

PERSPECTIVE

Youth networks as bridging actors in environmental governance: Roles, achievements and barriers

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Abstract

1. Young people form a large demographic group and have specific interests and views on the current socio-environmental crises. However, they are largely underrepresented in decision-making. To bring their visions and claims into environmental governance, youth have created alternative pathways of participation, such as youth networks. Yet, their roles and contributions are poorly understood.
2. Drawing from the first-hand experiences of 12 youth networks, we shed light on the bridging role of youth networks in environmental governance, showcase some of their achievements, describe barriers they encounter and offer recommendations to overcome them.
3. In environmental governance, youth networks connect young individuals and generations, foster interactions between grassroots movements and decision-makers, and between environmental governance processes.
4. Youth networks have accomplished tangible achievements. They empower youth to transform parts of societies, are pivotal for the recognition of youth as key actors, and influence some policy processes.
5. Yet, youth networks face major accessibility and systemic barriers that hinder their meaningful engagements and contributions. To lift these barriers, environmental governance actors should pay attention to the processes of youth participation, recognize youth rights to participate in decision-making, follow best practices on meaningful youth engagement, better support grassroots communities and projects, and critically rethink environmental governance to prevent power imbalances.
6. *Policy implications*—Youth networks are driving positive, bottom-up changes for people and nature and play an important bridging role in environmental governance. Yet, their participation is not yet mainstreamed nor meaningful. All

For affiliations refer to page 9.

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environmental governance actors and generations need to work together to overcome youth engagement barriers and ensure the meaningful participation of this overlooked demographic group that is crucial for the needed societal transformations ahead of us.

KEYWORDS

decision-making, environmental activism, environmental governance, science-policy interface, stakeholder participation, transformative change, youth agency, youth networks

1 | INTRODUCTION

Addressing the current socio-environmental crises requires transformative societal changes (IPBES, 2019), which must be driven by just and inclusive governance that allows the meaningful participation in decision-making of traditionally marginalized actors, such as youth (Bonsu et al., 2020).

Youth form a large demographic group, with half of the world's population below 30 years old (Ritchie & Roser, 2019). There is no universally agreed age-definition of 'youth': from 15 to 24 in the United Nations (UN) reported statistics to up to 35 in the African Union (African Union, 2006; United Nations, 1985). Young people form a heterogeneous group, diverse in age, gender, culture, language, religion, life circumstances, socioeconomic status and access to opportunities (UNDP, 2022). Yet, current youth generations are all living through major environmental and societal changes, with ever-increasing environmental debts: pollution now exceeds planetary boundaries (Persson et al., 2022), and accelerating biodiversity loss and climate change severely affect ecosystems and societies (IPBES, 2019; IPCC, 2022). In a highly connected world, youth are increasingly aware of the ongoing global socio-environmental crises (UN Joint Framework Initiative on Children Youth and Climate Change, 2010), which they experience first-hand and will inherit the responsibility of addressing (Thew, 2018).

Consequently, youth have emerged as social groups with specific interests and views on these crises (Rodela & Roumeliotis, 2024), asserting their right to determine their future by protesting and engaging (Thew et al., 2020). Youth have engaged in social and environmental movements for decades, shaping public debate and policy (Earl et al., 2017; Roberts, 2015). Yet, the scale of recent youth mobilizations is unprecedented: In 2019, 7 million people in 185 countries joined the largest *Fridays for Future* protest, with the median age below 30 years old across 19 cities around the world (de Moor et al., 2020). As Gen Z protests are spreading around the world, youth are asking for society-wide changes, notably in decision-making processes.

Youth have the legal right to participate in the making of decisions affecting them (Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989; International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, 1966). They are recognized as a Major Group in UN processes, highlighting the

importance of their participation to achieve sustainable development (United Nations, 1992). Despite their legitimacy, youth remain underrepresented in political and decision-making processes and institutions, such as political parties and national and local governments (UNDP, 2020). Worldwide, only 2.6% of parliamentarians are under 30, with less than a third of them being women (United Nations, 2023).

To overcome this lack of representation and bring about change in decision-making, young people have created alternative pathways of participation, such as youth-led networks (hereafter youth networks). These networks unite young individuals and organizations, acting together to contribute to solving societal issues and move towards a desired future for themselves and future generations. Networks engage on various topics, such as combating corruption, promoting peace, alleviating poverty, protecting biodiversity or preventing climate change (UNDP, 2020).

