

Youth Participation in Climate Diplomacy: Barriers, Regional Disparities, and Policy Impact

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Abstract

This study explores youth participation in climate diplomacy, focusing on barriers, regional disparities, and policy outcomes. Using a Participatory Action Research (PAR) approach, the research integrates qualitative and quantitative methods, including interviews, focus groups, surveys, and document analysis. Data were collected from 50 interviews, 5 focus groups, and surveys distributed to 100 youth delegates who participated in COP26–COP28. Observations during COP28 and key policy documents further enriched the analysis. Findings reveal significant financial constraints as a major barrier, particularly for participants from Africa and South America, where 80% relied on external funding. The concept of “youth-washing” emerged, with many participants reporting symbolic inclusion without real influence. Regional disparities were evident, as Europe and Asia demonstrated higher institutional access compared to resource-constrained regions in the Global South. Despite these challenges, youth advocacy achieved notable successes, including the inclusion of intergenerational equity in the Glasgow Climate Pact. The study recommends addressing structural barriers through targeted funding for Global South youth and establishing youth advisory councils within global climate bodies. These measures will ensure more inclusive and meaningful youth participation, advancing equitable climate governance.

Keywords: Youth Participation, Climate Diplomacy, Financial Barriers, Youth-Washing, Policy Impact.

1. Introduction

The world today as we know is facing severe environmental challenges, with climate change as one of the most pressing issues of our time. Rapid global warming, increasingly frequent natural disasters, and the degradation of ecosystems underscore how urgent we need to tackle this crisis. These challenges have birthed a generation of young leaders that are keen to addressing these issues through advocacy and action (Gardiner, 2011). Youth around the globe are mobilizing at grassroots, national, and international levels to influence policies, raise awareness, and demand urgent intervention from governments, corporations, and international bodies. The past decade has seen a surge in youth-led environmental advocacy. Movements such as Fridays for Future, initiated by Greta Thunberg, Extinction Rebellion, and the Global Youth Climate Strike have galvanized millions worldwide and has brought heightened attention to the issue of climate change (Fisher, 2019). These movements advocate for

immediate action, not only through protests but by pushing for policy changes that align with global environmental commitments such as the Paris Agreement (2015) and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (UNFCCC, 2015). Despite the influence and visibility these youth movements have achieved, questions remain about the true extent of their impact on global climate diplomacy. So far, research on inclusive governance highlights the importance of incorporating youth voices in decision-making processes, yet the practical effectiveness of youth-led advocacy within formal climate negotiations has been relatively underexplored (Checkoway, 2017; Sloam, 2014). As these movements grow, it becomes even more critical to understand the role youth play in shaping climate policy and governance. This study addresses this gap by examining the impact of youth-led advocacy on international climate diplomacy and exploring the challenges youth face in achieving meaningful policy influence.

Global climate diplomacy operates within a complex framework designed to address climate change through international cooperation and policy commitments. Key mechanisms within this framework include the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), Conference of the Parties (COP) negotiations, the Paris Agreement, and the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). Each plays a distinct role in shaping global climate action. The UNFCCC, established in 1992, laid the foundation for global climate governance by recognizing climate change as a common concern and establishing an international framework to address it (UNFCCC, 1992). The Conference of the Parties (COP) is the annual gathering of UNFCCC member states where countries negotiate and adopt decisions to enhance climate action (UNFCCC, 2020). These meetings bring together government representatives, NGOs, youth groups, and indigenous communities to facilitate broad participation in climate policy discussions.

