POLICY REPORT

Rebuilding Youth Trust in Inclusive Governance and Multilateralism

The Journalists and Writers Foundation (JWF) is an international civil society organization dedicated to the culture of peace, human rights, and sustainable development. The JWF promotes diversity and inclusion by creating forums for intellectual and social engagement; generates and shares knowledge with stakeholders, builds partnerships worldwide and develops policy recommendations for positive social change.

JOURNALISTS AND WRITERS FOUNDATION

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1.0 Executive Summary

In today's world, humanity is witnessing the largest youth demographic in recorded history, 1.8 billion young people whose passion, ingenuity, and compassion hold the power to shape our shared future. Yet, despite their immense potential, most remain excluded from the very institutions that define the course of their lives. Authored by the JWF Summer 2025 Research Interns, this policy brief examines how trust between young people and governments can be rebuilt through strengthened transparency, genuine inclusivity, and shared leadership. It argues that youth must not only be invited into decision-making spaces but equipped with the authority and opportunity to co-lead the processes that influence local, national, and global realities.

Drawing on evidence, from expert interviews and street conversations with young people, this report identifies the underlying barriers to youth engagement in multilateral spaces and makes practical proposals towards change. It contributes to the Pact for the Future (2024) and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 5, 10, 16, and 17 by urging more responsive, equitable, and inclusive systems to the ambitions of young people. Restoring youth trust is not a matter of goodwill, it is a matter of necessity. The sustainability of multilateralism depends on the inclusion of those who will inherit it.

2.0 Key Findings

1

Youth participation in governance remains largely symbolic, as young people continue to face barriers to meaningful involvement despite comprising the largest generation in history.

2

Institutional and structural obstacles persist, including outdated recruitment systems, limited access to information, and unequal funding opportunities that prevent equitable engagement in diplomacy and governance.

3

Growing trust deficit separates youth from institutions, driven by tokenistic engagement, lack of transparency, and insufficient accountability mechanisms.

4

Civil society initiatives demonstrate effective alternatives, with programs such as JWF's Global Youth Leadership Programme and youth-driven dialogues at United Nations (UN) platforms translating participation into concrete leadership experience and measurable impact.

5

Intergenerational co-leadership is essential, as sustainable governance requires shared responsibility, mentorship, and cooperation between experienced leaders and emerging youth voices.

6

Long-term reform depends on systemic accountability and inclusive representation, Youth participation must be embedded within permanent institutional frameworks at both national and multilateral levels.

3.0 Introduction

In every generation, the question of trust defines the relationship between people and power. For today's youth, that trust has been **eroded by experiences of exclusion, disappointment, and institutional distance** from the institutions meant to support them.

The global discourse has shifted from talking about youth to engaging with them, however, this shift has not always led to genuine participation, even though young people remain one of the most active and creative forces driving innovation and peacebuilding. Despite their significance, youth participation in decision-making remains limited.

This policy brief seeks to bridge that gap. It aims to understand the reasons behind unequal representation, explore how trust can be rebuilt through greater inclusion and recognition, and propose ways for policies to ensure that youth become true partners in shaping decisions rather than passive contributors to discussion.

By linking the principles of inclusivity with real-world experiences, this paper highlights that sustainable global governance depends on building bridges between generations, combining the insight and experience of older leaders with the energy and vision of youth.

3.1. Background and Rationale

During the last decade the international community has acknowledged that young people should not be treated as recipients of policies but as active participants in global governance. 1.8 billion people fall within the age range of 10 to 24 years. The world has never seen a larger youth population. The perspectives of young professionals serve as essential tools for solving international challenges including climate change, digital transformation, economic insecurity, rising conflict among the other global setbacks. Young citizens compose a significant percentage of national populations, yet they maintain limited access to decision-making positions. The purpose of this policy brief is to establish a connection between theoretical youth inclusion and actual meaningful participation.

> " Young people must no longer be treated as recipients of policy, but as active participants in global governance. "

3.2. Purpose and Scope of the Report

This report is intended to achieve three objectives:

Identifying Challenges: To map the current context in which young people participate, or do not participate, in governance and multilateral institutions, highlighting significant gaps in participation, systemic challenges, and structural barriers.

Highlighting Best Practices: To highlight the current directives, creative projects, and effective models (in the UN and civil society) that are successfully empowering young people.

Providing Policy Suggestions: To present achievable steps of global youth engagement based on the ideals of transparency, inclusiveness, accountability, and intergenerational co-leadership.

3.3 Which SDGs and commitments at the Pact for the Future this policy brief contributes?

This policy brief contributes to several Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs):

SDG 5 (Gender Equality): by integrating intersectional youth perspectives, especially through intergovernmental platforms including the UN Commission on the Status of Women (CSW).
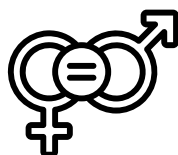
SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities): by addressing barriers that exclude marginalized youth from governance processes.

SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions): by promoting inclusive decision-making and building institutional trust.

SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals): by advancing intergenerational and cross-sectoral partnerships as a foundation for sustainable progress.

