

Overlooked No More: Empowering Youth Voices in Global Climate-Change Negotiations

[Julian Campisi](#)¹, [Miriam Hird-Younger](#)², Evvan Morton³,
Hamangai Pataxó⁴, [Fany Ramos Quispe](#)⁵, [Sergio Richard
Romero Nina](#)⁶, [Laila Thomaz Sandroni](#)⁷

¹Department of Political Science, University of Toronto-Scarborough, Canada

²Postdoctoral Fellow, Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Carleton University, Canada

³AAAS Science & Technology Policy Fellow, US Department of Energy, USA

⁴Youth Activist, Coordinator of the gender working group, Engajamundo Youth Organization, Bahia

⁵IAI STeP Fellow, The Belmont Forum

⁶Youth activist, Thojpa-Bolivia

⁷IAI STeP Fellow, The Science Program

<https://doi.org/10.38126/JSPG220203>

Corresponding author: julian.campisi@utoronto.ca

Keywords: climate change; multilateralism; youth; barriers; negotiations; COP; science diplomacy

Executive Summary: Youth participation in climate change negotiations has increased over the last decade; however, youth voices are still underrepresented. The diversity of youth activists in the Americas and the sheer number of youth-led organizations belies any stereotypes about disinterested youth. Youth care about both the present and the future of our planet; are organizing; and have many voices. Yet, there are currently weak institutional mechanisms to integrate these voices into climate negotiations beyond showcasing experiences. Youth must be included in collaborative and transdisciplinary ways. We recommend opportunities that have had success in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC), which help youth to engage in discussions with policymakers to inform climate negotiations. These recommendations include the following: 1) institutionalizing formal national and regional youth councils and committees to strengthen collaboration between young people and decision-makers; 2) creating and expanding training programs for youth on climate negotiations; 3) using science diplomacy as a key tool to enhance science-based and collaborative efforts for youth engagement; and 4) developing strategies to navigate the diversity of expertise, scientific knowledge, and inclusion of youth to address equitable climate solutions.

I. Problem: Finding youth in climate negotiations

Youth voices are often underrepresented and over-looked in global decision-making (Inter-Parliamentary Union 2021). In 2019, about 25% of negotiation delegates of the Conference of the Parties (CoP) 25 at the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) were under 35, representing 56% of the

world's population who are considered youth¹. Although youth engagement has increased over the last decade, their participation at climate-related CoPs tends to rely predominantly on non-state actors (i.e., via Non Governmental Organizations [NGOs]), meaning that they officially engage as observers and not as

¹See also: UN Population (2022)

<https://population.un.org/wpp/Download/Standard/Population/>

negotiators (Thew 2018). In the current structure of climate negotiations, “parties” (i.e., nation states) are the key decision-makers. As is the case among many formal, high-level multilateral negotiations, the ability for youth contributions are performative at best, with senior organizers promising to implement concerns from affected youth, but seldom considering their ideas (UNDP 2022).

Meanwhile, in the context of the Americas, those very same youth—especially those in northern Indigenous Communities, Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC)—are most at risk from the adverse impacts of climate change, but have inequitable means to address the impacts. Over 80% of the world’s children live in the Global South (the phrase “Global South” refers broadly to the regions of Latin America and the Caribbean, Asia, Africa, and Oceania, mostly, though not all, low-income and often politically or culturally marginalized. Yet, the governmental and institutional capacity to respond to climate-based disasters in the Global South is generally weaker due to a lack of resources, financing, and political will. On top of this, today’s generation of youth will be most affected by the worst outcomes of climate change in a few decades from now (Sanson and Bellemo 2021).

The problem of incorporating necessary youth voices into global climate change decision-making spaces is multi-faceted and does not have a straightforward solution. Many of the youth climate voices that are visible are singular (e.g., Greta Thunberg), confined to local contexts, not organized within national structures, and do not have deep cooperative ties with other youth organizations in the domestic, regional, and international contexts. Often, Black, Indigenous and Youth of Colour (BIYOC) are the most disconnected and overlooked.

