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**YOUTH ORIENTED INSTITUTIONAL  
REFORMS AND INCLUSIVE POLITICAL  
AND DEVELOPMENT PARTICIPATION**

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**Harnessing Parliamentary Diplomacy for the Realization of Global Solidarity, Equality, and Sustainability**

## ACRONYMS

<b>ACRWC</b>	African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child
<b>AYC</b>	African Youth Charter
<b>EU</b>	European Union
<b>IPU</b>	Inter-Parliamentary Union
<b>IYDS</b>	Integrated Youth Development Strategy
<b>MDGs</b>	Millennium Development Goals
<b>MP</b>	Member of Parliament
<b>NYDA</b>	National Youth Development Agency
<b>NYP</b>	National Youth Policy
<b>SDG</b>	Sustainable Development Goals
<b>UNCRC</b>	United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child
<b>YPS</b>	Youth, Peace and Security

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## ABSTRACT

Youth have a critical role in institutional reforms as well as inclusive political and development participation. Young people represent over 23% of the global population and therefore their engagement is essential for addressing pressing challenges such as unemployment, inequality, and climate change. The paper examines international and regional frameworks, including the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the African Youth Charter and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC), which underscore the importance of youth participation. It highlights barriers to meaningful engagement, such as structural inequalities, cultural biases, and the digital divide, while proposing actionable strategies for parliaments and policymakers. These include youth quotas, civic education, and leveraging digital platforms. The paper concludes with a call for systemic reforms to empower youth as active contributors to sustainable development and democratic governance.

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## KEY CONSIDERATIONS

- SDG 17 (Global Partnerships) emphasises youth participation to drive innovation and equitable development.
  - Many youth policies lack implementation; robust measures like youth quotas are needed to enhance youth representation.
  - Inequitable access to technology excludes marginalised youth from policy discussions, requiring inclusive digital strategies.
  - Youth mainstreaming should be incorporated into Parliament’s core functions via formal and informal processes.
  - Parliaments must create platforms for engagement such as youth parliaments, adopt youth charters, civic education, and mentorship programmes to institutionalise youth voices.
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## 1. BACKGROUND

In an increasingly interconnected world, the importance of inclusive, participatory decision-

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**Young people represent over 23% of the global population and their engagement is essential for addressing pressing challenges including unemployment, inequality and climate change.**

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making is more vital than ever. Among the most underrepresented, yet critically important demographics in global policy discourse, are young people. Representing over 23% of the world's population<sup>1</sup>, youth are both the change agents of today and the leaders of tomorrow. Youth oriented institutional reforms and inclusive political and development participation is the intentional and sustained inclusion of young voices in policy-making processes, ensuring that their insights, experiences, and aspirations inform decisions that shape societies.<sup>2</sup>

The imperative to engage youth in global policy formulation stems from both demographic and democratic considerations.

According to the United Nations, over 1.8 billion people worldwide are aged between 10 and 24 years, making this the largest youth generation in history.<sup>3</sup> They are disproportionately affected by global challenges such as climate change, unemployment, inequality, gender-based violence and conflict, yet they remain largely excluded from decisions that directly impact their futures.

Globally, youth face numerous interconnected challenges, including unemployment, economic instability, mental health issues, and limited access to quality education and healthcare. They also grapple with the impacts of climate change, digital divides, and social inequality, including gender-based violence. These challenges are further compounded by a decline in trust in institutions and a sense of uncertainty about the future.

In terms of unemployment specifically, youth unemployment is at its lowest level for 15 years and there seems on the surface plenty to celebrate. Yet it is also the case that one-fifth of young people were not in employment, education or training (NEET) in 2023. More startling, two-thirds of these NEETs were female, while in some developing regions, youth unemployment rates have gone up since the pandemic.<sup>4</sup>

Across Africa, which is heading for what demography experts term a 'youthquake', young people are still not faring well – with unemployment rates "critically high" in North Africa and nearly three-quarters of young adults in sub-Saharan Africa stuck in insecure employment.<sup>5</sup>

Considering the challenges facing youth, this paper explores the significance of involving youth in shaping global policies, the barriers that hinder their effective engagement, and the strategies needed to institutionalise their participation.

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<sup>1</sup> Commonwealth (2023).

<sup>2</sup> United Nations Youth Affairs (2025).

<sup>3</sup> Commonwealth (2023).

<sup>4</sup> World Economic Forum (2024).

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

## 2. INTERNATIONAL AND REGIONAL PERSPECTIVE

### 2.1 International Frameworks and Agreements

Several international frameworks and agreements recognise and promote youth participation. These frameworks and agreements underscore the importance of youth participation in decision-making processes, including those related to peace and security, sustainable development, and human rights.