In line with the Pact for the Future adopted in 2024 during the Summit of the Future on the occasion of the UN General Assembly 79th Session, this brief advocates for the idea of a renewed multilateral system that is more accessible, diverse, and responsive to the opinions of youth. By embracing an intergenerational solidarity and shared leadership, it reinforces the Pact for the Future's demand for comprehensive reforms that guarantee the transfer of institutions capable of resolving current and future issues to future generations.
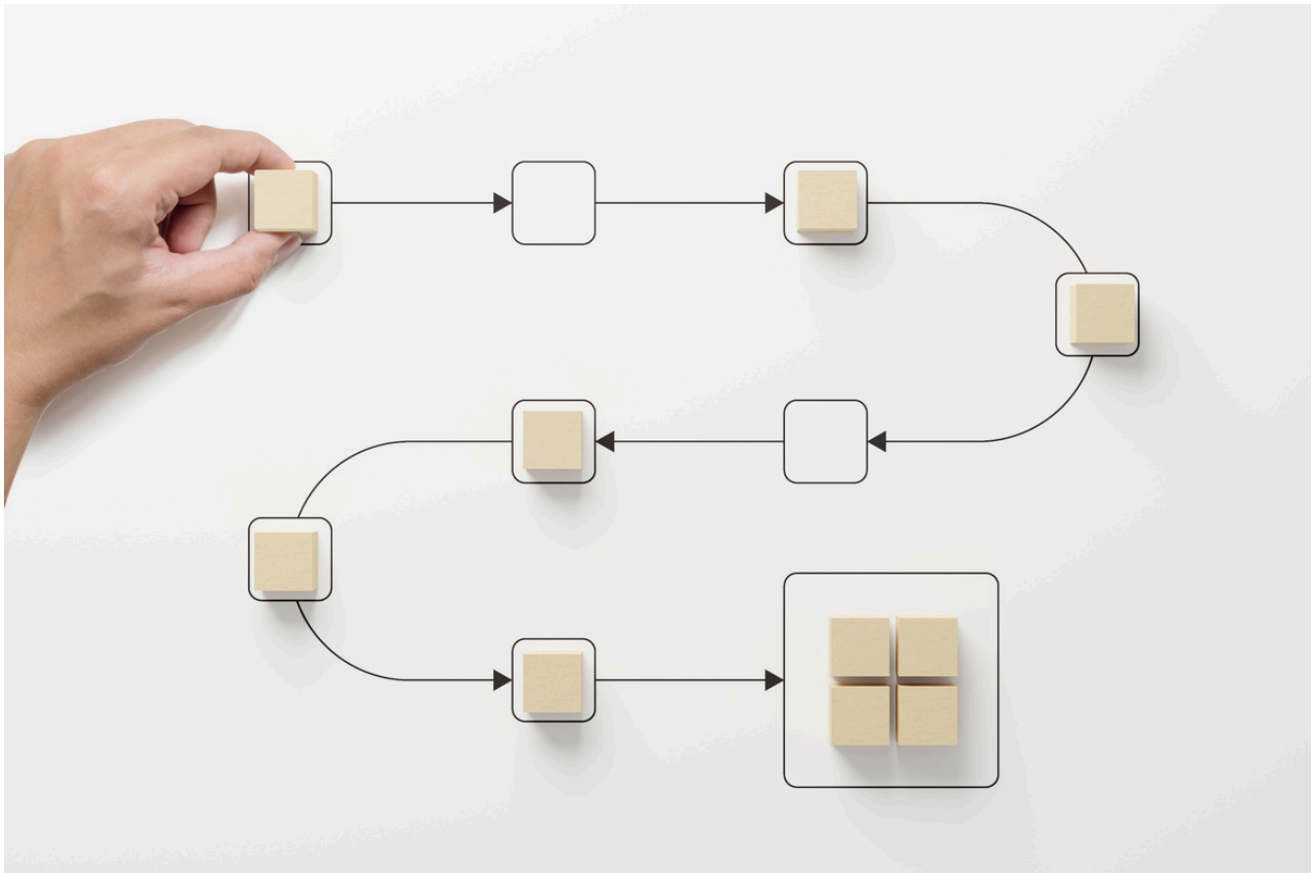
4.0 Understanding the Landscape

Understanding the landscape of youth participation in governance and multilateral institutions is essential for identifying both the opportunities and the persistent barriers shaping young people's engagement. Without a clear grasp of the structural, systemic, and institutional realities that define how youth interact with political systems, policies risk being aspirational rather than transformative. Mapping these dynamics highlights where gaps in participation emerge, reveals how broader social and technological changes reshape the civic environment, and exposes entrenched inequalities that undermine trust and inclusion. In this sense, understanding the landscape is not only a diagnostic exercise but also a foundation for designing evidence-based policy interventions that can meaningfully strengthen intergenerational trust and institutional legitimacy.

4.1. Participation Gaps Stagnating Youth Participation

Youth advocates have several interconnected gaps that cohesively decrease their ability and willingness to participate in intergovernmental and diplomatic platforms:

Participation challenges. Despite the fact that they tend to make up most national populations, young people's participation in institutional political life remains to be unbalanced. This is reflected in low electoral turnout among 18–30-year-olds across most settings, low levels of participation in public consultations, and being denied spaces on formal negotiation tables in national and multilateral contexts. Globally, only 2.6% of parliamentarians are under the age of 30, and less than 1% of them are women, while the average age of national leaders remains above 60 (IPU, 2021). Within UN diplomacy, youth make up less than 1% of official delegates in multilateral negotiations, highlighting the sharp disconnect between the size of the global youth population and their presence in high-level decision-making.
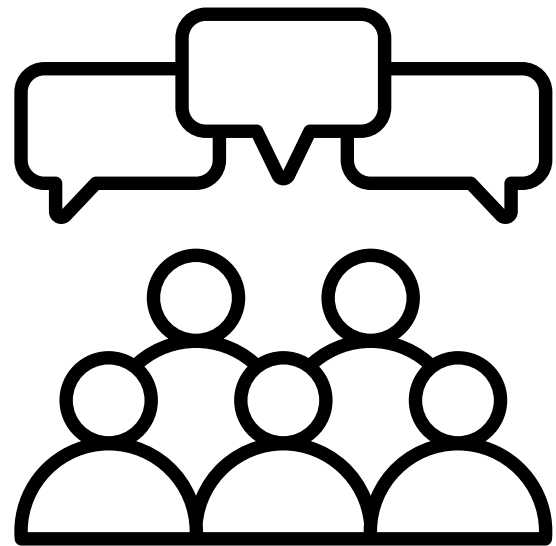
Representation gap. Institutional representation, parliamentary seats, executive roles, party and multilateral delegation leadership, continues to be dominated by older generations. Youth, where they hold office at all, are advisory or symbolic and lack to participate meaningfully at decision-making mechanisms. This representation gap sends a clear message to broader youth electorates that influential positions at government offices are not accessible for them to lead a long-lasting impact.