Another key issue is the lack of connections and networks among organisations focused on youth voices. The absence of influential connections can lead to a disconnected and overlapping network of youth climate action organizations whose areas of focus differ by group and region. In 2022, the authors conducted a simple stakeholder mapping exercise to analyse the scope of youth-focused

organisations working on climate change in Brazil, Bolivia, Canada, and the United States². We identified about fifty youth organisations based in these four countries alone and then analysed their areas of focus, influence, and connections. This informal exercise was meant to understand the current ecosystem and what we found was that some of these groups receive funding from governments, while others are part of larger established environmental organizations. A few are de-facto youth bodies of government agencies, and others are part of training programmes, while some are just a collection of like-minded youth with a social media page. Unfortunately, many of these groups will not likely have an opportunity to tangibly effect climate policy and will have little influence across different governments. However, some youth-led efforts for coordinating activities in an informal way are happening to enhance their action, especially in the LAC region.

Another complicating factor is defining who constitutes ‘youth.’ We are critical of the fact that youth are often painted as a singular, homogenous group. Young people should not be viewed as a monolith. We suggest that youth-focused research, advocacy, and support can draw on learnings from feminist scholars and activists from the Global South on the dangers of homogenizing groups, such as women, in policies and programs (Mohanty 1988; in the Global North, see Crenshaw 2017). Such scholars advocate for an intersectional approach to gender inclusivity, and intersectionality is necessary for youth engagement as well. An intersectional approach—referring to an approach that considers the “overlapping social identities and the related systems of oppression, domination and/or discrimination” (UNICEF 2017)—is critical for recognizing the diversity of youth voices and experiences, in addition to avoiding assumptions that all youth experience climate change in the same way or hold the same knowledge. For example, in the Americas an Indigenous young woman from rural Bolivia does not experience

² To learn more about stakeholder mapping in the context of science diplomacy, please see this resource created by Science for/in Diplomacy for Addressing Global Challenges: https://www.s4d4c.eu/training_material/science-diplomacy-stakeholders/

climate impacts as a young woman in rural United States does, therefore they do not have the same priorities or resources to cope with such impacts. Furthermore, in LAC, due to the diversity of ecosystems and pre/post-colonial cultural heritages, youth hold knowledge and practices as diverse as the ecosystems in which they live. Moreover, there is little consensus on what defines youth in terms of age limit. For example the UNFCCC defines youth as under 35; however, in Bolivia, youth are considered between 16 and 28, and the Brazilian Statute of Youth defines them as between 15 and 29. Listening to a single youth voice in climate negotiations would risk ignoring the diversity of youth experiences across cultures, regions, and communities. The potential of youth diversity to contribute expertise and knowledge to climate negotiations from different perspectives is worth elevating.

The diversity of youth activists and the sheer number of such organizations belies any stereotypes that may still exist about disinterested youth. Recognition of these voices is increasingly prominent and mechanisms for youth participation are growing, e.g., YOUNGO, which is the official children and youth constituency of the UNFCCC and is a network of children and youth activists up to 35 years old who work to foster awareness, knowledge, and capacity building; enhance collaboration; influence policy and advocacy; and facilitate youth action within the UNFCCC processes (UNFCCC n.d.). Another example is the imminent case in which sixteen children and youth activists have taken the Montana state government to court for not protecting their constitutional right to a healthy environment (Weir 2023). This representation must extend further, since there is a glaring need to create effective spaces for strengthening youth voices in climate change negotiations. As it stands, key problems remain around weak institutional mechanisms to integrate these voices into negotiations, the need to recognize the scientific expertise of youth, and the importance of collaboration across the diversity of youth organizations.

Because youth have a vested interest in caring about the present and the future of our planet, many are organizing to develop a wide range of

informal activities to articulate their local organizational goals and actions, especially in the LAC region, with the hope of connecting with youth in other parts of the world. However, to bolster the impact of youth actions, there is a need to support those actions in a systematic way that avoids further silencing of youth efforts.