Youth networks provide an avenue for young people to participate in environmental governance (e.g. Kolleck & Schuster, 2022), defined as 'the set of regulatory processes, mechanisms and organizations through which political actors influence environmental actions and outcomes' (Lemos & Agrawal, 2006). Environmental governance unfolds across scales, from local (e.g. a city council) to international (e.g. a United Nations Convention meeting) and brings together diverse actors. These include policymakers, non-governmental organizations, businesses, media and marginalized rights-holders groups whose human rights, including the right to 'a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment' (UN General Assembly, 2022), are affected by decisions taken, such as Indigenous peoples, local communities, women and youth. Environmental governance is expected to drive large-scale actions needed to address current socio-environmental crises, making youth participation essential to democratize decision-making (Orsini, 2022) and advance intergenerational justice (Kotzé & Knappe, 2023; Thew et al., 2020).

Youth networks engaging in environmental governance vary in their focus and composition, but all rely on relational strategies: They connect young people together and form alliances with a range of actors involved in environmental governance (Kang & Orsini, 2024). Youth networks can also be grounded in shared relational values among members, such as care towards nature and the pursuit of environmental and intergenerational justice (Chan

et al., 2016). Through these relationships, youth networks foster interactions across multiple governance levels, knowledge systems and generations and contribute to policy processes and on-the-ground changes for people and nature. They are essential for the institutionalization of meaningful youth inclusion in environmental governance.

Until now, research on youth environmental activism has almost exclusively focused on climate mobilization, mostly on global North movements and leading figures like Greta Thunberg (Neas et al., 2022). This narrow focus overlooks the contributions youth networks make to environmental governance and provides little insight into the achievements and challenges they encounter, especially outside of the climate space (Rodela & Roumeliotis, 2024). The connections between grassroots youth movements and youth participation in environmental governance also remain unclear. These research gaps partially originate from the common conception among scholars that youth are recipients of politics who need to be educated and trained, rather than political actors and are therefore rarely studied as such (Orsini & Kang, 2023). As a result, the relational work that youth networks perform remains poorly understood. Youth-centred approaches are therefore needed to attend to the diverse, relational practices through which young people engage in environmental governance, while also challenging research traditions that rarely recognize their political agency (Neas et al., 2022; Orsini, 2022).

West et al. (2020) draw attention to how knowledge emerges from practical engagement in the world, emphasizing the situated nature of knowledge and the diverse practices through which it is produced. Such perspectives encourage closer attention to experiential, context-specific knowledges and to the plurality of ways actors participate in environmental governance. To complement existing knowledge, we offer a youth-led collective perspective, based on the first-hand experiences of 12 youth networks engaged in environmental governance. We highlight the relational work of youth networks by exploring their bridging roles in environmental governance, identify achievements and barriers to participation, and offer recommendations to strengthen their meaningful participation.

2 | PRESENTATION OF THE 12 YOUTH NETWORKS

Youth from different networks interact across environmental governance spaces (e.g. Conference of the Parties of UN Conventions). The idea for this perspective was born at the 15th Conference of the Parties of the UN Convention on Biological Diversity, to (1) share experiences and draw lessons on achievements and barriers across networks, and (2) make visible the scarcely documented youth contributions to environmental governance.

To include diverse geographical representation and modes of actions, we invited youth networks engaged in environmental

governance to contribute to this perspective, by directly asking networks and sharing the invitation across youth networks' communities (snow-ball sampling method). Twelve networks answered positively (Figure 1) and appointed a representative. We convened a workshop to share experiences on contributions, achievements and barriers when engaging in environmental governance. While we paid specific attention to regional balance and diversity of youth networks, our 12 networks only represent a part of networks active in environmental governance, and we therefore only present our own views, although we believe that others may share similar experiences.

Our 12 networks engage in environmental governance at the local, national and international level and across all continents (Figure 1), on diverse issues, such as biodiversity, ocean, forest and climate. The networks belong to three categories. First, self-organized, official youth representatives in International Conventions and United Nations (UN) Agencies, including the Global Youth Biodiversity Network, Youth Engaged in Wetlands, UN Youth Delegates and MAB youth. Second, early-career professional networks, bringing the voice of young professionals into environmental governance, including the Early Career Ocean Professionals (ECOP) Programme of the UN Decade of Ocean Science for Sustainable Development, ECOPs of the European Marine Board, International Forestry Students' Association (IFSA) and Young Ecosystem Services Specialists (YESS). Third, NGO-supported youth-led networks, created to drive local, bottom-up changes while engaging in environmental governance to ensure youth priorities are reflected. These include EarthEcho International's GenSea community, the Sustainable Ocean Alliance and WWF Philippines National Youth Council. Others are more policy-focused, such as Eurocean's Youth.

