

# YOUTH AND CLIMATE ACTION IN INFORMAL SETTLEMENTS

THE HIDDEN CHAMPIONS OF URBAN CHANGE



Cities Alliance  
Cities Without Slums

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The vulnerability of youth in informal settlements is compounded by **multidimensional poverty** encompassing the various deprivations experienced in their daily lives.

## YOUTH – FACTS & FIGURES

**60 %**

Live in urban areas

**~ 1 billion**

Global youth population

**85 %**

Live in developing countries, often in informal settlements

### KEY TRENDS IN YOUTH DEMOGRAPHICS IN THE GLOBAL SOUTH

Slow economic development, inequality, and political instability already **undermine economic and social prospects for young people** in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) today. This is especially true for young people in informal settlements, who face challenges such as multi-dimensional poverty, poor living standards, lack of education and income, and multiple health risks.

Youth unemployment rates in sub-Saharan Africa are double those of adult unemployment. For young women, the situation is even worse: they are over 1.5 times less likely than young men to be formally employed or undergoing education or training. In countries affected by

fragility, conflict, and poverty, girls are 2.5 times more likely to be out of school due to external constraints like child marriage or gender bias. Where there are **no jobs and prospects for youth**, the risk grows for disillusionment and negative social impacts.

Despite the increasing urgency of addressing the challenges of urban youth, especially in the Global South, direct dialogue with governments is still scarce. **Young people are seldom recognised as a distinct group for the important role they will play in shaping the future.** However, when provided with the knowledge and opportunities needed to thrive, young people can be a very powerful force for climate action. This publication provides some best practices.



## CLIMATE CHANGE CHALLENGES AND YOUTH

As the climate crisis aggravates underlying social, economic, environmental, and development challenges worldwide, young people are disproportionately affected. Youth in general are already experiencing social, economic, and environmental shocks. **But those who live in densely populated informal settlements in LMICs are being especially hard hit.** Informal settlements are often located in hazard-prone areas such as steep slopes and coastal zones. For example, 75 per cent of young people living in Uganda's Karamoja and Busoga sub-regions stated that environmental changes such as flooding, and droughts disrupted their livelihoods in 2020.

Climate hazards also disproportionately affect girls - who not only have less access to relief and assistance but are also already vulnerable to gender-based violence. Furthermore, without ambitious climate action, **climate change could force the migration of millions** across sub-Saharan Africa by 2050, and many of these will be young people seeking livelihoods.

Young people are not the only victims of climate change, however. They are also **indispensable**

**contributors to climate action as agents of change, innovators, and entrepreneurs.** The youth demographic forms a key stakeholder group in the climate crisis. Young people are increasingly aware of the challenges and risks it presents, as well as the opportunities to achieve sustainable development through community-based, innovative solutions. In recent years, the unprecedented mobilisation of young people around the world has also shown the potential power they possess to hold decision-makers accountable.

It is apparent that **young people prioritise climate action** more than older generations do and are also more willing to engage in training and activities to raise awareness. However, in LMICs many young people still have limited knowledge of the climate crisis and are not empowered to take part in climate action. This is partly due to insufficient resources, climate education and training. Inclusive dialogues at the national and international levels that engage young people and validate their experiences, expertise, and progressive ideas are essential to the successful delivery of effective change.

The informal economy also presents a vast opportunity for young people in urban areas to participate in the transition to low-carbon and resilient pathways. With the **informal sector representing most of the urban economy** in the Global South, there is immense potential to unlock innovative and sustainable development. But conventional policy-driven or investment-led approaches, that ignore the contributions of the informal economy are unlikely to be sufficient or appropriate for building more inclusive, resilient and green economies.

Gender dimensions of the informal economy must also be considered in order to promote economic inclusion while contributing toward achieving low-carbon and climate resilience goals. **The climate crisis exacerbates the drivers of inequality** and disproportionately affects land tenure rights, access to finance, food insecurity, and the burden of unpaid care work, especially for women and girls.

To address these challenges in cities, a shift is needed to **mainstream gender-related approaches within climate mitigation and adaptation strategies and initiatives**. To develop inclusive and productive cities, women and girls need to feel safe and should have equal access to education, financial resources, and tenure security. They should also be equally involved in decision-making processes related to city development and climate action plans and policies in order to bring their knowledge and priorities to the table. Furthermore, they should be able to count on a social and care infrastructure system that supports them in the work related to children and elderly people (or victims of climate hazards), so that they can achieve their full potential.

Empowering girls and women has a disproportionately positive impact on their communities. **Girls and women are often the climate champions and drivers of change** at household and community levels because they possess unique knowledge and experience on natural resources management as well as traditional adaptation knowledge.



