



# EXPLORING THE **BARRIERS AND OPPORTUNITIES** FOR YOUTH ENGAGEMENT IN ENVIRONMENTAL STEWARDSHIP

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## Abstract

This study explores the critical role of youth engagement in environmental conservation, particularly focusing on the barriers and opportunities they experience. Recognizing the increasing global emphasis on sustainable practices, the research highlights the significance of youth involvement as a driving force for change, through a mixed-methods approach, including an online survey with 67 participants and two focus group discussions. The study identifies key socio-economic and cultural challenges that hinder youth participation in conservation initiatives. Findings reveal high levels of awareness and intrinsic motivation among youth; however, significant obstacles such as financial constraints, cultural attitudes, and family responsibilities persist. The research underscores the importance of empowering youth through capacity-building programs, increased funding, and policy advocacy. By addressing these barriers, the study aims to enhance youth participation in environmental conservation efforts, ultimately contributing to sustainable development in Malawi. The findings provide valuable insights for policymakers, youth organizations, and donor community seeking to foster a more inclusive and effective approach to environmental stewardship.



## Background

Conserving natural resources and the environment has become a global priority, with the active participation of youth increasingly acknowledged as crucial for promoting sustainable practices. Conservation involves carefully utilizing, recycling, and safeguarding resources vital for technological, economic, and social needs (Pragalbh & Nidhi, 2021). These resources can be classified as either biotic or abiotic, renewable or non-renewable. The increasing frequency of disasters highlights the pressing need for environmental conservation, the effects of climate change, and the loss of biodiversity (Kumar, 2022). Youth are considered a key demographic for advancing conservation efforts due to their productivity and large numbers compared to older populations (Tafesse, 2018).

In Malawi, youth engagement in environmental conservation is essential due to the country's heavy reliance on natural resources for economic development. The Malawi National Youth Policy underscores the importance of involving young people in sustainable development initiatives. Youth organizations are making substantial strides in promoting environmental sustainability. There has been a rise of initiatives advancing reforestation, waste management, and climate advocacy, demonstrating the potential of youth-led efforts to address pressing environmental issues (Manda et al., 2021).

These organizations are also committed to empowering young people by providing leadership opportunities and equipping them with the skills necessary to make meaningful contributions to conservation efforts. It is reported that environmental education plays a pivotal role in transforming attitudes and behaviors toward conservation, fostering a sense of responsibility and stewardship among the youth (Nicole et al., 2023). Through these combined efforts, the youth of Malawi are increasingly positioned as vital agents of change in the pursuit of sustainable environmental practices.

Despite that youth groups have been making notable contributions to environmental and natural resource conservation, several obstacles continue to impede their effectiveness. These obstacles include limited access to needed resources, lack of formal recognition, and insufficient training opportunities (Chikoko, 2020). Although the Malawi National Youth Policy stresses the importance of youth engagement, many young people remain excluded from decision-making processes and lack access to essential resources needed for effective involvement (Zimba et al., 2021).

Different youth groups in the region face unique challenges, which are often made worse by a limited understanding of their specific needs. Research by Manda (2021) and Nicole (2023) highlights the positive role of youth in environmental sustainability. However, these studies do not fully address the socio-economic and cultural barriers that hinder youth participation in conservation efforts.



This study explores both the challenges and opportunities for youth engagement in environmental conservation in Malawi. It compares the experiences of different individuals and youth groups and identifies strategies to enhance their effectiveness in promoting sustainable practices.

### **Specific Objectives**

1. Identify and explain the socio-economic and cultural barriers that limit youth participation in environmental conservation initiatives.
2. Assess the effectiveness of current youth programs and activities on environmental conservation, highlighting best practices and areas for improvement.
3. Develop strategies that strengthen youth involvement in conservation efforts in Malawi.

### **Justification for the Study**

This study is essential in empowering young people by equipping them with the skills, resources, and support needed for active participation in environmental sustainability. Exploring their experiences bridges the gap between youth potential and its effective utilization. It also helps policymakers and donors understand the specific needs of youth groups and provide the necessary support. Without such research, the barriers limiting youth involvement may go unrecognized, leading to missed opportunities for meaningful conservation efforts.

## **THEORETICAL REVIEW**

### **Global Perspectives on Youth Involvement in Conservation**

Around the world, young people have emerged as central figures in conservation initiatives. The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP, 2020) highlights that youth make up a significant portion of the global population, and their active involvement can lead to substantial change. Global events like the Youth Climate Summit emphasize the importance of integrating youth voices into both policymaking and grassroots actions. Research indicates that empowering young people not only leads to positive environmental outcomes but also supports personal growth and a sense of civic duty (Wheeler, 2019). Youth-focused programs promoting activities like tree planting and wildlife protection have been shown to increase environmental awareness and foster stewardship in communities (O'Brien, 2021).

