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By Brian Muthuri Kithinji

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1. INTRODUCTION

a) Background and Problem Statement

The intensifying effects of global warming are among the most serious threats to human security and stability in Africa (Fotso-Nguemo et al., 2023). Climate change impacts affect the security of African states both directly and indirectly, by exacerbating existing political, peace and security, socio-economic and development challenges that especially affect vulnerable groups, such as women, young people, children, internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees, persons with disabilities and other minority groups. While Africa contributes less than 3% of global greenhouse gas emissions (IPCC, 2023), the continent

is disproportionately affected by climate change due to its socio-economic and political vulnerabilities. The climate crisis has already caused significant harm to biodiversity, water security, food production, life, health, and economic growth, and it is projected to worsen significantly over the coming decades.

However, it is unfortunate that the continent is experiencing a crisis it did not create. In Africa, where most of the livelihood activities are climate sensitive like agriculture, fishing and tourism, climate change is escalating poverty. But it critical to note that the youth of Africa have decided to rise to the occasion as they have taken it upon themselves saying, “*We are not going to drop down the mic of climate justice, we are not going to keep quiet, this is our future. We do not have planet B, we only have planet Earth.*” The emergence of youth climate activism is a direct response to these challenges and it has proven to be of paramount importance in shaping policy and awareness across the continent. However, there are very few formal spaces for youths to have a voice in decision-making. Youth climate activists continue to suffer a myriad of challenges including limited financial resources, state bureaucracies, and fragmentation and competition between movements that impacts their work.

Recently, there is a growing consciousness of the intersectionality between climate activism and conflict prevention. Fulford (2006) defines conflict as a clash of thoughts, opinions or ideals, and this is usually the result of confused false expectations especially in the area of unmet emotional needs. Paul Wehr in Miall, Ramsbotham and Woodhouse (1999) views conflict as the pursuit of incompatible goals by different groups or persons and this is usually generated by the structure and nature of society. He goes on to say that conflict is a result of misperceptions, miscalculation and poor communication, and that if not properly handled, it becomes dysfunctional and degenerates into violence. It can also become a negative force when it degenerates into faultfinding, belittling, demeaning level, let alone when it leads to violence.

Growing up and living in a conflict-affected area significantly affects the growth and development of young people (Cordoba, 2021). Exposure to conflict, violence and insecurity, economic deterioration and breakdown of societal structures can drain their

psychological well-being. Exposure to hunger and poverty leaves them vulnerable to underdevelopment and disease. At the same time, they are often unable to attend school or gain employment and are at high risk of sexual violence or exploitation. Some young girls have also been forced into early marriages or childbirth (Schlecht, 2013).

A study commissioned by the United Nations Security Council to gauge the implementation of the Resolution 2250 which calls upon for youth engagement in peacebuilding and conflict resolution, estimated that 408 million youth, equivalent to 23 percent of the global population aged 15-29, are affected by violence or armed conflict. More so, in many conflict-affected or fragile states, a majority of the population, at times up to 60 percent, is considered to be youth. The costs on human life are devastating, as 90 percent of all deaths directly caused by armed conflict are young adult males.

b) *Objectives of the Study*

The main objective of the study is to explore the motivations and factors driving youth involvement in climate activism and conflict prevention across Africa. Other objectives include:

- i. To examine the impact of youth-led climate activism on policy-making and climate security efforts in African countries.
- ii. To assess the challenges and barriers faced by youth activists in promoting climate action and conflict prevention in Africa.
- iii. To examine the role of technology and social media tools in youth-led climate activism and conflict prevention in Africa.

II. OVERVIEW OF YOUTH CLIMATE ACTIVISM IN CONFLICT PREVENTION

Youth have been at the forefront demanding urgent action to resolve ongoing conflicts, sustain peace and address climate change. But while the youth in peace and security movements and youth climate movements emerged at similar times, they have taken different approaches. The climate activism taken by youth is often characterized by street protests and strikes to demand action from political leaders. It counters the status quo and has a much smaller footprint in the African Union and United Nations structures. YOUNGO, the Youth Constituency of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), provides perhaps the strongest institutional link between youth organizations and multilateral climate negotiations. Nonetheless, it remains at the periphery of the UNFCCC and its Conference of the Parties (COP). With the president of the COP changing every year, there is little institutional memory of how youths were involved in past conferences. The COP

president sometimes assumes there is no youth constituency in place and invents new mechanisms, creating unnecessary overlap and missing the opportunity to build on what already exists. Without strong institutional linkages, youths pursue other forms of engagement in climate negotiations.

At the 2019 COP, several youth protesters were escorted out of the building. This reflects the clear gap between the prominent climate activism of youth in the streets and their much smaller role in policymaking. The formation of the Secretary General's Advisory Group on Climate Change in July 2020 was seen as an initial effort to bridge this gap by connecting youth leaders with the highest office at the United Nations (UN News, 2020). Disagreements over issues such as youth political participation and sexual and reproductive rights has also prevented member states from adopting an overarching policy framework on youth and sustainable development.

The Paris Agreement does not mention youth, only referring to intergenerational equity. The policy framework that most strongly makes this link is the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, where youth are mentioned in ten areas, but there is no stand-alone goal on youth as there is for women and girls. The most concrete link is in Target 13.b, where youth are mentioned as important to building capacity to plan for and manage climate change. As a result, the UN development system has taken an ad hoc approach to youth, particularly when it comes to climate change.