## KEY MESSAGES

- Without ambitious climate action, climate change could force the internal migration of 86 million across sub-Saharan Africa by 2050, many of whom will be young people looking for livelihoods.
- The youth demographic forms a key stakeholder group when it comes to climate action, as agents of change, innovators and entrepreneurs. Yet many young people still are not empowered to take part in climate action.
- Gender dimensions of the informal economy must be also considered to create well-informed engagements that increase economic inclusion and contribute to low-carbon and climate resilience goals.

# Focus Areas for Youth Engagement



The role of young people in advocating for climate action in their communities.



Youth participation in sustainable urban development.



A just transition for youth in jobs and livelihoods.



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## THE ROLE OF YOUTH IN DRIVING CLIMATE ACTION

With just over 1 degree Celsius of warming, the climate crisis is already causing widespread disruption around the world. The most vulnerable people and ecosystems are beginning to reach the limits of what they can adapt to.

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) finds that limiting global warming to 1.5 degrees is not safe for all and that for every added tenth of a degree of warming, threats to people living in vulnerable countries will increase significantly.

As the need for urgent climate action grows, it is becoming more apparent that youth can and must play a key role in precipitating and enabling climate action. **The next generation of climate action leaders is emerging from among the current youth.** Many of these young people are already leading adaptation efforts in their communities and regions hit hardest by the effects of climate change.

However, there is still a lack of widespread robust understanding among youth when it comes to the impacts of climate change. For example, a recent survey showed that the majority of Ugandan respondents do not have adequate access to information about how the environment is changing. Therefore, **raising awareness of local climate risks is very important.**

In recent years, global youth-led movements, such as Fridays for Future and the International Youth Climate Movement, have been gaining considerable momentum. These offer great examples of collaboration and communication that are essential for addressing the global crisis. They also provide a platform for young people to engage in direct action and mass participation globally, nationally and in their local communities.

Young people can be powerful communicators and agents for climate-change action within their communities. **Using social media platforms, youth activists have been advocating for climate justice** and the rights of vulnerable groups often excluded from conversations, while also promoting behavioural changes. Digital storytelling in particular, demonstrates an effective way to build support and spark conversations between different stakeholders. It can enable consensus building that can help direct community demands to relevant municipal government representatives. An excellent example of this is the Kenya-based Future Yetu project, as outlined in Box 1 below.

## BOX 1: Future Yetu Youth for Climate Action in Kenya

Nairobi is one of the fastest-growing cities in Africa with a current population of over 4 million people. Like many cities that are facing the challenges of rapid urbanization, Nairobi has limited land area, which exacerbates urban challenges, especially those linked to climate change and vulnerability to environmental hazards.

Enhancing the number of green urban spaces and improving their accessibility can provide multiple environmental and social benefits. Planting high biomass trees that store carbon increases carbon stock potential in urban environments, which in turn can improve not only the air quality but also the health of residents in communities.

[Hope Raisers Initiative](#), established in 2007, is a youth-led community-based organization primarily focusing on creating climate-resilient neighbourhoods for disadvantaged children and livelihoods for young people in the Korogocho, Nairobi community. Funded by Cities Alliance, Hope Raisers' '[Future Yetu](#)' project partnered with a local school to reactivate a student environmental club and create an eco-learning lab in the form of a '[pocket park](#)'.

The pocket park aims to be a child-friendly space that also educates kids about the role of trees in food production, air purification, and other benefits. Through firsthand experience in growing and caring for trees, grass, and other plants in the park, local children also gain awareness of how to sustainably care for the environment and reshape their future and that of other generations to come.

The initiative was also able to bring together younger and older generations. This allowed each generation to share their own experiences and knowledge. Adults and older people could present historical knowledge on changes in weather patterns or urban development in their community, while younger participants could bring in their technology skills.





Young people have the potential to become influential **climate change communicators and catalysts for change** within their communities.

However, youth activism and engagement face many challenges. Adults often dismiss youth-led activism, considering it from a point of superiority instead of pursuing genuine partnerships. In doing so, **they overlook the incredible capacity for mobilisation and technological advances that youth movements** have already harnessed in Africa and elsewhere. In order to tackle the climate crisis, **younger and older generations must work together**, and governmental bodies must facilitate an enabling environment so that all people can co-create climate solutions. Regarding partnerships between generations, it is essential to include women and girls and consider their needs, priorities and responsibilities to create more inclusive solutions for all vulnerable groups.



## YOUTH PARTICIPATION IN SUSTAINABLE URBAN DEVELOPMENT

Urbanisation is one of the defining sustainable development challenges globally. It is expected that **by 2050, over two-thirds of the world's population will live in cities, with 3 billion people residing in informal settlements**. Urban population growth, especially in informal settlements, is not only increasing naturally, but also as people displaced internally by conflicts and climate change seek safer environments and better livelihood opportunities in cities.