Despite their interest, youth face several challenges. Stein and Mesfin (2021) argue that, though eager to participate in conservation, young people often lack the necessary experience and long-term perspective. Additionally, because many young individuals do not own land, they may feel





less motivated to engage in conservation activities (Stein & Mesfin, 2021). Furthermore, social inequities and a lack of transparency in decision-making processes hinder youth involvement in environmental initiatives (Mucha et al., 2023).

## **Youth Participation in African Conservation Efforts**

The involvement of young people in conservation is increasingly recognized as essential for achieving sustainable development across Africa. The African Union's Agenda 2063 underscores the importance of youth engagement in environmental protection, highlighting young people as key players in the continent's future sustainability (African Union, 2015). Initiatives such as the African Youth Initiative on Climate Change (AYICC) are mobilizing youth across Africa to address environmental challenges, including climate change and ecosystem degradation.

Several successful models demonstrate how effectively young people can contribute to conservation. In Uganda, the Rakai Environmental Conservation Programme (RECO) engages local youth in reforestation and sustainable practices, using indigenous tree species to restore ecosystems and involving young people directly in hands-on conservation projects (RECO, 2021). These youth-led initiatives show the powerful impact that projects rooted in traditional knowledge and local involvement can have on environmental health (Mulugetta et al., 2019).

Recognizing and celebrating the achievements of youth in conservation can further encourage their active participation. Research by Redeemer et al. (2024) reveals that acknowledging young people's contributions not only empowers them but also sparks their interest in developing innovative approaches to conservation. Leadership development, which includes roles like leading for the group, leading a group, and leading within a group, also motivates young people to take ownership of conservation efforts and feel more invested in these initiatives (Patricia & Annette, 2019).

Youth involvement in conservation is especially critical in southeastern Africa, where unique environmental challenges—such as deforestation, biodiversity loss, and climate change—threaten the region. Studies by Chigwada (2020) show that youth-led organizations in Tanzania and Zambia have successfully promoted sustainable practices through education and community engagement. The Southern African Development Community (SADC) has also recognized the role of youth, advocating for policies that incorporate environmental education into school curricula (SADC, 2018). These efforts are raising awareness and encouraging youth to play active roles in environmental protection.

However, youth participation in conservation faces obstacles, including the perception that environmental responsibility lies primarily with the government (Tafesse, 2018). Additionally, misaligned government priorities and a lack of clear communication on conservation policies further discourage youth engagement (Mucha et al., 2023).



## METHODOLOGY

### Research Design

This study utilized a mixed-methods approach, combining both quantitative and qualitative research techniques to investigate the barriers and opportunities for youth engagement in environmental conservation in Malawi. By integrating these methods, the research aimed to provide a holistic understanding of the challenges faced by youth in conservation efforts and the effectiveness of their initiatives.

### Study Population

The target population for this study included youth aged 18 to 35 years who were actively involved in various youth organizations or clubs across Malawi. This demographic was selected due to its active participation in environmental conservation initiatives and its potential to drive sustainable practices within their communities.

### Sampling Method

A purposive sampling method was used to select participants who were directly engaged in environmental conservation activities. This approach ensured that the sample consisted of individuals with relevant experiences and insights, enhancing the study's focus and validity.

### Data Collection Methods

#### a. Surveys via Google Forms

- A structured questionnaire was designed using Google Forms, incorporating both closed and open-ended questions.
- The survey gathered data on demographic details, knowledge of conservation efforts, motivations for participation, perceived challenges, and awareness of youth organizations.
- Up to 67 participants from various youth organizations completed the online survey.

#### b. Face-to-Face Focus Group Discussions

- A total of 20 participants took part in two focus group discussions, ensuring diverse representation from different youth organizations. Small group discussions were organized to encourage detailed conversations about youth engagement in conservation activities
- Each session lasted between 60 and 90 minutes, guided by a facilitator using a semi-structured discussion guide.
- With participants' consent, the discussions were audio-recorded to ensure accurate transcription and analysis.



## Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics summarized survey data, including frequencies, percentages, and mean scores. Focus group transcripts were analyzed thematically to identify recurring patterns and themes related to youth engagement in conservation. establish relationships between identified themes.

## RESULTS

### Demographic Information

The study included 67 participants with diverse occupations: students, environmental managers, business professionals, and community developers. This variety provides insights into the perspectives and experiences shaping youth engagement in environmental conservation. The participants were of varied age groups with more responses from the 18 – 24 age group as shown in Figure 1.