- **Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)**

Youth participation is crucial for the successful implementation of the 2030 Agenda and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The 2030 Agenda emphasises the need for inclusive, participatory decision-making at all levels. Young people are recognised as critical agents of change, actively engaging in advocacy, data collection, and monitoring efforts. The United Nations has established guiding principles to enhance youth participation in SDG implementation.

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development offers a common roadmap for world peace and prosperity. The 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), are a pressing call to action for all developed and developing nations, working in a global partnership. The SDGs focus on matters related to climate change, and eradication of poverty and other forms of deprivation and highlight the importance of policies that enhance health and education, lessen inequality, and promote economic growth. While it can be argued that all 17 SDGs should be viewed through a lens that focusses on youth participation and inclusion, in the context of youth oriented institutional reforms and inclusive political and development participation, SDG 17 is the most relevant.

*SDG 17: Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalise the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development*

Partnerships for all SDGs must be youth-sensitive and inclusive, drawing on the knowledge and experience of young people to drive forward solutions for a greener, more prosperous and safer future.<sup>6</sup> SDG 17 emphasises the importance of global partnerships to achieve the 2030 Agenda, highlighting the role of multi-stakeholder collaboration in mobilising resources, sharing knowledge, and fostering innovation.

Youth participation is critical to SDG 17, as young people bring fresh perspectives, technological saviness, and grassroots advocacy to strengthen partnerships for sustainable development.<sup>7</sup> Through the empowerment of young people as key stakeholders, SDG 17 can harness their

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<sup>6</sup> United Nations Children's Fund (2023).

<sup>7</sup> UN Youth Envoy. (2020).

potential to bridge gaps between governments, private sectors, and civil society, ultimately driving more inclusive and sustainable development.<sup>8</sup>

While all 17 SDGs are interconnected, some directly affect young people including:

- SDG 4-Quality Education: Ensuring inclusive and equitable education for all.
- SDG 5-Gender Equality: Empowering young women and girls.
- SDG 8-Decent Work and Economic Growth: Tackling youth unemployment and underemployment.
- SDG 10-Reduced Inequalities: Fighting discrimination based on age, gender, or background.
- SDG 13-Climate Action: Youth-led movements like Fridays for Future highlight their role in environmental advocacy.
- SDG 16-Peace and Justice: Promoting youth participation in governance and conflict resolution.

Young people are not just beneficiaries of the SDGs, they are essential partners in achieving them. By empowering youth with education, opportunities, and a seat at the decision-making table, the world can accelerate progress toward a sustainable and equitable future.

- **United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)**

This treaty outlines the rights of children and young people under the age of 18, including protection from exploitation, and access to education, and healthcare. Based on the definition of “youth”, young people aged 15-18 years are considered in this treaty. The UNCRC emphasises the right to education and development for all children, including adolescents. It has influenced policies to ensure that youth in this age group have access to quality education that prepares them for adulthood and equips them with necessary skills.

The UNCRC recognises children's right to participate in decisions affecting them. For youth aged 15-18, this means opportunities to engage in civic activities, express their opinions, and participate in community and governmental processes. The Convention stresses protection from exploitation and harmful practices, such as child labour and trafficking. It encourages governments to enact laws and programmes to safeguard older children and adolescents from these risks.<sup>9</sup>

- **United Nations Youth Strategy – Youth2030**

The United Nations Youth Strategy, known as Youth2030, is a UN-wide framework launched in September 2018 to guide the UN's work with and for young people. It aims to empower young people, protect their rights, and ensure their meaningful engagement in policy-making and decision-making processes, ultimately harnessing their potential as agents of change in achieving the SDGs.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> OECD. (2018).

<sup>9</sup> Committee Section and Research Unit, Parliament of the Republic of South Africa (2024).

<sup>10</sup> United Nations (2018).

- **Agenda 21**

Agenda 21 is a comprehensive plan of action that aims to achieve global sustainable development by integrating environmental protection with economic and social development. This framework, particularly Principle 10 and Chapter 25, emphasises the importance of youth participation in environmental decision-making and implementation of programmes.<sup>11</sup>

- **UN Security Council Resolution 2250 (2015) on Youth, Peace and Security**

UN Security Council Resolution 2250 (2015) on Youth, Peace and Security (YPS) is a landmark resolution that recognises the positive contributions of youth to peace and security. It acknowledges the role of young people in conflict prevention, resolution, and post-conflict peacebuilding, urging Member States to include youth in all levels of peace processes and decision-making.<sup>12</sup>

## **2.2. Regional Frameworks and Agreements**

Regional frameworks and agreements related to youth participation often focus on promoting youth inclusion in decision-making processes, particularly in areas like peace and security, sustainable development, and governance. These frameworks aim to empower young people, giving them a voice and agency in shaping policies and programmes that affect their lives.

