

Environmental Democracy for Justice: Involving Young People in Climate Governance, Biodiversity Conservation and Novel Innovations for Sustainable Development

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Table of Contents

Abstract.....	3
1.0 Introduction	3
2.0 Role of the Youth in Environmental Governance.....	5
3.0 Involving Young People in Climate Governance, Biodiversity Conservation and Novel Innovations for Sustainable Development	8
4.0 Conclusion	10
References	11

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Abstract

This paper discusses how the ideal of environmental democracy can be realised through the involvement of young people in environmental governance. The paper observes that the youth are agents of change who can strengthen environmental governance through their activism and innovative practices. In particular, the paper notes that young people are a driving force who can provide effective and sustainable solutions for global environmental threats including climate change and biodiversity loss. Despite their role in bolstering global environmental governance, the paper observes that young people are usually excluded from decision-making processes undermining the tenets of environmental democracy. Consequently, the paper suggests how environmental democracy can be attained through involving young people in climate governance, biodiversity conservation and novel innovations for Sustainable Development.

1.0 Introduction

Environmental democracy plays a fundamental role in promoting Sustainable Development by ensuring equity, inclusivity, fairness and justice in environmental governance. At its core, environmental democracy seeks to ensure that environmental and natural resource decisions involve all citizens and adequately and equitably address the needs and interests of all stakeholders¹. It has been observed that environmental democracy seeks to give an equal opportunity to every individual to participate in environmental decision-making as freely as they do in other public interest matters including health care, education, finance and governance in general². In particular, environmental democracy captures the principle of equal rights for all stakeholders including the public, community groups, advocates, industrial leaders, workers, governments, academics and other professionals to be involved in environmental governance³.

In order to ensure equity, inclusivity, fairness and justice in environmental governance, environmental democracy is based on three fundamental and mutually reinforcing pillars. These are: the ability of all people to freely *access environmental information*⁴; to *participate meaningfully* in

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¹ Center for International Environmental Law., 'Environmental Democracy and Access Rights' Available at <https://www.ciel.org/issue/environmental-democracy-access-rights/> (Accessed on 02/10/2026)

² Lewa. S.K et al., 'Actors in Managing Human-Wildlife Conflict: The Case of Arabuko-Sokoke Forest, Kenya' *International Academic Journal of Arts and Humanities.*, Volume 1, Issue 2 (2017), pp 37-50

³ Worker. J., & Ratte. S., 'What Does Environmental Democracy Look Like?' Available at <https://www.wri.org/insights/what-does-environmental-democracy-look> (Accessed on 02/10/2026)

⁴ Center for International Environmental Law., 'Environmental Democracy and Access Rights' Op Cit

decision-making relating to the environment and natural resources⁵; and to seek enforcement of environmental laws or compensation in respect of environmental harms through enhanced *access to justice*⁶ (Emphasis added). The tenets of environmental democracy are stipulated under the *Rio Declaration on Environment and Development*⁷ which states as follows:

*'Environmental issues are best handled with the participation of all concerned citizens, at the relevant level. At the national level, each individual shall have appropriate access to information concerning the environment that is held by public authorities, including information on hazardous materials and activities in their communities, and the opportunity to participate in decision-making processes. States shall facilitate and encourage public awareness and participation by making information widely available. Effective access to judicial and administrative proceedings, including redress and remedy, shall be provided (Emphasis Added)*⁸.

The Rio Declaration on Environment and Development therefore provides the basis for environmental democracy by capturing its fundamental tenets including access to environmental information, public participation in environmental governance, and access to justice in cases of environmental harm. Upholding the tenets of environmental democracy is key towards justice and Sustainable Development. For instance, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) notes that enhanced access to environmental information, effective and meaningful public participation in environmental decision-making processes, and appropriate, timely and adequate access to justice ensures transparency, inclusivity, fairness, justice and accountability in environmental governance⁹. It addition, it has been observed that environmental democracy which is built on the principles of participation, transparency, and justice, is key towards bolstering environmental governance including through effective, inclusive and participatory responses to environmental threats such as climate change and biodiversity loss for Sustainable Development¹⁰.

However, upholding the tenets of environmental democracy remains a challenge all over the world. For example, it has been observed that marginalized and vulnerable groups including women, the youth, indigenous peoples and local communities suffer from low levels of access to information, representation and participation and justice in environmental decision-making

⁵ Ibid

⁶ Ibid

⁷ United Nations General Assembly., 'Report of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development: Rio Declaration on Environment and Development.' A/CONF. 151/26 (Vol.1)

⁸ Ibid, Principle 10

⁹ United Nations Environment Programme., 'Principle 10' Available at <https://www.unep.org/civil-society-engagement/partnerships/principle-10> (Accessed on 02/10/2026)

¹⁰ Democratic practices in climate change adaptation., Available at <https://demofinland.org/en/democratic-practices-in-climate-change-adaptation/> (Accessed on 02/10/2026)

processes undermining the tenets of environmental democracy¹¹. Promoting environmental democracy is therefore necessary towards justice and Sustainable Development.

