Preparing youth from LDCs for international climate negotiations

The Least Developed Countries (LDCs) have the largest and most rapidly growing youth population worldwide. Youth from the LDCs are not only amongst the most vulnerable, young women and men, girls and boys, can also be important agents for change if informed and empowered. In light of the 28th Conference of Parties (COP28) taking place in the United Arab Emirates, the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO), jointly with the LDC Group of Climate Change, and the UNFCCC Youth Constituency (YOUNGO) will organize a webinar for youth from LDCs and with this build upon a series of webinars that were held in 2022 to prepare youth for the COP27.

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LDCs are home to 60% of the world youth population

The LDCs have the largest and most rapidly growing youth population worldwide. Today about 60 percent of the population in LDCs is under the age of 25, and the number of young people in the LDCs will increase by more than 60 percent over the next 40 years. Youth in LDCs are more than twice as likely to be illiterate compared to other developing countries and conventional education systems struggle to deliver future-proof knowledge and skills that meet the emerging needs of the green transition. Not only do they lack basic literacy and numeracy skills, but they also face serious health challenges, have often no access to reproductive health care, and their economic prospects are extremely limited.

Minority youth groups living in LDC face greater challenges

Another big challenge is a poor digital infrastructure in LDCs. While youth’s demand for Internet and network coverage have grown exponentially, connectivity rates range from 6 to 13% among young people in LDCs. The gap in access is even starker in rural areas of low-income settings.

Particularly vulnerable are young women and girls, indigenous and disabled youth in the least developed countries. For instance, girls are more likely to be illiterate, and are severely affected by the high prevalence of births to mothers aged 15 to 19 years showing that female

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1 Details are to be announced.
2 For instance, about half of all HIV infections are in people under 25, with girls disproportionately affected and on average, one-third of women in developing countries give birth before age 20; a large proportion of these pregnancies are unwanted. Source: World Bank: Adolescent health at a glance.
4 In the least developed countries, the ratio of illiterate females to males aged 15 to 24 years is even greater, with only 81 young women literate compared with every 100 young literate men. chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnibcpa...pdf/case_youngpeople_eng.pdf
5 Adolescent females under age 20 in the least developed countries in 2002 are estimated to account for 17 in every 100 births. This is more than double the rate for developed regions (8 in every 100 births) and much higher than the rate for developing regions in general (11 in every 100 births). chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnibcpa...pdf/case_youngpeople_eng.pdf
adolescent health is pivotal. Estimates suggest that there are between 180 and 220 million youth with disabilities worldwide, and nearly 80 percent of them live in developing countries. These young people with disabilities are among the poorest and most marginalised of the world's youth.

Many indigenous youth face immense challenges, such as lack of culturally appropriate education in their own languages, illiteracy and drop-out rates, discrimination, forced relocation and loss of land as a result of the intergenerational effects of colonisation and assimilation policies, as well as the continued struggles to ensure their rights and identity as indigenous peoples.

Young people as key stakeholders in climate negotiations

However, the young people of today, who will be the adults of tomorrow, have a right to a healthy future. They can be a driver for economic growth and social progress and be able to escape poverty if they enjoy health, education, and employment. Also, young women and girls can fulfil their potential to be leaders in their communities, countries, and the world when they grow up healthy, educated, safe, and empowered. Education and protection are fundamental rights.

“Nothing about us without us” demands the UN Major Group for Children and Youth. Under this banner, young women and men are already leading the climate action agenda. While they are at the frontlines of Climate Justice Movements and engage as activists, entrepreneurs, and community leaders, they are also at great risk of suffering the consequences of inaction in the years ahead. That is why it is crucial for youths to have a say at the climate negotiations and discussion tables and provide solutions from their own perspective.

A successful youth capacity-building webinar series on the road to COP27

Last year, in the lead-up to COP27, UNIDO joined forces with the Egyptian National Institute for Governance and Sustainable Development, UNFCCC Youth Constituency (YOUNGO), SDG7 Youth Constituency (SDG7YC), and the Climate Parliament, and hosted a webinar series for youth interested in getting engaged in climate action with themes ranging from sustainable energy transition and green entrepreneurship to key interlinkages with climate justice and gender. A special focus of the over 20 invited experts was given on drawing references to youth engagement in climate action, making it of utmost relevance to the more than 1500 participants, of whom more than half were young women between 18 and 35 years.