- **European Union (EU) Youth Strategy 2019-2027**

The EU Youth Strategy “is the framework for EU youth policy cooperation for 2019-2027, based on the Council Resolution of 26 November 2018. EU youth cooperation shall make the most of youth policy's potential. It fosters youth participation in democratic life; it also supports social and civic engagement and aims to ensure that all young people have the necessary resources to take part in society.”<sup>13</sup>

- **Africa Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC)**

The ACRWC was drafted to give the UNCRC specific application in the African context since the representation by African countries at the time of the drafting of the UNCRC was deemed inadequate. The ACRWC was the first regional treaty on the human rights of the child.<sup>14</sup> The UNCRC and ACRWC are premised more on the rights of the child than the powers of the parent over the child. Emphasis has been placed on continent specific issues in the ACRWC such as inter-country adoptions and child trafficking. Moreover, the ACRWC encompasses the following:

- The ACRWC provides that every child who is mentally or physically disabled shall have the right to special measures of protection in keeping with physical and moral needs and

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<sup>11</sup> United Nations, (1992).

<sup>12</sup> UN Security Council Resolution 2250 (2015) on Youth, Peace and Security.

<sup>13</sup> European Union (2018).

<sup>14</sup> Sloth-Nielsen, J. and Mezmur, B.D. (2007).

under conditions which ensure dignity and promote self-reliance and active participation in the community.

- Children shall be protected from all forms of economic exploitation and from performing any work that is likely to be hazardous or to interfere with the child’s physical, mental, spiritual, moral, or social development.
- A child shall be entitled to the enjoyment of parental care and protection and shall, whenever possible, have the right to reside with his or her parents. No child shall be separated from parents against his or her will, except when a judicial authority determines in accordance with the appropriate law that such separation is in the best interest of the child.<sup>15</sup>

- **African Youth Charter (AYC)**

The Charter aims to address young people’s rights to a livelihood, to participate in decision-making, to live in peace and security and to be respected. It captures a broad array of civil, political and socio-economic rights for youth on the African continent. Article 11 focusses on youth participation and stipulates that every young person shall have the right to participate in all spheres of society. States Parties are required to implement measures to promote active youth participation in society.<sup>16</sup>

- **Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU)**

The Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) is a global organisation of national parliaments that promotes democratic governance, international cooperation, and peace. The IPU works closely with the United Nations to address global challenges, ensuring that parliamentary perspectives are included in international decision-making. Through meetings, research, and policy guidance, it empowers parliaments to better serve their citizens. The IPU has adopted several resolutions related to youth, focusing on political participation, employment, education, and empowerment.

Key IPU resolutions concerning youth include:

- Resolution on youth participation in the democratic process<sup>17</sup>
  - Encourages parliaments to lower the voting age and eligibility for candidacy.
  - Calls for youth quotas in political parties and parliaments.
  - Recommends civic education programmes to enhance youth engagement.
- Resolution on access to health as a basic right<sup>18</sup>
  - Emphasises the need for adolescent and youth-friendly health services.
  - Calls for policies to prevent early pregnancies and ensure sexual/reproductive health rights.

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<sup>15</sup> African Union (1990).

<sup>16</sup> African Union (2006).

<sup>17</sup> Inter-Parliamentary Union (2010).

<sup>18</sup> Inter-Parliamentary Union (2012).

- Resolution on youth unemployment and migration: The need for collective action<sup>19</sup>
  - Urges governments to create decent jobs for youth.
  - Calls for policies to address brain drain and support entrepreneurship.
- Resolution on parliaments as promoters of human rights, including the rights of women and young people<sup>20</sup>
  - Highlights the need to protect young people’s rights, especially in conflict zones.
  - Encourages youth participation in human rights advocacy.
- Resolution on education for peace<sup>21</sup>
  - Stresses the role of education in preventing youth radicalisation.
  - Calls for peace education programmes in schools.
- Resolution on the role of parliaments in protecting the rights of children, particularly unaccompanied migrant children, and in preventing their exploitation<sup>22</sup>
  - Addresses the vulnerability of migrant youth.
  - Calls for legal protections against child trafficking and exploitation.
- Resolution on parliamentary action in support of youth empowerment<sup>23</sup>
  - Advocates for youth representation in decision-making bodies.
  - Encourages digital literacy and vocational training for youth.