The Paris Agreement (2015) marked a pivotal moment in climate diplomacy by uniting countries under a shared commitment to limit global warming to 1.5°C to 2°C above pre-industrial levels. For the first time, the agreement recognized the importance of non-state actors, including youth, in achieving climate goals (UNFCCC, 2015). Additionally, the IPCC provides scientific assessments that inform climate negotiations, guiding policymakers with data on climate impacts, risks, and adaptation strategies (IPCC, 2020). Together, these frameworks have laid the groundwork for global cooperation in combating climate change, though challenges remain in ensuring inclusive governance and effective implementation. Inclusiveness in governance refers to ensuring that all stakeholders—particularly marginalized and underrepresented groups—have opportunities to participate in decision-making processes. This concept is foundational in achieving equitable policies that reflect diverse needs and perspectives. Inclusive governance is especially relevant to climate diplomacy, where young people, indigenous communities, and marginalized populations are often disproportionately affected by climate change but lack representation in policy decisions (Backstrand, 2006; Stevenson & Dryzek, 2014).

Core concepts within inclusive governance include participatory governance, deliberative democracy, and intersectional equity. Participatory governance advocates for the direct involvement of communities in decision-making processes, while deliberative democracy promotes dialogue among diverse stakeholders to achieve consensus on complex issues (Fung

& Wright, 2003; Dryzek, 2010). Intersectional equity is also crucial, as it addresses overlapping social identities and systems of oppression, such as race, gender, and socioeconomic status, which often intersect in environmental issues (Crenshaw, 1989). Recognizing and addressing these intersections in climate policy helps create fairer, more effective solutions that consider the unique challenges faced by different groups. Inclusive governance is particularly relevant in the context of youth participation in climate diplomacy. Despite their disproportionate exposure to climate risks, youth often encounter barriers to meaningful engagement in decision-making spaces. This underscores the importance of establishing structures within climate diplomacy frameworks to ensure that youth perspectives contribute to shaping effective climate policies.

Intersectionality, a term coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), recognizes that individuals experience multiple, interconnected social identities, such as race, gender, and socioeconomic status. These intersecting identities create unique experiences of privilege or oppression that shape how individuals interact with social and political structures. In the context of climate change, intersectionality helps identify and address inequalities that make certain populations more vulnerable to environmental impacts (Kaijser & Kronsell, 2014). For youth advocates, an intersectional approach is essential in promoting climate justice. Issues such as climate justice and equity, intergenerational justice, and intersectional environmentalism have gained prominence within youth-led movements, advocating for climate action that acknowledges and addresses systemic inequalities (Shue, 2014; Gardiner, 2011). Climate justice calls for accountability in addressing the disproportionate impacts of climate change on marginalized communities, while intergenerational justice emphasizes the responsibility to future generations (Gardiner, 2011). Intersectional environmentalism advocates for solutions that address environmental degradation while simultaneously challenging racial, gender, and economic injustices (Kaijser & Kronsell, 2014).

Youth-led advocacy groups have increasingly adopted intersectional approaches to amplify voices from marginalized backgrounds, ensuring that climate policies are inclusive and equitable. By prioritizing intersectionality, these movements seek to achieve holistic climate action that considers the diverse needs and experiences of all affected populations, advocating for policies that are not only environmentally sustainable but also socially just.

This research aims to examine and deepen our understanding of the role of youth-led environmental advocacy within the field of global climate diplomacy. Specifically, the study has three objectives: To assess the influence of youth-led environmental advocacy on climate policy decisions at the global level – The objective is to explore the extent to which youth movements have impacted policies, particularly within frameworks such as the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and COP negotiations (UNFCCC, 2020). Secondly to analyze the strategies used by youth-led initiatives to promote inclusive governance – Understanding the tools, tactics, and approaches employed by youth groups reveals the pathways they use to advocate for equitable representation and policy influence (Bessant, 2004). And lastly to identify the challenges and opportunities for youth-led advocacy in influencing global climate policies – This objective focuses on uncovering structural and operational barriers, as well as potential areas of support that could help amplify youth voices in climate diplomacy (Sloam, 2014).

2. Methodology

2.1 Research Design

This study adopts a Participatory Action Research (PAR) approach, integrating qualitative and quantitative methods to explore youth participation in climate diplomacy. The PAR approach allows for critical engagement with youth stakeholders, ensuring both personal insights and measurable outcomes.

