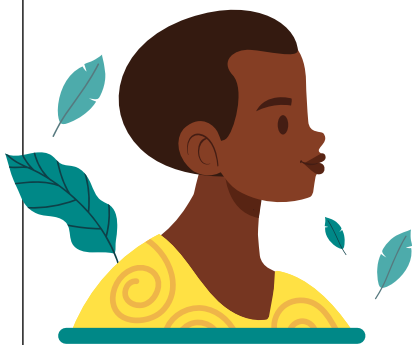




Inclusive practises for nature: The vital role of the youth

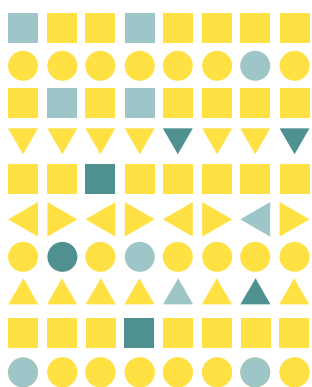


Introduction

Interest in youth participation in the development space has expanded recently, mirroring a global trend. This is part of a growing recognition that the conventional decision-making format by so-called experienced officials has failed to bring about the necessary changes to adapt to climate change, mitigate global warming, reduce waste, protect natural resources and improve livelihoods. A lack of considered decision-making has left billions of vulnerable communities – including youths – increasingly at risk. In the African context, where 60% of the population is under 25 years of age (Karibu, 2020) this is especially important, as these are the citizens who will inherit crises they did not cause. They will be the leaders in the future that will have to respond to compounding burdens.

What's becoming clearer is that processes for sustainable planning and decision-making should be more dialogical and thoroughly thought through. Decisions that “look good” are no longer sufficient. Decisions need to be demonstratively considerate of multiple perspectives for better outcomes for all groups of society. Young people recognise the catastrophic consequences of conservative and tedious decision mechanisms, and because they will be the ones left to deal with the ramifications, they are taking it upon themselves to speak up. Movements like Fridays for Future (Fridays for Future, 2023), institutions like YOUNGO (YOUNGO, 2023) and Youth for Water and Climate (YWC, 2023), networks like the African Youth Commission (AYC, 2023) and Restless Development (Restless Development, 2023), and activists like Vanessa Nakate (Uganda) and Greta Thunberg (Sweden), are just a few great examples of youth activation.

In terms of urban nature, the threats associated with land encroachment, unchecked development, resource overutilization, climate change, unrestrained waste, environmental degradation and poor management, will have dire consequences for urban natural assets, ecological systems and vital ecosystem