Limited resources for information & opportunities. There is not equal access to concrete information providing youth advocates with a guideline on how to participate and where to access resources for political and diplomatic empowerment. Youth in rural towns, inner city neighborhoods without formal institutions, or economically marginalized neighborhoods are particularly disadvantaged civic education, limited mentorship programs and networking opportunities, and lack of financing for youth-driven projects.
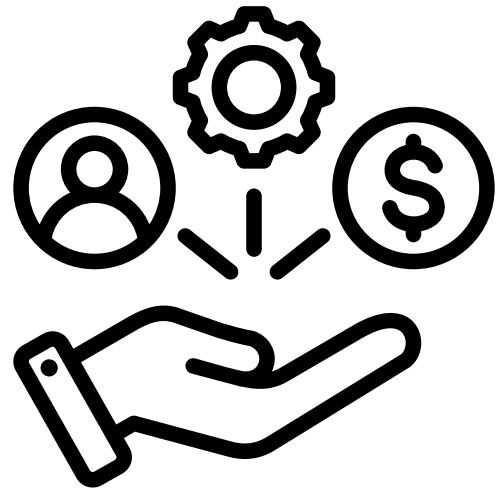
Trust deficit. Perceived low legitimacy of institutions, corruption, inefficiency, or past exclusion, lowers young people's inclination to invest time and effort in institutional career building. This trust deficit becomes self-reinforcing where institutions fail, youth disengage; where youth disengage, institutions lose the mandate and feedback to become more accountable. For example, UNICEF Innocenti (2024) reports that 81% of youth described their roles in multilateral processes as tokenistic, and 94% said they lacked sufficient institutional support. This highlights how limited influence erodes confidence and discourages long-term engagement.

Collectively, these inequalities are mutually reinforcing: poor representation engenders mistrust; limited information stifles participation; low participation perpetuates disparities. **Effective policy must therefore address the entire constellation of challenges, not just isolated symptoms.**

4.2 Systemic Challenges and New Risks

There are a number of systemic barriers and dominant hindering trends complicating the youth participation in leadership including:

Polarization and culture of suspicion. Increasing political polarization, most often originating from social media spaces, generates unhealthy public spaces in which deliberative engagement is difficult to attain. Polarized spaces promote performative involvement and discourage the sort of cross-cutting coalition-building that follows strong pluralist institutions. This environment undermines civic norms and increases intergenerational stress when cohorts experience conflicting priorities.

Constrained resources and institutional capacity. A majority of youth serving at institutions of governance are working within constrained budget and personnel limitations. Constrained resources limit the availability and range of possible opportunities to be created for youth (e.g., youth councils, internships, participatory budgeting processes). Shortfalls in capacity also hinder the ability of institutions to create inclusive participation mechanisms or effectively integrate youthful inputs into policy processes.

Cyber-age Challenges: disinformation, moderation breakdown, and algorithmic echo chambers. Online platforms are empowering as well as disenfranchising youth civic participation. As digital technology lowers the cost of mobilization transactions, it also lowers the cost of spreading disinformation and polarized content, decreases cross-cutting opinion exposure, and can generate targeted manipulation of youth segments. Low levels of digital skill and low-quality content moderation enable the establishment of spaces that can dis-enfranchise young people off the mainstream channels to segregated or radicalized spaces.

Climate change and economic insecurity. Accelerating environmental changes and unstable labor markets are reshaping youth aspirations. When institutions fail to respond effectively to climate risks or economic hardships, young people experience frustration and disengagement, which deepens intergenerational distrust.

Authoritarian backsliding. In some contexts, legal restrictions on freedom of association, expression, and assembly primarily burden young movements and emerging groups. Legal restrictions, surveillance, or oppressive legislation has chilling effects that deter people from participating and centralize power with the powerful actors. According to CIVICUS's *People Power Under Attack 2024* report, only 40 out of 198 countries and territories have an open civic space rating, reflecting widespread respect for civic freedoms. By contrast, 81 countries are rated as repressed or closed, indicating systemic violations of fundamental rights. In total, 72.4% of the global population lives under repressive civic space conditions, and nearly 30% live in countries where civic space is completely closed. These conditions directly affect young people, who are often at the forefront of protest movements. Predominantly youth-led mobilizations against poor governance in 2024 were met with widespread repression, including mass arrests numbering in the thousands. CIVICUS documented disruptions of protests in at least 53 countries, with excessive force recorded in 41 of them. Such patterns demonstrate how shrinking civic space severely undermines the safety of youth participation, reducing opportunities for peaceful advocacy and reinforcing cycles of exclusion from decision-making.

These system-level problems are linked to each other and tend to interact with each other dynamically: e.g., economic crises may make younger and older generations more susceptible to polarized material on the internet, while low institutional capacity limits the capacity to respond.

4.3 Structural and Institutional Barriers

Besides generic system drivers, there are certain structural features of political institutions and systems that inherently exclude or marginalize youth:

Legal and procedural formal barriers. Age limits of political candidacy and appointment, advisory committee qualifications, or limiting accreditation procedures for civil society participation at intergovernmental arenas, formally prohibit or restrict the youth from participating in decision-making bodies. Even if the law is non-discriminatory, procedural complexity and bureaucratic screening can function de facto as a preventive measure.

Institutional cultures and informal norms. Institutions predominantly have norms that prioritizes seniority, technocratic credentials, or closed networks. Institutional cultures cut out voices with no pre-existing access to elite networks and dislike risk-taking or new ideas that the young generation would otherwise bring.

Funding and resource structures. Philanthropic and public funding mechanisms are predominantly oriented toward established organizations with long institutional track records and formalized structures. Youth organizations, typically smaller in scale, informally constituted, and volunteer-led, are often unable to meet stringent grant requirements, leaving them systematically disadvantaged in accessing resources and deprived of the organizational capacity and resilience needed for long-term impact.

Participation mechanism design. Consultation processes are sometimes poorly timed or designed, happening at moments when decisions already have been made, inaccessible through timing or locale, or without back-checking mechanisms that feedback on how inputs were utilized. Tokenistic mechanisms (such as advisory committees with no mandate or resources) add further to the impression of performative rather than substantive participation.

Intersectional and spatial exclusion. Age is added to structural exclusion to produce cumulative disadvantages among rural young people, ethnic and linguistic minorities, disabled people, migrants, and young women. Centre-floored decision-making exerts power over capitals and world cities and places their peripheries out of reach from these centres.

Accountability and monitoring gaps. Ineffective monitoring of inclusion pledges and a lack of transparency into decision-making processes complicate assessment of whether youth participation is substantive. Without measurable targets and sanctions, reform remains wishful thinking.

Finally, structural constraints develop circular feedback: exclusion reduces the number of experienced young players who could have flourished at leadership positions, repeating cycles of generational underrepresentation and discrediting institutional renewal.

It is critical to these gaps, system pressures, and concrete barriers that provides the diagnostic impetus for policy intervention realignment. Effective interventions should be multi-pronged: legal and procedural reform; investment in organizational capacity and youth organizations; digital and civic literacy initiatives; and procedures for translating participation into concrete impact.