The research focuses on case studies of platforms such as YOUNGO, Fridays for Future, and the BRICS Youth Forum, providing a balance between grassroots and institutional perspectives (UNFCCC, 2023; KIPPRA, 2023). Data collection included semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), surveys, document analysis, and observations, creating a triangulated framework for reliability and depth.

2.2 Target Population and Sampling

The target population comprised youth activists, policymakers, NGO representatives, and experts involved in global climate diplomacy. A purposive sampling method was employed to ensure diverse regional representation and stakeholder inclusion.

The sample consisted of:

- 20 youth activists (e.g., YOUNGO, Fridays for Future),
- 15 policymakers engaged in climate negotiations,
- 10 NGO representatives in climate finance/youth programs,
- 5 governance experts,
- 5 focus groups (6 participants each) representing Africa, Asia, Europe, South America, and BRICS+ regions.

Surveys were distributed to 100 youth delegates who attended COP26–COP28 to capture broader trends.

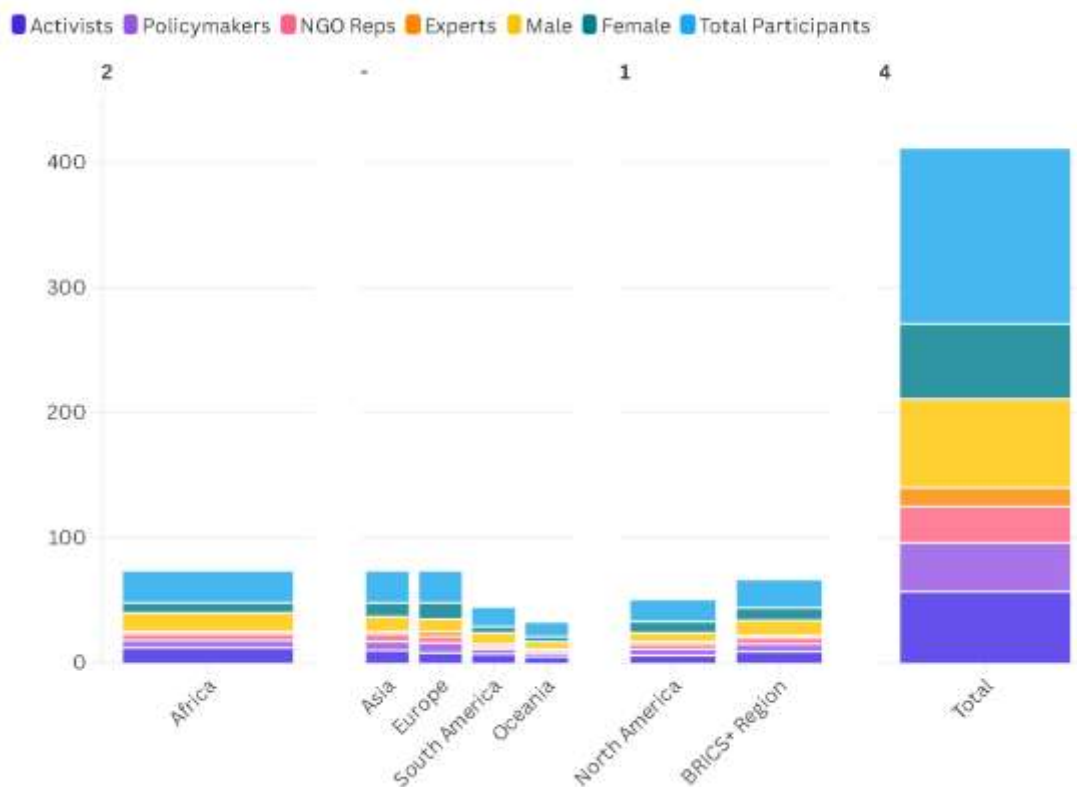


Fig 1.1: A column bar chart showing participant Breakdown by Role, Region, and Gender

2.3 Data Collection

1. Semi-Structured Interviews

- Conducted with 50 participants, lasting 30–45 minutes via Zoom, Teams, or in-person.
- Topics included financial barriers, policy influence, and mental health challenges.