This article reflects upon the major outcomes for youth participation at COP27 and provides suggestions for youth on how to prepare their engagement for this year's international climate conference, COP28, taking place in the United Arab Emirates from 30th of November to the 12th of December 2023.

1. Youth in climate action within UNFCCC

“All of the work that youth delegates will do, as negotiators, as activists and as contributors to climate action is critical both at the local level in keeping pressure on governments to deliver enhanced NDCs and on the intergovernmental process to strive for the highest level of ambition and ensure that the goal of the Paris Agreement is kept alive” - points out Conor Barry (UNFCCC Secretariat) at the inauguration webinar.
The Paris Agreement, adopted in 2015, aims to implement the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) by increasing the global average temperature to well below 2°C above pre-industrial levels and pursuing efforts to limit the temperature increase to 1.5°C. Why is this important? The IPCC assessment report on 1.5 degrees speaks a clear language: The Paris Agreement is really the last line of defence against interference in the climate system that secures the livelihood of the human species. Countries contribute to the Paris Agreement with nationally determined contributions (NDCs) and long-term goals.

Young people play a crucial role as a link between the intergovernmental and national level. They witness what kind of climate ambition their political and industrial representatives are preaching at conferences and are responsible for holding them accountable for it in their respective countries and can demand enhanced NDCs. Yet, a review of NDCs conducted in 2019 reveals that only 67 of the 160 NDCs analysed or recognized the role of youth in climate policymaking and only 7 positioned youth as stakeholders.8

Youth until the age of 35 and youth-led NGOs are represented in the UNFCCC under YOUNGO, the official children and youth constituency, but do not have decision-making power at the negotiations.

The LDC Group on Climate Change is committed to empower and increase the participation of youth from LDCs in international climate negotiations. In order to amplify their voices and concerns in a way to build hope for future generations the Groups established a Youth Focal Points and is working on ensuring physical participation of the young negotiators in workshops and sessions and by linking them with the senior negotiators.

A significant step forward in empowering young voices from LDCs was taken in March 2023, in Doha, at the 5th United Nations Conference on the Least Developed Countries (LDC5) through the adoption of the Youth Declaration For All Generations9. Upon the recommendations of the LDC5 Youth Engagement Group, the document provides an overarching action framework to address the development needs of young generations in the 46 UN LDCs and elevate their role both as rights-holders and key stakeholders.

2. Youth in Energy: A catalyst for climate action

The energy sector has a major impact on the climate. It accounts for roughly two-thirds of all harmful greenhouse gas emissions and these emissions must be reduced dramatically. This can only be achieved by phasing out fossil fuels and using renewable energy technologies. At the same time access to affordable, reliable, and sustainable energy for all (SDG 7) is the prerequisite for many other Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), including decent employment and economic growth, poverty reduction, gender equality, quality education, and healthcare.

“To achieve SDG7 it is essential to empower the young generation” agrees Helen Watts, a youth leader in the energy transition, who is Senior Director of Student Energy. An area where she sees a chance for young professionals to accelerate is in the global scale-up of green jobs in the renewable energy sector. According to the International Energy Agency (IEA), clean energy workers are set to increase by 14 million by 2030 and 16 million are expected to move to clean energy roles.10

At the High-level Dialogue on Energy in 2021, country-led energy compacts together with the private sector promised the creation of millions of jobs that are needed to achieve SDG7 by

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8 https://www.jstor.org/stable/7af22867-d8f5-305c-adff-ba4e018d2e35?seq=2
10 https://www.iea.org/reports/world-energy-employment/overview.
“However, 1.8 billion youth around the world still face limited access to educational opportunities, project finance, and decent jobs, particularly those in emerging and developing economies where access is compounded with additional development challenges,” Helen points out. Hence, she advises the participants to train and educate themselves and to empower their peers to jointly seek opportunities in the renewable energy sector and get involved in achieving SDG7. For cost-effective decarbonization to occur, cross-sectoral links for a stronger energy system integration that allows young people to embrace clean energy alternatives across-the-board shall also be encouraged. It is, thus, crucial to create a shared understanding among youth on the transformative changes needed in different sectors to respond to the planetary climate change crisis through shifting to renewable energy sources.