III. LITERATURE REVIEW

a) *Theoretical Review - Negative-Positive Peace Theory*

Climate change has negative implications on social cohesion, poses a security risk and may increase the likelihood of violent conflict (Barnett & Adger, 2007). It is imperative to have a greater comprehension of the complex relationship between conflicts and climate change in the wake of intensifying extreme climate events. To create lasting solutions to the conflict and climate change dilemma, a holistic way of thinking is required, leading to solutions that address environmental issues while also preventing tensions from erupting into violent conflicts. However, the conventional approaches to conflicts and violence are usually limited to focus on the elimination of direct violence that averts bodily harm or loss of property (Bangura, 2022). The underlying causes of social inequalities are often ignored, which creates room for conflict recurrence. Embracing the key underpinnings of the negative and positive peace will then assist in better understanding the complexity of conflicts related to climate change.

The Negative-Positive Peace theory developed by Johan Galtung provides a nuanced framework for understanding different types of violence and clearly

explains how omitting any form of violence in conflict resolution will have a negative effect on attaining positive peace (Galtung, 1969). According to Galtung (1969), the two different models of peace can be easily distinguished by the extent which key actions are targeted. For instance, positive peace aims to address the structural and cultural violence which results in addressing social injustices, whilst negative peace only focuses on taking away direct violence. Galtung identifies three types of violence: direct, cultural, and structural. In the context of this study, militant actions that are caused by competition for the ever-shrinking base of resources is defined as direct violence. Structural violence refers to the policy inadequacies and administrative biases that further exposes vulnerable communities to the negative impacts of climate change (Jarstad et al., 2017). Lastly, cultural violence refers to the agreed social norms, values and practices that encourage violence.

According to Galtung (1969), negative peace rhetoric usually ignores structural violence, which is the result of systemic injustices embedded in social, economic, and political systems. In many African communities, climate change worsens the social inequalities by making it harder for marginalized communities to access resources such as arable land and water, which leads to conflict (Scheffran et al., 2012). On the other hand, positive peace is deep rooted in addressing the underlying causes of conflict more than just the absence of violence. It also involves equality, justice, and well-being. This approach resonates with the primary aim of youth climate activism, which is to address the underlying causes of social disparities as well as environmental degradation. It is argued that positive results can be witnessed if young people in the activism sector take a more focused, organized and grounded ways of engagement on these issues, which empowers them to meaningfully participate in decision making and creation of working solutions. The negative-positive peace theory implores the importance of social inclusion in conflict prevention as means to foster lasting peace, while more often the intentional systemic exclusion of young people can be identified as one of the key factors to discontent and conflict in Africa.

Having a deeper understanding of these differences and levels of engagement creates an opportunity to address the root causes of conflict, which prevents minor misunderstandings from turning into physical violence, and building more climate resilient communities (Barnett & Adger, 2007). According to Matthew (2010), youth climate activism has a great potential to prevent conflict since it challenges the flawed social structures and provides sound alternatives that fosters social cohesion, equality and socio-economic growth resulting into a state of positive peace. This study espouses this theoretical framework in order

to gain a deeper understanding of how climate activism contributes to the development of a secure and equitable landscapes in Africa.

b) *Empirical Review*

Conflict prevention can be classified into various themes based on the socio-economic, environmental, and political contexts in Africa. This study identified five key themes, which are discussed below.

i. *Peacebuilding*

Human security necessitates freedom or absence of threat, fear or danger. It also implies buttressing freedom from both violent and non-violent threats to danger such as diseases, environmental degradation and disasters. Since environmental security refers to the safety of our environment from natural disasters and human activities that jeopardize the quality of life, it constitutes an important dimension to the pursuit of peace and development (Matthew, 2006).

This study notes that better access to, and more equal distribution of natural resources is critical in preventing violent conflicts in the region. National, regional and international actors are currently involved in a range of initiatives that address peace- and security-related challenges, in line with natural resource management, national reconciliation and decentralization processes. At the regional level, policies have been adopted to address insecurity as well as a range of security and military operations launched by regional and international actors. The African Union (AU) has also recognized and discussed climate-related security risks. For example, it adopted the Bamako Declaration on Access to Natural Resources and Conflicts between Communities in November 2019. But while the AU has taken steps to improve collaboration and coordination in this field, experts have noted a lack of tangible policy operationalization, financial unpreparedness, and limited member state accountability as constraints to the AU's climate--security work (Aminga & Krampe, 2020).

In this context, it will be crucial to promote a politically sensitive approach to development and security in the region and link it to ongoing decentralization and reform processes. In areas where conflicts over resources are currently taking place, strategies and aid programmes should be implemented in a conflict-sensitive manner, buttressed by efforts to strengthen inter-communal trust and social cohesion.

ii. *Strengthening Institutions*

In his remarks on the International Day of Democracy, observed on 15 September 2023, the United Nations Secretary General Antonio Guterres, while recognizing the threats to democracy, "in this time of tension and turmoil", warned that civic spaces are shrinking and recalled the importance to "expand meaningful participation of young people in decision-making processes at every level". Exclusion and the silencing of dissenting voices is often a key component

of declining public trust in institutions. However, many initiatives, actions, and protests led by youths globally throughout history have shown that young people are often among the first to speak and stand up. Youths make a vital contribution to strengthening and renewing democracies and their efforts are crucial to addressing democratic backsliding. As such, they should be recognized as powerful and active agents of change in democratic systems.

Youths also have a vested interest in doing so, not just for today but for the future. They will have to bear the biggest consequences of political decisions and thus have the strongest motivation to ensure decisions are made with a long-term perspective. Their participation and empowerment are crucial components for ensuring harmony and peaceful societies. The 2030 Agenda explicitly names youths as “critical agents of change” and directly prioritizes them throughout the 17 SDGs and in more than 60 of the 169 SDG targets. Their participation in formulating the Agenda was substantial through negotiations by the UN Major Group for Children and Youth and the online My World Survey, where more than 7 million young people voted for their priorities for a better world.