5.0 Core Principles for Rebuilding Youth Trust in Diplomacy

Rebuilding youth trust in diplomacy and multilateralism requires building a bridge between the past and the future. The wisdom of older generations forms the foundation, while the energy and vision of youth represent the road ahead. Both sides are indispensable; only through harmony and mutual respect can this transition be sustainable. If cooperation fails today, tomorrow will inherit the unresolved problems of the present.

Between 2017 and 2023, young people active in multilateral forums reported barriers undermining their trust. 94% cited insufficient support, pointing to the need for guidance before, during, and after participation, as well as financial and logistical help. 90% felt spaces were not inclusive, citing barriers such as disability inaccessibility or visa restrictions. 81% observed that their voices were allowed but not reflected in decisions, while 76% described environments as exploitative, with predetermined agendas limiting authentic contribution. Finally, 56% noted the absence of follow-up mechanisms to track youth input.

At the same time, youth themselves highlighted solutions: pre-participation training, youth-centered approaches, hybrid participation, and stronger accountability measures. These findings form the basis for three guiding principles, transparency and accountability, inclusiveness and representation, and intergenerational co-leadership, to rebuild youth trust in diplomacy.

5.1 Transparency and Accountability

Transparency in youth participation within diplomacy and governance entails providing clear, accurate information, establishing accessible procedures, and fostering open, meaningful communication with young people. For youth to contribute effectively, they must understand how decisions are made, who is responsible for them, and how outcomes are implemented. Accountability naturally follows transparency: leaders are expected to take responsibility for their actions, track results, and provide feedback that enables young people to learn, adapt, and meaningfully engage in the decision-making process.

Findings from Street Interviews and Expert Perspectives

Yet, between 2017–2023, 74% of youth reported no feedback mechanisms and 63% said dialogue was one-way. Economist and Policy Expert Anil Wasif, Co-Founder of BacharLorai, warned that youth contributions often remain symbolic without systems to track and institutionalize them: "It's important to create formal channels that can actually trace when ideas are developed by civil society… The question now is how do we advance it from the advocacy piece and transfer that into policy?" His observation underscores that consultation alone is insufficient if it is not coupled with structures that ensure youth ideas are carried forward into implementation.
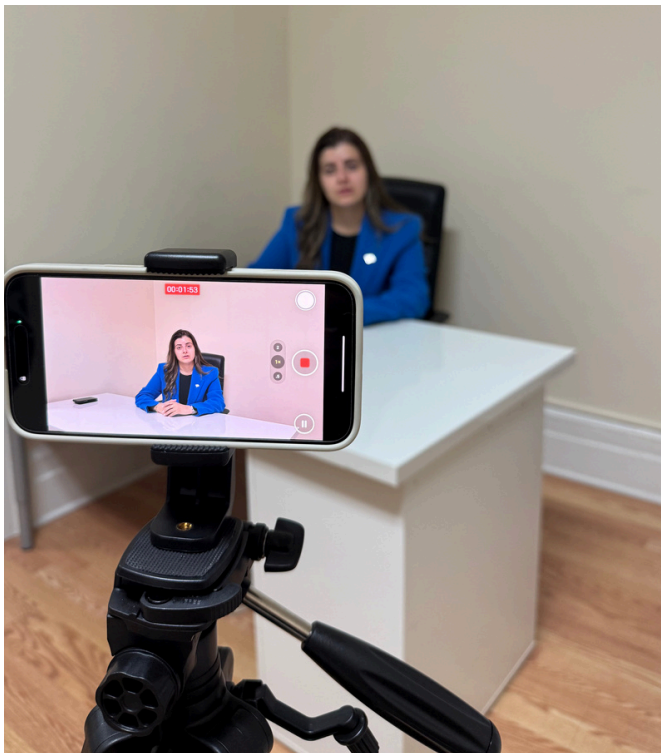
"**Words have to be backed by concrete actions.**"

- Marina El-Khawand

Founder of Medonations, Marina El-Khawand, reinforced this point, cautioning that engagement without follow-through erodes legitimacy: "Words have to be backed by concrete actions." Her own experience after the Beirut explosion showed that young leaders must build trust by proving impact, but institutions also have a responsibility to sustain that momentum through continuity mechanisms. She launched Medonations to deliver medical supplies in a moment of acute crisis. Facing public skepticism, she responded with radical transparency, tracking every donation from donor to patient, which allowed her to turn doubt into trust. Her story illustrates that while young leaders can build credibility through action, institutions must create continuity mechanisms that sustain such legitimacy beyond individual efforts.

Human rights lawyer and UN Advisor at CIVICUS, Jesselina Rana, emphasized that meaningful engagement requires institutions to recognize youth not only as participants but as co-leaders. She argued that policymakers must involve youth "from a very nascent process," ensuring that evidence, research, and youth-generated recommendations shape agenda-setting rather than appearing as afterthoughts. Her remarks echo a central theme across interviews: transparency is effective only when young people can trace their contributions throughout the full policy cycle.
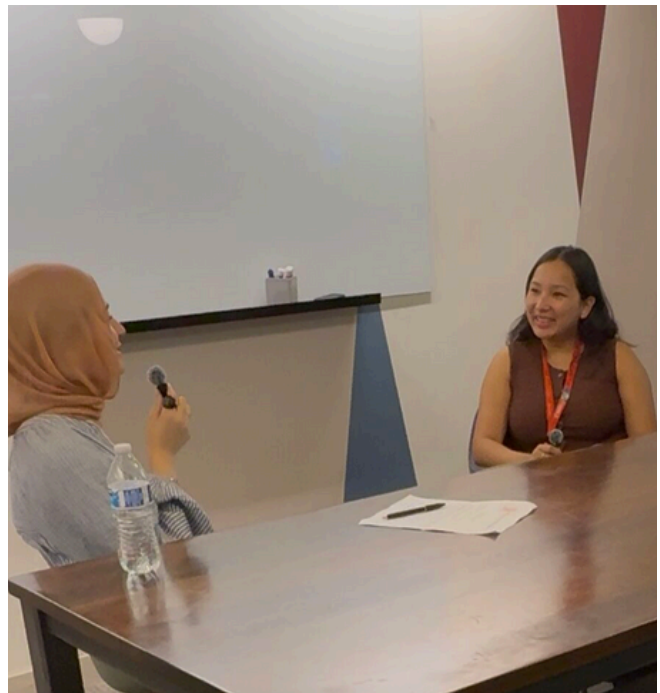
As JWF interns, we also conducted short street interviews with young people. These conversations were designed to capture grassroots perspectives, focusing only on youth voices. Their insights, placed alongside expert reflections, provide a complementary picture of how young people themselves experience barriers to trust, representation, and leadership.

