



Climate Governance and Youth Engagement

Opportunities, Challenges and the Way Forward

Bringing young people to the forefront of international climate negotiations and ensuring meaningful youth engagement was one of the key priorities of the joint UK-Italy Presidency of the 26th United Nations Climate Change Conference, commonly known as COP26. In this spirit, a range of youth-led and youth-oriented climate events were held in 2021, including the [‘Youth4Climate’](#) pre-COP summit in Milan, as well as the [‘Unifying for Change’](#) youth headline event held on COP26 Youth and Public Empowerment Day. Across these platforms, hundreds of youth climate leaders came together to highlight the importance of intergenerational equity, share their personal experiences of climate change, and call for policy and mindset shifts, in order to address the climate crisis. In response, high-level dignitaries, including COP26 President Alok Sharma and UNFCCC Executive Secretary Patricia Espinosa, recognised the valuable contributions of the youth climate movement and reiterated their commitment to meaningful youth engagement.

Despite the dedication of young people to urgent, ambitious, and equitable climate action, there remain key obstacles to meaningful youth engagement. Most notably, the complex dynamics of climate governance may limit the influence and impact of young people in reality. Furthermore, concerns of youth-washing and tokenism pose a significant challenge to the credibility and effectiveness of processes under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), fuelling doubt as to whether youth climate advocacy can make a tangible difference to the negotiation outcomes. Finally, even as the youth climate movement gains momentum, it is worth reflecting on whether, and to what extent, certain youth voices and perspectives in climate governance are privileged over others, and what it takes to actually achieve climate justice.

Moving forward, therefore, a deeper and more critical examination of the role of young people in climate governance is required. What does it truly mean to give youth a seat at the table, and how we will collectively get there? Building on a youth-led UCL workshop and public panel event, this memo discusses both obstacles and opportunities for greater youth engagement in global climate governance.

Key Insights

- **COP26 was a pivotal moment for youth climate leadership.** Through pioneering a youth engagement strategy, the UK COP26 Presidency explicitly sought to amplify the voices of young climate leaders across the globe. Notably, COP26 saw the launch of the [Global Youth Statement](#), which sets out demands endorsed by over 40,000 young climate leaders from across the world. The official outcome document of conference, the Glasgow Climate Pact, also recognises the critical role of youth in addressing climate change and provides avenues for meaningful youth engagement moving forward.
- **Despite such efforts, young people continue to be side-lined, if not tokenised, in international climate policymaking.** Opportunities for meaningful youth participation in UNFCCC negotiations remain constrained as many key decisions are still taken behind closed doors. Not all national delegations include youth representatives or provide them with the capacity, knowledge and tools needed for them to play more than an observer role. While opportunities are growing for young climate leaders to make their voices heard, they do not always feel truly listened to, highlighting the danger of youth engagement turning into purely performative 'box-ticking' exercises.
- **Meaningful engagement requires consistent and long-term efforts to incorporate the voices and perspectives of youth during all stages of climate policymaking and on all relevant topics.** Youth voices are often acknowledged during agenda-setting processes but largely marginalised at other stages of the policy cycle, such as decision-making, implementation and evaluation. In addition, youth consultation is often limited to ostensibly 'soft' issues, such as Action for Climate Empowerment (ACE), inclusion and representation, or climate education. While these are undoubtedly important concerns, young people have also much to contribute to other substantive issues areas, from climate finance to carbon markets, the energy transition, or food systems transformation. Indeed, young people are often well-placed to appreciate the interconnection between these different issue areas and the need for systemic change at multiple scales.
- **Effective communication is key to fostering broader youth and public engagement on global climate governance.** Technical language and terminology on climate change is prevalent both in the science and policy arenas. IPCC reports, for example, are difficult to digest for lay readers and few people are proficiently familiar with UNFCCC processes, which consist of multiple negotiation tracks and items. To navigate this space, young climate leaders need support, for example, in the form of capacity building, mentoring, or linguistic interpretation. Provided with such support, youth can play an important role in communicating complex climate issues to a wider public, in a way that is easy to understand and appropriate to local context, drawing on their own experience and using innovative digital communication tools.
- **To maximise opportunities for positive change, young people can take on a variety of roles at multiple levels of governance.** This starts by recognising that young people may wear different 'hats' in their efforts to influence climate

policymaking. On the one hand, we need more young people *inside* the different arenas in which decision-making takes place. We need spaces for youth negotiators in every delegation and at every COP as well as greater inclusion of youth in national policymaking processes, where they can play an active role, for example, in the development and implementation of Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs). On the other hand, we also need a vibrant youth movement pushing for radical change *outside* of international conference rooms and national government structures, the Friday for Futures protests being a prominent example. A strategy that aims to influence climate governance at multiple levels and from multiple vantage points promises to be most effective at shifting the agenda and holding decisionmakers to account in delivering their promises to young people.