Additionally, over the last decade, young people worldwide have been mobilizing and taking to the streets, demanding more inclusive and representative political systems. This surge in youth activism may be in direct response to their perceived exclusion from formal political decision-making processes. According to data collected and analyzed by the United Nations Peacebuilding Support Office (PBSO), youth and youth groups were a major demographic and political component of protests in 2019. Survey respondents identified youth as part of protests in 93 percent of countries and as the primary part in 65 percent of countries. Young women and men, along with middle-aged women and men, were the demographics most likely to lead protests in 2019 by a significant margin.

iii. *Cultural and Social Integration*

Expressing one's own opinion, questioning political decisions, speaking openly about sensitive issues is not frequent for young people in societies where older generations dominate the public discourse. Traditionally, respect for the elderly is an almost universal concept. However, this concept has evolved differently across the globe, as some places now have a culture that strongly idealizes youth, while in others, respect for the elderly, whether determined by age or by the longevity of service in an organization or institution, still holds strong. Such an ingrained ‘culture of seniority’, combined at times with highly hierarchical societies, can pose great challenges on youth political participation not only for young people themselves to overcome internalized biases, but also to overcome the cultural resistance to breaking traditions.

The obstacles to voter registration, voting, running for office, and participating in peace processes are even higher for young women, who continuously face discrimination by age and gender. Patterns of intimidation, harassment and violence against women in political life discourage many young women from joining the space. A 2016 study by the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) reveals that sexism, harassment, and violence against women parliamentarians exists to different degrees in every country, affecting many female legislators. The study's findings reveal that 81.8 percent of all respondents were victims of psychological violence. Among the kinds of psychological violence, 44.4 percent of those surveyed said they had received death threats, rape, beatings or abduction during their parliamentary term. According to the same IPU study, women under the age of 40 are at even greater risk of becoming victims of sexual harassment in the form of sexist remarks, intimidation, threats and degrading treatment on social media.

As stated in the 2021 UN Women Guidance note on Preventing Violence against Women in Politics, the threat of gender-based violence can prevent young women from participating in public affairs, voting and standing office, therefore excluding them from exercising their constitutional rights. A recent study by the United Nations Development Program also reveals that LGBTI+ people face various hurdles in politics due to criminalization, discrimination, and exclusion. They also endure harassment and violence, placing an extra burden on them to tackle safety concerns and combat discrimination in order to participate in civic processes.

Notwithstanding the progress that has been made in increasing enrollment of girls in learning institutions, the traditional societal expectations of women and girls, such as deeming their primary responsibility as caregivers, remains core. Young women who attempt to become politically involved are often confronted with sexism, harassment, violence, and stigmatization, leading them to abandon politics altogether. They are also more likely to become victims of conflicts and climate change events.

iv. *Provision of Economic Alternatives*

The provision of economic alternatives through youth-driven sustainable development projects is a crucial aspect of youth climate activism. This approach addresses two interconnected challenges: climate change and youth unemployment or underemployment. This approach involves creating and implementing sustainable development projects that are led by young people and provide economic opportunities, while also addressing climate change. These projects typically focus on green technologies, sustainable agriculture, renewable energy, eco-tourism, or other environmentally friendly sectors.

By providing economic alternatives, this approach tackles one of the root causes of environmental degradation - the perceived conflict between economic development and environmental protection. Additionally, it empowers young people to take direct action on climate issues while also addressing their immediate economic needs. Successful youth-led projects can influence policy-makers to support more significant sustainable development initiatives. This approach is particularly relevant in developing countries where youth unemployment is high and climate change impacts are severe. However, it's also gaining traction in developed nations as young people seek to align their career aspirations with their environmental values.

It is important to note that during the Africa Youth Month in November 2023, the African Union launched the 1 Million Next Level Initiative, which is a pan-African program aimed at empowering the continent's youth. Spearheaded by the African Union Commission, it seeks to provide opportunities for 300 million young Africans by the year 2030. The initiative focuses on five key areas, often referred to as the 4Es+H: Education: Improving access to quality education and skills development, Employment: Creating job opportunities and promoting youth employment, Entrepreneurship: Supporting young entrepreneurs and fostering a conducive business environment, Engagement: Encouraging youth participation in governance and decision-making processes and Health and Wellbeing: Promoting physical and mental health among young people. By addressing these areas, the initiative aims to unlock the potential of Africa's youth demographic, drive economic growth and development, foster social inclusion and stability and strengthen governance and democracy.

The 'Africa We Want' can only be achieved by providing our young people with education, entrepreneurship, employment and engagement opportunities. Agenda 2063 provides a solid foundation for these actions. It prioritizes the development and empowerment of Africa's young people and provides a framework for unleashing the potential of young people to make a meaningful contribution to Africa. This is the only way the continent can achieve a prosperous, integrated and peaceful Africa. The sixth Aspiration of Agenda 2063 hinges on the potential of Africa's youth as a key ingredient for development.

Furthermore, the Second Ten-Year Implementation PLAN 2024 – 2033 of African Union Agenda 2063, termed as "Decade of Accelerated Implementation", speaks keenly on strengthening and enhancing the resilience of economies and communities against the effects of climate change as the continent needs to have the requisite capacities to predict, withstand and mitigate against disasters. This is justified by the adverse effects of climate change on all

socioeconomic domains and the growing trends in migration and conflicts in parts of Africa attributed to climate change. Youth climate activism is vital in achieving the African Union Agenda 2063 Aspiration 1 and goal 7, which aspires to build a sustainable environment, climate resilient economies and communities in Africa by taking urgent action.

v. *Monitoring and Surveillance*

Early warning systems are a major component of addressing climate-related security risks. They are also at the heart of prevention strategies, both in terms of preparing for natural hazards as well as addressing violent conflicts or other threats to human security. However, African countries are lagging behind in developing early warning systems. Only about 40% of African countries have functioning early warning systems, largely due to poor access to and availability of reliable data (United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction, 2022).