Street voices mirror these concerns. One young participant bluntly stated: "Transparency means knowing where the money is going." Another described how peer and family pressure around voting silences youth, undermining open dialogue and trust.

Transparency, then, is not abstract, it requires feedback loops, youth-friendly reporting, and concrete accountability so that participation translates into tangible impact.

5.2 Inclusiveness and Representation

Exclusion undermines the promise of multilateralism. Just as a rainbow requires all its colors, global governance requires voices across religions, cultures, languages, and political identities. Yet 90% of youth feel excluded from multilateral spaces, due to inaccessible venues, visa barriers, or socioeconomic disadvantage.

Representation is equally pressing. Tokenism, still reported by 81%, must give way to genuine influence. Inclusivity means not only inviting youth but integrating their ideas into outcomes. Anil Wasif argued that youth assemblies, where diverse young people engage institutions directly, are key to inclusivity and knowledge transfer. Marina El-Khawand insisted that it is not enough to offer "a seat at the table," but to ensure a place in decision-making, supported by mentorship and resources. Founder of the International Youth Conference (IYC) and Representative of AFS to the UN, Ali Mustafa went further, proposing a dedicated UN body for youth, akin to UN Women or UNICEF, to institutionalize representation.

Thus, inclusivity and representation demand more than symbolic gestures. They demand structural reform, accessible pathways, and intentional integration of youth perspectives at every level of governance.

5.3 Intergenerational Co-Leadership

Finally, trust depends on shared leadership. Like a child learning to walk, youth need support before they can stand alone. True leadership lies not in holding power but in preparing the next generation to take it on.

Anil Wasif described millennials as the bridging generation passing knowledge from retiring baby boomers to Gen Z, possible only through genuine interaction. Ali Mustafa pointed to the Youth Steering Committee and AFS Youth Assembly, where young people co-authored outcome documents and planned conferences alongside senior leaders. Marina El-Khawand reminded us that mentorship and financial backing are critical, enabling youth-led organizations to act independently rather than remain dependent.

Street voices reinforced these points. Street interviews with young people revealed a strong sense of exclusion and frustration regarding political and international decision-making. Several participants highlighted barriers such as lack of access, family or peer pressure, and entrenched networks that favor older generations, leaving youth "outside or at the lower parts of politics." Many reported limited awareness of opportunities for civic engagement, with schools often being the primary, though insufficient, entry point for political education and participation. Financial barriers and opaque institutional processes were also cited, alongside the perception that older leaders are holding onto positions, restricting meaningful youth influence. Participants emphasized the importance of persistence, networking, and proactive engagement to navigate these obstacles, while repeatedly calling for transparency, particularly regarding the allocation of resources by institutions like the United Nations. Inclusivity was identified as the top priority for rebuilding youth trust, with respondents expressing a need for institutions to create accessible, equitable, and informed pathways for participation. Additionally, some noted that when formal channels fail, young people often turn to protests, social movements, and grassroots activism as alternative avenues for leadership and influence.

Ultimately, intergenerational co-leadership means building a culture where young people are empowered, mentored, and trusted, while senior leaders willingly share responsibility. Only then can today's bridge between generations truly carry us toward tomorrow.

6.0 Current Mandates and Best Practices
6.1 UN Youth-Focused Initiatives

The way the UN views and incorporates youth into its structures has changed gradually but significantly over the last 20 years. First introduced in 2018, the Youth2030: UN Youth Strategy represented an acknowledgement that young people are not only the recipients of policies but also collaborators and leaders in influencing global outcomes. The strategy, which focuses on accountability with the adoption of Phase II (2025–2030), calls on UN organizations to integrate youth participation through tangible results frameworks and monitoring mechanisms across all thematic areas, such as digital governance, peace and security, and climate action (Youth2030, 2025). In contrast to Phase I's aspirational tone, Phase II introduces an unprecedented accountability measure, system-wide reporting to the UN General Assembly, and commits agencies to measurable progress.

The Youth, Peace and Security (YPS) agenda, which was firmly established by UN Security Council Resolution 2250 (2015), provides a foundation for the establishment of the Youth2030 strategy. The first formal recognition of young people as non-state actors who support global peace and security was provided by this historic resolution. A paradigm shift was further demonstrated by the resolutions that followed, 2419 (2018), which called for youth to be included in formal peace processes, and 2535 (2020), which institutionalized YPS within the larger UN bodies and systems.

The normative framing has changed from viewing youth as "future leaders" to acknowledging them as actors capable of participating in peacebuilding, diplomacy, and conflict resolution efforts. However, there are still significant gaps despite these advancements. The mission and funding of institutional innovations such as the UN Youth Office (2023) are still largely limited. In his interview, International Organization of Youth Founder Ali Mustafa made the following argument: "The UN needs an independent, dedicated international organization for youth, just like UN Women or UNICEF … rather than just an office that is more like a bureaucracy."

Ali Mustafa's point highlights a tension in current UN structures: while frameworks exist, the institutional power to implement them is fragmented. It might take structural innovation, possibly a specialized agency, for young people to transition from symbolic engagement to co-decision-making. The UN DGC's Civil Society Youth Steering Committee, which Mr. Mustafa characterized as a venue where young people "were leading in planning the briefings and writing the outcomes," serves as an example of the transformative power that arises when young people are given agenda-setting authority instead of being restricted to supporting organizations.

6.2 Empowering Youth in Diplomacy, Human Rights, and Sustainable Development

Although Youth2030 and YPS have made significant normative strides, there is frequently a gap between principle and practice. The following concerning statistics are provided by UNICEF Innocenti's Meaningful Youth Engagement in the Multilateral System (2024): 81% of young participants said their roles were tokenistic, and 94% said they did not receive enough institutional support before, during, or after their involvement. This discrepancy between words and actions undermines institutional credibility.