The IPU has consistently addressed youth participation, employment, health, education, and migration through its resolutions.

### 3. YOUTH-SENSITIVE PROGRAMMES

Youth-sensitive programmes are intended to consider the needs, perspectives and challenges of young people with the aim of ensuring an inclusive approach towards youth development. This invariably entails youth mainstreaming which has been defined as a transformative process that is inclusive and consciously proactive, placing the capabilities and rights of young men and women alongside those of other marginalised community members in development planning. It is transformative because it radically improves young people’s wellbeing and rights by translating co-created visions into youth-centric policies and programmes.<sup>24</sup>

Of importance to note, is that young people are not a single, homogenous group and instead are comprised of a diverse individuals with varied views and experiences “that inform the issues that

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<sup>19</sup> Inter-Parliamentary Union (2015).

<sup>20</sup> Inter-Parliamentary Union (2016).

<sup>21</sup> Inter-Parliamentary Union (2017).

<sup>22</sup> Inter-Parliamentary Union (2018).

<sup>23</sup> Inter-Parliamentary Union (2021).

<sup>24</sup> Commonwealth Secretariat (2017).

interest them and the ways they interact.”<sup>25</sup> Their engagement is not only limited to “youth” issues but extend beyond that to areas that may impact them currently and in the future.<sup>26</sup> Youth mainstreaming (like with disability and gender mainstreaming) lends itself to a twin-track approach. One approach is that of targeted initiatives focussed solely on youth to empower and support young people, and the other involves the integration of youth-sensitive measures into the development, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of all laws, policies and programmes. Parliamentarians thus have a duty to understand what this means and how it can be given effect to, through Parliamentary functions - key of which is holding the Executive to account.

Parliaments can encourage and facilitate institutional reforms required within the Executive to facilitate youth-sensitive programmes through several means. These include enacting legislation, ensuring youth policies/programmes are adequately funded and effectively implemented, advocating for policies that address youth needs, promoting youth representation, and establishing structures and platforms for youth engagement. Synchronising the voting age with the age of eligibility to run for a political office is another area whereby parliaments (through its law reform processes) amend legislation where necessary and in so doing provides for more young people to apply for and assume decision making positions within legislatures and in government.

## 4. INCLUSIVE POLITICAL AND DEVELOPMENT PARTICIPATION

### 4.1 Youth Representation

Involving young people in shaping global policies is not just a matter of fairness, it is a strategic imperative. Young people have the most to gain or lose from the policies crafted today. Their energy, vision, and commitment can breathe new life into global governance.

Limited data exists on meaningful youth engagement relating to shaping inclusive, sustainable, and effective global policies. The following key statistics highlight some relevant data to consider.

#### Youth Representation in Decision-Making

<b>2.6%</b>	of parliamentarians worldwide are under 30 <sup>27</sup>
<b>less than 1%</b>	of parliamentarians worldwide are under 25 <sup>28</sup>
<b>1%</b>	of government ministers globally are under 30 <sup>29</sup>
<b>62</b>	the average age of world leaders <sup>30</sup>
<b>23</b>	youngest member in the South African Parliament <sup>31</sup>
<b>35</b>	number of members under 35 in the South African Parliament <sup>32</sup>

#### Demand for Youth Participation

<sup>25</sup> Inter-Parliamentary Union and United Nations Development Programme (2022).

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Inter-Parliamentary Union (2021).

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> United Nations Development Programme (2022).

<sup>30</sup> Financial Times (2024).

<sup>31</sup> Derived from Parliament of South Africa Human Resources 2025

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

69%	young people believe politicians don't listen to them <sup>33</sup>
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### Digital Divide

2.2 billion	children and youth under 25 don't have access to the internet in their homes. <sup>34</sup>
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The inadequacy in youth representation is not solely a function of demographic mismatch but is also significantly affected by the lack of robust national policies that actively promote youth involvement. For example, while some African governments have initiated youth policies and youth-led political frameworks, substantial gaps persist in their implementation and resourcing.<sup>35</sup> Various national governments have yet to fully commit to legislating, budgeting, and resourcing policies that not only include but also empower the youth beyond tokenistic measures. The current state of youth political participation reveals a critical need for reforms that address systemic barriers and align policy frameworks with demographic realities. This is because empowering youth participation is not just a matter of fairness; it is essential for fostering a democratic process that is representative and responsive to future societal needs.