INFO BOX - How to get involved in the energy transition?

- Join the SDG7 Youth Constituency.
- Become a member of the SDG7YC.
- Participate at energy conferences such as the IRENA Youth Forum, International Vienna Energy and Climate Forum, SEforAll Forum, Student Energy Summit.\(^\text{11}\)
- Check out the career training programs and courses of Student Energy.
- Educate yourself on energy. Enhance your knowledge through taking free online courses,\(^\text{12}\) participating in webinars and training both as participant and agent of change.
- Become part of your local community-led energy group/project.

3. Innovation and Entrepreneurship as catalysts for climate action

“You do not have to be an engineer to come up with an idea that would lower emissions of a project. All you need to do is to develop an innovative mindset and that is much needed for tackling the complexity of climate change” - shared Athra Khamis, a 24-year-old Water and Environmental Engineer and CEO of ECO2 startup.

Achieving the Paris Agreement goal of limiting Global Warming to 1.5°C over the century requires significant reductions in GHG emissions by 2030. Among others, this calls for rapid development, deployment, and adoption of innovative cleantech solutions at an unprecedented scale and pace. As young people are three times as likely than adults to be unemployed, leveraging digital technologies and sustainable entrepreneurship opportunities presents the two-fold benefit of curbing the most harmful effects of climate change and fostering job creation potential, especially in LDCs’ where wages are low\(^\text{13}\). An excellent example is the Youth Adaptation Solutions Challenge (YouthADAPT Challenge), an annual

\(^{11}\) https://studentenergy.org/ses/.

\(^{12}\) Some UN organizations and specialized agencies provide free self-paced courses focusing on climate change-related matters. For instance, UNICEF’s e-learning platform Agora offers a number of activities, such as short courses, discussions, videos, and experiential learning on youth and climate change and youth-responsive programming.

competition program targeting young people, who venture into groundbreaking entrepreneurship solutions to drive adaptation and resilience in Africa. A joint initiative by the Global Center on Adaptation, the African Development Bank, and Climate Investment Fund, it supports young innovators, half of whom are women, to scale up their businesses in the form of capacity-building, mentorship, and grant funding. Another interesting program is the Climate-Smart Entrepreneurship Competition by the Global Youth Climate Network, which connects young entrepreneurs with World Bank leaders and industry experts to develop their innovative business idea in the areas of climate education, waste management, marine pollution, and urban resilience.

At this webinar, panellists explored the concept of cleantech innovation and entrepreneurship ecosystems, the role youth play in their development, and why they are crucial in supporting the success of enterprises. The speakers made clear that every individual and every sector could find its way to sustainability and that is not limited to people working in the environmental sector. In the Q&A and during the session, there was strong interest in and demand for more support to connect youth and bring their clean technologies and climate solutions ideas into practice.

Participants showed great interest in the Global Cleantech Innovation Programme (GCIP) programme, which was presented and is led by Olga Rataj, Project Manager, at UNIDO. The GCIP supports small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) with innovative cleantech ideas in establishing markets to upscale robust business models also in some LDCs, such as Lesotho.

INFO BOX - How to get involved in cleantech entrepreneurship and innovation

- Participate in Incubators and Accelerator programmes in your country and city, such as the Impact Hub, GCIP, Climate KIC, Youth Sustainable Energy Hub
- Apply for the next round of the annual YouthADAPTChallenge to share ideas on business solutions for adaptation efforts across Africa and become one of the 20 award winners and be supported with a 100,000USD grant, mentorship and training programs
- Share your business ideas with the Catalyst, a clean technology startup accelerator by the city of Masdar, which provides entrepreneurs a range of services and support needed to run a business, or the IRENA-sponsored NewGen Renewable Energy Accelerator.
- Be bold: Try it, start projects and startups, fail, and get up again, and succeed to create impact!