Given the inequitable outcomes of climate change, it will be necessary to address this issue of under-representation and ensure that there are opportunities to enable youth to adequately participate in decision making. This shift will require active organization and support networks among diverse youth representatives, with an intersectional approach that pays particular attention to BIYOC participation as well as youth from countries with fewer resources.

II. Status quo of youth in climate negotiations

As mentioned, contemporary climate negotiations are often structured in a way that only allow “formal parties” to make decisions. Further, such parties are divided into different negotiating groups according to their developmental stage. Other stakeholder groups, such as women, indigenous peoples, and youth, are mostly confined to observer status: they are allowed to speak but are not really involved in the decision-making process. When permitted, youth representation is also often segregated into a specialized, large, “youth” group, within national or issue-specific delegations. Akin to the description of youth climate organizations above, this situation can lead to the formulation of issue- or region-based “islands”, siloed from one another. This separation discourages collaboration and united voices that draw on the scientific knowledge and expertise of the group.

There are, however, some existing, multilateral mechanisms at the UN level for youth participation. For example, the YOUNGO constituency was created to leverage youth participation in the UNFCCC activities, and, in 2022, a Children and Youth pavilion was organized at the COP27 (Children and Youth Pavilion n.d.). Additionally, several key youth-related outcomes

were adopted in the final decision document of COP27³.

Past experiences suggest that youth who attend the UNFCCC negotiations as official delegates (i.e., within nation-state “parties”) can add more direct value to negotiation outcomes by offering youth perspectives, even though they ultimately have to follow their own governments’ positions. These youth delegates are also able to share, for example, their specific experiences of the negotiation dynamics with their YOUNGO counterparts to enhance future youth participation (United Nations Joint Framework Initiative on Children, Youth and Climate Change). This is a good start, but these systems need more work, time, and influence in order to strengthen the impacts of youth participation. Moreover, we need to be able to foster collaboration between youth across the LAC region and connect them with youth from North America and the world, breaking out of siloed positions. Greater acknowledgement of the expertise and knowledge youth bring to the table can shift, strengthen, and innovate the climate negotiation process in such a way that moves individual country positions towards a regional LAC perspective, or even better, a common North, Central, and South American position that would allow more effective and just climate action in and for the Americas.

The advances of the last few years make us optimistic about the direction of youth involvement, and our recommendations to further strengthen youth involvement in climate negotiations build on these promising steps.

III. Recommendations to foster youth participation in the co-production of science and policy for climate action

Science diplomacy is both a perspective and method of international relationship-building that mobilizes science and collaboration to tackle transnational issues such as climate change. As science diplomacy has gained traction over the last 20-30 years, it has been used in three interrelated ways: 1) science in diplomacy, referring to the use of scientific evidence to support multilateral relations and negotiations; 2) diplomacy in

science, regarding the definition of priorities for transnational policy agendas for science and technology; and 3) transnational issues of a scientific nature, referring to agendas put to the table by international organizations with a scientific basis (Soler 2021). Science diplomacy can, therefore, be a multifaceted tool to help find potential solutions to build and to support networks among diverse youth organizations. Using science and policy to build key bridges and relationships across different youth groups—to have them really work in a collaborative way—is representative of the kind of collective solutions that real climate action requires. As such, there are innovative mechanisms and opportunities to foster youth participation that should be considered, most importantly from a perspective that recognizes science diplomacy as a catalyst to do so. We thus offer the following recommendations:

i. Institutionalizing formal national and regional youth councils focused on climate action to strengthen collaboration between decision-makers and young people.

Youth councils can provide a platform for young people to share their perspectives and to work together to develop strategies for addressing climate change in an organized manner. Many organized efforts in the Americas can offer guiding examples of such councils.