While independent from one another, our 12 networks share three principles. First, shifts in current dominant societal values are necessary to stop and reverse the current socio-environmental crises. Second, intergenerational equity, inclusivity and human and nature rights-based approaches are essential to achieve environmental and social justice. Third, maintaining a grassroots perspective while engaging in environmental governance is critical to ensure that young people's efforts translate into tangible outcomes.

3 | THE BRIDGING ROLES OF YOUTH NETWORKS IN ENVIRONMENTAL GOVERNANCE

Youth networks act as bridges between individuals from all generations, fostering inclusivity and horizontality (e.g. Kolleck & Schuster, 2022; Orsini, 2022). These networks bring together individual youth, nurturing interdisciplinarity and the weaving of diverse knowledge systems (Huambachano et al., 2022). They also bridge generations by creating opportunities for youth to engage

and build alliances with organizations, researchers, governments, thereby fostering intergenerational dialogues and accountability in environmental governance. The mutual contributions of young and older generations can result in synergies that enhance decision-making with greater innovation and productivity (e.g. Zeldin et al., 2000).

Our 12 networks build two-way bridges in environmental governance, connecting decision-makers to the realities of young people on the ground and helping young people enter and influence environmental governance (Figure 1).

First, our networks consult youth and synthesize their claims to bring them to decision-makers (e.g. Youth Engaged in Wetlands, 2021). Youth from our networks have also supported their countries' national delegations in UN environmental negotiations, sometimes negotiating for them, especially countries with small delegations. By doing so, they directly bring youth voices to decision-makers.

Second, youth who can enter environmental governance through our networks bring their skills, innovative methods and values. Young professionals often know the latest developments