This paper discusses how the ideal of environmental democracy can be realised through the involvement of young people in environmental governance. The paper observes that the youth are agents of change who can strengthen environmental governance through their activism and innovative practices. In particular, the paper notes that young people are a driving force who can provide effective and sustainable solutions for global environmental threats including climate change and biodiversity loss. Despite their role in bolstering global environmental governance, the paper observes that young people are usually excluded from decision-making processes undermining the tenets of environmental democracy. Consequently, the paper suggests how environmental democracy can be attained through involving young people in climate governance, biodiversity conservation and novel innovations for Sustainable Development.

2.0 Role of the Youth in Environmental Governance

Young people play a key role in ensuring a healthier and sustainable planet for the benefit of current and future generations. It has been observed that youth all over the world are demonstrating their willingness and capacity to strengthen environmental governance through innovative ideas, sustainable practices, and youth advocacy focusing on climate action, biodiversity conservation and pollution control¹². UNEP notes that with half of the global population under 30, young people are not only inheriting the planet but they are also actively driving the transition to a greener and sustainable future¹³. The participation of young people in environmental governance is a key approach towards achieving a climate neutral, nature positive and pollution free future for people and planet¹⁴.

It has been argued that mounting global environmental challenges, including the triple planetary crisis of climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution, have placed importance on multiple-actor solutions that have young people at the forefront of environmental governance¹⁵. For example, the United Nations notes that young people are not only victims of climate change but

¹¹ United Nations Development Programme., 'Environmental Governance: Bolstering inclusive and effective governance systems that champion environmental justice and sustainability' Available at <https://www.undp.org/nature/our-work-areas/environmental-governance> (Accessed on 02/10/2026)

¹² Geneva Environment Network., 'Youth and the Environment' Available at <https://www.genevaenvironmentnetwork.org/resources/updates/youth-and-the-environment/> (Accessed on 02/10/2026)

¹³ United Nations Environment Programme., 'Youth, education and environment' Available at <https://www.unep.org/topics/youth-education-and-environment> (Accessed on 02/10/2026)

¹⁴ Ibid

¹⁵ Sithole. S.S., 'Youth engagement in global conservation governance' Available at <https://conbio.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/cobi.14387> (Accessed on 02/10/2026)

they are also valuable contributors to effective climate action¹⁶. Through their mobilization and activism, young people around the world are scaling up their efforts and using their skills to accelerate global climate action¹⁷. Since climate change disproportionately impacts young people, harnessing their involvement in climate governance is key towards effectively confronting climate change for posterity. Although climate change is predominantly caused by the current generation of adults, its worst consequences will occur during the lifetimes of today's children and young people¹⁸. It has been observed that current generations and the next ones will bear the brunt of climate change impacts, as extreme weather events such as droughts, wildfires, floods and heatwaves become more frequent and severe with time¹⁹.

Due to the disproportionate impacts they face from the climate crisis, tackling climate change is of particular importance to young people in order to secure a healthy, sustainable and liveable planet. Consequently, it has been observed that the youths are raising their voices, spearheading climate initiatives, calling for immediate climate action and inspiring change through grassroots movements and worldwide campaigns²⁰. Many young people all over the world are extremely alarmed about the consequences that climate change will have on their future, and are therefore driving meaningful change to address this crisis²¹. It has been observed that young people are advocates and community leaders, researchers and educators, innovators and entrepreneurs who are helping to confront climate change and build more resilient and sustainable societies around the world²². Young people are driving change and effective climate action including through advocating and promoting the transition to renewable energy, sustainable agriculture and circular economy while also holding polluters accountable through climate litigation²³.