Marina El Khawand, Founder of Medonations, captured this disillusionment in her account of founding a youth-led health nonprofit after the Beirut explosion: "Even if you start now and if you succeed with the mission, you're going to fail. But it's on us to take the lead… We are the decision makers for our future. It's not someone else who will decide our future." Her experience illustrates the trust deficit that young people frequently encounter from both community members and institutional practices.

In response, she implemented radical transparency, tracking every donated box of medicine from donor to patient, turning skepticism into legitimacy. This path to legitimacy lays out an example of UNICEF's focus on continuity mechanisms, youth engagement must include more than just the moment of participation, we need to support continuity throughout the entire lifecycle of their engagement. Ms. El-Khawand`s insistence that "I don't like the sentence 'inviting youth to raise their voice' anymore...If we are going to invite youth to join, I want to invite youth to start acting" encourages institutions to rethink youth as implementers not consultants. Ms. El-Khawand's experience highlights that building trust alone is not enough; young people also need the tools and pathways to act effectively. Moreover, human rights lawyer and UN Advisor at CIVICUS, Jesselina Rana, observed, the trust deficit runs deeper than community skepticism: "When young people are unable to see that concrete delivery of justice at home… and when the international space is unable to answer that… that's when we start losing trust in the multilateral process." Her point highlights that disillusionment with global institutions is not isolated from national governance failures; rather, youth encounter a double loss of confidence that leaves them skeptical of both domestic and international systems.

While radical transparency and agency can transform skepticism into legitimacy, structural barriers continue to limit youth participation in governance and diplomacy. As Anil Wasif, Co-Founder of Bachalorai, notes, systemic obstacles such as limited access to information prevent many young professionals from even knowing where to find opportunities in multilateral spaces, underscoring that both trust and structural support are essential for meaningful engagement.

Beyond trust, structural barriers in access to diplomacy and governance persist. Anil Wasif, Co-Founder of Bachalorai, identified three systemic obstacles:

1- Access to information – many young professionals simply do not know where to find opportunities in multilateral spaces.
2- Complex application processes – talented youth are often excluded due to opaque recruitment systems privileging those with insider knowledge.
3- Outdated employment policies – requiring disproportionate qualifications for entry-level jobs, effectively excluding many from disadvantaged backgrounds.

As Mr. Wasif explained: "Employment policies are still the same as how they were defined back in the 70s and 80s … you need a master's degree to get an entry level job." His recommendations are on parallel lines with the best practices endorsed by the UNICEF Innocenti report (2024): mentorship, customized training, and access pathways. Mr. Wasif stressed the importance in particular of convening in person: "We need to start convening young people at a variety of conferences … most knowledge transfer will not take place unless you start meeting people in person."

Mr. Wasif identified key systemic obstacles to youth employment and participation, including lack of access to information and outdated hiring policies. Mr. Mustafa, pressed the point further, arguing that the problem is embedded in the UN's very architecture: "The structural change I think the UN needs… is to have a dedicated department or independent organization for youth, just like we have UN Women, just like we have UNICEF… not just a UN Youth Office that's more like a bureaucracy." His call reframes youth inclusion not as a matter of outreach but as an issue of institutional design, suggesting that parity will only be achieved when youth have a permanent, independent platform within the UN system.

"**The structural change I think the UN needs… is to have a dedicated department or independent organization for youth, just like we have UN Women, just like we have UNICEF… not just a UN Youth Office that's more like a bureaucracy.**"

- Anil Wasif

> **"The UN itself must undergo institutional reform by establishing an independent body for youth, comparable to UN Women or UNICEF.**
>
> **- Ali Mustafa"**

Taken together, the insights from Ms. El Khawand, Ms. Rana, Mr. Wasif, and Mr. Mustafa show that meaningful youth engagement requires change at multiple levels. At the community level, Ms. El Khawand demonstrates how transparency and direct agency can turn skepticism into legitimacy, while Ms. Rana underscores how trust erodes when both national and international institutions fail to deliver tangible results. At the structural level, Mr. Wasif highlights barriers such as lack of information, burdensome recruitment processes, and outdated employment policies that prevent talented youth from entering diplomatic spaces. Mr. Mustafa pushes this further, arguing that the UN itself must undergo institutional reform by establishing an independent body for youth, comparable to UN Women or UNICEF. Together, their perspectives emphasize that trust, access, mentorship, funding, and structural redesign are all essential if youth are to move from tokenistic participation to genuine power-sharing in governance and diplomacy.

6.3 JWF's Youth Initiatives on the Sidelines of UN Platforms

In this global context, the Journalists and Writers Foundation (JWF) demonstrates how civil society can engage with UN mandates while addressing the barriers identified by young leaders. Through its Global Youth Leadership Programme (GYLP), JWF offers participants aged 18–32 a structured, globally connected learning journey that bridges international policymaking with grassroots realities. The program includes a six-session virtual seminar series covering topics such as empowerment programs, gender equality, peacebuilding, climate action, and interfaith engagement, culminating in a certificate of completion. Participants also develop practical leadership, teamwork, communication, and policy advocacy skills through interactive discussions with diplomats, experts, and UN-affiliated professionals. Crucially, GYLP emphasizes youth-led outputs: participants produce blog posts, attend or reflect on local and global events, and deliver projects like webinars, infographics, or presentations at SDG roundtables, ensuring that training translates into tangible advocacy and empowerment.

Beyond GYLP, JWF's Media and Journalism Webinars 2025 have further strengthened youth capacities in media advocacy, engaging 166 participants from 33 countries and connecting them with over 37 media experts to enhance global reporting skills. The program's reach and diversity cultivate an inclusive network of emerging youth leaders, while its action-oriented approach ensures that skill-building is paired with real-world impact.

JWF has consistently been at the forefront in fostering youth-led perspectives at the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW). Youth-led panels have been designated platforms at CSW Side-Events, providing opportunities for uninterrupted dialogue with UN stakeholders and Member States. These hands-on diplomatic engagements are among the practices that UNICEF deems important, including inclusive representation, pre-engagement planning, and consistent follow-up.