Early warning systems that exist often face quality issues due to severe limitations in hydro-meteorological infrastructure and services, as well as multi-hazard monitoring capacities. Existing early warning systems suffer from horizontal siloes and struggle to mainstream the climate-conflict nexus, mainly because they are institutionally divided between climate and weather-focused early warning on the one side, and conflict early warning on the other (Moyo and Phiri 2023; Nhamirre et al. 2023).

Lack of harmonization between both early warning pillars is evidenced in the poor integration of climate and conflict indicators in both systems. Early warning systems at the continental, regional, national and local levels also lack vertical integration. One key challenge remains the integration of local knowledge and data gathered through civil society networks into existing systems. This then calls for full youth engagement in developing and managing early warning systems for climate-related conflicts.

IV. METHODOLOGY

a) *Study Design*

For a thorough analysis of the study, the researchers employed focus group discussions and interviews with youth stakeholders drawn from across the continent and professions. Due to the dearth of literature on youth climate activism in Africa, this methodology could help shed light on the situational realities that exist in the continent, in a manner that gives ample voice to the subjects. Additionally, this mixed methods approach allows for a nuanced exploration of the participants' perceptions and experiences, as well as the analysis of key variables that underpin their activism.

At the beginning of each focus group session, the researcher sought to ascertain if the participants



believed climate activism impacts conflict prevention. From the responses gathered, further questions were asked to allow the youths to share their experiences, challenges they face, and what opportunities they foresee that could upscale their impacts in conflict prevention. Furthermore, the youth participants elaborated on their climate activism in various professions including art, healthcare, education, social work, policy formulation and research.

The focus group discussions and interviews narrowed to five areas of conflict prevention, based on the participants' expertise. These include:

- Peacebuilding
- Strengthening institutions
- Cultural and social integration
- Provision of economic alternatives
- Monitoring and surveillance

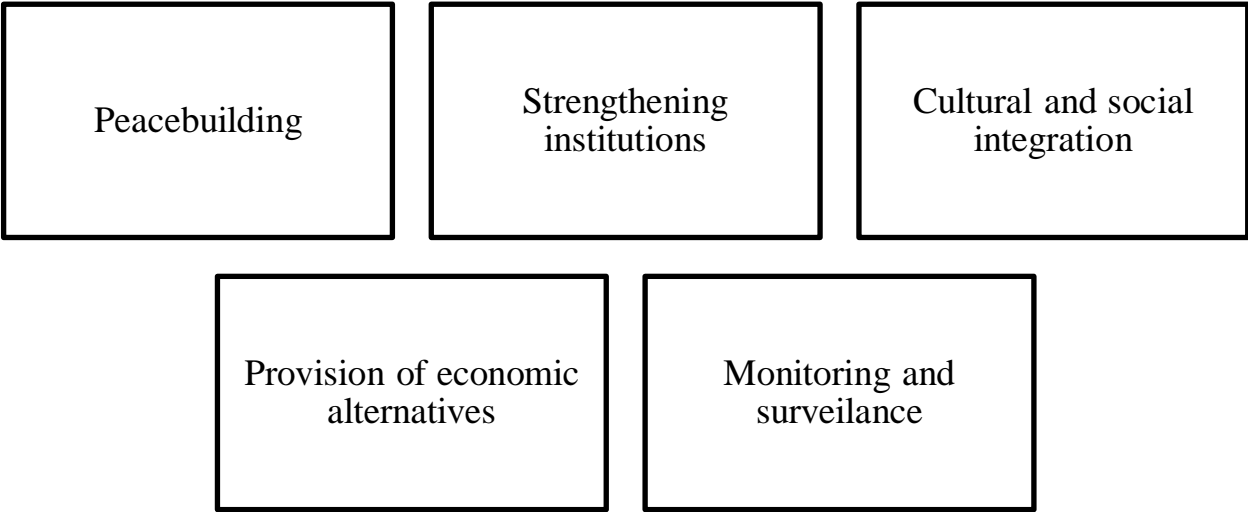


Fig. 1: Thematic Areas of Conflict Prevention

b) Interview Guide

During the focus group discussions, a semi-structured questionnaire was used as an interview guide. Some of the key questions asked in the focus group discussions are as follows:

- What do you understand by climate activism in your own words and how are you involved in it?
- In your own understanding, how does climate activism contribute to conflict prevention in your country or community?
- What are the social, cultural or historical factors that influence climate activism in your community?
- What are the key strategies that you use in your climate activism?
- What are the major challenges you face as a climate activist and how do you overcome them?
- What role does technology play in your climate activism and which tools do you frequently use?
- What do you think are the future directions for youth climate activism in Africa?

The data from the group discussions was captured using a systematic table model, making it easy to organize and record the emerging themes during the discussions. See below, the table with a glimpse of the data collected during the first focus group discussion highlighting the emerging themes, quotes and findings.