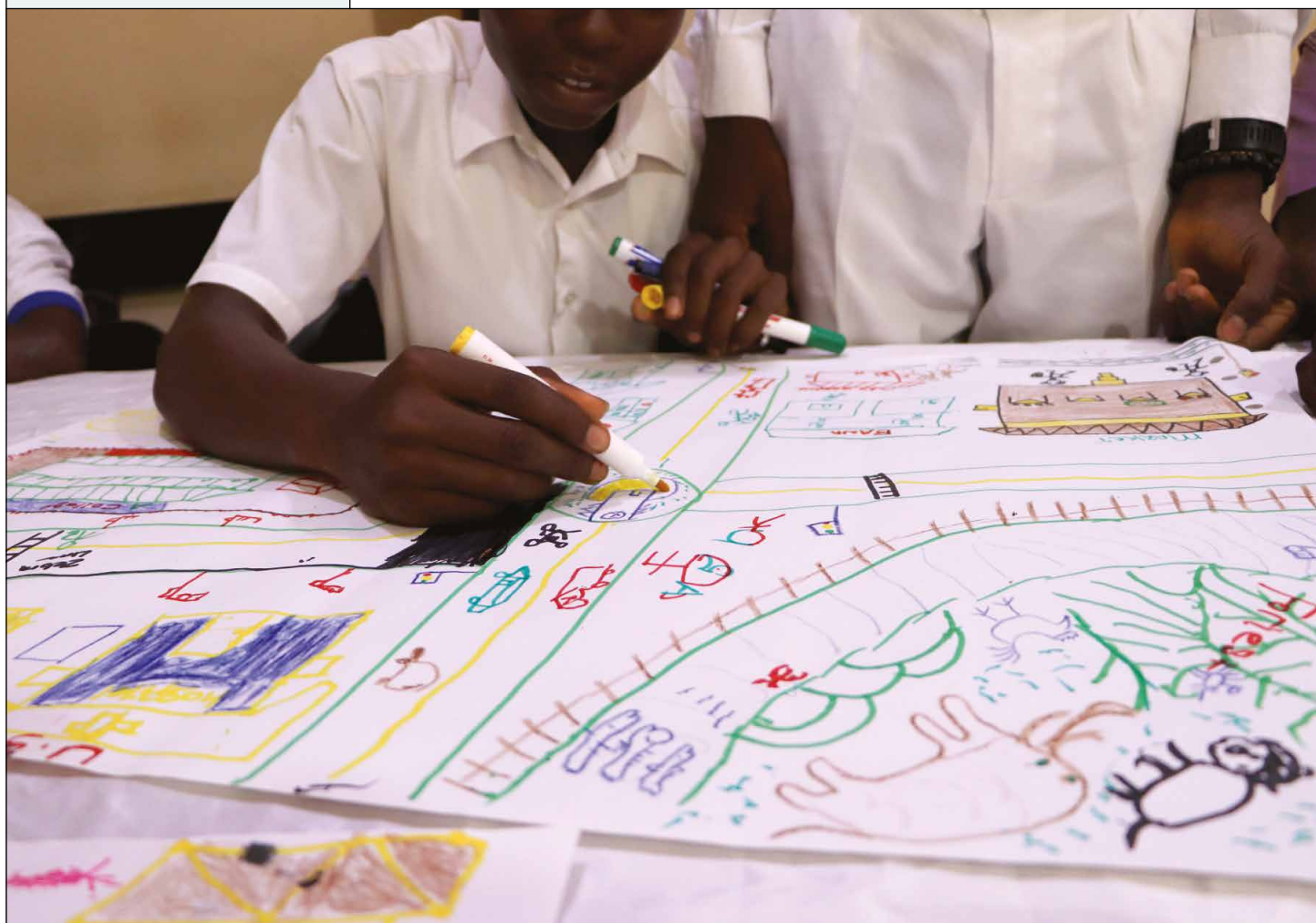


services that communities rely on all over the world, and especially in Africa (Güneralp et al, 2017). Scaling the threats over time means young people and future generations will be left with unpredictable, erratic and dangerous environmental contexts. Thus, it is critical to bring the voices of active youth citizens, and future leaders, into the present conversations about topics that directly impact their lives. It is essential to capture the energy and vision of the youth while balancing it with the wisdom of experienced officials and civil society leaders. While this requires a broader paradigm shift, [ICLEI Africa's Urban Natural Assets \(UNA\) programme](#) recognises the need to build the competencies of future leaders by facilitating participatory processes that validate youth contributions and build youth capacity to safeguard urban natural assets in cities.

Youth at the local scale

Youth engagement makes for better, stronger and more sustainable decisions and implementation in an increasingly unpredictable world (YOUNGO, 2023). There are many youth-led organisations contributing to meaningful work across the world. Youth are valuable partners in research and development, decision-making and planning, implementation and monitoring. However, the role of youth is not fully appreciated in dominant socio-political systems. Token exercises and

BELOW: UNA Resilience Youth Day, April 2023: School children from Bo City and Cape Coast drew their imagined future cities.