Age

67 responses

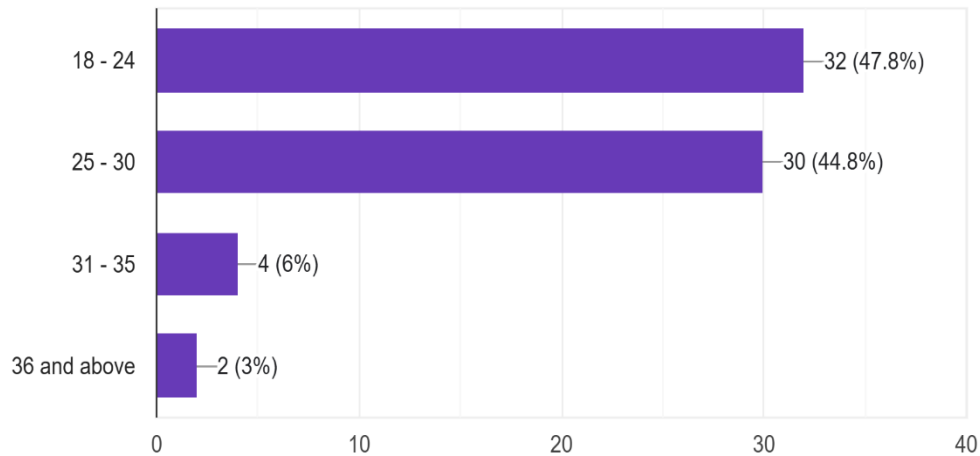


Figure 1: Respondents' age distribution

The 18–24 age group's prominence mirrors trends in youth-led initiatives, as seen in Uganda's RECO program, which thrives on the active involvement of young people in conservation. This demographic dominance underscores the enthusiasm of younger individuals to engage in conservation efforts, potentially driven by their acute awareness of climate change impacts on their future. As highlighted by the UNEP (2020), youth globally are recognized as agents of change in



sustainability initiatives, and similar patterns are observed across Africa through programs like the African Youth Initiative on Climate Change (AYICC).

### Awareness and Participation

Participants demonstrated high awareness of environmental conservation, with an average familiarity rating of 4.2 (on a 1-5 scale). Despite this, barriers prevent awareness from consistently translating into active participation. Eighty percent of participants were aware of organizations like the National Youth Network on Climate Change, rating their effectiveness at 4 out of 5. However, awareness has not consistently led to active involvement. Familiarity strongly predicts engagement, suggesting that educational interventions could bridge gaps in active participation. This finding enforces the role of formal and informal environmental education to improve active participation. The gap between awareness and active participation remains a critical concern, aligning with global observations of similar trends.

Common environmental activities include tree planting, recycling, clean-up campaigns, and environmental education. While 70% of participants were actively engaged, 30% were not, signaling challenges that hinder broader involvement. The key issues that affect active participation include lack of funding (cited by 85%), cultural attitudes limiting youth decision-making roles, and educational and logistical constraints, as shown in Figure 2.

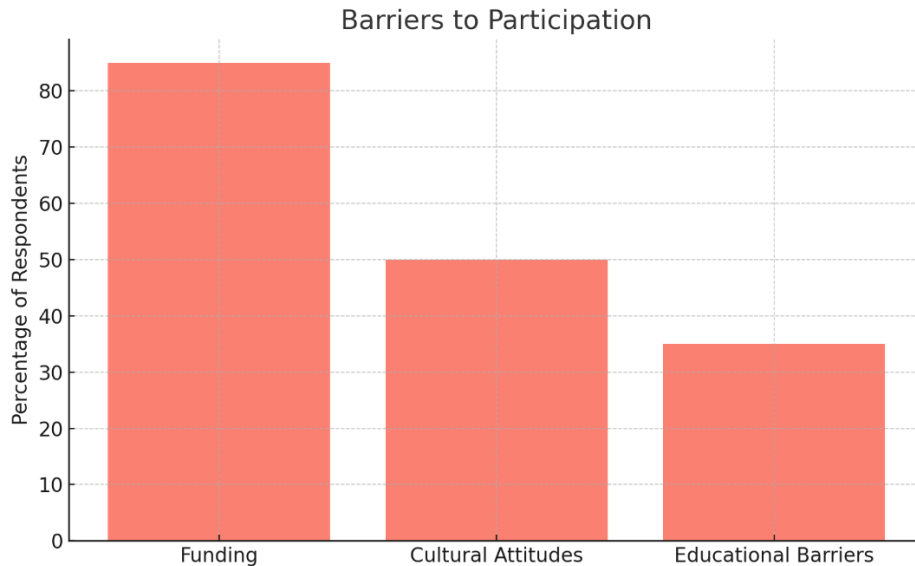


Figure 2: Barrier to active participation

Despite strong familiarity, barriers such as socio-cultural norms, lack of resources, and limited leadership opportunities prevent consistent engagement. Research highlights that even when youth are knowledgeable, systemic issues like decision-making exclusion and economic challenges limit their involvement (Stein & Mesfin, 2021). In Malawi, these challenges are compounded by





perceptions that conservation is the government's responsibility, reducing youth initiatives (Tafesse, 2018).