Table 1: Focus Group Data Collection Table

Location	Date	Questions Asked	Emerging Themes	Valuable Quotes	Insights/ Findings	Follow up/Actions
Google Meet	02/08/24	<p>What do you understand by climate activism in your own words and how are you involved in it?</p> <p>In your own understanding, how does climate activism contribute to conflict prevention in your country or community?</p> <p>What are the social, cultural or historical factors that influence climate activism in your community?</p> <p>What are the key strategies that you use in your climate activism?</p> <p>What are the major challenges you face as a climate activist and how do you overcome them?</p> <p>What role does technology play in your climate activism and which tools do you frequently use?</p> <p>What do you think are the future directions for youth climate activism in Africa?</p>	<p>High climate change literacy amongst young activists.</p> <p>Economic hardship affect activism efforts.</p> <p>Influence of cultural norms and values of youth activism</p>	<p>We are a community deep rooted in cultural beliefs, our cultures implore environmental protection.</p> <p>Youth climate activism can have positive effect on conflict prevention if intentionally executed focused on addressing the underlying causes of conflict.</p>	<p>Young activists presented a deeper understanding of climate change issues and their link to social justice.</p> <p>Culture poses both a positive and negative effect on climate activism.</p> <p>Economic hardships have a negative effect on youth participation in climate activism</p>	<p>Follow-up on participants to get further information on the initiatives that they are implementing</p>

c) Sampling and Sample

Participants for this study were selected through purposive sampling to ensure diversity in gender, nationality, and region. A total of 52 individuals participated in five focus group sessions, each comprising of about 11 participants per session. For relevance and clarity, the study mostly targeted alumni of the Nairobi Summer School on Climate Justice (NSSCJ), working in different professions including art, healthcare, education, social work, policy formulation and research.

The researchers employed a structured interview format which felt appropriate owing to the nature of youth climate activism and conflict prevention as variables that intersect. The focus group discussions lasted nearly two hours each and were transcribed in real time for future referencing. After the sessions ended, the researchers reviewed the transcripts to capture key points, while in some cases, further questions were shared to the participants directly to understand their responses better.

d) Data Analysis and Presentation

This study employs a SWOT analysis which assesses the key findings of the study and presents them appropriately. SWOT analysis is usually intended to highlight critical aspects that need attention or improvement by evaluating internal and external factors. This holistic view is crucial towards understanding the wide range of factors that could influence the success or outcomes of youth climate activism in conflict prevention and enable researchers to develop informed strategies to leverage strengths, mitigate weaknesses, capitalize on opportunities, and prepare for threats.

Additionally, a case study review was undertaken of successful youth climate activism projects in Africa. This approach provides a unique opportunity to walk in the shoes of an African youth climate activist, understand their struggles, hopes, dreams, and the opportunities they are creating. With over 80 per cent of Africa's population under the age of 35 years, this study shows the immense potential of this demographic dividend to uplift the continent's socio-economic trajectory.

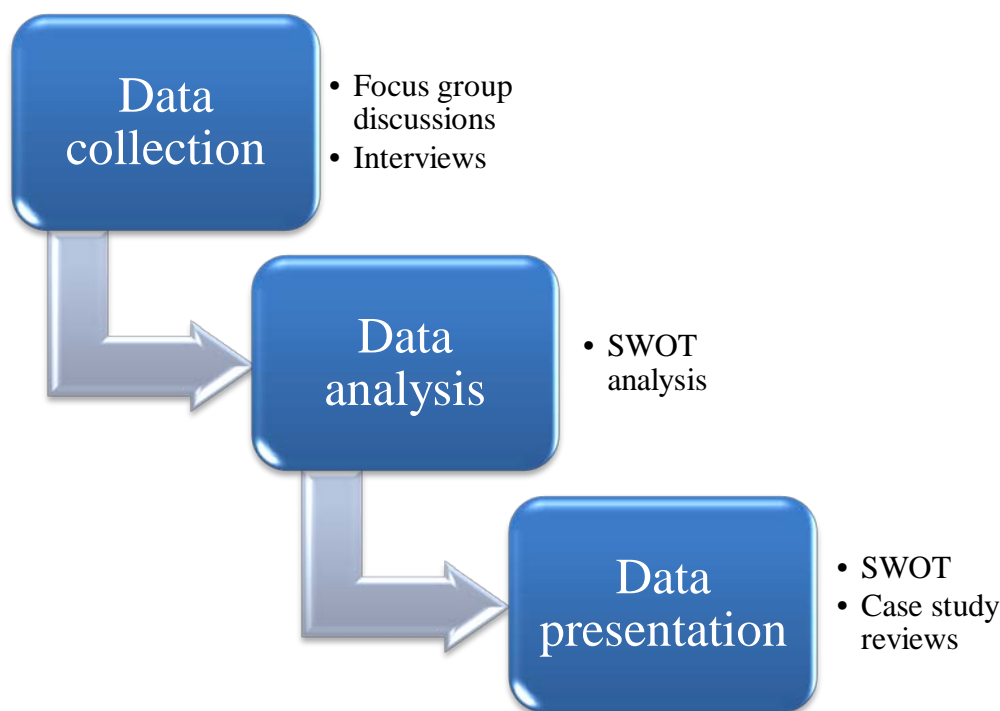


Fig. 2: Step-by-step Guide of the Methodology

V. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

a) SWOT Analysis of Youth Climate Activism in Conflict Prevention

i. Strengths

African youths are highly educated and possess unparalleled passion, energy, and innovative ideas to address environmental and social challenges. The prevailing economic conditions have compelled many young people to navigate a fiercely competitive environment, driving them to create movements, foundations, societies, and community-based organizations to seek for opportunities. These entities play a pivotal role in fostering community engagement and advancing climate activism and conflict prevention across the continent.