“The active participation of young people in decisions and actions ... is essential if we are to build more democratic, inclusive and prosperous societies. Participation in the democratic life of any community is about more than voting or standing for election, although these are important elements. Participation and active citizenship is about having the right, the means, the space and the opportunity and where necessary the support to participate in and influence decisions and engage in actions and activities so as to contribute to building a better society.”<sup>36</sup> *Council of Europe's Revised European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life*

The Council of Europe maintains that “actively engaging youth in political decision making is key to protect democracy, strengthen it and counter democratic backsliding”.<sup>37</sup> Youth participation is a vital precondition ultimately working towards the public good.

Parliament has an important role to play in the promotion of youth inclusion by engaging young people in its work and including young people from vulnerable groups in society, supporting and partnering with youth organisations, and creating youth education and empowerment programmes.<sup>38</sup> Youth engagement and education can take on several forms such as:

- **Civic education:** Establishing civic education programmes in collaboration with schools, universities and youth organisations is an important avenue to build youth engagement. The more traditional way of encouraging youth to visit parliament and educating young

<sup>33</sup> OECD. (2022).

<sup>34</sup> UN Office of the High Commissioner (2023).

<sup>35</sup> Inter-Parliamentary Union (2023).

<sup>36</sup> Council of Europe (2023).

<sup>37</sup> Council of Europe, Parliamentary Assembly (2023), p.8.

<sup>38</sup> Indicators for Democratic Parliaments (2023).

people about democracy and parliamentary processes has been through “school tours, role plays, student programmes, youth parliaments and competitions to teach young people about parliament and experience aspects of its procedures. Parliaments have also reached out to young people through workshops, forums and round tables, as a way to hear their opinions on issues being examined by parliamentary committees.”<sup>39</sup> In addition, “(m)edia literacy has been increasingly becoming a prerequisite of full citizen participation. The latter has been shifting, especially among youth, away from the traditional media forms and more towards non-conventional ones. ...One of the tools to narrow down the ‘participation gap’ may be in media literacy education (MLE).”<sup>40</sup>

- **Youth charter:** A key opportunity to develop a youth partnership includes collaborating with youth and co-designing a youth charter for youth participation that outlines principles for engagement, and reviews education programmes and activities. A collective decision is thus made on what and how to engage with youth in a meaningful way to facilitate youth mainstreaming within parliamentary processes. “Developing a parliamentary charter for youth engagement would provide a unique opportunity for future focused interaction between parliament and young people. It would demonstrate a commitment to listen, to work collaboratively, to take views seriously, and to make the changes that will enable youth to participate more meaningfully in parliamentary democracy. An action plan flowing from the charter would translate good words into actual deeds. Progress would need to be evaluated regularly, in order to assess what works and to adjust approaches based on experience and feedback.”<sup>41</sup>
- **Meaningful engagement:** Providing youth with meaningful opportunities to engage in core aspects of parliamentary work is important. This entails regular consultation between Parliament and youth organisations with a view to develop effective mechanisms for including young people in formal (e.g. committee work) and informal political processes. These methods of engagement are substantive and influence parliamentary decision-making. MPs should be encouraged to engage with young people through various platforms e.g. youth parliaments, youth forums and social media. Due consideration should be given to the content of proceedings and debates within Parliament and how these can reach youth. Moreover, decisions on issues affecting young people should be communicated in a way that is accessible to youth.<sup>42</sup> This would also entail being cognisant of disability, language and the digital divide.
- **Social media:** “Social media are particularly important for youth, who are leading innovation in new forms of political interaction. The burgeoning use of this technology has altered, or has the potential to alter, the enabling environment for parliamentary oversight.”<sup>43</sup> Furthermore, social media can be used to disseminate information, raise awareness and build connections. It also serves as a platform for engagement whereby youth can directly participate by posing questions and raising concerns with MPs.

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<sup>39</sup> Inter-Parliamentary Union and United Nations Development Programme (2022), p.60.

<sup>40</sup> Römer, L. (2024).

<sup>41</sup> Inter-Parliamentary Union and United Nations Development Programme (2022), p.63.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid

<sup>43</sup> Inter-Parliamentary Union (2017), p.85.

- **Internships:** Providing opportunities for internship programmes for students in parliament is another direct means of creating opportunities for youth participation and employment. Internships such as that offered by the Parliament of Ukraine, constituency youth councils in Canada and the United Kingdom’s Youth Select Committee as well as the South African Parliament are examples of more in-depth programmes for youth to experience parliament and participate more directly.