In addition to their role in climate governance, young people are also playing an important role in strengthening global biodiversity conservation. It has been observed that young people bring energy, creativity and deep knowledge of local biodiversity challenges and consequently their

¹⁶ United Nations., 'Youth in Action' Available at <https://www.un.org/en/climatechange/youth-in-action#:~:text=Young%20people%20are%20not%20only,skills%20to%20accelerate%20climate%20action> (Accessed on 02/10/2026)

¹⁷ Ibid

¹⁸ Sanson. A., & Belleomo. M., 'Children and Youth in the Climate Crisis' *BJPsych Bull.* 2021 Aug; 45(4): 205–209

¹⁹ Stockholm Environment Institute., 'Charting a Youth Vision for a Just and Sustainable Future' Available at <https://www.sei.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/stockholm50-youthreport-10.51414-sei2022.010.pdf> (Accessed on 02/10/2026)

²⁰ World Economic Forum., 'How today's youth are taking the lead in global climate action' Available at <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2023/07/empowering-tomorrows-climate-leaders-how-youth-influence-climate-action/> (Accessed on 02/10/2026)

²¹ United Nations Development Programme., 'Young people are key to solving the climate crisis – here's why' Available at <https://climatepromise.undp.org/news-and-stories/young-people-are-key-solving-climate-crisis-heres-why> (Accessed on 02/10/2026)

²² Ibid

²³ Ibid

involvement is key for effective conservation strategies²⁴. Youth projects and initiatives are improving local biodiversity awareness, ecosystem restoration and sustainable resource management thus enhancing global biodiversity conservation²⁵. In particular, it has been observed that indigenous youth and youth from local communities possess valuable Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) that is enabling them to be effective stewards of biodiversity especially at local levels²⁶.

Young people are therefore key agents of change whose knowledge, activism and leadership and novel innovations is strengthening environmental governance. The constant dedication and creative strategies employed by the youth is influencing effective climate action and biodiversity conservation and raising environmental awareness all over the world²⁷. It has been observed that the enthusiasm, energy, commitment and innovative ideas offered by the youth are an inspiration and serve as a reminder that everyone can make a difference in the fight against climate change and biodiversity loss among other global environmental threats²⁸.

Involving young people in climate governance, biodiversity conservation and novel innovations is therefore crucial towards strengthening environmental governance for people and planet. However, it has been observed that the youth have historically been excluded and marginalized from global, regional and national platforms and decision-making processes in climate action and biodiversity conservation²⁹. Young people all over the world who are crucial agents and decision-makers are often excluded from environmental governance spaces due to structural barriers, including economic and political hurdles³⁰. Exclusion of the youth from environmental governance undermines environmental democracy while also worsening environmental injustices due to the disproportionate impacts that young people face from climate change and biodiversity loss. Consequently, there is need to ensure effective and meaningful involvement of young people in climate governance, biodiversity conservation and novel innovations towards ensuring environmental democracy for Sustainable Development.

²⁴ Global Environment Facility., 'How young people are transforming biodiversity policy' Available at <https://www.thegef.org/newsroom/feature-stories/how-young-people-are-transforming-biodiversity-policy> (Accessed on 02/10/2026)

²⁵ International Climate Initiative., 'Youth hands-on biodiversity conservation and management' Available at <https://www.international-climate-initiative.com/en/project/youth-hands-on-biodiversity-conservation-and-management-isg2023-iv-106-phl-youth-hands-on-biodiversity-conservation/> (Accessed on 02/10/2026)

²⁶ United Nations Environment Programme., 'Youth Action' Available at <https://www.unep.org/topics/youth-education-and-environment/youth-action> (Accessed on 02/10/2026)

²⁷ World Economic Forum., 'How today's youth are taking the lead in global climate action' Op Cit

²⁸ Ibid

²⁹ Centre for Public Impact., 'Six Ways Governments can Meaningfully Engage Youth in Tackling Climate Change' Available at <https://www.centreforpublicimpact.org/insights/six-ways-governments-can-meaningfully-engage-youth-in-tackling-climate-change> (Accessed on 02/10/2026)

³⁰ Sithole. S.S., 'Youth engagement in global conservation governance' Op Cit

3.0 Involving Young People in Climate Governance, Biodiversity Conservation and Novel Innovations for Sustainable Development

Young people are key stakeholders whose involvement in environmental governance is a prerequisite for achieving environmental democracy and promoting Sustainable Development. In particular, it has been observed that as the largest generation in history, young people, in all their diversity, have a crucial role to play in tackling climate change³¹. Ensuring that young people effectively and meaningfully participate in climate governance is essential towards building a healthy and sustainable world that reflects the needs and aspirations of current and future generations³². In addition, young people are crucial agents of biodiversity conservation utilising their skills, knowledge and activism to raise awareness on the importance of conserving biodiversity, promote sustainable resource use and support ecosystem restoration activities³³. The *Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework*³⁴ recognises the role of young people in bolstering biodiversity conservation. It seeks to foster the full, meaningful and effective contribution of the youth and other stakeholders towards achieving sound biodiversity conservation for Sustainable Development³⁵. In addition, involving the youth in environmental governance is key towards unlocking novel innovations in areas such sustainable waste management, circularity, use of TEK, and green transition towards a sustainable and nature-positive future³⁶.