Moreover, Africa boasts high literacy rates, resulting in a tech-savvy and educated youth population with strong opinions on global issues. Inspired by historical movements like the Civil Rights Movement in the United States and recent social justice movements such as Black Lives Matter, African youths are elevating the fight for climate justice to new heights. They adeptly utilize digital platforms and social media to mobilize support, raise awareness, and amplify their messages on climate action on a global scale.

Leading up to COP28 in Dubai, youth movements from across Africa united under the Keep Your Promise campaign, organized by the Pan African Climate Justice Alliance (PACJA), to advocate for the establishment of a Loss and Damages Fund. This

initiative gained momentum as the continent grappled with cyclones in the south (UNDRR, 2023) and devastating floods in the east (NASA, 2023), that disproportionately affected young people. The campaign achieved significant success on the very first day of COP28, with the official launch of the Loss and Damages Fund by the Secretariat (BBC News 30 November, 2023). This outcome underscored the influential power of youth engagement in shaping policies and driving transformative changes at local, national, and international levels.

ii. Weaknesses

Despite the innovative spirit of African youths, the effectiveness and sustainability of youth-led climate initiatives are severely hampered by inadequate financial resources and organizational support. According to the African Development Bank (AfDB), only 3 percent of global climate finance was allocated to Africa in 2023, while the continent needs \$2.8 trillion through 2030 to achieve its Nationally Determined Contributions goals (Climate Policy Initiative, 2023).

Additionally, youths face significant barriers to meaningful participation in formal political processes and decision-making bodies. A report by The Youth Café in March 2024 revealed that despite youths comprising half of the electorate in Kenya, only 17 percent of local leaders (Members of County Assembly) elected in the 2022 General Elections were under the age of 35 years. Similarly, young people are underrepresented in UNFCCC processes, where older individuals often dominate decision-making roles. Focus

group discussions underscored the consensus that the continent lacks mechanisms to empower youths into positions of influence, as incumbent leaders often cling to power until their advanced age or death. This issue mirrors challenges observed within the United Nations itself, whose agencies offer limited employment, funding, and engagement opportunities for young people.

Furthermore, the fragmentation and negative competition among youth movements exacerbates these challenges. Diverse approaches and conflicting priorities have led to internal rivalries, where youths compete rather than collaborate for limited resources and opportunities. This undermines the collective power of young people, who possess significant intellectual capital and numerical strength. Unlike political divisions driven by ethnic or racial factors across the continent, divisions among youth are largely fueled by unequal access to resources and opportunities.

More so, given the economic hardships and limited financial rewards in climate activism, young people are finding it hard to balance between securing economic gain and continuing with climate activism work. Failure to address this challenge can have a significant bearing on the growth and sustenance of climate activism since most young people will end up dropping out to secure stable livelihoods.

To elevate the role of young climate activists in conflict prevention, it is vital that policymakers invest in their leadership development, advocacy skills, and sustainable organizing practices. This support is essential to harnessing their potential to drive transformative change and ensure their meaningful participation in shaping climate action and conflict prevention at local, national, and international levels.

iii. *Opportunities*

The situation in Africa demands urgent change, and young people are eager to drive this transformation. There are significant opportunities for cross-sector collaboration between youth groups, governments, non-governmental organizations, academia, faith-based organizations, and private sector businesses to implement climate-resilient policies and practices that can effectively contribute to conflict prevention.

Annually, the Pan African Climate Justice Alliance (PACJA) organizes the Nairobi Summer School on Climate Justice (NSSCJ), convening over 350 youth participants from across Africa. This initiative has played a crucial role in enhancing visibility and providing limited funding for youth-led climate adaptation projects. Participants in focus group discussions emphasized the need for expanding similar programs to facilitate personal and organizational growth among youth activists.

Advancements in technology and digital platforms offer unparalleled opportunities for youth

climate activists to amplify their voices, share knowledge, and mobilize global support. Platforms like TikTok have emerged as powerful tools for information sharing among youths worldwide. Despite challenges in some African countries where governments restrict or ban the internet or social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter (now X), and Instagram (Freyburg & Garbe 2018), the openness of digital tools continues to foster increased youth engagement in climate activism and conflict prevention efforts.

Moreover, there is a growing public awareness and concern about climate change across Africa, presenting opportunities to mobilize broader support for climate action and conflict prevention initiatives. Studies indicate a significant rise in climate change literacy among the population, providing a fertile ground for effective advocacy and policy influence. Furthermore, the integration of climate education into school curricula and community programs by governments creates additional opportunities for youth engagement in research, arts, and policymaking arenas. An information gap on the relationship between climate change and conflict prevention, especially in climate activism efforts, was identified which necessitates the creation of context-based educational toolkits that highlight this critical issue. This creates an opportunity for collaborative actions between youth activists, academicians and policy-makers in the co-creation of the content that addresses the local needs and influence behavior change.

African communities pose a rich cultural heritage of positive norms and practices that promotes social cohesion and environmental protection. These can be used as valuable tools in promoting peace amongst local communities, as well as aid in combating climate change. By leveraging cross-sector collaboration, embracing digital innovations, and capitalizing on heightened public awareness, African youths can significantly enhance their role in advancing climate justice and preventing conflicts in their communities and beyond.

iv. *Threats*

The primary threat to youth climate activism in conflict prevention in Africa is political resistance. Powerful leaders at the community level and private sector who are often driven by vested interests, pose significant obstacles to addressing climate-related conflicts. Governments have shown reluctance to recognize these conflicts as socio-economic issues rather than mere security challenges. Consequently, peace committees in African states are dominated by security chiefs and administration officials, excluding youth activists and community-based groups from meaningful participation.