Some countries are setting up such spaces supported formally by governments. For example, the Youth Platform for Climate Justice in Bolivia serves as a vehicle for youth to make recommendations or demands to the government. However, this organization needs further inclusion into governance institutions and the negotiating bodies at the national level, as well as greater regional efforts to encourage the youth delegations to foster trusting relationships with neighboring countries. Continental and regional organizations dedicated to fostering science-based decisions are well positioned to support such processes across the Americas, such as the Inter-American Institute for Global Change Research (IAI), which has invested heavily in research and partnerships with other multilateral institutions in the climate sphere.

³See the GYS from Egypt on Climate Justice: <https://coy17eg.com/globalyouthstatement/>

These councils can also provide formal structures for youth engagement and participation in decision-making processes. The establishment of youth advisory groups or the inclusion of youth council representatives in negotiation delegations will create opportunities for the perspectives of young people to be included in policy-making processes. Canada's Environment and Climate Change Youth Council may be one such example. It is a newly established council that provides direct advice to policy and decision makers from youth members (ECCC 2022). Such direct conversation can ensure that youth perspectives inform national platforms for climate negotiations before nations participate in international discussions, as there is not always space to adopt proposals made when negotiations are already in progress. Formal relationships with youth councils and advisory bodies would also help address the issue of siloing mentioned above, integrating youth perspectives into negotiating platforms from the beginning of the process rather than having these voices limited to side meetings and statements.

More formally supporting the participation of young people and youth council representatives in global climate negotiations by working with like-minded regional youth colleagues is also crucial. Some potential challenges to consider deal with ensuring the diversity of representation (to avoid singular, loudest voices) and navigating political alignment or disagreements (ideological or organizational) with national government entourages. Practical requirements for youth participation also need to be considered, such as providing funding for travel and accommodations from different organizations, especially for underprivileged youth.

ii. Creating interconnected and specialized training programs for youth focused on climate negotiating
Providing and co-creating training programs that target skills development and capacity in climate action, multilateral negotiations, transdisciplinary collaboration, and science diplomacy would provide youth with the tools and resources they need to participate actively in climate negotiations. This training can be done with an overarching goal of building connections across regions and stakeholders, such as across the Americas.

Existing training programs, such as the Climate Youth Negotiators Programme, which “trains, connects, and empowers youth negotiators to participate meaningfully in the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) negotiations,”⁴ are a good start. We recommend investing in existing programs to be even more accessible and affordable. Emphasizing transdisciplinary science, active learning, and real-world application through practical training and actual projects is important. This can include on-site training, apprenticeships, and guidance programs that allow individuals to apply their knowledge and skills in real-world scenarios. Shadowing programs where youth are paired with mentors with experience in climate negotiations to observe the discussions and processes involved would be valuable. Ideally, there can be cross-pollination and exchange of ideas among youth organizations of different countries in such programs.

A challenge for youth participation, especially for Latin American and other marginalized populations, is traveling to training sites while also considering the costs and carbon emissions associated with traveling and their disproportionate effects on marginalized communities. This requires opportunities for hybrid training and localized training with online components.

Furthermore, the challenge of acquiring the necessary funding and translation resources needed to adequately participate in negotiations is also evident. Therefore, a key aspect of these training programs should also include access to such resources to make sure youth voices are understood. Overall, the development and use of educational resources on climate change and multilateral negotiations will ensure that young people have the knowledge and skills they need to participate effectively in negotiations.

iii. Recognizing science diplomacy as a catalyst to foster real youth participation.

Science diplomacy (as defined above) can be used as a key tool to enhance science-based, socially legitimate, and relevant collaborative efforts on

⁴See, for example:

<https://www.youthnegotiators.org/programmes>

delivering solutions and ideas in international spaces. Science diplomacy also tends to use the transdisciplinary approach by integrating different societal actors in dialogue, and, as such, it is known in Latin America as the *diplomacy of peoples* (Diaz 2013).