2. Focus Group Discussions (FGDs)

- 5 sessions (6 participants each) explored regional dynamics, collaborative efforts, and barriers like "youth-washing" and financial inequality.

3. Surveys

- Google Forms surveys were sent to 100 youth delegates from COP26–COP28.
- Questions included Likert-scale items assessing participation effectiveness and financial support.

4. Document Analysis

- Review of 10+ key documents, including UNFCCC reports, BRICS climate declarations, and policy frameworks, to trace youth advocacy impact.

5. Observations

- Conducted during COP28 Blue Zone sessions, focusing on youth engagement in formal negotiations and policymaker interactions.

2.4 Data Analysis

1. Qualitative Analysis

- Interview and FGD transcripts were thematically coded using NVivo to identify patterns such as financial constraints, tokenism, and mental health pressures.
- Regional disparities were analyzed to highlight unique challenges faced by Global South participants.

2. Quantitative Analysis

- Survey data were processed using SPSS and Excel, generating descriptive statistics (e.g., percentages, regional trends).
- Key findings included:
 - 72% reported financial barriers,
 - 45% felt policy contributions were undervalued,
 - 80% of African respondents relied on external sponsorship for participation.

3. Document Analysis

- Traced the influence of youth advocacy on agreements like the Glasgow Pact (e.g., intergenerational equity inclusion).

4. Observations

- Recorded behaviors, youth presence, and interaction patterns in negotiation spaces to assess participation quality.

2.5 Ethical Considerations

Participants provided informed consent, and all data were anonymized to protect confidentiality. Ethical approval was obtained to ensure adherence to research standards.

2.6 Limitations

The study acknowledges the following limitations:

1. Uneven regional participation, with higher responses from Europe and Asia.
2. Limited access to policymakers during COP28.
3. Reliance on self-reported data, introducing potential social desirability bias.
4. Findings reflect a specific period and may require updates to capture evolving policy dynamics.

3. Results and Discussion

This section presents the findings from interviews, focus groups, surveys, document analysis, and observations. The results focus on key themes, including barriers to youth participation, regional disparities, and the policy impacts of youth involvement in climate diplomacy. Visual aids, such as tables and graphs, are used where relevant to illustrate trends and comparisons.

3.2 Barriers to Youth Participation

3.2.1 Financial Constraints

One of the most significant barriers identified by participants was financial limitations. Based on survey data, 72% of youth delegates reported facing difficulties in covering costs associated with attending COP events, particularly from Africa and South America. Although some sponsorships were available through NGOs and government programs, many participants mentioned that these funds were insufficient to cover travel, accommodation, and visa costs.