## 4.2 Political and Development Participation

It is imperative for Parliament to monitor and evaluate its youth inclusion and education programmes for the purpose of continuous improvement by obtaining data and participant feedback.<sup>44</sup>

Youth representation in parliament is another key aspect to ensuring youth participation in politics and development. The following measures have been identified as mechanisms for addressing youth representation in Parliament:<sup>45 46 47</sup>

- **Legislative and policy measures:** Developing an enabling legal framework, free of restrictive barriers, is important for increasing the political participation of young people. This entails aligning the minimum age of eligibility to run for office with the minimum voting age as well as introducing youth quotas thereby directly promoting youth representation in parliament.
- **Youth quotas:** Promoting youth quotas that include a gender parity provision (50/50) enhances the selection and promotion of young candidates thus helping overcome barriers to election. The representation of young MPs can, in turn, increase the level of political engagement amongst youth. In 2018, the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) Forum of Young MPs defined the following targets for the representation of young people in parliament: By 2025, based on youth proportions in the global populations, 15% of parliamentarians to be aged under 30, 35% under 40 and 45% under 45.<sup>48</sup>
- **Establishing specific structures:** Parliamentary bodies, such as committees, caucuses or networks of young MPs that are mandated to address youth issues should be established. This is to ensure youth empowerment is at the centre of parliament by creating and supporting youth focused platforms for engagement in which the views of youth are taken in consideration by MPs.
- **Enabling environment for young MPs:** Creating an enabling environment for young MPs in parliament, includes the availability of training and mentoring thus empowering young

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**Youth representation can be addressed by implementing robust measures such as youth quotas and alignment of eligibility age to run for office with voting age.**

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<sup>44</sup> Indicators for Democratic Parliaments (2023).

<sup>45</sup> Indicators for Democratic Parliaments (2023).

<sup>46</sup> Inter-Parliamentary Union (2021).

<sup>47</sup> Inter-Parliamentary Union (2021).

<sup>48</sup> Inter-Parliamentary Union (2021), p.54.

parliamentarians so that they can contribute, influence and lead. Mentoring will help to share knowledge, experiences and ideas. It can also serve as an opportunity for parties to diversify party membership internally. Other measures such as childcare facilities, a flexible work schedule and remote working possibilities, are examples of good parliamentary practices for enhancing the representation of youth.

- **Gender:** Youth-led gender transformative approach explicitly tackles social norms around gender, power, violence, and attitudes and values around gender roles. This approach does not only focus on social norms, but it is an integrated and multifaceted approach to tackling gender inequality and power relations. As part of the worldwide movement, youth play a critical role in bringing about good, transformative change by confronting stereotypes that support violence against women and girls and opposing political and societal conventions. This can be done through social media campaigns or major social rallies.<sup>49</sup>
- **Disability:** The interplay between youth and disability often amplifies their experience of exclusion and marginalisation. Their lives are further shaped by multiple factors, including gender, race, socioeconomic status, and cultural background. An intersectional approach helps to understand these complexities and the nuanced interactions between them.<sup>50</sup>

## 5. PROSPECTS AND CHALLENGES

Youth bring unique perspectives, creativity, technological savviness, and a deep commitment to social justice. They often challenge conventional thinking, offer innovative solutions, and push for transformative change. Their involvement can enhance the legitimacy, accountability, and effectiveness of global governance. Despite these strengths, they face multiple barriers to meaningful participation in global policy spaces. The table below highlights some of the key barriers that hinders participation in shaping global policies.

**Table 1: Barriers to meaningful participation in global policy spaces**

<p><b>Structural and Institutional Barriers</b></p>	<p>Limited access to education, economic resources, and political platforms restrict many young people from participating in decision-making. In many parts of the world, youth unemployment and poverty are persistent, leading to disengagement and marginalisation.</p> <p>Formal political systems often exclude young people through age restrictions on voting, candidacy, and leadership roles. Many national parliaments and international organisations lack mechanisms to institutionalise youth participation.<sup>51</sup> For instance, only 2.6% of parliamentarians worldwide are under 30, despite young people making up a large proportion of the global population.<sup>52</sup></p>
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<sup>49</sup> Aruri (2020).

<sup>50</sup> Youth 2030 (2023).

<sup>51</sup> OECD (2024).

<sup>52</sup> Inter-Parliamentary Union (2021).