Informal settlements in urbanising areas already face multiple challenges, however. They are characterised by overpopulation, poverty, lack of housing and sanitation, high health risks, poor water and air quality, insufficient access to drinking water and electricity, unplanned land management, and poor-quality structures. Often located in high-risk areas, **informal settlements are especially vulnerable to climate impacts** such as extreme weather events and flooding. To address these challenges, there is an urgent need for strengthening institutional frameworks and policies to promote, plan and finance inclusive access to housing and basic urban services.

Youth are a key demographic in the urbanisation process in the Global South, **as they comprise approximately 60% of the urban population**. As urban areas become demographically younger, young people will be most affected by planning decisions. Therefore, integrating youth engagement and participation in urban planning and program design and implementation is crucial in order to meet their needs and to develop sustainable urban areas. Involving youth in planning processes helps to build social capital, develop meaningful relationships between governmental bodies and young people, and often leads to improved urban design.

In addition to fresh perspectives, young people often have direct knowledge of and insights into issues that are less accessible to adults. There are **many areas where young people's contributions can help to realise co-benefits** between climate action and urban planning.

There is an urgent need for **strengthening institutional frameworks** and policies to promote, plan and **finance inclusive access** to housing and **basic urban services**.







An example is the nexus between planning for parks that integrate nature-based solutions for flood-risk mitigation with greater shade and reduced heat-island effect, while also solving social challenges, such as providing green space.

Providing an environment that enables **young people to participate in data collection and consultation on planned developments** is crucial for improving informal settlements, and it also empowers young slum dwellers.

The Centre for Community Initiatives (CCI) in Tanzania offers a strong example of engaging youth in climate adaptation, water provision, sanitation, solid waste management, and affordable housing (see Box 2). Another example facilitated by CCI, and the Tanzania Urban Poor Federation (TUPF) involves alternative financing options for informal settlement infrastructure through community investment schemes. These can be enabled by youth-led organisations and supported by mobile-enabled digital platforms.

## BOX 2: The Centre for Community Initiatives (CCI) Tanzania

Tanzania has an informal settlement population of over 6 million people, with the third highest slum growth rate in Africa, at over 6% per year. The urban poor were excluded from the opportunities of both the formal city and the economy, and municipal authorities failed to address their challenges.

The [Centre for Community Initiatives \(CCI\)](#), established in 2004, aims to amplify the voices of the urban poor to create inclusive cities with empowered and united communities that have the capacity to voice, promote, and negotiate for their collective interests. CCI uses a bottom-up approach to build strong engagement among community members toward climate change challenges. Together with TUPF, CCI mobilized youth groups to participate in decision-making processes related to climate change, water supply, waste management, land, housing, and shelter.

Many young people have now been trained in different technologies of toilet construction and solar power installation and are able to support their communities in adapting to and mitigating the impacts of climate change in an affordable way. The improvements in water and sanitation facilities especially can strongly improve the lives of women and girls. Initiatives such as CCI are also important for empowering and mobilising girls to join organised groups and benefit from gender-smart skills development and community organisation approaches.

*Source: CCI Tanzania*

**Digital tools** provide a further layer of opportunities for youth-driven urban planning. Young people can participate in data collection, mapping and surveys. Participatory mapping can help to convert local knowledge into GIS maps to capture property boundaries, flood risks and many other aspects. Cities Alliance has partnered with local communities to use drones to capture aerial images, which then form a basis to plan settlements and enforce building controls.

When equipped with appropriate digital tools and training, the contribution of young people can be an invaluable asset for climate-integrated resilience plans of informal settlements. For example, [Badabon Sangho](#) is a women's rights organization in Bangladesh that received a grant from the Cities Alliance Innovation Programme. They [trained 32 local youth volunteers](#), including 18 girls, in digital mapping, using mobile devices with Open Data Kit (ODK), to contribute to a Climate Resilience Development Plan.



## A JUST TRANSITION FOR YOUTH: JOBS AND LIVELIHOODS

To meet the employment needs of young people around the world, **600 million new jobs will have to be created by the year 2035**. During this same time, climate change will continue to greatly affect economic opportunities in the Global South. Sectors that rely on consistent rainfall patterns, such as agriculture, are particularly at risk from climate impacts. However, there also are **emerging employment opportunities** in sectors related to low-carbon development and green growth. We need a just transition to low-carbon and resilient cities and infrastructure to enable access to services and jobs for the greatest number of inhabitants possible.