Due to the exclusion they face in decision-making processes, involving young people in environmental governance is key towards promoting environmental democracy for justice. The *Global Youth Declaration on the Environment*³⁷ urges policy makers to embed the principle of intergenerational equity in environmental governance with emphasis on meaningful participation of children and youth at all levels of environmental decision-making³⁸. The Declaration notes that young people and future generations are disproportionately affected by environmental crises including climate change and biodiversity loss, yet they remain underrepresented in the systems and policies designed to address these challenges³⁹. According to the Declaration, failure to promote environmental democracy for the youth undermines both

³¹ United Nations Development Programme., 'Young people are key to solving the climate crisis – here's why' Op Cit

³² Ibid

³³ Global Environment Facility., 'How young people are transforming biodiversity policy' Op Cit

³⁴ Convention on Biological Diversity., 'Decision Adopted by the Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity: 15/4. Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework' Available at <https://www.cbd.int/doc/decisions/cop-15/cop-15-dec-04-en.pdf> (Accessed on 02/10/2026)

³⁵ Ibid

³⁶ United Nations Environment Programme., 'Youth push for action on environmental crises' Available at <https://www.unep.org/news-and-stories/story/youth-push-action-environmental-crises> (Accessed on 02/10/2026)

³⁷ Global Youth Declaration on the Environment., Available at https://ik.imagekit.io/5zp8ovb7c/CYMG/GlobalYouthDeclaration/GYD_2025.pdf?updatedAt=1764927194446 (Accessed on 02/10/2026)

³⁸ Ibid

³⁹ Ibid

the legitimacy and long-term effectiveness of environmental policies, as well as the principle of intergenerational equity⁴⁰. The Declaration seeks to ensure meaningful involvement of young people across all levels of environmental governance towards promoting Sustainable Development⁴¹.

It is therefore necessary to involve young people in climate governance, biodiversity conservation and novel innovations in order to strengthen environmental democracy for Sustainable Development. In particular, through youth representation and leadership positions in climate governance and biodiversity conservation, it is possible to design effective and inclusive environmental governance approaches that promote environmental democracy and intergenerational equity⁴². Supporting youth initiatives and projects including through capacity-building and access to finance is also vital towards strengthening climate governance and biodiversity conservation and unlocking novel innovations. For example, supporting youth environmental projects through access to finance can strengthen climate action and biodiversity conservation through ecosystem restoration, sustainable agriculture, and renewable energy among other youth-led initiatives⁴³. In addition, by empowering youth-led environmental startups through access to finance and capacity building, it is possible to promote novel innovations including green and clean technologies that promote Sustainable Development⁴⁴.

Promoting environmental education for the youth is also key towards building their capacity to effectively and meaningfully participate in climate governance, biodiversity conservation and novel innovations. It has been observed that environmental education has the power to influence positive attitudes and motivate action towards protecting the environment for sustainability⁴⁵. In addition, UNEP notes that environmental education plays a fundamental role in capacity building, increasing access to policy making and facilitating participation in environmental governance towards a climate neutral, nature positive and pollution free future⁴⁶. In particular, environmental education enables the youth to appreciate the causes and effects of environmental threats such as climate change and biodiversity loss therefore creating basis for their informed and meaningful participation in decision-making while also encouraging them to opt for safer and sustainable lifestyle choices to combat climate change, bolster biodiversity conservation, and curb pollution and waste⁴⁷. It is therefore necessary to embrace environmental education at all

⁴⁰ Ibid

⁴¹ Ibid

⁴² Ibid

⁴³ United Nations Development Programme., 'Young people are key to solving the climate crisis – here's why' Op Cit

⁴⁴ United Nations Environment Programme., 'Youth, education and environment' Op Cit

⁴⁵ About Environmental Education and why it Matters., Available at <https://naaee.org/about/ee> (Accessed on 02/10/2026)

⁴⁶ United Nations Environment Programme., 'Youth, education and environment' Op Cit

⁴⁷ Stockholm Environment Institute., 'Charting a Youth Vision for a Just and Sustainable Future' Op Cit

levels towards empowering young people to be actively and meaningfully involved in climate governance, biodiversity conservation and novel innovations for Sustainable Development.

4.0 Conclusion

With the world witnessing mounting environmental challenges including climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution and waste, promoting environmental democracy is key towards inclusive, equitable, fair and just environmental governance for posterity. In particular, young people are agents of change whose energy, enthusiasm, skills, activism and motivation can bolster environmental governance for the benefit of present and future generations. It is therefore necessary to involve young people in climate governance, biodiversity conservation and novel innovations towards promoting environmental democracy for justice, intergenerational equity and Sustainable Development.

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