	Global governance institutions often lack mechanisms for youth representation. While there are youth advisory councils and consultative bodies, these are frequently restrictive with limited influence on actual policy decisions. Youth are often consulted rather than empowered, resulting in symbolic rather than substantive participation.
<b>Cultural Barriers</b>	Deep-seated societal norms often dismiss youth perspectives as "inexperienced" or "naïve". Intergenerational power dynamics in policymaking spaces can marginalise young voices, with older leaders reluctant to cede decision-making authority. <sup>53</sup>
<b>Limited Access to Resources and Opportunities</b>	Financial, logistical, and educational barriers disproportionately affect youth from marginalised communities. Participation in global policy forums often requires travel funding, technological access, and policy literacy - resources that many young activists lack. <sup>54</sup>
<b>Digital Divide and Accessibility Challenges</b>	While digital platforms have expanded participation opportunities, the digital divide excludes many young people, particularly in low-income regions. <sup>55</sup> Limited internet access, language barriers, and technological illiteracy prevent equitable engagement in online policy discussions. <sup>56</sup> Virtual participation often lacks the influence of in-person diplomacy, further marginalising youth in critical decision-making spaces.
<b>Fragmentation and Lack of Coordination</b>	Youth movements are often decentralised, with diverse priorities and advocacy strategies. While this diversity is a strength, the absence of unified platforms can weaken their collective policy influence. <sup>57</sup> Without structured mechanisms to consolidate youth voices, policymakers struggle to engage with them systematically, leading to inconsistent participation.
<b>Gender barriers</b>	Youth-led gender transformative approach explicitly tackles social norms around gender, power, violence, and attitudes and values around gender roles. This approach does not only focus on social norms, but it is an integrated and multifaceted approach to tackling gender inequality and power relations. <sup>58</sup>
<b>Barriers for persons with disabilities</b>	Young people with disabilities face a number of challenges, ranging from societal stigmas and discrimination to accessibility barriers, hindering their participation in community life, education, and employment. <sup>59</sup>

<sup>53</sup> Nwaozuru, U. C., Haines, E. R., Shato, T., Obiezu-Umeh, C., & Iwelunmor, J. (2025).

<sup>54</sup> Enaifoghe, A., Maramura, T., Durokifa, A., Maduku, H., Ekanade, I. K., & Chiwarawara, K. (2024).

<sup>55</sup> ITU (2022).

<sup>56</sup> UNICEF (2021).

<sup>57</sup> Taft, J. and Gordon, H. (2013).

<sup>58</sup> Aruri (2020).

<sup>59</sup> Youth 2030 (2023).

Meaningful youth engagement in global policymaking requires dismantling systemic barriers and shifting from symbolic inclusion to substantive participation. By addressing institutional exclusion, tokenism, resource gaps, and cultural biases, policymakers can harness the innovation and energy of young people to create more equitable and sustainable futures.

## 6. ROLE OF INDIVIDUAL MEMBERS OF PARLIAMENT

The following recommendations/measures for individual MPs include:<sup>60</sup>

- **Understanding the constituency base:** MPs should gather information about the concerns of youth and identify the systemic challenges.
- **Engagement Plan:** MPs should develop a plan for meaningful consultation with youth and community entry. This could include facilitated entry through established organisations and groups and involvement of youth from the onset. Meeting at a time and place where youth gather and feel safe is key. Youth are not a homogeneous group and gender, disability, language, geo-location (urban, rural) must be taken into account when developing the plan and engaging with youth. Given the prominence of social media amongst young people in society, virtual/social media platforms are other key spaces for engagement that should also be factored into the plan for entry and as a means of ensuring ongoing contact with the youth constituency.
- **Creating platforms for engagement:** MPs should arrange in person meetings to discuss implementation of laws and policies that affect youth alongside direct site visits to assess practical implications and gather empirical evidence. Social media (X, Instagram, Facebook) and virtual platforms (Zoom, MS Teams) are other forms of communication with young people. However, cognisance should be given to the digital divide from a gendered perspective, youth with disabilities and youth living in impoverished peri-urban and rural areas who may not have access to data or networks to be able to engage on virtual platforms. The use of radio as a means of reaching out to youth should also be considered as a way of reaching out to youth and talk shows whereby youth can be afforded the opportunity to call in to ask questions and raise concerns.
- **Understanding legislative frameworks:** MPs should develop a clear understanding of the relevant laws and policies that impact the youth constituency.