Recent panels convened by youth leaders include:

- **"Youth Leadership in Promoting Gender Sensitive Climate Action"**

This virtual panel featured young leaders discussing the intersection of gender and climate action. jwf.org

- **"InnovaSHEon: Women's Empowerment through Innovation and Technology"**

This hybrid panel took place in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, in collaboration with UN Women Kyrgyzstan, UNDP Kyrgyzstan, Women Techmakers Bishkek, and Compass College. The event focused on women's empowerment through innovation and technology, with discussions on the role of women in STEM fields. jwf.org

- **"Increasing Challenges Faced by Women Civil Society Members"**

Organized during the CSW69 session, this panel addressed the complex challenges facing women civil society members and offered actionable recommendations to protect and empower them. jwf.org

- **"Pathways to Ensure Women's Equal Access to Global Health"**

This virtual side event brought together leading voices in global health, technology, and social medicine to examine barriers to gender equity in healthcare and highlight strategies for promoting women's equal access to health services worldwide.

These panels exemplify JWF's commitment to amplifying youth voices and fostering meaningful engagement in global discussions on gender equality and women's empowerment.

Mr. Mustafa's principle also offers a useful lens to interpret JWF's model: "It is not always about financial resources. It is about combining assets and resources from all sides and making things doable." Global Youth Leadership Programme and Media and Journalism Webinars, empowering emerging media professionals, initiatives various best-practices on impactful strategies presenting how NGOs can help young people take on leadership roles in global governance and engage with high ranking policy-makers in international bodies where young people are impacted by intersectional obstacles..
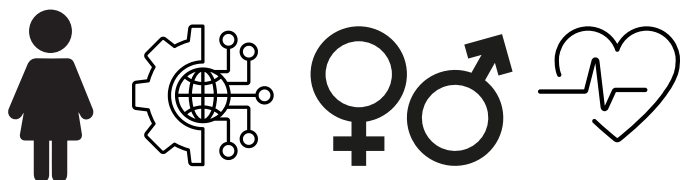
> **"It is not always about financial resources. It is about combining assets and resources from all sides and making things doable."**
> **- Ali Mustafa**

7.0 Strategic Priorities for the Next Decade

Over the next decade, rebuilding youth trust and consolidating meaningful engagement must move beyond consultation toward long-lasting system-wide transformation. The priority is clear: elevate young professionals from the margins to positions of decision-making authority.

Foundational Changes

Long-Term Structural Reforms

Binding mechanisms for youth participation: Establish advisory councils with legislated roles, youth seats on delegations, and mandatory quotas to ensure that youth are not merely consulted but co-decide on global priorities.

Accessible, accredited capacity-building programs: Strengthen civic literacy, negotiation, and policy analysis, enabling youth to contribute as equal partners today, not tomorrow.

Inclusive digital engagement platforms: Pilot secure, accessible digital tools for civic participation with strong privacy safeguards to modernize engagement while closing the digital divide.

Sustainable funding streams: Secure predictable, multi-year financing for youth-led organizations, reducing bureaucracy and enabling innovation. Without financial security, youth influence remains fragile.

Cross-sectoral mainstreaming: Integrate youth perspectives into climate, economic, health, education, and other policies through inter-ministerial coordination, shifting engagement from symbolic to systemic.

Institutionalized accountability: Develop standardized indicators and independent review mechanisms to track the quality and impact of youth participation, making accountability tangible rather than rhetorical.

Opportunities for Fostering Youth Engagement

Risks and Safeguards

Scale proven pilots: Expand successful initiatives into national programs with public funding and technical support, retaining flexibility to maintain inclusivity.

Leverage procurement and grants: Prioritize youth-led innovation and service delivery to create stable markets for youth solutions.

Digital tools and participatory budgeting: Translate broad consultation into concrete resource allocation, ensuring visibility leads to tangible commitments.

Strengthen partnerships: Collaborate with private sector and philanthropy through matched funding and mentorship, where shared risk creates shared reward.

Regional peer-learning hubs: Facilitate cross-border collaboration, exchange programs, and collective advocacy to amplify regional voices on the global stage.

Institutionalize youth metrics: Integrate youth-focused indicators into national and international reporting, including SDG reviews—what gets measured gets resourced.

Mobilize global moments: Use summits, observances, and campaigns as catalysts for long-term change, ensuring pre-committed follow-up converts momentum into durable reform.

Efforts must guard against tokenism (youth present but powerless) and inequity (digital divides, elite capture). Independent oversight, transparent reporting, and grievance mechanisms are essential to protect youth voices and ensure equitable engagement. As youth climate negotiators stress, "flexible funding and real seats at the table" are non-negotiable for trust. The next decade must embed these principles into the DNA of governance.
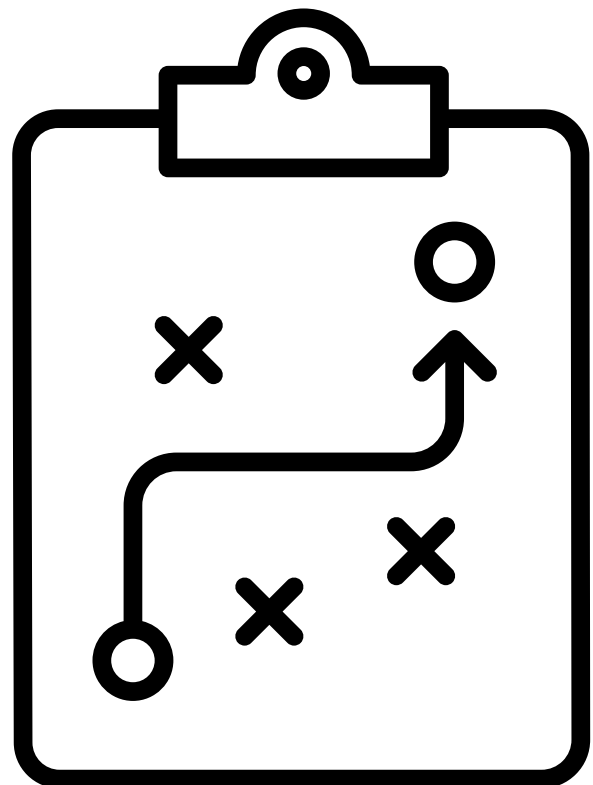
8.0 Policy Recommendations

8.1 For UN Member States

- Institutionalize youth participation: Establish national youth advisory councils with legislated authority, ensuring youth are not only consulted but co-decide on policies.
- Ensure representation in delegations: Mandate youth quotas in national delegations to the UN and other multilateral forums.
- Increase funding and accessibility: Secure multi-year, predictable funding for youth-led initiatives, and guarantee that all national and international venues are fully accessible to youth with disabilities—not just those themed around inclusivity.
- Monitor accountability: Develop standardized indicators and reporting mechanisms to evaluate the quality and impact of youth participation.