- **Effective youth leadership in climate change requires inclusivity and representation, organisational capacity, and unity.** While recognising that youth is not a uniform, homogeneous category, and there is no one-size-fits-all approach to engage young people, bridges should be built between different groups of young climate advocates to forge a cohesive and collective alliance. Importantly, youth in the Global North tend to have far more (if still limited) opportunities to influence policymaking than their peers in the Global South. This highlights the crucial importance of amplifying each other's voices, and in particular the voices of those that are suffering the brunt of climate change impacts. Facilitating mutual learning is also key to capacity building and equipping everyone with the appropriate skills and knowledge to engage meaningfully with international climate negotiations.
- **Structural reform of UNFCCC processes is imperative to ensure more meaningful youth engagement.** We need to consciously move away from ad-hoc and tokenistic youth-centric events towards a broader integration of intergenerational dialogue in international climate negotiations, even where it is conflictual. Follow-up mechanisms are urgently required to ensure that key policy demands, such as those included in the Global Youth Statement presented at COP26, are taken into account and implemented. Where young people are included in national delegations, they must be accorded with active and autonomous involvement in focal positions, with real responsibilities and decision-making powers. Young people must be able to advocate on their own terms and defend the positions they actually care about, rather than being co-opted into supporting pre-decided positions and policies. In pressing for such reforms, it may be useful for youth to exploit different spheres of influence within COPs, beyond formal negotiations, such as side events, informal meetings or internal protests.
- **Centring the climate conversation around the needs and priorities of the Most Affected People and Areas (MAPA) is a key prerequisite for achieving climate justice.** Climate justice is impossible without taking into account the lived experiences and perspectives of those who are most affected by the impacts of climate and ecological collapse. These people and communities find themselves marginalised in international negotiations despite the fact they are disproportionately at risk from climate change and bear no responsibility for the climate crisis. This is a particular concern for young people as the majority of their

generation resides in the Global South, often finding themselves below the poverty line and already experiencing the devastating impacts of climate change.

- **An intersectional approach is key to effective climate action.** Youth and other climate activist groups have pointed to the interlinkages between climate change and other pressing societal concerns – including human rights, poverty, development, economic inequality, neo-colonial extractivism, or the future of democracy – highlighting the need to address shared root causes and explore shared solutions. Importantly, this also presents opportunities for youth climate leaders and activists to build broader alliances with other environmental and social justice movements, including (but not limited to) those working on gender and Indigenous rights.
- **Recognising the multiple pressures young climate leaders face is important to ensure their well-being.** Youth climate leaders and activists often volunteer significant amounts of time and energy, with very limited financial, logistical or mental health support. The scale and gravity of the climate crisis – and the slow progress made to address it – can leave young people frustrated, anxious and potentially cynical about the prospects of climate diplomacy. This highlights the need for additional support for climate-engaged youth but also, more broadly, the importance of investing in self-care, building connections with others, finding meaning in activism, and fostering more productive narratives that centre not just on personal sacrifice and the constraints imposed by decarbonisation but also on the many opportunities presented by a climate-positive future.

This memo builds upon a workshop and public panel discussion, convened on 10 May 2022 by Xuan Zi Han (COP26 Global Youth Statement Co-Lead), Dr Tom Pogram and Julia Kreienkamp (both UCL Global Governance Institute), with support from UCL Grand Challenges and the UCL Environment Domain. The workshop brought together youth climate leaders and other stakeholders from UN constituencies, national governments, and civil society, to discuss youth engagement in the context of global climate governance. It was followed by a [public panel event](#), featuring an intergenerational dialogue between youth climate leaders and Mary Robinson (Chair of the Elders). This memo aims to serve as a summary of the discussion. It does not necessarily reflect the views of all participants.