## 7. ROLE OF PARLIAMENTS

Along with the role of individual Members of Parliament, Parliament, as an institution is strategically positioned to influence youth-oriented institutional reform and inclusive political participation. The following actions are proposed:

- **Raising issues identified by youth constituents in Parliament through the work of committees and the Houses:** This would include raising issues posed by youth

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<sup>60</sup> Inter-Parliamentary Union (2017) and Inter-Parliamentary Union (2022).

constituents in committee work, in questions for oral or written reply to the Executive, in the submission of petitions, and in speaking and moving for debates.<sup>61</sup>

- **Advocacy and lobbying:** Advocating for youth mainstreaming and lobbying other Parliamentarians and Ministers directly.
- **Creation of youth caucus:** With the slow but steady increase in the number of young Parliamentarians, a youth caucus can serve as a structured form in which issues affecting young people can be addressed in a coherent manner with a political block across party lines. Lessons can be learnt from the development and functioning of women’s caucuses.
- **Legislative reform:** Oversight of how effective laws and policies have been implemented to determine areas for improvement on the side of government and, where relevant, amending existing legislation or proposing new legislation.
- **Youth Budgeting:** Engaging with budgets from a youth perspective and assessing whether policies and laws are supported with adequate funding to enable implementation. Determining if funds have been optimally used and if not, what consequence management has been implemented. Assessing what measures are in place to ensure budgets allocated for youth development are optimally spent/utilised.
- **Inquiry:** Calling for an inquiry into a specific matter.
- **Treaty compliance:** Domestication of international, regional treaties and agreements and monitoring and evaluation of country’s compliance in that regard.
- **Facilitating platforms for youth engagement:** Creating opportunities for youth to engage directly with MPs in-person and on virtual platforms. Partnering with youth organisations, groups and young people and involving them from inception in the planning phase, implementation and providing feedback options. Use of social media, news print, radio and television are all important avenues to utilise as a part of a broader communication strategy.
- **Youth Parliament:** Creating public platforms for meaningful engagement such as a Youth Parliament serves as an opportunity for youth to gather to raise their issues and engage directly with Parliamentarians on the things that impact their lives. Furthermore, the dialogue enables youth to articulate not only challenges identified but propose solutions and create partnerships for change.
- **Youth Charter and Action Plan:** “In order to remain relevant to this expanding group, parliaments need to connect and interact meaningfully with them. Parliaments can enliven their youth engagement by working with young people to co-design a charter for youth participation.”<sup>62</sup> Developing a youth charter for participation as means of formalising partnerships in which principles are outlined for how to engage, what to focus on, reviewing education programmes, and creating digital hubs – digital platforms for engagement between Parliament and youth. The charter should be accompanied with an action plan that outlines the approach for youth engagement. A key aspect of the charter is a commitment to partner/collaborate/co-operate with youth councils, organisations

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<sup>61</sup> Inter-Parliamentary Union (2017).

<sup>62</sup> Inter-Parliamentary Union and United Nations Development Programme (2022).

and networks with the action plan outlining the meetings to be held to discuss key issues in so doing enabling youth to share their ideas, perspectives and solutions.

- **Use of social media:** Using social media and other digital platforms as a means of engaging with youth, raising awareness and disseminating information. Safeguards are required to protect against misinformation and dis-information, as well as exposure to online abuse and harassment (in addition to protection of personal information and data security). Due consideration should be given to tissues including the digital divide attributed to cultural and gender norms, gender, disability, geo-location (peri-urban, rural areas who do not have access) and access to data/network.
- **Eligibility age for voting:** Lowering the age eligibility for youth to vote from 18 to 17 years (as in the case with Greece and Indonesia) and 16 years (as in countries such as Austria, Argentina, Brazil, Ecuador, Nicaragua, Cuba and more recently the United Kingdom). Consider the pros and cons in this formalised means of giving voice to youth within electoral reform as this provides young people the opportunity to have a say in how the country should be governed.
- **Young MPs:** Facilitating access for young people to become Members of Parliament by removing legislative barriers that would hinder this which may include the alignment of the voting age and eligible age to run for office. Emphasis should be placed on addressing the gendered implications insofar as young female parliamentarians are concerned and LGBTQIA+ persons.
- **Disability awareness:** Building disability awareness amongst MPs and Parliamentary staff and training on disability mainstreaming and the challenges faced by youth with disabilities.

## 8. CONCLUSION

Youth are indispensable partners in shaping inclusive and sustainable futures. It is urgent that the barriers (structural, cultural, and digital) that hinder their participation are dismantled, together with the understanding that youth are not a homogenous group. By leveraging international frameworks like the SDGs and regional agreements such as the African Youth Charter and the EU Youth Strategy, policymakers can integrate youth perspectives into governance. Practical steps include legislative reforms, youth-sensitive budgeting, and the creation of platforms such as youth parliaments. The global community must shift from tokenistic inclusion to substantive empowerment, ensuring young people are co-creators of policies that affect their lives. As South Africa's G20 theme highlights, solidarity, equality, and sustainability demand proactive investment in youth today to secure a resilient tomorrow.

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