Lessons from past youth contributions to negotiations have shown that allowing young people to be members of official delegations adds new perspectives and capacity to the delegation (United Nations Joint Framework Initiative on Children, Youth and Climate Change 2010). Science can provide youth representatives with tools to move beyond slogans and push substantive proposals for consideration in negotiations. Ultimately, scientific understanding leads to collaboration, which encourages the use of science-informed diplomacy (and not just consensus among youth voices).

An investment in science diplomacy approaches is particularly relevant to countries in the LAC region that may attend CoPs with smaller delegations or have fewer resources to invest in multilateral negotiations. As science diplomacy is explicitly meant for use in such spaces, it will equip delegates with some of the skills needed to have a proportionate impact within negotiations.

Further, building skills and knowledge in science diplomacy now will have an even greater impact in the future, because it will build the capacity of those who will lead negotiations in years to come. Science diplomacy skills will be required for future generations of climate negotiators, as they need the capacity to navigate the science and policy interface to provide a more effective response to the global challenge. Thus, science capacity building in this manner will allow youth to better understand the different dimensions of the crisis and give them the tools and know-how to enter international discourse on a more level scientific playing field with their adult counterparts, without being monopolized by singular voices. As discussed in the next recommendation, science diplomacy also encourages collaboration to build consensus among the different youth voices.

In implementing this recommendation, it will be important to foster greater awareness about

science diplomacy, its principles, and its tools. Moreover, because of its evolving nature, the principles and elements of science diplomacy cannot remain static. A challenge will be to include youth in continuing to explore and co-build science diplomacy ideas and approaches to ensure that it remains as inclusive as possible as it evolves alongside social and policy norms.

iv. Using science diplomacy tools to successfully navigate diverse sets of expertise and scientific knowledge.

We support the use of science diplomacy tools, such as mobilizing different forms of scientific potential, engaging diplomatic contacts, and creating a support structure and culture for relevant scientific activities in order to help youth navigate the difficult realities of global climate negotiations.

Moreover, by sharing such forms of scientific knowledge across regions and cultures, it can be a reference point from which to build greater dialogue for negotiations between the diversity of youth who have an existential stake in climate action. It will be critical to minimize hierarchies to engage with different youth groups and other actors within a system of power dynamics. As discussed previously, leveraging science diplomacy can help encourage progress in this field by helping to reframe those traditional negotiation dynamics to allow for a more democratic process to play out (Chambers et al. 2021). Most importantly, it should be a process that recognizes youth voices as equals.

As a group of authors connected across the Americas, we are exemplary of such transdisciplinary collaboration. We come from a variety of formal and experiential training backgrounds; expertise across disciplines and fields; experiences from four countries; and from systems of Indigenous knowledge. Moreover, the experiences of two youth climate participants from Latin America and the Caribbean already embedded within the negotiation processes are thus reflected in this piece.

This recommendation will require a rethinking of the types of information and knowledge that inform multilateral negotiations, making it

perhaps the stickiest recommendation to implement. However, the complexity of climate change challenges necessitates some creative changes to the status quo. Perhaps valuing diversity, different ways of knowing, democratic engagement, and long-term relationships, along with building trust, is just what global climate negotiations need.

III. Conclusion

As global climate justice concerns are finally becoming more mainstream in the international community (Hoffman 2022), we need to take youth voices more seriously. An intersectional approach to incorporating youth in climate

negotiations will be essential to recognize the various identities of youth and how perspectives may differ based on these experiences, education, and worldviews. Such an approach would also align with transdisciplinary and science diplomacy principles, placing the emphasis on each person coming to the table with their expertise and contacts, underlining the critical importance of dialogue in coming together to build social change with shared scientific expertise. To achieve a truly realistic and equitable climate justice in the coming decade, diverse and organized youth voices, armed with collaborative science diplomacy tools and partnerships, need to be at the forefront.