12 youth networks engaging in environmental governance

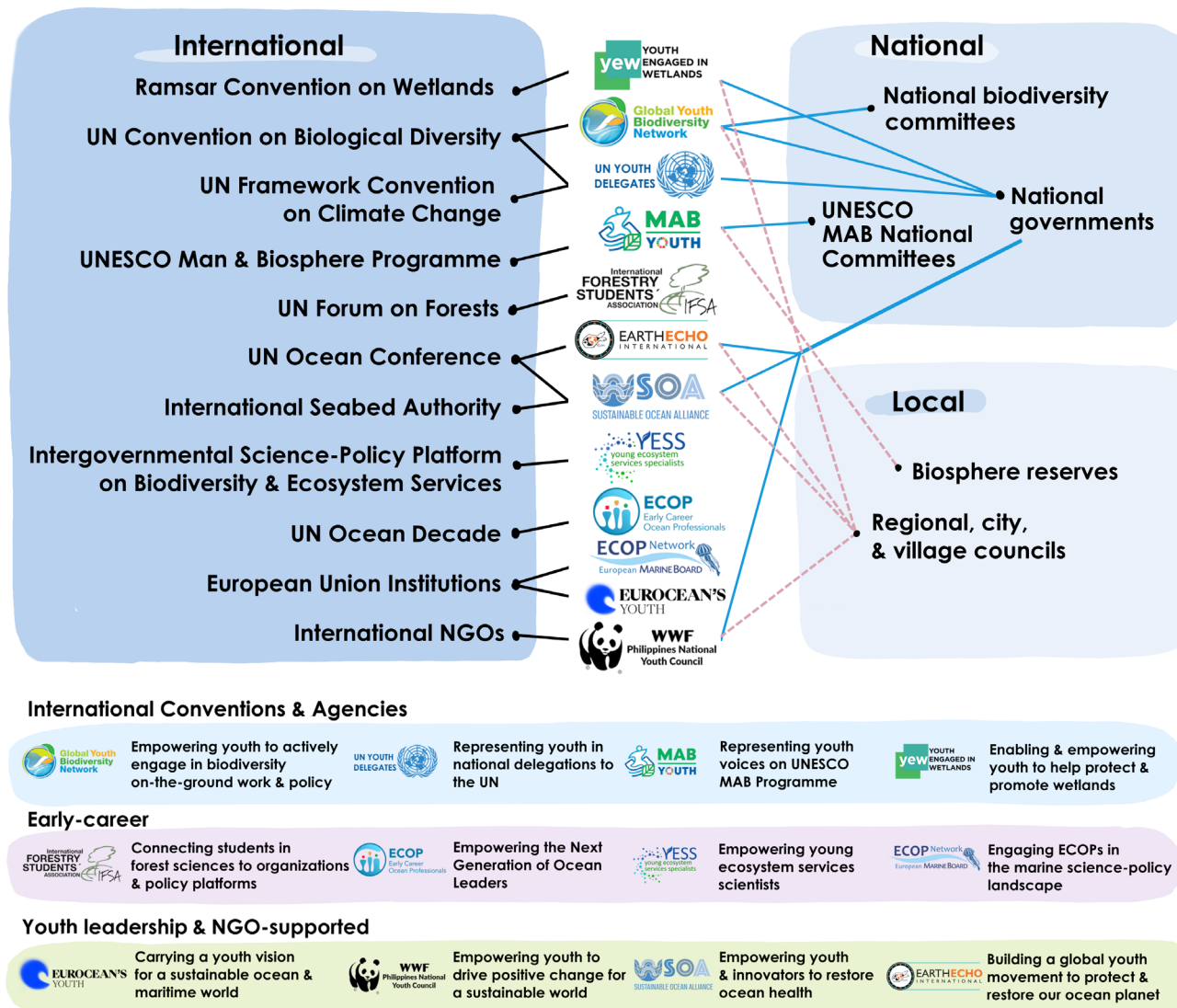


FIGURE 1 Twelve youth networks engaging in environmental governance that participated in the writing of this perspective. The top part showcases the links between the 12 youth networks and examples of environmental governance spaces in which they engage, at different levels. International links are in black, national in blue and local in dotted orange. For readability, only links to the main environmental governance spaces youth networks engage with are displayed, while acknowledging that some youth networks engage in multiple spaces at the international level or in spaces not represented in the figure at the national and local levels. The bottom part of the figure presents the core missions of the 12 youth networks and the three categories they belong to.

in their fields, and their expertise can contribute significantly to knowledge exchange (e.g. Filyushkina et al., 2022). Youth are effective at problem-solving and creative (e.g. Palmiero, 2015; Thornton & Dumke, 2005), and can be more receptive to scientific evidence (e.g. Stevenson et al., 2014). Youth networks master new methods of engagement, including social media and innovative campaigns (e.g. low costs, artistic methods; Orsini, 2022), that can mobilize diverse social groups and promote civic and political engagement in many countries (Agarwal & Sung, 2021). Research across 65 countries also shows that youth are overall more tolerant and open to diversity (Vala & Costa-Lopes, 2010). Youth are often seen as a 'moral voice' in environmental governance (Yona et al., 2020), their demands going beyond youth-specific interests (Orsini, 2022) and supporting long-term perspectives. These demands include respecting planetary boundaries, ending fossil fuels and false climate and biodiversity solutions, respecting fundamental human and nature rights, social and environmental justice, transparency of decision-making and transforming the economic and financial systems (our networks; also reported in Orsini, 2022; Orsini & Kang, 2023; Thew et al., 2021). By bringing ambitious views, youth networks challenge established norms, values and assumptions grounding environmental governance power structures (Knappe & Schmidt, 2021; Rodela & Roumeliotis, 2024).

Youth networks also bridge environmental governance processes, helping break down silos that currently fragment environmental governance. Youth who are given an opportunity to engage in environmental governance gain confidence and expertise, leading them to engage in other environmental governance processes at different levels (Orsini, 2022). Youth networks support these individuals and build collective positions across networks, with which they advocate in multiple environmental governance processes (e.g. on Nature-based solutions, relevant to both the UN Climate and Biodiversity Conventions, see GYBN et al., 2021).

The relational practices of youth networks extend beyond their bridging roles in environmental governance, as our work is often grounded in renegotiating how societies relate to nature, shifting from dominant extractive relationships. Youth networks often mobilize around ecosystems or places their members feel connected to, through relationships, such as responsibility or attachment. Examples from our networks include MAB Youth, which bring together youth engaging within UNESCO Man And Biosphere reserves, or other of our networks that focus on marine ecosystems, wetlands or forests. These relationships are enacted through hands-on practices, such as biodiversity conservation and restoration, awareness raising, advocacy and policy engagement (see Boxes 1–4). Overall, our actions are frequently motivated by care for nature, emerging from social-ecological relations (West et al., 2018). This shapes how youth networks relate to environmental problems and why they seek to intervene in environmental governance in the first place. By bridging individuals, generations and governance spaces, while remaining grounded in relationships

between people and nature, youth networks have been able to achieve tangible results.

4 | YOUTH NETWORKS' ACHIEVEMENTS

Youth-centred perspectives are needed to better understand the achievements of and for youth networks in environmental governance. We showcase here some of our networks' achievements (i.e. reaching a network's goal).

