

Youth contribution

Youth climate leaders: What are the major barriers facing young people in climate action and how can these be overcome?

*Michelle Chiperi Aivazova, James Mhina
and Sarah McIvor*

The authors of this piece Michelle, James and Sarah have all worked together as part of a project called 'SAUTI-Youth' supported by World Vision. This project works to empower Tanzanian and Irish youth to have a voice and assert their right to be meaningful participants in the different climate policy dialogues with their governments, and jointly agree on ways of improving services. The project also supports climate action activities led by youth. This case study shares perspectives from youth climate leaders Michelle and James, reflecting on their experience in engaging in climate action in their countries. Research on the project was conducted by IIED and World Vision Ireland to capture the main barriers and opportunities facing youth in working on climate action, which Sarah outlines below.

MICHELLE CHIPERI AIVAZOVA, YOUTH CLIMATE LEADER, IRELAND

Climate action has recently gained traction as a matter of pressing importance among world leaders. The discourse is extensive, with many conferences and discussions occurring around the world. However, a key piece missing from this discourse is the perspective of young people.

I have experienced many barriers in my involvement as a young person in the conversations around climate action. I have felt climate anxiety, burnout and disillusionment to my core. Hearing about the destruction that comes with climate change, I was rendered helpless in the face of such adversity. I would participate in protests, holding up signs and joining others in marches along the streets, trying my best to feel a bit better about what I could see happening. The protests received mixed reviews from the general public, but people's most common reaction was to look away.

Throughout my youth, I have had to navigate physical and mental health issues – all while attempting to stave off feelings of impending doom surrounding climate change. I have often had to choose among my education, job or climate action.

I chose to become a youth leader because I wanted to contribute to change. I was passionate, and understood that for change to really happen, individual actions must be combined with local, national and international actions. I was excited, learning about politics at a local level, trying to understand how I could contribute, even when I didn't even have a vote.

However, as my involvement as a youth leader grew, I saw that the rhetoric around climate action rarely, if ever, involved youth perspectives. As youth leaders, we were ignored, and one politician even said that they would not engage with us, because we could not vote yet.

Although most of my experiences as a climate youth leader have been negative, I have found positive spaces that have allowed me to feel heard. Youth groups such as SAUTI-Youth (Sustainable Accountability Uniting Tanzanian and Irish Youth) have provided ample opportunities for me to contribute to change in my local area. SAUTI trained us in the Citizen Voice and Action model, whereby communities are encouraged to hold their local authorities accountable.

Through SAUTI, I have managed to meet many local authority representatives who are interested in engaging young people in climate action. Our work as youth leaders has inspired some local representatives to contribute to the process of youth consultation on climate, which we have been undertaking as a project.

I have felt truly valued and heard by politicians and local authority representatives who take the time out to engage me as a young person in

decision-making. Collaborating to bring about change means that the weight on our shoulders can be distributed in a way that feels fair.

JAMES MHINA, YOUTH CLIMATE LEADER, TANZANIA

Climate change is real, it's bad, it's our fault, but we should do something. It's not inevitable, but the best way to fight it is to include youth from local to international levels, since young people are the core towards any change worldwide.

As a climate youth leader, I've been through ups and downs in my journey towards climate action, but first there were things that motivated me to participate in climate action, like having knowledge about climate change, which I got from school studies, and different environmental platforms, which made me aware of climate issues.

Also, the effects of climate change in my society triggered my involvement in climate action. Droughts, severe water scarcity and food insecurity due to lack of rain – all these socioeconomic hardships were common as a result of climate change. So for me to act for climate change was inevitable, since I saw there was no solution other than to help my society by getting involved in climate action.

As a youth climate leader, I faced some challenges and hardships while organising other youth in order to create awareness of climate issues in society. Most of my fellow youth were the cause of destruction of the environment. Most of the economic activities performed by youth were against environmental preservation, such as lumbering, charcoal businesses and production of local burned blocks. So it was hard transforming them to be environmental experts.

Also, at first, I lacked support from my family, since they wished I would fight for my own life, especially by working in town, rather than wasting time encouraging people about climate issues.

I was ignored by the community and seen as having nothing to do, since people thought they have bigger problems in life than climate change, so climate action was a topic they didn't want to hear. Also, it was hard to get support from young people, since they concentrated on their own economic activities and they didn't want to waste their time on climate issues.

In addition, the culture and beliefs of people in the community conflicted with the struggle against climate change, as people believe God is in control of climate change and there's nothing they can do.