Moreover, governments face daunting challenges in managing climate-related conflicts amidst

soaring levels of debt distress and declining foreign aid. About 20 low-income countries in Africa are listed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to be in debt distress and African nations collectively owe \$655.6 billion to external creditors. Government debt accounts for 61 percent of the continent's GDP, according to data released by the ONE Campaign in 2023. Meanwhile, in 2022, Africa received a less share of global aid than at any time in the preceding century. These financial strains complicate efforts to address the escalating impacts of climate change such as resource scarcity, displacement, and environmental degradation, which in turn exacerbate social tensions and undermine peacebuilding initiatives.

As a result, youth climate activists are advocating passionately for climate change to be treated as a national emergency, urging comprehensive national and local-level efforts to mitigate its impacts. If the warnings are not heeded, nearly 2 billion people will be displaced by climate events by 2050, up from 1.5 percent today (Africa Climate Mobility Initiative, 2024). With the overwhelming majority of the displacement happening within countries rather than across borders, it will spur rural-urban migration and conflicts over land and water resources between farming and nomadic communities. This dynamic contributes to crime in urban informal settlements and destabilizes social cohesion.

Furthermore, the high levels of activism and advocacy among youth activists can lead to burnout, jeopardizing the sustainability and continuity of their efforts. There is a growing awareness globally of the mental health impacts of climate change, particularly on young people. According to the World Health Organization, more than 116 million youths in Africa were living with mental health conditions before the COVID pandemic, underscoring the need for support mechanisms to sustain their engagement in climate activism.

Climate hypocrisy, characterized by green-washing and jet-setting among climate activists, threatens to erode public trust in climate messages and diminish support for youth-led initiatives. When youth climate activists are seen flying around the world and posting photos on their social media handles from luxurious hotels while claiming to advocate for climate action, it can foster resentment and the perception that climate concerns are insincere. This undermines the credibility of their advocacy efforts and risks fueling skepticism that climate issues are merely a façade for personal enrichment.

Furthermore, the tendency of global policymakers to favor established youth leaders over emerging voices each year perpetuates an unequal system. Without reforms that promote equal opportunities for all youth activists irrespective of their socio-economic, nationality, ethnicity, or gender

identities, the effectiveness of youth-led climate activism in preventing conflicts could be severely compromised. It is imperative to address these issues to ensure that climate action remains inclusive, credible, and capable of achieving meaningful change.

b) *Case Studies of Successful Programs*

i. *Nairobi Summer School on Climate Justice (NSSCJ)*

The Nairobi Summer School on Climate Justice (NSSCJ) was established in 2019 by the Pan African Climate Justice Alliance (PACJA) to find solutions to the pressing issues of climate change through education, advocacy, and community engagement. The program was borne from a collaborative initiative between international non-governmental organizations, local universities, and government agencies in Kenya. At the initial stages, the Summer School sought to leverage on Nairobi's position as a regional hub for climate action and sustainable development. The United Nations Environment Program (UNEP) has its headquarters in Nairobi, alongside other leading environmental agencies such as the Center for International Forestry and Research and World Agroforestry (CIFOR-ICRAF).

Every year in June, the Nairobi Summer School on Climate Justice brings together over 350 young climate activists from across the continent and beyond working in the grassroots. The program runs for two weeks and it features a curriculum that is designed collaboratively by expert practitioners and community leaders to ensure that the youth participants gain not just theoretical knowledge but also practical skills and real world engagement that will elevate their grassroots projects. The activities include lecture presentations, hands-on workshops on climate science and policy, policy simulations, field visits to communities affected by climate change or implementing climate adaptation innovations.

As a case study of how youth activism can spur conflict prevention, the Nairobi Summer School on Climate Justice offers a model that could be replicated by other organizations and governments with much success. Since inception, there have been four cohorts of the Summer School, with over 1,300 youths completing the training. The outcomes have also impacted conflict prevention in the continent in a number of ways.

a. *Policy Advocacy*

Alumni of the Summer School have gone on to work in government, civil society, and international organizations, influencing climate policy and advocating for marginalized communities. One such alumni, Simpilo Syabantwa (Cohort II) from Zambia, Tapiwa Chimbadzwa (Cohort IV) and Tanaka Ndongera (Cohort I) from Zimbabwe have played significant roles in advocating for youth development policies at YOUNGO and the UNFCCC processes.

The NSSCJ alumni network also played an important role in championing for the creation of the Loss and Damages Fund in the build-up to the COP28 summit in Dubai.

b. Research

Recognizing the dearth of local data and information across the continent, some alumni of the Summer School have been leading research projects in various fields such as food security, climate adaptation, renewable energy, efficient water use, healthcare, education, and land tenure systems.

Magdalene Idiang (Cohort IV) from Nigeria has been advocating for environmental justice and food sovereignty through her work in academia faculty and Brian Kithinji (Cohort III) from Kenya has authored policy papers for various international scientific journals and think tanks.

c. Community Education and Awareness

Alumni of the Nairobi Summer School have been championing community projects that raise awareness on the effects of climate change and climate justice. One such example is Hadeer Elkhoully (Cohort IV) from Egypt, who has been training young kids on ocean biodiversity protection and advocating for gender inclusion in marine and aquaculture.

d. Challenges

Despite the impacts of the Nairobi Summer School on Climate Justice, the program faces challenges with providing opportunities for sustainable engagement and career transition of alumni. Additionally, the program does not provide funds for youths to implement the ideas they have learnt, and as result, may not be as successful in creating the community-led impacts it desires.