Qualitative insights revealed that traditional norms often marginalize youth voices, fostering a sense of disempowerment among young participants. Participants aged 18-24 perceived cultural attitudes as moderately supportive, averaging 2.3 out of 5, while those aged 36 and above rated them as highly supportive, averaging 5.0. Interestingly, participants aged 31-35 reported the least supportive attitudes, with an average rating of 1.5, indicating that cultural resistance may be most pronounced for individuals transitioning into leadership roles.

Significant barriers to youth engagement in environmental conservation included financial constraints, cultural attitudes, and family responsibilities, aligning with findings by Wals (2017). The majority of participants highlighted the critical impact of socioeconomic factors on their ability to participate in conservation activities, corroborating observations by Hollweg et al. (2021). Cultural attitudes towards youth involvement varied, with some communities encouraging youth participation while others upheld elder-dominated decision-making processes, consistent with findings by Bennett et al. (2018). These results also align with Kollmuss and Agyeman (2019), who emphasized that financial limitations, cultural norms, and familial responsibilities are key factors that hinder youth participation in conservation efforts in many parts of Africa.

### **Youth Motivation**

The study found that key motivators for participation were a passion for nature, a need for community improvement, climate change awareness, and a sense of personal responsibility. The average motivation rating was 4.5, indicating strong intrinsic drivers. The respondents recommend the following strategies to enhance the meaningful participation of youths in environmental stewardship

- Capacity-building programs.
- Increased funding and resource allocation.
- Community awareness campaigns.
- Policy advocacy to empower youth.

Participants in youth groups favour capacity building and funding strategies over community awareness campaigns, indicating that active members prioritize structural support. This finding is consistent with global research that identifies intrinsic drivers as crucial to sustained youth involvement in conservation activities (Wheeler, 2019).

Participants in youth groups prioritize structural support strategies like capacity-building programs and increased funding over broader awareness campaigns. This preference reflects a pragmatic approach among active members, emphasizing skill development and resource access to enhance their ability to contribute meaningfully to conservation efforts. Similar findings by Redeemer et al. (2024) illustrate that training in leadership and technical skills empowers youth to take



ownership of conservation projects and sustain participation. Addressing resource barriers is essential for translating motivation into action. This is particularly important in contexts like Malawi, where funding constraints are significant challenges (Mucha et al., 2023). Empowering youth through policy measures, such as creating roles for young leaders in decision-making processes, can institutionalize their involvement in environmental stewardship.

Although less prioritized by active participants, these campaigns remain vital for engaging non-participating youth and raising awareness of conservation opportunities. Inclusive campaigns can bridge gaps between awareness and action for a broader audience.

## Conclusion

This study highlights the vital role of youth engagement in advancing environmental stewardship in Malawi. While awareness among youth regarding environmental issues is commendably high, significant barriers such as socio-cultural norms, lack of resources, and limited leadership opportunities hinder their active participation. By addressing these challenges through targeted capacity-building programs, increased resource allocation, and inclusive policy advocacy, there is immense potential to amplify the impact of youth-driven conservation efforts.

The findings underscore the need for a holistic approach that bridges the gap between awareness and action. Empowering youth with knowledge, skills, and leadership opportunities will not only foster environmental sustainability but also ensure that the next generation is well-equipped to lead and sustain these initiatives. Future efforts must prioritize collaboration among policymakers, organizations, and communities to create a conducive environment for youth engagement in environmental stewardship.

## Applicability of Findings

- **Policy Design:** Leveraging the enthusiasm of the 18–30 age group through targeted education and training initiatives could bolster conservation outcomes.
- **Capacity Building:** Addressing barriers like socio-cultural constraints and enhancing the involvement of marginalized demographics can ensure sustainable and inclusive conservation strategies.
- **Cultural Sensitivity:** Recognizing traditional norms and leveraging intergenerational mentorship models could mitigate cultural conflicts in conservation leadership.
- **Strategic Education:** Incorporating interactive and localized content in environmental education can address the specific barriers faced by youth in Malawi, aligning with UNEP's (2020) emphasis on youth-focused capacity building.



- Empowering Organizations: Strengthening the operational frameworks of environmental organizations can enhance their effectiveness, ensuring that high awareness translates into active participation.
- Policy Recommendations: Policymakers should prioritize funding and support for educational initiatives and organizational capacity building, enabling sustained youth engagement in conservation.



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