8.2 For Intergovernmental Organizations (UN, EU, African Union)

- Mainstream youth perspectives system-wide: Embed youth priorities across sectors —climate, health, education, economic policy—through inter-ministerial and inter-agency coordination.
- Shared leadership models: Implement co-chair systems in working groups where youth representatives hold decision-making authority alongside senior officials.
- Digital engagement platforms: Pilot and scale secure, inclusive digital participation tools with strong privacy safeguards, ensuring marginalized youth are not left behind.
- Independent oversight: Establish grievance mechanisms and transparent reporting channels to guard against tokenism and elite capture.

### 8.3 For Civil Society and Youth-Led Organizations

- Capacity-building: Expand accredited programmes that strengthen youth skills in civic literacy, negotiation, and policy analysis so that youth can contribute as equal partners.
- Pre-participation training: Provide structured training before major events to prepare youth for meaningful engagement in multilateral processes, ensuring they understand objectives, procedures, and expected outcomes.
- Peer-learning hubs: Create regional networks for cross-border collaboration, mentorship, and collective advocacy to amplify youth voices globally.
- Youth-centered approach: Ensure agendas are co-designed by youth themselves, moving beyond tokenism to meaningful involvement.
- Partnerships for scale: Leverage philanthropy, private sector, and community-based partnerships to scale youth-led pilots into national and global programmes while safeguarding inclusivity.

9.0 Conclusion

This policy paper has shown that the participation of young people in governance and multilateralism remains constrained, fragmented, and often symbolic. Persistent gaps in representation, limited access to information and opportunities, shrinking civic space, and systemic barriers in recruitment and funding have collectively eroded youth trust in institutions. Evidence from global reports and the reflections of young people and experts interviewed for this paper consistently point to the same conclusion: youth are willing and ready to lead, but the systems around them are not yet designed to share power.

Our analysis identified three core principles for rebuilding youth trust in diplomacy and governance:

- **Transparency and accountability:** Young people need clear information on how decisions are made, how their contributions are used, and who is responsible for outcomes. Without feedback loops and continuity mechanisms, engagement feels tokenistic and short-lived.

- **Inclusiveness and representation:** Youth participation must extend beyond symbolic invitations or one-off consultations. Structural reforms are required to remove legal, procedural, socio-economic, and spatial barriers that prevent diverse youth, especially marginalized groups, from accessing decision-making spaces.

- **Intergenerational co-leadership:** Sustainable governance depends on shared power between generations. Young people need mentorship, resources, and formal roles, while senior leaders must be prepared to open space, transfer knowledge, and institutionalize youth leadership.
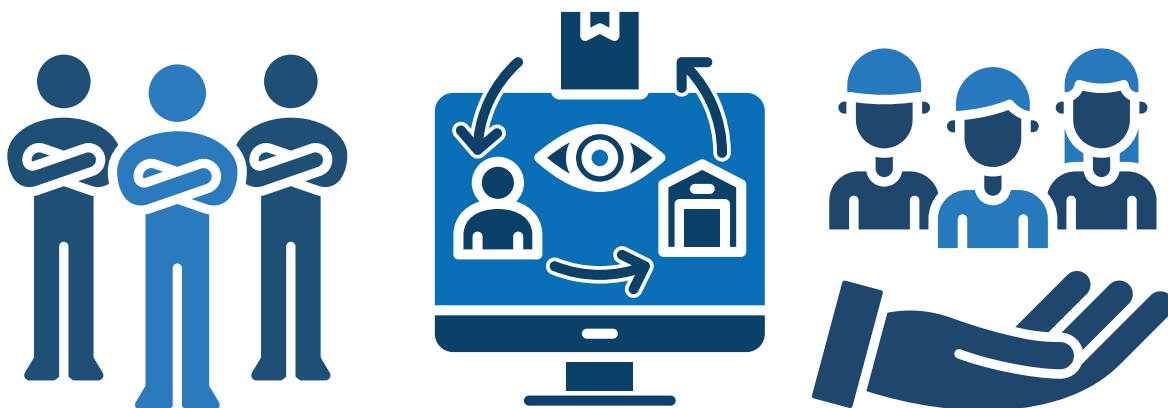
The practices reviewed in this paper, including UN initiatives such as Youth2030 and the Youth, Peace and Security agenda, as well as civil society efforts like the Journalists and Writers Foundation's Global Youth Leadership Programme and youth-led CSW side events, demonstrate that meaningful youth engagement is both possible and impactful when these principles are applied. However, these examples remain the exception rather than the norm.

To move from commitment to implementation, this paper recommends that:
- **UN Member States** legislate and institutionalize youth participation through national youth councils, quotas in delegations, predictable funding for youth-led initiatives, and measurable indicators to track progress.

- **Intergovernmental organizations** mainstream youth perspectives across all policy areas, adopt shared leadership models, create secure and inclusive digital participation tools, and establish independent oversight mechanisms to guard against tokenism and elite capture.

- **Civil society and youth-led organizations** expand capacity-building, pre-participation training, and peer-learning hubs; co-design agendas with young people; and leverage partnerships to scale successful pilots while maintaining equity and inclusion.

The path forward lies in transforming tokenistic gestures into durable structures, ensuring that every young voice has both a seat at the table and the means to shape the outcomes that affect them. Ultimately, empowering youth today secures inclusive, responsive, and sustainable governance for generations to come.

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SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

1 NO POVERTY

2 ZERO HUNGER

3 GOOD HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

4 QUALITY EDUCATION

5 GENDER EQUALITY

6 CLEAN WATER AND SANITATION

7 AFFORDABLE AND CLEAN ENERGY

8 DECENT WORK AND ECONOMIC GROWTH

9 INDUSTRY, INNOVATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE

10 REDUCED INEQUALITIES

11 SUSTAINABLE CITIES AND COMMUNITIES

12 RESPONSIBLE CONSUMPTION AND PRODUCTION

13 CLIMATE ACTION

14 LIFE BELOW WATER

15 LIFE ON LAND

16 PEACE, JUSTICE AND STRONG INSTITUTIONS

17 PARTNERSHIPS FOR THE GOALS