

Youth Engagement and the SDGs: Pathways to Meaningful Participation in Sustainable Development

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Abstract

The active participation of youth is crucial to achieving the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially considering that young people constitute over 40% of the global population. Despite their demographic significance and potential as agents of change, youth are often marginalized in policy formulation and implementation processes. This paper explores the role of youth engagement in advancing the SDGs, identifying mechanisms for meaningful participation and the challenges that hinder inclusive involvement. Drawing from case studies in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, and utilizing a qualitative research method, the paper highlights successful strategies in youth-led development, policy advocacy, and innovation. It argues that meaningful youth engagement—anchored in capacity building, inclusive governance, and digital platforms—can significantly accelerate progress towards the 2030 Agenda. The study concludes with recommendations for governments, civil society, and international institutions to institutionalize youth participation in sustainable development.

INTRODUCTION

Youth represent one of the most dynamic and influential demographics in the world. According to the UN (2022), there are over 1.8 billion people aged 10 to 24, making youth engagement not only a moral imperative but a developmental necessity. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development emphasizes the importance of youth participation across multiple goals, particularly SDG 4 (quality education), SDG 8 (decent work), and SDG 16 (inclusive societies) (Rahmat & Alawiyah, 2020; Putri et al., 2020; Ardinata et al., 2022; Rahmat et al., 2021; Marufah et al., 2020; Bastian et al., 2021; Alawiyah et al., 2020; Rahmat, 2019; Syarifah et al., 2020). Yet, young people are frequently sidelined in decision-making processes. While many programs target youth as beneficiaries, fewer initiatives enable youth to shape policy, lead development projects, or monitor implementation. Without active youth participation, the goals of inclusivity and sustainability remain elusive (Muara et al., 2021; Rahmat et al., 2021; Pratikno et al., 2020; Priambodo et al., 2020; Rahmanisa et al., 2021; Rahmat & Budiarto, 2021; Zakiyah et al., 2022; Hakim et al., 2020; Rahmat et al., 2021; Utama et al., 2020; Adri et al., 2020; Yuliarta & Rahmat, 2021; Rahmat & Kurniadi, 2020; Rahmat et al., 2020; Rahmat et al., 2020).

This paper investigates the importance of youth engagement in sustainable development, focusing on how youth can meaningfully participate in achieving the SDGs. The central research questions are:

- What roles do youth currently play in advancing the SDGs?
- What are the key barriers to meaningful youth participation?
- What mechanisms can promote more inclusive, sustained youth engagement?

METHODS

This study adopts a qualitative research approach, employing literature review and comparative case study analysis to explore youth participation in sustainable development. Thematic content analysis was used to identify patterns and strategies in youth engagement. The comparative case study method facilitated understanding of contextual differences and successful models of youth involvement (Rahmat, 2019; Banjarnahor et al., 2020; Rahmat et al., 2020; Gustaman et al., 2020; Rahmat et al., 2022; Kodar et al., 2020; Najib & Rahmat, 2021; Rahmat et al., 2020; Widyaningrum et al., 2020; Yurika et al., 2022; Muara et al., 2021; Aminullah et al., 2021; Wulandara & Rahmat, 2024; Ardinata et al., 2023; Pamungkas & Rahmat, 2023; Rahmat et al., 2020; Febrina & Rahmat, 2024; Rahmat, 2023).