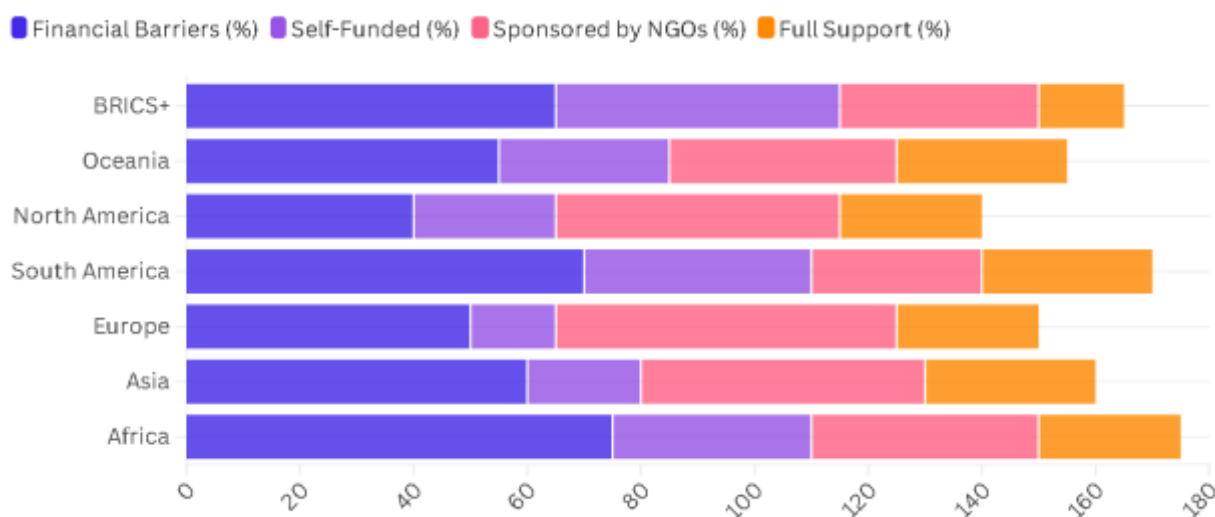


Fig 2: Regional Distribution of Financial Barriers Faced by Youth Participants at COP28

Fig 2 illustrates the financial challenges encountered by youth participants from various regions at COP28. The chart highlights that Africa (75%) and South America (70%) faced the most significant financial barriers, requiring greater external support. In contrast, regions like Europe (50%) and North America (40%) reported fewer constraints, benefiting from stronger institutional backing.

The breakdown also shows that a large percentage of youth from Africa and the BRICS+ regions were self-funded or received partial sponsorship, indicating the need for more comprehensive financial aid for these youth. This visualization emphasizes the disparities in financial support across regions, which impacts equitable participation in climate negotiations.

3.2.2 Tokenism and Symbolic Participation

Another recurring theme was the issue of tokenism. Many youth participants, especially from the Global South, felt their roles were largely symbolic, with minimal opportunities to influence actual policy decisions. For example, 45% of youth delegates felt that their contributions were not taken seriously in formal negotiations, even though youth issues such as intergenerational equity were mentioned in the Glasgow Pact (COP26) (UNFCCC, 2023). Participants described their presence at COP events as a form of “youth-washing,” where their visibility was acknowledged but their input was sidelined in critical decision-making.

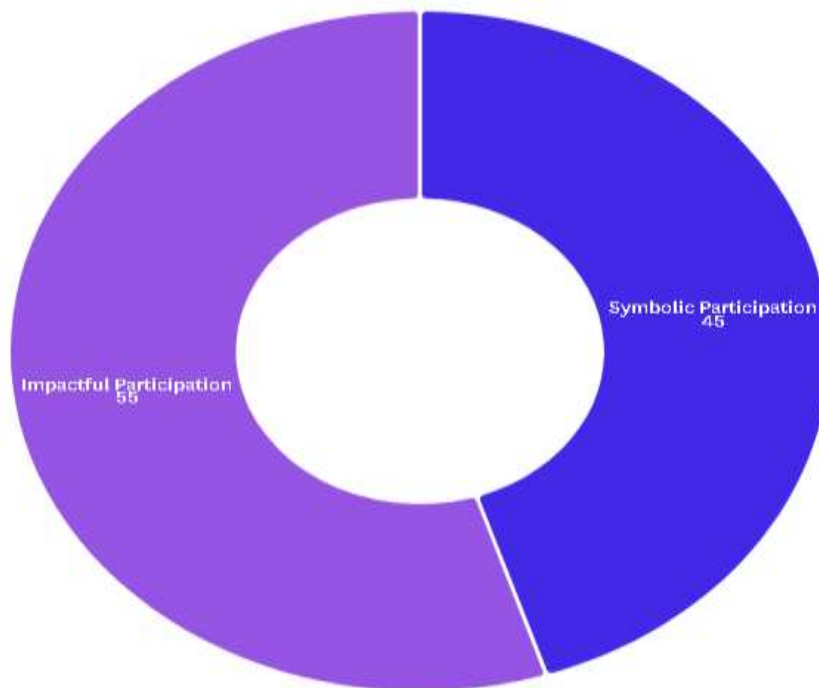


Fig 3: Distribution of youth experiences at COP28

From Fig 3 above, 45% described their involvement as symbolic, and 55% reported it as impactful after COP28. Symbolic participation refers to visible inclusion without real influence, often labeled as "tokenism" or "youth-washing." These participants felt their input was acknowledged but not acted upon in key decisions.