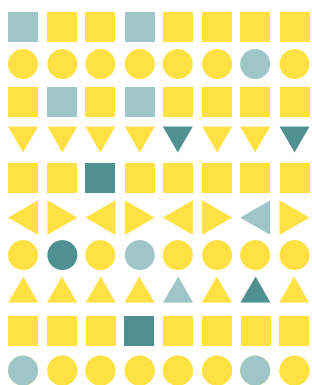


“Providing opportunities for partnerships, mentorship and collaboration is critical to equip and empower the up-and-coming generation of leaders and decision-makers.”

‘youth-only sessions’ are not enough. **Systemic change is needed to capture the younger generation's unique ideas, energy and determination** (ICLEI - Local Governments for Sustainability, 2022). In addition, providing opportunities for partnerships, mentorship and collaboration is critical to equip and empower the up-and-coming generation of leaders and decision-makers. In the pursuit of creating meaningful and sustainable spaces, embracing a people-centred approach becomes paramount. By placing individuals and communities at the centre, we foster inclusive environments that empower diverse stakeholders. Such spaces become safe for expression and open dialogue, enabling all voices to be heard and respected.

In many ways, youth participation at the local scale is integrally linked to substantive human rights, for example, the universal right to a safe, healthy and clean environment and the right to meaningful engagement and participation. It's important to empower youth in engagement processes, as rights holders, by ensuring effective mechanisms are in place to accommodate shared views on topical socio-economic and environmental dialogues and decisions.

It is important to implement this at different scales. At the local government scale, there are several good practices to unlock the power of youth. In terms of advocacy, it is important to increase awareness and sensitivity of municipal staff on youth engagement, communicate the relevance of youth's contribution to the community, and design programmes and campaigns to inspire cultural and behavioural change and contribute to social movements for environmental sustainability. From a governance perspective, local authorities can establish programmes or campaigns to increase youth focus and youth inclusion in policy and plans, and they should include youth voices in formal decision-making processes. Regarding knowledge sharing and capacity development, creating inclusive and accessible capacity building or training programmes geared towards youth, and establishing effective re-skilling programmes, transition programmes, and opportunities for communities who want to shift to sustainable jobs is useful for enhancing youth awareness and capacity in a sustainable economy (ICLEI - Local Governments for Sustainability, 2023).





“Participatory methods, mentorship, educational opportunities, and access to resources are key elements in empowering youth to positively contribute to their communities.”

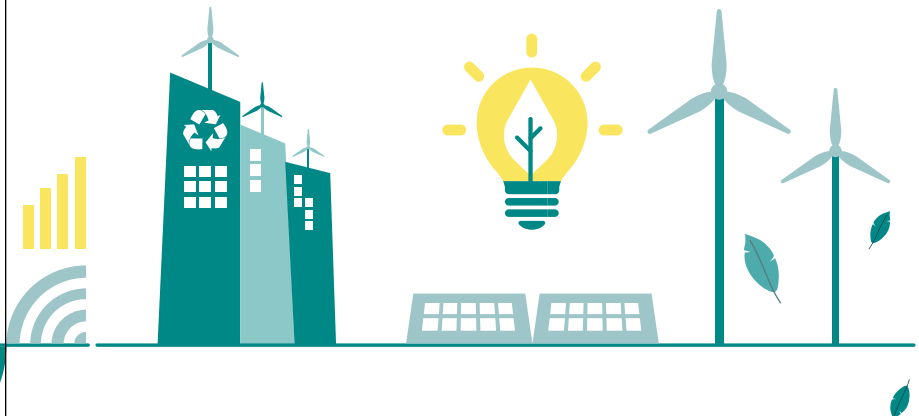


Participatory methods, mentorship, educational opportunities, and access to resources are key elements in empowering youth to positively contribute to their communities. This can catalyse youth inclusivity, offering creative and alternative outlets for expression and agency. **Embracing the fresh perspectives of the youth, unclouded by apathy and fatigue, opens doors to innovative solutions and invigorates the trajectory of any project.** Young people must be integrated into every stage of decision-making – from planning and implementation to working groups, negotiations, and policy decisions. By mainstreaming the above approaches, not only is an inclusive future fostered, but also the leadership potential of youth can be nurtured for a sustainable and shared future for all.