Also, the fact that young people were not involved in community meetings made it hard to affect local policies and bylaws that are positive around climate issues.

Despite having these challenges, still there were some solutions and opportunities that helped to overcome the challenges.

As a youth leader, with the help of other youths, we managed to set up economic projects that are making a positive contribution to the climate, like a beekeeping project, which helps youth earn money for their daily needs and replaces the activities that were undermining environmental preservation.

Also, the rise of youth participation in society meetings, and the presence of non-governmental organisations like World Vision, has helped in fighting against climate change. The increase in awareness among society and community members towards climate action, and networking with other youth worldwide, has helped in the war against climate change. Lastly, family support – although at first, it was hard for them to support – but [having the] last laugh is better, and now here we are!

The world is a good place and worth fighting for. Let's take collective action towards climate change with full involvement of youth, from the local to the international level. Let's do our part and act as if the house is on fire – because it is.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CLIMATE POLICY-MAKERS AND PRACTITIONERS BY SARAH MCIVOR

Young people deserve to take up space in discussions around climate action. Youth perspectives must be taken into account in decision-making because these decisions directly affect young people's futures. Here are my recommendations – based on my own discussions and research with young people – for achieving greater youth engagement in climate action.

Hold important climate meetings outside of school hours

When climate meetings take place during school or university hours, young people face an impossible choice between advancing their education and taking climate action. But there is a simple solution. These meetings could be held outside of school hours, or during school holidays or mid-term breaks. That would make it easier for young people to attend and contribute to climate action.

Build capacity of decision-makers and community members to value youth voices

Programmes often focus on building youth capacity to engage with policy-makers and decision-makers, which is of course a useful skill to have. But what about the other way around? Is there sufficient capacity among decision-makers to engage with and value youth voices? Young people

told us that even when they have the skills and understanding to engage more effectively with decision-makers, their voice is often not appreciated, respected or valued. When older people talk over them in meetings, or do not listen to their perspectives, they feel disempowered. It is therefore vital to strengthen the capacity of older people as well as younger people to appreciate the importance and value of each other's perspectives and to create a supportive and empowering environment for youth engagement on climate issues.

**Incorporate youth-led approaches into climate programmes
that build new skills for the climate economy and use existing
youth structures and support networks**

Young people have new ideas, perspectives and solutions to problems. Climate action can harness their potential through youth-led climate programmes and activities that give more ownership, decision-making and responsibility to young people to implement climate actions that matter to them. Incorporating youth economic empowerment and skills development activities into climate programmes can help young people build skills and generate income, while also advancing climate action. Combining the two tackles challenges around time and money and equips young people with skills for the future climate economy. Such programmes could also harness the supportive agency that exists surrounding young people, making use of youth workers, friends and teachers and building on existing youth groups and youth structures. Programmes could also harness the opportunities presented by social media for sharing ideas around climate action.

**Communicate climate information in a straightforward,
youth-friendly and easy-to-understand way**

Climate information is usually full of technical jargon and acronyms (such as COP [Conference of the Parties], UNFCCC [United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change], and IPCC [Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change]). This can intimidate and alienate young people, and many others too! Communicating climate information in a straightforward, youth-friendly and easy-to-understand way can enhance climate understanding and learning among young people. From embedding interactive learning through games and role-plays to creating safe, comfortable spaces to learn, ask questions and receive honest and informed answers, there are many ways to help young people build their understanding and confidence to engage in climate action.

Consider all the intersecting inequalities young people face to achieve inclusive engagement in climate action work

Young people experience a range of intersecting inequalities based on age, gender, race, geography, socioeconomic status, ability and other factors – all of which can affect their ability to engage in climate action. For example, in Tanzania, we found that young women advancing climate action were restricted by community expectations not to be outspoken and to prioritise family responsibilities. In both Ireland and Tanzania, young people with disabilities found it harder to get to meetings on time and to conduct some climate activities (such as community surveys). Becoming aware of the constraints that affect different groups of young people is the first step to factoring in additional support to overcome those barriers. For example, building community awareness can help remove restrictive gender norms that prevent girls from engaging in climate action, while including accessible climate activities can increase access for young people with disabilities. Climate programmes need to consider these issues if they are to fully engage young people and ensure inclusive action.

Today's young people are tomorrow's climate policy-makers and world leaders. They will also inherit the responsibility for dealing with climate change. It is therefore vital to include young people's perspectives now in climate decision-making forums and across climate programmes. This will help recognise and harness the potential of youth as climate leaders, now and in the future.