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Dr. Julian Campisi is an Assistant Professor, Teaching Stream at the University of Toronto-Scarborough. He completed his Ph.D. in Political Science at York University in 2019 and his research interests are predominantly in the field of international political economy and comparative politics, specifically the methodologies that underpin political risk assessments in the private and public realms, with specific interest in the Italian case. Julian has worked and studied in China, Australia, and Italy over the years in a variety of industries. Currently, he teaches courses on Canadian politics, IPE, public policy, IR, and multiculturalism, in addition to providing consulting advice on geopolitical risks. Julian was a 2022 Visiting Scholar at JHU SAIS Bologna, and recently completed a 2021 MITACS Science Policy Fellowship with the Department of National Defence in Canada, and a STEP Fellowship with the IAI.

Dr. Miriam Hird-Younger is a postdoctoral fellow with Carleton University's Department of Sociology and Anthropology (Ottawa, Canada). Miriam holds a Ph.D. in Anthropology, collaborative with Women and Gender studies, from the University of Toronto (2021). Trained in ethnographic and qualitative methods, Miriam's research and teaching specialise in international development, participation and partnership building, and intersectional gender analyses.

Dr. Evvan Morton is a AAAS Science & Technology Policy Fellow in the U.S. Department of Energy. She obtained her Ph.D. in Civil, Environmental, and Sustainable Engineering from Arizona State University with a certificate in Responsible Innovation. Her research explored the need for carbon dioxide removal through political, technological, and ethical lenses. She also co-founded BioGals, a non-profit empowering women of color in STEM through global sustainability projects. Motivated to bridge the gap between science and decision making, Evvan looks forward to a career in science policy to help create a sustainable and equitable energy future.

Hamangai Pataxó is from the Kariri-Sapuyá ethnic group. She belongs to the Pataxó-hã-hã-hãe and Terena peoples and lives in the indigenous village Caramuru Catarina Paraguaçu, Bahia. She is a volunteer at the Engajamundo Youth Association and currently the coordinator of the gender working group. She is also a counselor at Humana, an organization that works for the human rights of girls and women in Brazil. She is an undergraduate student in Veterinary Medicine at the Federal University of Recôncavo da Bahia-UFRB.

Fany Ramos Quispe is a Bolivian fellow inspired by and committed to contributing to a better relationship between humankind and the earth. Her academic background is in environmental engineering, environmental change and international development. She serves society and the earth by combining academic and professional activities with side projects on education and science. Fany's professional experience is mainly around tackling climate change with justice, renewable energies, waste and water management, environmental education, and transdisciplinary research. She collaborates with different civil society organizations to advance participatory approaches and social/environmental justice. Fany is currently an IAI-STeP Fellow at the Belmont Forum.

Sergio Richard Romero Nina has his Pakarina (birthplace) in the Community of Chayacari Ayllu Chullpa-Orinary Nation Suyu Charkas in 1994, he acted as executive secretary of the Federation of High School Students, and the Federation of Youth Organizations (municipality of Llalagua). He feels the call of Mother Earth to live in balance and respect the life that inhabits her, therefore he works to recover the Ancestral Knowledge and recognition of the cultural expressions of Indigenous Peoples. He is a member of the youth organization Thojpa.

Dr. Laila Thomaz Sandroni is an environmental social scientist working at the science-policy interface in matters related to Global Environmental Change, especially Climate Change and Biodiversity Conservation. She holds a Ph.D. in Social Sciences in basic formations in Geography and Anthropology. She is particularly interested in the use of the best evidence available for responsible decision making in agriculture, climate change adaptation and mitigation and forest management policies. She has participated and/or coordinated several research and innovation projects involving diverse stakeholders, including academia, local associations, indigenous organizations, environmental NGOs, intergovernmental organizations and federal and state level governments in Brazil.

Acknowledgements

The Authors would like to acknowledge the help and support of the Inter-American Institute for Global Change Research (IAI), and especially the IAI Science, Technology, and Policy (STeP) Fellowship Program Coordinators for their role in facilitating this group project, training on science diplomacy and transdisciplinarity, and other related workshops.

Disclaimer

The authors do not have any conflicts of interest.