In contrast, those reporting impactful participation described experiences where their contributions were valued and integrated into policy proposals, such as intergenerational equity. This group was able to co-draft agreements and collaborate with decision-makers, resulting in a measurable influence on specific policy areas.

3.2.3 Regional Disparities in Access and Representation

The research highlighted notable regional disparities in youth participation. Delegates from Europe and Asia had greater access to formal negotiations and the Blue Zone, where high-level discussions occur. In contrast, African and South American delegates struggled with limited access and representation, often being confined to side events or excluded from the key

decision-making spaces. The study also found that 80% of youth from Europe had Blue Zone badges, compared to only 60% from Africa.

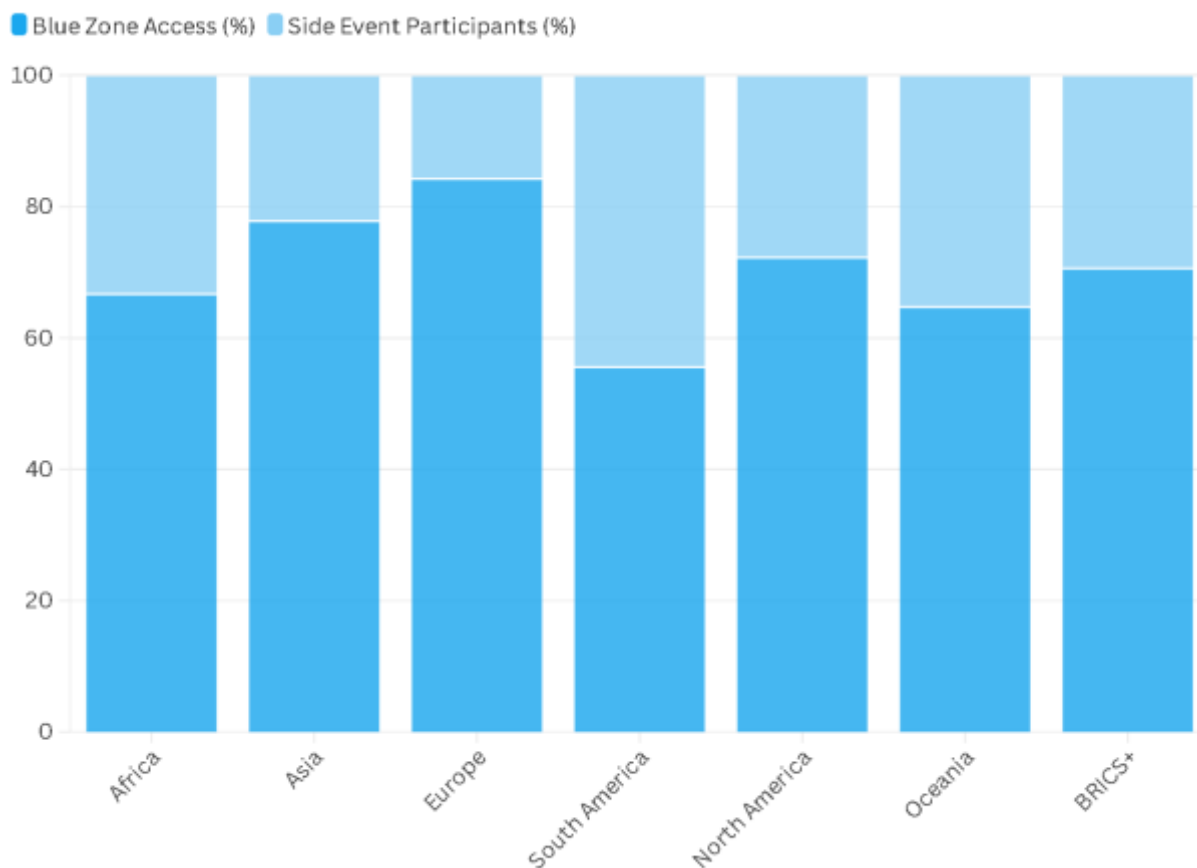


Fig 4: Regional Distribution of Blue Zone Access at COP28

Fig 4 illustrates the regional disparities in Blue Zone access at COP28, where high-level negotiations take place. Europe had the highest access with 80% of youth delegates holding Blue Zone badges, followed by Asia at 70%. In contrast, Africa and South America had much lower access, with 60% and 50% respectively. The chart highlights how youth from different regions faced varying levels of involvement in key discussions, reflecting broader inequalities in representation and decision-making power at COP events.

3.3 Youth Influence on Policy Outcomes

3.3.1 Intergenerational Equity and Climate Justice

Despite the challenges, some youth advocacy efforts have resulted in tangible policy outcomes. For example, youth activists from YOUNGO successfully lobbied for the inclusion of intergenerational equity in the Glasgow Pact (COP26), which has since become a key concept in climate negotiations. Survey results show that 60% of participants felt that youth-led

campaigns contributed to raising awareness of climate justice and the rights of future generations (UNFCCC, 2023).

3.3.2 Loss and Damage Fund

Youth advocates also played a role in pushing for the creation of the Loss and Damage Fund, formally agreed upon at COP27. However, youth were excluded from key financial decision-making committees, which was seen as a missed opportunity to address youth perspectives on climate finance (KIPPRA, 2023). 45% of participants expressed frustration over their limited involvement in the fund's development. These results highlight the complex landscape of youth participation in climate diplomacy, where financial barriers, tokenism, and regional disparities continue to shape the experience of youth delegates. While policy wins like the Glasgow Pact and the push for the Loss and Damage Fund show the growing influence of youth, the lack of meaningful inclusion in decision-making spaces remains a significant challenge.