The **principles and opportunities of a regenerative circular economy**, as outlined in [Cities Alliance's recent publication](#), offer a promising way to create employment in informal settlements. Examples of employment opportunities that can be relevant to the informal as well as the formal sector include start-up or private-sector service provision in areas such as sanitation, waste management, bio-gas for clean cooking or energy, organic compost and fertilizer production, and upcycling of waste materials into new products, as well as regenerative agriculture, supporting urban-rural value chain solutions, producing biodegradable packaging alternatives, producing sustainable building materials and providing low-carbon local mobility services.

One such example is the Green Project Initiative in Kenya, a youth-led organisation that provides accessible, clean, affordable, and reliable energy sources to residents of informal settlements. This is done by producing briquettes from organic waste collected across slum areas.

## BOX 3: Youth Employment in Agriculture – AVSI, Uganda

Uganda's population growth rate is among the highest in the world. Its population is among the youngest, with over 70 per cent aged 30 years and below. At least 300,000 youths graduate from tertiary institutions annually, but their employment opportunities are limited, especially in cities.

The Association of Volunteers in International Service ([AVSI](#)) has been working in Northern Uganda since the 1980s to engage the private sector, government, and communities in building the capacity of children, youth and households across Uganda, in order to build resilience.

Between 2016 and 2022, **AVSI projects reached 34,000 young people**, half of whom were female.

These projects, designed around circular economy principles, focus mainly on agriculture and livelihood opportunities. One such project is the Skilling in 'Agripreneurship' for [Increased Youth Employment \(SAY\) initiative](#). The SAY project aims to equip youth with skills in climate-smart agribusiness so they can find employment in the agriculture sector or start their own businesses as 'agripreneurs'. Since June 2021, at least 6,478 young people have enrolled in agricultural skills training centres. 807 of them have already found employment.



*I can now afford to provide the basic needs of my 2 daughters. I thought I would not be where I am today, but you have lifted me from grass to grace and I know that in 3 years' time, I will even be driving.*

**Rebecca Acan**  
a 29-year-old agripreneur

Rebecca Acan, a 29-year-old mother of two, is one such agripreneur. Despite being a trained midwife, she could not find employment. After learning about the AVSI/SAY project on the radio in 2021, she enrolled at Archways Agro Limited, an agribusiness engaged in honey and other products from hive wastes.

After training, she started an agripreneurship selling organic honey and other bee products. As the demand for her products is high and rising, she wants to expand her business by procuring more honey, setting up value-adding equipment, establishing other roadside stalls in Lira City, and supplying her products to supermarkets.

Source: AVSI



However, young people in many LMICs **lack the skills demanded for the emerging job market**, particularly in green industries. They need support to develop basic business skills such as accounting, marketing, and customer relations, as well as knowledge of circular economy principles. This is often the role of youth-led projects, such as AVSI's work to enable employment in agriculture for young people in Uganda (see Box 3).

As mobile phone ownership and internet access continue to increase in the Global South, **digital skills and platforms continue to offer opportunities** for innovation and job creation. Mobile apps can connect businesses with customers, therefore creating much greater reach and improving efficiencies and service quality.

For example, Coliba in West Africa uses a mobile app to facilitate plastic waste management. The app lets customers book collection services and enables informal waste workers to participate in the business.

**Gender dynamics must also be factored into support for youth in informal settlements.** Girls face barriers such as gender bias and violence, which result in decreased access to education, training, finance, digital tools, and mobile internet. As a result, **women and girls are disproportionately affected by climate change.** Support programs, interventions, and upskilling activities should take these factors into account.

An example of transformational support is the Cities Alliance [Her4Climate tool](#), which aims to promote women's participation, leadership, and agency in designing and managing climate adaptation initiatives and plans. This tool identifies the main factors that affect women's exposure, sensitivity, and adaptive capacity to climate events, making them visible and actionable.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR INVESTMENTS TO SUPPORT YOUTH ENGAGEMENT

Young people living in the fast-growing informal settlements of the Global South can and must play a vital role in climate action. To support youth-driven climate initiatives in informal settlements, international funds should consider the following recommendations:



Empower youth as agents of climate action through environmental **education** and with support to help them communicate climate risks, build consensus, and advocate for positive change.



Create synergies between climate action in informal settlements and **opportunities for livelihoods and jobs** that provide important services, based on circular economy principles.



Support the **role of women and girls** within the youth demographic to build consensus on climate change-related impacts and drive strategies for climate action.



Promote and support the role of **digital innovation** to enable youth-led communications and advocacy initiatives, platforms for service delivery and related employment opportunities.



Encourage young people to join participatory planning approaches by **addressing barriers to engagement**, such as lack of access, awareness and knowledge.



Provide targeted, **long-term funding** to support youth-led enterprises, including digitally enabled solutions.

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