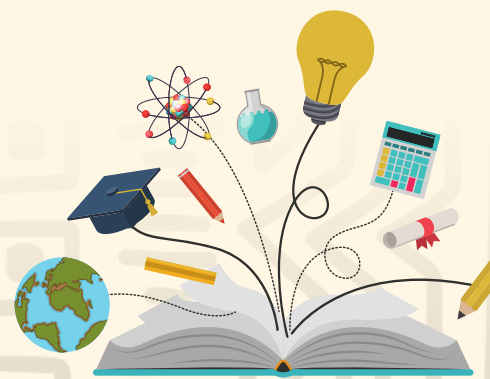
4.1.3 Access to Information

Access to clear, reliable, and timely information emerged as a significant strategy. In South Sudan, respondents stressed the need for transparent, online-accessible policy processes: **“This information should be available online. Almost every youth in South Sudan has access to the internet.”**

In Burundi, respondents asked: **“Why can’t Burundi adopt platforms like Rwanda’s Irempo?”**

Evidence supports investment in national digital engagement platforms, available in local languages that enable youth to access policy documents, monitor progress, and provide real-time input. This is particularly vital for rural and underserved youth.

The Fix the Country movement in Ghana³ demonstrates youth activism through social media, highlighting how digital spaces can amplify civic voices. Access to information aligns with the African Youth Charter (Article 12), which calls on governments to ensure that youth have access to information and participate in development planning. Additionally, both Agenda 2063 and Agenda 2030 emphasise the role of ICT and innovation in inclusive governance. Goal 9 (Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure) and Goal 16 of Agenda 2030 encourage the use of digital tools to enhance transparency, accountability, and participation.





4.1.4 Financial Support and Political Endorsement

Financial support is essential for sustained civic engagement. Respondents called for stipends and budget allocations: “The national youth services should be sponsored well for youth through giving stipends to motivate youth in those services.”

In Uganda, research indicates a significant relationship between economic empowerment and civic engagement. Without adequate financial support, young individuals may become disengaged from civic activities. These findings underscore the importance of integrating youth development financing into national budgets. The Agenda 2063 Financing and Implementation Framework urges AU member states to allocate at least 15% of public expenditure to youth-related development programs. The African Youth Charter also mandates allocating resources to youth initiatives and youth councils. The Not Too Young To Run Act[1] in Nigeria serves as a significant illustration of how political endorsements can effectively diminish age-related barriers to candidacy, thereby facilitating increased participation of young individuals in formal politics with the support of state resources. Providing financial incentives, stipends for national service, and grants for youth-led initiatives should be regarded not as charity, but as strategic investments in Africa’s democratic and socio-economic future.

[2] Rwanda’s national digital public-services platform and a private technology company that partners with the Rwandan government to deliver, manage and monetise online government services (G2C and G2B).

[3] Is a non-partisan, youth-led civic campaign in Ghana that began online (Twitter/X) in May 2021 to protest economic mismanagement, poor public services and political accountability failures and to demand structural reforms, including a new constitution, jobs, better public services and an end to corruption

[4] Is a 2018 Nigerian constitutional amendment that lowered minimum age requirements for elective offices and introduced independent candidacy to boost youth political participation

5. Recommendations

Recommendations	AU–EU Joint Vision Pillar(s)
1. Legally mandate youth quotas and co-creation roles in policymaking bodies, supported by precise monitoring and accountability mechanisms.	Governance, Democracy & Human Rights
2. Institutionalise inclusive civic education from the secondary level onward, coupled with mentorship programs tailored to rural youth, young women, and youth with disabilities.	Governance, Democracy & Human Rights
3. Develop national digital engagement platforms in local languages to ensure transparent, real-time youth participation in policy processes.	Governance, Democracy & Human Rights

6. Conclusion

The research highlights that meaningful youth participation in policymaking is essential for Africa’s socioeconomic transformation. Despite commitments from frameworks such as the African Youth Charter and the Malabo Decision, young people remain underrepresented in decision-making roles. The study across fourteen countries indicates that youth are often seen as beneficiaries rather than active co-creators of policy, fostering frustration and disengagement. This disconnect reflects governance cultures that prioritise hierarchy and control over inclusion and accountability. With youth making up about 60% of Africa’s population, their political marginalisation and economic exclusion hinder both democratic legitimacy and development.

A key theme of the study is the persistence of tokenistic participation, in which young people are symbolically included but lack real influence over policy outcomes. They are often invited to consultative spaces after decisions are made, experiencing “performative inclusion” that legitimises pre-determined choices rather than shaping them. This approach, described as “invited spaces,” validates the authority of adult decision-makers rather than empowering youth. Consequently, tokenism breeds distrust and disillusionment, weakening civic engagement.

The research indicates that the issue is not a lack of policy frameworks, such as the African Youth Charter and Agenda 2063, which mandate youth inclusion, but rather a lack of enforcement and accountability. For meaningful participation, real power must be redistributed to youth through legally binding quotas, decision-making authority, and monitoring mechanisms for youth-led policies.

Hierarchical decision-making, bureaucratic obstacles, and administrative control hinder genuine partnerships between youth and adults. Many young respondents noted that governance processes tend to favour educated, urban, and politically connected youth, while marginalising those from rural or disadvantaged backgrounds, creating an unequal playing field. Political repression further deters youth engagement, with reports of intimidation and censorship in countries like Uganda, Tunisia, and Burundi. This “climate of fear” undermines participatory governance, despite the African Union’s frameworks supporting freedom of expression.

The study highlights how intersectional inequalities exacerbate exclusion among marginalised youth. Gender, disability, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, and geography all influence whose voices are heard in policy discussions. Young women often face discrimination from cultural norms that frame politics as male-dominated, as well as economic constraints and language barriers. Rural youth noted that many policy forums are urban-focused, costly, and conducted in languages inaccessible to their communities. Youth with disabilities face physical barriers and negative attitudes that undermine their leadership potential. This creates a scenario termed “participation apartheid,” where only urban, educated, able-bodied males are represented.

The findings underscore the need for inclusive strategies, such as language translation, accessible venues, and targeted outreach, to ensure marginalised groups are engaged rather than overlooked. The lack of civic education is a significant barrier to meaningful youth participation. Many young people struggle to understand political processes, civic rights, and governance, which leaves them vulnerable to manipulation and apathy in politics. This reflects a systemic failure to integrate civic education into both formal and informal learning. Knowledge and confidence are essential for young people to transition from passive voters to active citizens. Strengthening civic education in schools and communities can empower youth in decision-making.

Additionally, respondents from South Sudan and Burundi emphasised the need for digital platforms to provide policy updates and open-access government data, which could help bridge gaps and promote inclusive participation.

Economic barriers significantly affect youth engagement, as financial insecurity limits their participation in governance processes. If African states commit to these reforms, governance can become more inclusive, reflecting the continent’s youth demographic and driving progress toward Agenda 2063 and the Sustainable Development Goals. Meaningful youth involvement can unlock Africa’s vast human potential.

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