4.1 | Youth networks empower thousands of young people worldwide

Bringing together a community of potential agents of change is the first achievement of any youth network. Our 12 networks have created large, youth-led, inclusive, bottom-up communities for young people to collaborate, develop creative solutions, new narratives and participate in decisions affecting their lives, rights and future. Altogether, our networks are pushing for on-the-ground and policy changes that support biodiversity, wetlands, climate, ocean, forests, ecosystem services, local communities and youth participation from the local to the international levels. Currently, our 12 networks are made of more than 400 local, national and regional subgroups across all inhabited continents, bringing together more than a million young people worldwide. The networks are expanding rapidly (e.g. the UN Ocean Decade ECOP Programme grew from 300 members to 8000 in the last 5 years).

Our 12 networks have built capacity of thousands of young people from more than 150 countries. They organized more than 50 workshops and 10 youth forums (e.g. on youth engagement in wetland, forest and marine policies), provided hundreds of learning opportunities in a diversity of languages, and created capacity-building materials used across generations (e.g. Sakiyama & Schwarzer, 2018). For example, the youth-led Climate Youth Negotiator Programme trained in 2 years for more than 200 youth to become negotiators for their countries in the UN Climate Convention (Youth Negotiators Academy, 2022), with the help of former UN Youth Delegates. Together, our 12 networks have reached at least 17.7 million views on social media and trained at least 15,000 young people, leading to the implementation of hundreds of youth-led projects.

4.2 | Youth networks transform societies locally

Local transformations are the building blocks of broader societal change, and half a million youth around the world have already taken action in their homes, schools and communities (UNDP, 2015). Some of our 12 networks have achieved grassroots successes leading environmental projects, as illustrated in Boxes 1 and 2, see also Youth Engaged in Wetlands (2021).

BOX 1 WWF Philippines National Youth Council transforming societies and influencing policies locally in the Philippines

The WWF Philippines National Youth Council empowered a generation of youth in the Philippines, by building the PANAMA youth network of environmental defenders. They provided platforms for youth to connect, learn and collaborate, allowing them to initiate **numerous grass-roots projects rooted in local needs**, including reforestation, clean-up, educational and biodiversity conservation projects. These helped reduce carbon footprints, protect biodiversity and create healthier environments, **benefiting both people and nature**. Local communities actively participated, enhancing collaboration among youth, government agencies, NGOs and the private sector.

The Youth Council also **trained youth to analyse policies and identify the social-environmental challenges facing their communities** so they could develop solutions. **Youth have advocated for barangay (village) policies focused on climate change and waste segregation and management**. In several places in the Philippines, local youth have raised awareness through campaigns and workshops, participated in public consultations and legislative hearings, and collaborated with local governments and other stakeholders to ensure youth representation in policy discussions. Youth were **generally satisfied with the outcomes as policies reflected their contributions**. They **continue to advocate for better implementation and more inclusive measures**.

BOX 2 Local youth from the Sustainable Ocean Alliance transforming societies worldwide and influencing global policy

The Sustainable Ocean Alliance (SOA) focuses on solving ocean issues through environmental restoration, youth leadership and innovation. Since 2018, SOA has deployed over \$5.8 million and supported >300 projects across >100 countries, enabling the creation of >500 sustainable blue jobs. In 2023–2024, these projects **restored 3969 ha of coastal ecosystems, removed or prevented 26,892 metric tons of waste and 84,621 metric tons of CO₂**.

SOA was also the **first youth-led observer to the International Seabed Authority**. It led international youth advocacy helping **change the narrative on deep-sea mining**. In June 2022, a Peruvian congressman introduced a **bill calling for the first deep-seabed mining moratorium in Latin America**, co-written with SOA Peru and SOA's Youth Policy Advisory Council. **SOA continues to advocate for youth inclusion in the decision-making process of the International Seabed Authority and against the negative implications of deep-sea mining**.

(e.g. UN Secretary-General's Youth Advisory Group on Climate Change, Canadian Prime Minister's youth council) and the increasing mentions of youth and intergenerational equity in decision texts (e.g. CITES, 2022; UNFCCC, 2022; CBD, 2012; Box 3).