Across four years of implementation, the Summer School is yet to have a representative from Eritrea, raising broader concerns about inclusion of diverse voices. This in itself shows that state bureaucracy is crucial towards the success of youth climate activism.

ii. Green Africa Youth Organization (GAYO)

Based in Ghana, GAYO advocates for climate policies across West Africa and participates in international climate negotiations. The movement was founded in 2014 to foster a human desire to follow fundamental natural laws and adopt a lifestyle that is in harmony with the environment. GAYO champions a world in which people live in harmony with the various natural systems on which they rely, with each component receiving the appropriate level of sustainability.

Since inception, GAYO's work has spanned a variety of industries including climate change, the circular economy, disaster risk reduction, sustainable agriculture, and renewable energy activism. To date, GAYO claims to have empowered over 3,000 women,

planted more than 20,000 trees, set up 40 tons of compost fertilizer, and processed 200 tons of plastics. The Ghanaian-based movement has expanded its impact to reach over 60,000 youths across the continent and created 700,000 jobs.

iii. Tanzania Climate Hub (TCH)

Climate HUB is a dynamic and influential youth-led non-profit organization that is committed to championing climate sustainability and environmental conservation from the grassroots level. It is headquartered in Tanzania.

At The Climate HUB, they take pride in being entirely youth-driven and women-led, recognizing the unique perspectives and innovative initiatives, projects, and campaigns that young people bring to the forefront of the climate movement. Their work empowers countless youths and communities to grasp the urgency of climate action and advocate for sustainable solutions, and to date, the organization reports that more than 10,000 young people have been engaged, 500 tons of plastics have been recycled, 200 women empowered and 1,000 youths capacitated.

VI. CONCLUSIONS AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

a) Conclusions

This study highlighted the pivotal role of youth climate activists in Africa and their positive impact on conflict prevention. Their efforts in peacebuilding, institutional strengthening, cultural integration, creating economic alternatives, and monitoring contribute significantly to community stability and cohesion across the continent.

In the SWOT analysis, the researchers identified that African youth climate movements have accrued successes in shaping national and global climate policy frameworks through their powerful mobilization. The high literacy rates and digital tech savviness is an asset that could be capitalized on. However, youths continue to face challenges with regards to limited and inaccessible financial resources, fragmentation and negative competition, and state bureaucracies that deter meaningful youth participation.

As always in Africa, there is hope and opportunity, if it can be pursued aggressively. Cross-sectoral collaboration between civil society, governments, private sector, academia, youth groups, faith-based leaders, and community-based organizations could yield additional opportunities and help bridge the resource gap. More media visibility and mentorship could spur youths to run their projects more efficiently, and the presence of an evolving technology tools could assist in mobilization and awareness campaigns. That being said, ongoing threats such as political resistance to change by ageing and increasingly authoritative governments, the soaring debt



and corruption, could stifle those rays of sunlight. Youths will also have to navigate mental health issues like burn out, depression, and hopelessness, and fight for recognition in a society where climate hypocrisy is becoming more of a norm.

Lastly, this study is a powerful reminder that youths can no longer be seen but must be heard if the continent is to continue on its upward trajectory.

b) *Limitations of the Study*

The study faced limitations in resources, majorly financial support, which may have impacted the depth and breadth of data collection and analysis, and influenced the comprehensiveness of the insights obtained from the study.

Furthermore, despite efforts to maintain consistency through trained facilitators and a structured interview guide, the qualitative nature of focus group discussions and interviews introduces subjectivity in data collection and interpretation. The purposive sampling of participants largely who had participated the Nairobi Summer School on Climate Justice could have also limited the generalizability of findings. Africa is a very diverse continent, and the researchers do not make any attempt to say that the findings represent every youth, particularly those without access to such educational programs who also make up majority of the populace.

Although efforts were made to include diverse participants from different regions of Africa, the study might have still underrepresented certain geographic areas mainly the Sahel region and the Congo Basin, potentially limiting the diversity of perspectives.

c) *Policy Recommendations*

This study concludes by making the following the recommendations:

i. *Enhanced Financial Support and Capacity Building*

Policymakers should prioritize allocating adequate financial resources to support youth-led climate initiatives and ensuring equitable distribution of those funds. Governments should create national programs that will train youth activists on project management, sustainable organizational practices, resource mobilization skills, and advocacy skills to empower youth climate activists to continue driving positive change within their communities.

ii. *Political Inclusion*

African leaders must realize that it is not sustainable to lock out a majority of the population from decision-making and governance processes. The end results of covering the bullet hole with band aids will only lead to more instability and chaos. Starting from the African Union to regional economic blocks such as the Common Market for East and Southern Africa (COMESA), South African Development Community (SADC), Economic Community for West African States

(ECOWAS), and the East African Community (EAC), Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) and the Great Lakes Community must establish mechanism for meaningful youth participation in peacebuilding and climate resilience processes. Additionally, opportunities need to be provided on merit to deserving youths based on their areas of professionalism.

iii. *Promote Access to Internet and Digital Tools*

This study illustrated the role of technology in supporting resource mobilization, creating awareness and digital activism. All these tenets are critical for conflict prevention in Africa, and efforts must be made to ensure that internet is accessible to every citizen and that digital freedoms are protected.

iv. *Address Climate Hypocrisy*

While youths have energy and hope, the feelings of mistrust towards international bodies and governments is rife due to the lack of meritocracy in allocating opportunities. It is vital that these entities promote transparency, accountability and ethical practices that could foster public trust in climate advocacy efforts.

v. *Foster Cross-sectoral Collaboration in Research and Education*

To promote youth climate initiatives on conflict prevention, there is need to foster partnerships between youth groups, governments, civil society, private sector entities, and academic institutions in research, awareness programs, advocacy, and policy formulation.

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