4. How is the Climate Crisis related to Climate Justice, Gender Equality, and Loss and Damage?

“At the heart of the climate crisis is the question of injustice. Due to historic discrimination and exploitation, we are living in a world, where those who created the climate emergency are better equipped to deal with it and those who have contributed less bear the brunt,” says
Mwanahamisi Singano, an African feminist passionate about fighting structural and intersecting inequalities in her role as Senior Policy Advisor at Women’s Environment and Development Organization (WEDO). To emphasize her statement, she suggests looking closely at the different climate realities between the Global North and the Global South, between urban and rural areas, between men and women, between adults and youth, and between a black and a white person. Whilst the list of injustice goes on - she argues - the means of climate adaptation become worse when these identities intersect. She also highlights that ‘Gender needs to be at the heart of the climate justice movement.’

Achieving climate justice and implementing effective adaptation measures is above all about making processes inclusive of people most impacted by the climate crisis and other systems of oppression. Meera Ghani, a climate justice organizer and country negotiator at previous COPs, draws from her experience that it is crucial to include affected communities at the negotiation table to have a say in decisions that impact their lives.

This is more important than ever for COP28 where countries will discuss how to protect humans and livelihoods from irreversible losses and damages of climate change when adaptation and mitigation efforts have been insufficient to do so.

Referring to her home country Pakistan, Meera argues that time ran out for people to adapt or mitigate. The devastating losses of lives and livelihoods that have been caused by the recent floods demand to seriously deal with the issue of Loss and Damage, especially when it comes to compensation payments. Even UN Secretary General Guterres was alarmed by Loss and Damage at the UN General Assembly in 2022, describing it as a “fundamental question of climate justice, international solidarity and trust” – adding that “polluters must pay” and that “the G20 emits 80 percent of all greenhouse gas emissions […] but the poorest and most vulnerable - those who contributed least to this crisis – are bearing its most brutal impacts.”

INFO BOX - How to get involved in climate justice

- Participate in relevant conferences and discussions
- Become a member of youth associations/ groups such as World’s Youth for Climate Justice, Indigenous Climate Action19 and join/ support initiatives such as the ‘He for She’ Campaign, the Gender Energy Compact, Equal by 30, and others.
- Stand up for vulnerable and marginalized groups and bring their needs to discussion tables.
- Educate yourself on climate justice and gender equality. Enhance your knowledge through taking free online courses, participating in webinars, and training, and listening to first-person stories of young minorities being directly impacted by climate change-induced L&D.

To allow for more active involvement and give participants the possibility to reflect on what they learnt through the four webinars, the last session was designed as an interactive workshop on how to assess the impacts of Loss and Damage (L&D) based on two case studies, exchange on L&D in their respective countries and communities, and inspire each other on leading climate action.

The final recommendation by Rana Ghoneim, Chief of the Energy Systems and Industrial Decarbonization Unit at UNIDO, for the attendees is to get involved both by being an advocate for change as well as by engaging at the local level, since the actions needed vary from region

to region. She resumes by encouraging young leaders to continue spreading innovative ideas for change: “I personally find the solutions of youth for decarbonizing our energy systems, for achieving our climate goals and for securing a liveable future for all very valuable and inspiring”.

5. Achievements of COP27 and possibilities for engaging at COP28

COP27 brought together more than 45,000 participants to share ideas, solutions, and build partnerships and coalitions. Many of them were young people from around the world who joined as representatives of numerous organizations, initiatives, NGOs, and some of them even as official country delegates. They have been a driving force for the largest COP27 success: an agreed finance facility for Loss and Damage.

One of the milestones in meaningful youth engagement at the 27th UN Climate Conference has been the first ever youth-led Children and Youth Pavilion, that provided youth with a voice and a safe space for pushing their agenda for climate justice and engaging with influential stakeholders.

Another milestone for youth was to become officially recognized by the UNFCCC as stakeholders in climate policy under the Action for Climate Empowerment (ACE) action plan. Young people’s voices and solutions are from now on much more impactful when it comes to the design and implementation of climate policies.

COP27 is now history, but it helped to grow the momentum for young people stronger than ever. Now it is time to prepare for COP28.

Recognizing the urgency to boost support for youth from climate-vulnerable countries in multilateral spaces, the COP28 Presidency has launched the International Youth Climate Delegate Program. The brand-new initiative is designed to embed youth views and proposals into global climate processes and build their capacity to meaningfully participate in critical decision-making moments.