3.4 Mental Health and Well-being of Youth Participants

The emotional toll of climate advocacy emerged as a significant theme across interviews and survey responses. 40% of youth participants reported experiencing burnout or mental health challenges during or after COP events. The demands of high-pressure negotiations, coupled with limited institutional support, contributed to stress and exhaustion, particularly for youth attending multiple climate events. Participants highlighted the difficulty of maintaining balance between advocacy work, personal well-being, and academic or professional commitments.

3.4.1 Key Stressors Identified

Many youth delegates felt the need to constantly prove their relevance and competence in formal spaces dominated by experts and policymakers. **Travel-Related Fatigue:** Youth from the Global South often reported long and difficult journeys to attend COP events due to visa issues and financial constraints, compounding their stress. Less than **25%** of respondents said they had access to mental health services during COP events, such as counseling or emotional support sessions. Burnout was most prevalent among youth from Africa and South America, where financial and logistical burdens were higher. Youth from Europe and North America, while also reporting stress, cited greater access to mental health services and support networks. The disparity reflects the unequal availability of institutional resources for youth participants from different region

Region	Reported Burnout (%)	Access to Mental Health Support (%)	Major Stressors Identified
Africa	50	20	Financial struggles, long travel times
Asia	35	25	High performance pressure, limited rest
Europe	30	50	Balancing advocacy with academics
South America	45	15	Visa challenges, lack of institutional support
North America	25	40	Overcommitment to events, emotional exhaustion
Oceania	40	30	Isolation from networks, logistical difficulties

4.0 Conclusion, and Recommendations

The research highlights the growing involvement of youth in climate diplomacy, with participation expanding notably between COP26 and COP28. Delegates from Africa and Asia recorded the highest increases, with youth representation growing by 80% and 50%, respectively (UNFCCC, 2023). This surge reflects heightened awareness of the importance of youth voices in climate discussions and the efforts of platforms like YOUNGO and Fridays for Future to mobilize participation.