Youth activation for urban natural assets

In 2022, the United Nations declared a [clean, healthy and sustainable environment](#) a universal human right. This historic move gave gravitas to the vision of ICLEI Africa’s almost decade-long UNA programme, which has always been to foster responsible and sustainable biodiversity management and urban nature preservation for resilient African cities and citizens. The programme prioritises equity, diversity and respect as the baseline and shuns rigid, hierarchical structures that reinforce the silence of marginalised groups. The current phase of UNA, [UNA Resilience](#), focuses on the three interconnected pillars of governance, planning and finance to mainstream resilient nature practice. It utilises a human rights-based approach (HRBA) as a framework to prioritise the lived experiences of people with specific emphasis on vulnerable groups – including children, women, youth, the disabled, aged, indigenous and LGBTIQ+ communities – and protecting the environment on which their lives and livelihoods depend.

While UNA views youth as the future custodians of natural assets, with a critical role to play in shaping relevant decisions for current (and future) cities, findings from project research showed a lack of youth participation in conserving urban natural assets in the project cities of Bo City (Sierra Leone) and Cape Coast (Ghana). In response to this, UNA Resilience has sought to involve youth in urban nature discourse by carrying out sensitisation and visioning workshops.





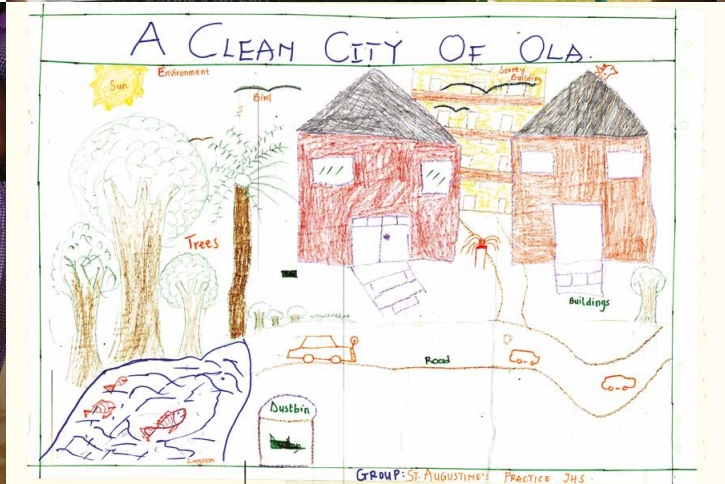
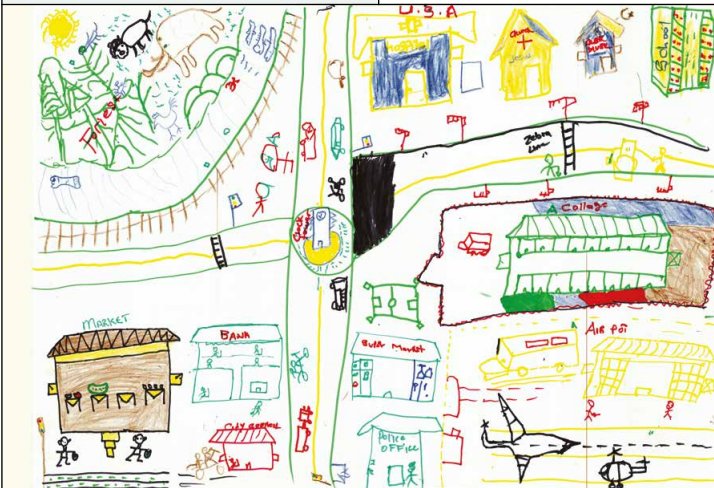
BELOW: A drawing from the Bo City Youth Day in April 2023, where local youth responded to the prompt - Draw Your Imagined Future City.