4.3 | Youth networks are pivotal in the recognition of youth as key actors of environmental governance

Youth demands and priorities gathered by our 12 youth networks through consultations fed into dozens of reports, recommendations, calls for action, manifestos and open letters. Our networks' members have joined working groups, created partnerships, drafted policy resolutions and delivered hundreds of interventions, including in negotiation sessions. They have also organized dozens of side events, met with funders and brought media attention through collective actions, campaigns, protests and press conferences. Our 12 networks' advocacy has resulted in hundreds of intergenerational dialogues, meetings with national delegations, UN bodies' officials and other environmental governance actors.

Youth networks' efforts are starting to lead to the recognition of youth as important and competent actors, contributing to improving their inclusion in environmental governance. Evidence of this trend includes increased speaking time given to youth in meetings and conferences, non-youth actors recognizing the dynamism and quality of youth participation (e.g. Marquardt et al., 2023), consulting youth

4.4 | Youth are influencing policies

Youth advocacy sometimes influences other environmental governance actors, translating into policy outcomes at the local, national and international levels. We provide examples from our 12 networks (see boxes) and from other youth.

At the local level, youth have influenced their municipalities (Box 1). Another example is the 'Bye-bye plastic bags' initiative launched by two children from Bali, which led to a single-use plastic bag ban on their island.

At the national level, youth-led movements have influenced environmental politics (Box 2). In the United States, the *Sunrise movement* contributed to the adoption of the Green New Deal (Yona et al., 2020). In Germany, *Fridays for Future* street protests influenced members of parliament, increasing their attention on environmental policies in parliamentary debates (Schürmann, 2024). In our 12 networks, youth also took part in successful national-level campaigns, such as 'America the Beautiful', enhancing ocean protection (EarthEcho International, 2022).

At the international level, youth are influencing current political negotiations (e.g. Box 2) and some of their claims have made their way into international policy (e.g. Box 4; Marquardt et al., 2023). Youth

BOX 3 Recognition of youth as a key actors in the Ramsar Convention

Youth Engaged in Wetlands' advocacy led to the **official recognition of youth as key stakeholders in the Ramsar Convention**, through Resolution XIV.12 (2022). **Crafted for and by youth**, the Resolution established a Youth Working Group to mainstream youth engagement, and recommended the inclusion of youth as part of national delegations and the creation of Youth Focal Points. In 2025, Resolution XV.19 enhanced and sustained youth participation: it re-established the Youth Working Group to implement a youth working plan, encouraged countries to empower their Youth Focal Points to participate in decision-making at national and international levels, and encouraged the Convention's Scientific and Technical Review Panel to engage with young and early-career scientists. As a result, **54 Parties have nominated Youth Focal Points**, demonstrating **expanding commitment to youth engagement**.

BOX 4 Influence of the Global Youth Biodiversity Network on the Global Biodiversity Framework and its implementation

The **Global Youth Biodiversity Network (GYBN)** contributed to the **Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework**, with the inclusion of **six of their text proposals on youth priorities** (e.g. intergenerational equity, transformative education). **An entire target is dedicated to the full and effective participation of rights-holders' groups in decision-making processes, including youth**. Never before had any major global agreement on biodiversity included youth in any of its targets or implementation guidelines. This has helped **national chapters of GYBN to be included in the ongoing review process of their countries' national biodiversity strategies**. Some chapters succeeded and could provide critical inputs on youth visions and priorities in their countries, and be included in the implementation of their national strategies. However, many were also not able to participate or their contributions were not taken into account.

have also influenced less political elements of international negotiations, such as youth employment in the Sustainable Development Goals negotiations (Orsini, 2022) and climate education in the climate negotiations (Thew et al., 2021). Youth influence has been recognized by negotiators (e.g. in UN Climate negotiations; Thew, 2018)

and policymakers (e.g. by the Rapporteur of the European Union Nature Restoration Law, 2023).

Some youth groups have also been successful in leveraging legal means to constrain governments to implement policies they agreed on. Youth have filed more than 50 climate litigation cases in 24 countries across all continents (Rodela & Stuber, 2023). This includes Colombian youth against their government to protect the Amazon (Bustos et al., 2020) or, more recently, Hawaiian youth against Hawai'i State's transport department to decarbonize and achieve zero emissions (The Guardian, 2024).

5 | BARRIERS TO MEANINGFUL YOUTH PARTICIPATION IN ENVIRONMENTAL GOVERNANCE

Despite actively engaging, being increasingly recognized and achieving tangible results in environmental governance, our 12 networks still face important barriers, which we categorized into accessibility, structural and systemic barriers. Accessibility barriers prevent youth from being able to access or efficiently engage in environmental governance. Structural barriers hamper the effectiveness of current environmental governance (e.g. excessive bureaucracy, lack of long-term strategy planning, accessible communication, accountability). These affect youth participation but also other actors; thus, we do not focus on them here. Finally, systemic barriers result from the underlying values and assumptions grounding current environmental governance. Here, we describe some of the biggest barriers to meaningful youth engagement we have encountered in our 12 networks.