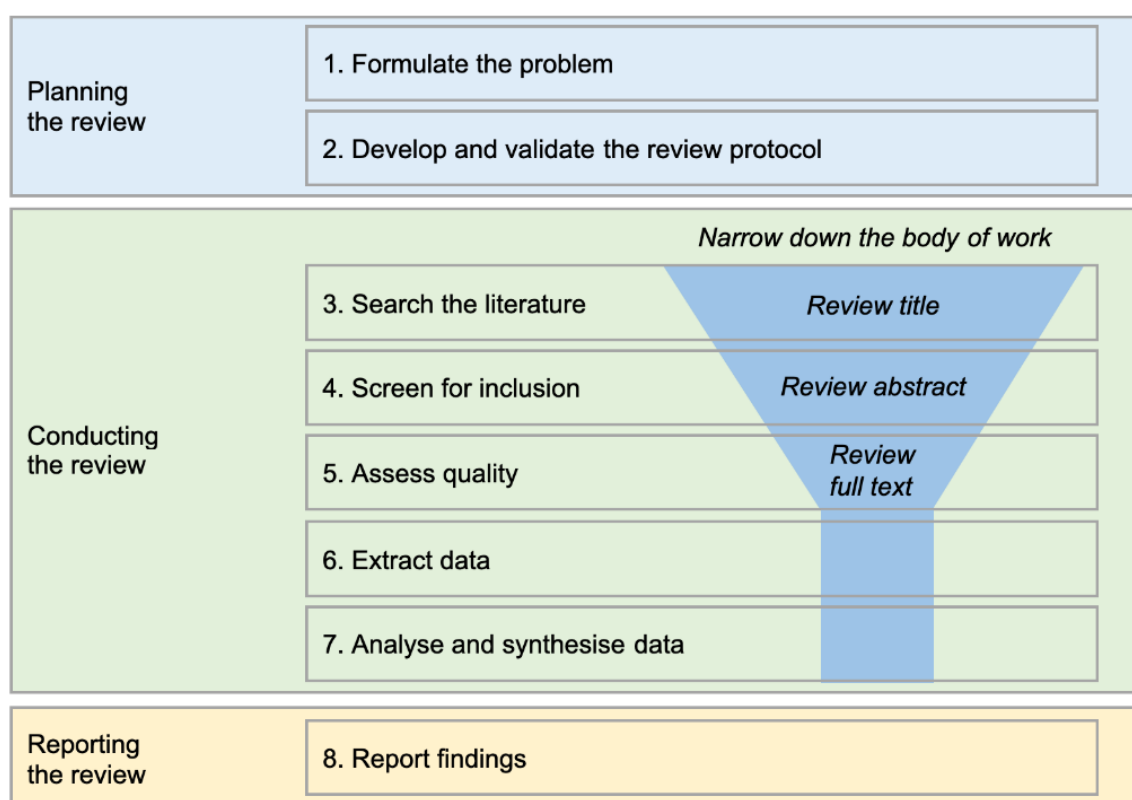


Figure 1. Interactive Model for Literature Review

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The Importance of Youth in the SDGs Framework

The SDGs recognize youth as both stakeholders and drivers of change. Several goals directly or indirectly relate to youth development:

- SDG 4 aims to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education, a critical enabler of youth agency.
- SDG 8 promotes employment and entrepreneurship, addressing youth unemployment.
- SDG 13 calls for climate action, where youth have led some of the most visible global campaigns.
- SDG 16 focuses on peace and justice, encouraging youth participation in governance and civic life.

As noted by Sachs et al. (2020), without tapping into the energy, creativity, and resilience of youth, the pace of SDG progress will remain insufficient.

Pathways to Meaningful Youth Participation

Youth-Led Innovation and Entrepreneurship. Young people are increasingly launching social enterprises and tech-driven solutions that address local sustainability challenges. For example, in Kenya,

the “Green Generation Initiative” led by youth climate activist Elizabeth Wathuti combines environmental conservation with education. Youth entrepreneurship in renewable energy and recycling has also shown promise in many African and Southeast Asian countries (UNDESA, 2020; Ma’dika & Rahmat, 2024; Saputra & Rahmat, 2024; Nurmalasari et al., 2022; Pratama et al., 2024; Rahmat, 2024; Rahmat & Pernanda, 2021; Rahmat et al., 2021; Rahmat et al., 2022; Akbar et al., 2024; Rahmat et al., 2023, Baarik et al., 2023; Rahmat et al., 2024).

Civic Engagement and Policy Advocacy. In countries like Colombia, youth movements such as Jóvenes por el Clima have influenced climate legislation and urban sustainability planning. Through protests, petitions, and lobbying, young people are shaping policies on education, environmental justice, and equality (UNDP, 2022).

Participation in Institutional Processes. Mechanisms like youth councils, student parliaments, and UN Youth Delegates offer formal entry points for youth input. In Indonesia, the National Youth Service includes SDG education and voluntary service in rural communities, empowering young people as development ambassadors (BAPPENAS, 2021).

Digital Engagement. Digital platforms have expanded opportunities for youth participation, especially during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Platforms like U-Report (by UNICEF) allow young people to voice opinions on national policies, while Youth4Climate connects global youth to co-design climate solutions.

Barriers to Meaningful Participation

Despite numerous opportunities, systemic barriers limit youth inclusion:

- a. **Tokenism:** Many youth programs involve symbolic participation without real influence over decisions (Hart, 1992).
- b. **Resource Constraints:** Limited access to funding, mentorship, and networks restrict youth-led initiatives.
- c. **Lack of Representation:** Rural youth, indigenous youth, and youth with disabilities are often excluded from mainstream development programs.
- d. **Intergenerational Power Imbalances:** Adult-centric governance structures often marginalize youth voices.

Moreover, education systems often do not equip youth with the civic, digital, or leadership skills needed to engage meaningfully in policy processes (World Youth Report, 2020; Nurhadiyanta et al., 2023; Rahmat et al., 2023; Rahmat et al., 2018; Rahmat et al., 2024; Hasrian et al., 2023; Akbar et al., 2024; Rahmat, 2024; Piliang et al., 2024; Wahyuni et al., 2024; Priantoro et al., 2024; Hasrian & Rahmat, 2024, Syazali et al., 2023; Rahmat et al., 2024; Ma’ruf & Rahmat, 2024; Rahmat et al., 2024; Meidiyustiani & Rahmat, 2024; Ma’ruf & Rahmat, 2024; Aprilyanto et al., 2023).

Recommendations

To enhance youth participation in sustainable development, the following steps are recommended:

- a. **Institutionalize Youth Participation:** Governments and development agencies should create permanent platforms for youth consultation in SDG planning and reporting.
- b. **Invest in Youth Capacity Building:** Focus on skills such as project management, public speaking, digital literacy, and policy analysis.
- c. **Ensure Inclusivity:** Engage marginalized youth groups through targeted outreach, accessible materials, and translation into local languages.
- d. **Fund Youth-Led Initiatives:** Provide microgrants and mentoring for youth-led SDG projects, particularly in rural areas.

- e. Promote Intergenerational Dialogue: Create safe and respectful spaces where youth and adults collaborate on equal footing.

CONCLUSIONS

Youth are not just the leaders of tomorrow—they are essential partners in shaping today's sustainable development strategies. Their energy, creativity, and proximity to community needs make them uniquely positioned to accelerate SDG implementation. However, for youth engagement to be meaningful, it must be systemic, inclusive, and sustained. The SDGs present a unique opportunity to reimagine development through a youth lens. By recognizing young people as co-creators rather than mere beneficiaries, societies can unlock transformative solutions to poverty, inequality, climate change, and more. As the 2030 deadline draws closer, prioritizing youth engagement is not an option—it is a necessity.

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