BOTTOM RIGHT: A youth drawing from the UNA Cape Coast Youth Day, depicting an imagined future city.



In the most recent Learning Lab held in April 2023, the UNA team facilitated a youth activation day on natural assets in project cities, hosting students from local schools. The aim was to raise awareness of natural assets, including their value and the need for nature-based solutions, inspire youth to safeguard natural assets, connect youth with nature in cities, and open opportunities for dialogue and engagement in city initiatives. The youth participants engaged in a drawing activity in which they illustrated and shared with the wider group their future visions for urban nature in their cities in 50 years' time. This exercise sparked a dialogue in which the youth could share reflections about the current state of urban nature, ideas about the key aspects of urban nature in their future cities, and a call to action to preserve and protect nature for current and future generations.

Recognising the significance of youth participation and their indispensable role in fostering active citizenry is essential to instilling long-term value and appreciation for nature. Youth's meaningful involvement ensures the sustainability of projects by fostering a deep connection with the environment and nurturing a sense of responsibility towards its preservation. By embracing the transformative power of youth engagement, a society that embraces change, innovation, and inclusivity can be promoted. Only through these collaborative efforts can a path be forged towards a brighter future that values the wisdom of the past while embracing the untapped potential of the youth.





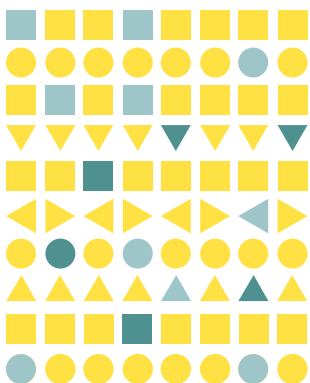
“By making capacity building and skills transfer a priority among stakeholders in African cities, sustainable and nature positive change can be achieved. ”

Conclusion

In today's rapidly changing world, the significance of people-centred approaches cannot be overstated. Placing individuals at the heart of decision-making processes creates environments that empower diverse stakeholders, ensuring all expressions are valued and heard. Participatory methods play a crucial role in breaking down barriers imposed by interpersonal power dynamics. These methods provide an inclusive platform for the youth, enabling full and unhindered expression of all needs and challenges through creative and alternative means. Harnessing the power of fresh perspectives, unburdened by apathy and fatigue, the youth become catalysts for co-designing pathways towards a sustainable future. The UNA project continues to advocate for sustainable development pathways that can lead towards a more resilient future. By embedding participatory processes for diverse stakeholders in planning, governance and finance, it acknowledges the importance of collaboration, equity, respect and inclusion to achieve lasting change.

Central to this vision is the recognition of the invaluable role that youth play in shaping the world. No longer mere beneficiaries, youth actions and voices are more prominent in politics, civic action, economics, environmental care, and the fight against abuse and violence. Young people are able to and do make considerable contributions to critical discussions, as demonstrated in the Urban African Youth Climate Change Manifesto (WWF, 2021), exemplifying the potential of youth as valuable partners in research, development, decision-making and planning.

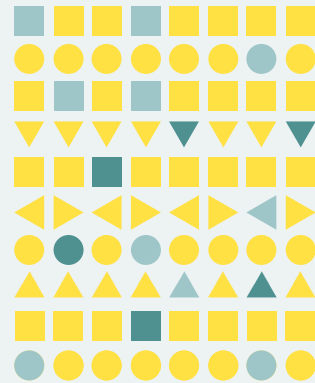
The success of many development projects, including UNA, rests upon meaningful collaboration with multiple stakeholders, including youth. By recognising and legitimising youth experiences, youths' potential as future leaders, and their capacity to contribute significantly to critical discussions, UNA is supporting dialogue and action for mainstreaming youth meaningfully into decision-making spaces.





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