5.1 | Accessibility barriers

5.1.1 | Lack of platforms to engage as youth

There is often no dedicated platform or entry point for youth to engage in environmental governance. For example, there is currently no youth network that could act as an official youth constituency in the UN High Seas Treaty. In fact, our youth networks were created by young people missing a platform to express their voices. Yet, young people cannot self-organize to increase their representation when they are completely absent in the first place or when barriers to creating such a platform are too high.

5.1.2 | Lack of resources to engage in environmental governance

Lack of funding is prevalent in environmental governance but bears a higher burden on youth (Orsini, 2022), who often highlight it as a main barrier (e.g. GYBN, 2025; Youth Engaged in Wetlands, 2021). Our networks' members are volunteers, who in their personal time,

train themselves to engage in environmental governance (from learning English to understanding the policy technicalities), attend meetings and try to find funding to do so. Since the creation of our 12 networks (mostly in the last 15 years), our members have worked at least 200,000h (likely largely underestimated), equivalent to more than a hundred full-time positions over 1 year. Some use their personal savings, but most cannot afford it (Orsini, 2022). Lack of consistent funding can lead to high turnover and can prevent networks from developing the institutional memory needed to best utilize opportunities in environmental governance (e.g. in UN climate negotiations; Thew et al., 2021).

5.1.3 | Inequalities in accessing environmental governance

While many youths from the Global South engage in our networks, they face even greater participation challenges (e.g. ECOP Programme, 2022). In our 12 networks, many were unable to attend environmental governance meetings due to visa rejections or delays, and significant associated travel costs.

5.2 | Systemic barriers

5.2.1 | Lack of recognition

Political representation is dependent on the possibility of gaining recognition (Rodela & Roumeliotis, 2024). Yet, research highlights that youth are overlooked, granted low credibility and considered passive learners rather than active contributors (e.g. Thew et al., 2020). In our 12 networks' experience, when youth are invited to participate in discussions, it is often to provide inputs on improving youth inclusion practices rather than on the discussion topic itself, despite recent improvements. Barriers to youth recognition are both formal and informal: regulatory acts often fail to include youth in environmental governance (e.g. committees) as youth engagement is not mainstreamed, and social and cultural constructs on youth affect our impact. As experienced by our networks and others (Yona et al., 2020), lack of recognition can turn into tokenism when youth are given a space to be represented, but without the possibility to properly do so (e.g., controlling youth discourse, using them only as a symbolic power, see Thew, 2018).

5.2.2 | Lack of support to grassroots movements changing business-as-usual narratives

For real change to happen on the ground, it is essential to focus on grassroots movements and cultural shifts. Youth networks provide accessible opportunities for young people to engage in such grassroots, community-led projects that respect and incorporate local

knowledge and culture (Box 1). However, appropriate technical support and financial flows scarcely reach such projects.

5.2.3 | Power imbalances

The performance of environmental governance systems depends on their ability to handle power relationships and integrate diverse voices and views (Lécuyer et al., 2024). Yet, environmental governance suffers from great power imbalances (e.g. between nationalities, languages, genders, generations, cultures and access to financial resources) that 'marginalize certain groups and threaten to perpetuate the drivers of environmental crises' (Ferrer et al., 2021). Our networks have experienced these power imbalances and are not satisfied with them; our members sometimes feel powerless, and other youth also noted unbalanced corporate influence (Yona et al., 2020). Because our demands for systemic transformative changes go against powerful actors that are resisting these changes, our voices are often not well reflected by decisions taken in environmental governance (also experienced by other youth, see Orsini & Kang, 2023; Orsini, 2022).