How to successfully integrate youth voices in international climate action has been brought forward in the webinar series by the panellists. According to Kareem Reynolds, part of the Belizean country delegation and young negotiator for Loss and Damage, the following are the most relevant steps for youth in order to get actively involved at climate conferences and make their voices heard:

INFO BOX - How to get involved in UNFCCC activities and participate at COPs

- Start your preparations as early as possible (at least 6 months prior to COP)!
- Find out who is your country’s focal point and get to know them. They are the gateway to the COPs. Reach out to your youth delegations.
- Identify all the National/Sectoral policies, strategies, and plans that your country has. Look at documents such as the Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs), National Adaptation Plans (NAPs), Nationally Appropriate Mitigation Actions (NAMAs). Read them, understand them and ask your focal points for explanation.
- Join the official UNFCCC Youth Constituency (YOUNGO) and get involved in Working Groups on COP28 relevant matters.

- Regularly follow **YOUNGO Updates** and make sure you participate at Local, Regional and Global Conferences of Youth in light of COP28.

- Regularly follow **UNFCCC Updates for COP28**.

- Inform yourself and/or apply for the **Climate Youth Negotiator Programme**.

- Follow relevant young stakeholders on social media for their tips and suggestions, such as the **Youth Advisory Group for Climate Change by the UN**.

- Join movements (rather than creating new ones), such as Mock COP; there is a role for everyone; added benefit: great people in the climate movement; being in a community helps when you get worried about the future.

> "I really encourage you to believe in yourself and keep this going on. Attend conferences and workshops; write blogs and papers; start projects and startups; follow what happens in our communities and countries, in our region and on a global level; join organizations, volunteer, start an advocacy campaign and follow UN updates" - Asma Rouabhia

As you plan your next steps in the run-up to COP28 and you are raring to shape climate and energy policy developments, you may want to expand your leadership skills for high-impact engagement. Let’s find it out what these interesting open calls have in store for you:

- **I ACT Peer Trainer initiative**, a joint initiative by IRENA, the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, UNICEF and SDG7 Constituency. Through an innovative training-of-trainers approach, young leaders commit to developing tailored modules and delivering training in their communities by pairing with local partners, including the Italian Embassy.

- **Student Energy Career Training program**, a four-month learning experience to equip youth with project management, data analytics, leadership, and teamwork skills needed to land an entry-level job in the energy sector.

- **Climathon**, a local event planned by independent organizers and organizations to tackle urgent climate challenges and inspire action.

- **Children and Youth Pavilion Volunteer at COP28**, an opportunity to volunteer for a platform led and curated by youth from around the world, where they actively engage in sessions’ preparation, communication, and people management with the aim to amplify the voices of young people.

And while working many hours in making this world a more resilient one, it is pivotal to not forget to build your own resilient ecosystem and take care of your mental health along your career path and engagement in climate action. Throughout recent years psychologists have seen an increase in ‘eco-anxiety’. The American Psychology Association (APA) describes eco-anxiety as “the chronic fear of environmental cataclysm that comes from observing the seemingly irrevocable impact of climate change and the associated concern for one’s future and that of next generations”.  

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21 [https://www.mockcop.org/](https://www.mockcop.org/)

How to alleviate eco-anxiety

1. Listen to your anxiety. Be patient with it. It’s not something to fear.
2. Remember that climate change and the state of the environment are mostly not results of your everyday actions, so don’t hold yourself personally responsible!
3. Learn about the environment and climate change.
4. If you haven’t done so already, decide which small actions you can regularly take in your daily life to reduce your carbon and environmental footprints. True, this won’t make a great difference to the environment, as bigger systems need to change. But we each need to feel that our lives and our ideals are partly in sync with each other.
5. Engage with nature. Studies have shown that regular time in green spaces or near rivers, lakes and sea is good for physical and mental health. Green spaces absorb carbon dioxide, and in urban areas, green spaces are usually cooler.
6. Nurture the habit of maintaining and improving your own physical and mental health. You’re an integral part of the ecosystem, so looking after yourself is part of looking after the ecosystem!23

The recording of the Webinar Series: Empowering Youth for COP27 - Inspiring Climate action is available here.

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23 The 6 steps of alleviating eco-anxiety have been quoted directly from the following source https://www.ecoanxiety.com/how-to-alleviate-eco-anxiety/, accessed 12/8/22