Despite these gains, financial and structural barriers persist. 72% of surveyed participants cited financial challenges as a major obstacle to attending events like COP, with the burden especially high for youth from the Global South (Aykut et al., 2022). Even when present, 45% of youth respondents felt their involvement was largely symbolic, with minimal influence on key decisions. Although youth movements contributed to policy concepts like intergenerational equity, their exclusion from major financial negotiations—such as the Loss and Damage Fund discussions—points to structural gaps that limit the depth of youth engagement.

The mental health impact of sustained advocacy emerged as another key finding. 40% of youth delegates reported experiencing burnout during or after COP events. Youth from Africa and South America faced the greatest emotional strain, due to a combination of long travel times, financial stress, and limited institutional support (KIPPR, 2023). In contrast, participants from Europe and North America reported lower stress levels, benefiting from greater access to mental health services.

While youth advocacy has achieved visibility in climate diplomacy, the research concludes that structural barriers continue to limit meaningful participation. Although platforms like

YOUNGO have created space for youth at COP events, the concept of youth-washing—where youth presence is recognized without real influence—remains a significant challenge. Delegates from the Global South still face disproportionate barriers in terms of funding, badge access, and policy inclusion, which curtail their ability to contribute effectively.

At the same time, the involvement of youth movements has led to important policy wins. The integration of intergenerational equity in the Glasgow Pact demonstrates the potential impact of youth-driven advocacy on climate policy. However, the exclusion of youth from decision-making committees such as those managing the Loss and Damage Fund highlights the need for more institutional reforms to ensure genuine engagement. Addressing these gaps is critical for making youth participation more impactful in future climate negotiations.

6.3 Recommendations

To move from symbolic inclusion to meaningful engagement, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Governments and organizations should establish youth advisory councils within the UNFCCC and regional climate bodies like BRICS and the African Union. These councils would allow youth to provide input throughout the decision-making process, not just at events like COP. Setting representation quotas for youth in key negotiation spaces would also ensure that young voices are included in high-level discussions.
2. A dedicated Youth Climate Fund should be created to address financial barriers. This fund would target youth from low-income countries and provide grants for travel, accommodation, and participation costs. In addition, application processes for existing funds should be streamlined to reduce the administrative burden on youth organizations. Partnerships with NGOs and private donors can also help provide sustainable financial support.
3. Climate events like COP should introduce on-site mental health services to support participants dealing with stress and burnout. These services could include counseling, debriefing sessions, and wellness activities. Event organizers should also provide access to virtual mental health resources, particularly for participants who may struggle to access such services at home.
4. Digital tools can complement physical participation, ensuring that youth unable to attend events in person can still contribute. Social media campaigns (e.g., ClimateStrike) and online platforms should be integrated into negotiation processes, allowing real-time input from youth worldwide. This would make climate diplomacy more inclusive and accessible, especially for youth from underrepresented regions.

6.4 Areas for Further Research

Future research should explore the long-term effects of burnout on youth activists and how mental health challenges influence their continued involvement in advocacy. Investigate whether participation in COP events translates into career opportunities or leadership roles in the environmental sector. Impact of Digital Advocacy: Analyze the influence of online campaigns like Fridays for Future on formal policy outcomes and how digital activism interacts with in-person negotiations. Longitudinal Study on Youth Policy Influence: Track the impact

of youth-driven proposals over multiple COP cycles to assess how well they are integrated into national and global frameworks.

Youth-led environmental advocacy has made significant strides in recent years, but more needs to be done to move from symbolic involvement to real influence. Institutionalizing youth participation, expanding financial support, and addressing mental health challenges are essential steps for creating a more inclusive and sustainable climate governance framework.

As the world faces the escalating impacts of climate change, the energy, creativity, and determination of young people will be critical in driving bold action. It is now up to governments, institutions, and civil society to ensure that youth are not just present at the table but are empowered to shape decisions that affect their future. This transition from participation to leadership will ensure that global climate governance is just, inclusive, and aligned with intergenerational equity principles

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