6 | RECOMMENDATIONS TO ENSURE MEANINGFUL YOUTH PARTICIPATION

Despite active engagement in environmental governance, our networks face major barriers. We provide here five priority recommendations and key questions to environmental governance actors (Figure 2), complementing others (GYBN, 2025), to lift these barriers so that youth engagement, as for other marginalized groups, evolves

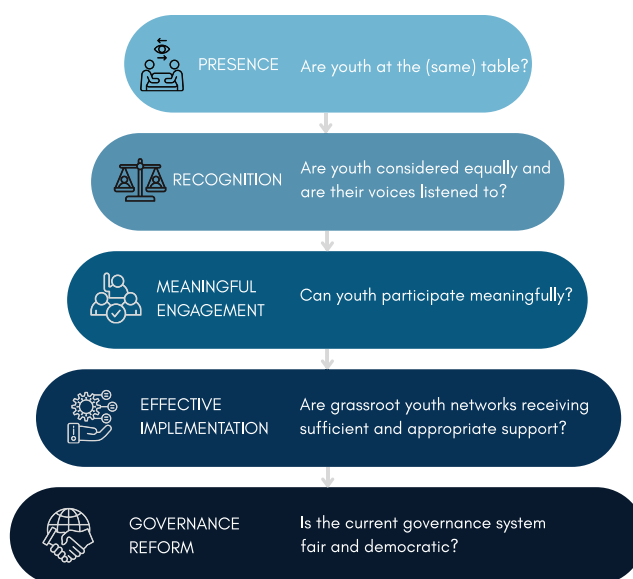


FIGURE 2 Key questions for environmental governance actors to improve meaningful youth engagement in environmental governance.

from symbolic participation to shared decision-making, equitable funding and systemic participation.

1. *Presence*: actively investigate the processes of youth participation and representation in environmental governance (e.g. are youth present, funded, on equal footing with other actors?). If they are absent, critically consider why and address the root causes of their absence. In particular, support the development of youth networks to open the door for a broader youth engagement.
2. *Recognition*: ensure that all actors recognize young people's right to participate in decision-making and that their ideas and visions are included when taking decisions. In particular, grassroots implementers of environmental decisions, including Indigenous peoples, local communities, women and youth, should participate equitably in decision-making at all levels.
3. *Meaningful engagement*: prevent tokenism and follow the principles of meaningful youth engagement (see United Nations, 2023): *rights-based and safe, institutionally mandated, designated for youth, resourced, transparent, accessible, voluntary, informative, reciprocally accountable, diverse and inclusive*, recognizing youth as *equal partners*. Further guidance on how to apply these principles is provided by UNESCO (2019).
4. *Effective implementation*: support grassroots implementers of environmental decisions, including youth, more directly, rapidly and effectively to make environmental governance more sustainable, equitable and effective over the long term. This implies working directly with young people and their networks, easing bureaucracy and channelling resources and support that can adapt to local contexts and challenges. Funding bodies in particular can create youth-specific funding schemes spanning over multiple years that would allow networks to hire youth staff, and co-create progress metrics and reporting adapted to youth networks' capacity as volunteers, such as accepting regular oral reports (e.g. European Marine Board).
5. *Governance reform*: critically rethink current environmental governance and work towards its restructuring to make it more efficient, democratic and to prevent power imbalances. This includes giving voting rights—rather than observer status—to rights-holders' groups, including youth.

7 | CONCLUSION

Our 12 youth networks engage in environmental governance to drive change and participate in decision-making needed to address current socio-environmental crises. We shed light on the bridging and relational roles that youth networks hold in environmental governance, connecting young individuals and generations, facilitating interactions between grassroots movements and decision-makers, and across environmental governance processes. We show how our 12 networks share common principles and work through bottom-up approaches to drive positive changes for people and nature, across

environmental governance processes and scales, a dynamic that has not been documented until now. Importantly, driven by relational values, such as care for nature, our networks engage in environmental governance but do not solely rely on it, also creating and implementing solutions to the current social-environmental crises outside of policy arenas. Youth networks' potential is only starting to be unveiled and could largely expand if the barriers they face are overcome. We invite readers, researchers, practitioners and decision-makers to question current youth engagement practices and engage meaningfully with youth, as their participation in decision-making and in the implementation of decisions is critical for the major societal transformations ahead of us.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Marie-Morgane Rouyer conceived the idea and led the writing of the manuscript. Juliette Aminian Biquet and Marie-Morgane Rouyer designed the figures, with input from all. All shared ideas and experiences and provided input to improve the text. All authors critically contributed to the drafts and gave final approval for publication.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

Each of the authors is a representative of one of the 12 youth networks that contributed to this perspective. They declare no other conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

All the data compiled on the 12 youth networks are available in the manuscript. No other data were used.

STATEMENT ON INCLUSION

The authors have strived to be as inclusive as possible in the composition of the youth networks contributing to this perspective. A call for collaborators was sent and distributed among youth networks to bring together a diverse group of networks active in environmental governance. Specific attention was paid to geographic representation across networks and networks' representatives. Yet, we acknowledge that not all regions of the world are well represented and that more network representatives from Europe took part in the writing of this perspective.

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