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Unequal Representation of Global Youth Knowledge in UNESCO Youth Discourse

Representasi Ketimpangan Pengetahuan Pemuda Global dalam Wacana Kepemudaan UNESCO

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Abstract

This study employs a qualitative case study approach to analyze the mechanisms of representation of Global South youth knowledge within UNESCO youth policy processes, rather than to achieve global statistical generalization. The units of analysis are two UNESCO IESALC initiatives, namely Youth as Researchers and Youth-informed Policy Papers, which are treated as institutional cases. Data are drawn from official policy documents, program reports, and related publications. The analysis is conducted through content analysis and thematic analysis to examine the relationships between participation mechanisms, knowledge legitimacy, and policy integration. The findings indicate that Global South youth are actively involved in knowledge production; however, their contributions more often remain at the consultative level and are not substantively integrated into UNESCO's global policy decision-making. This study does not claim to represent all UNESCO policies, but rather elucidates patterns of structural epistemic inequality that emerge in these two cases.

Keywords: Epistemic Inequality; Global South Youth; Qualitative Case Study; UNESCO IESALC; Youth Policy

Abstrak

Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan studi kasus kualitatif untuk menganalisis mekanisme representasi pengetahuan pemuda *Global South* dalam proses kebijakan kepemudaan UNESCO, bukan untuk melakukan generalisasi statistik global. Unit analisis penelitian adalah dua inisiatif UNESCO IESALC, yaitu *Youth as Researchers* dan *Youth-informed Policy Papers*, yang diperlakukan sebagai kasus institusional. Data bersumber dari dokumen kebijakan resmi, laporan program, dan publikasi terkait. Analisis dilakukan melalui *content analysis* dan *thematic analysis* untuk menelusuri hubungan antara mekanisme partisipasi, legitimasi pengetahuan, dan integrasi kebijakan. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa pemuda *Global South* terlibat secara aktif dalam produksi pengetahuan, namun kontribusi mereka lebih sering berhenti pada level konsultatif dan belum terintegrasi secara substantif dalam keputusan kebijakan global UNESCO. Penelitian ini tidak mengklaim seluruh kebijakan UNESCO, melainkan menjelaskan pola ketimpangan epistemik struktural yang muncul dalam dua kasus tersebut.

Kata Kunci: Ketimpangan Epistemik; Pemuda *Global South*; Studi Kasus Kualitatif; UNESCO IESALC; Kebijakan Kepemudaan



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INTRODUCTION

Global youth today face interlinked multidimensional crises, including educational uncertainty, limited access to decent employment, and weakening political participation.¹ These crises are exacerbated by technological disruption, the climate crisis, and geopolitical conflicts, positioning youth as the most affected group while simultaneously as strategic actors in the sustainable development agenda.² Although global narratives frame youth as “*agents of change*,” evidence from scoping reviews indicates that their voices are rarely articulated equitably within global policymaking processes.³

International organizations play a central role in shaping the normative and epistemic frameworks of youth-related issues. UNESCO and the OECD function as knowledge producers that set priorities and establish universal standards related to global youth issues.⁴ Their reports and recommendations not only guide national policies but also shape perceptions of the role of youth in development, underscoring the dependence of governments and institutions on these global guidelines.⁵

UNESCO was established in 1945 in the aftermath of World War II to build peace through education, science, and culture. UNESCO’s humanistic vision emphasizes education and intercultural dialogue as the foundation of global stability.⁶ Youth issues became part of UNESCO’s agenda because young people are regarded as key to the transmission of values of peace, democracy, and sustainable development across generations, although their representation in global policymaking continues to face significant challenges.⁷

- 1 Mari Gunnes et al., “Young Adults Not in Education, Employment, or Training (NEET): A Global Scoping Review,” *BMC Public Health* 25 (2025): 1–20, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-025-24781-y>; Hamed Rahmani and Wim Groot, “Risk Factors of Being a Youth Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET): A Scoping Review,” *International Journal of Educational Research* 120 (2023): 1–16, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijer.2023.102198>.
- 2 Ahmad Barati, “Casual Social Media Use among the Youth: Effects on Online and Offline Political Participation,” *ArXiv* 15, no. 1 (2023): 1–21; Kushagra Gupta, “A Machine Learning, Natural Language Processing Analysis of Youth Perspectives: Key Trends and Focus Areas for Sustainable Youth Development Policies,” *ArXiv*, 2022.
- 3 Astraea Augsberger, Mary E. Collins, and Riana C. Howard, “The Global Context of Youth Engagement: A Scoping Review of Youth Councils in Municipal Government,” *Children and Youth Services Review* 156 (2024), <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2023.107349>.
- 4 UNESCO, “Because Youth Perspectives Matter: UNESCO ToolBox for Youth Policy and Programming (Youth Policy Toolkit),” UNESCO, 2023 <<https://www.gcedclearinghouse.org/sites/default/files/resources/230300eng.pdf>>; UNESCO, “Youth Participation in Public Policies,” UNESCO, 2024 <<https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/youth-participation-public-policies>> [accessed 3 January 2026]; OECD, “Youth at the Centre of Government Action,” OECD, 2025 <https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/youth-at-the-centre-of-government-action_bcc2dd08-en.html> [accessed 3 January 2026].
- 5 Tinio-Le Douarin et al., “Enhancing Youth Participation in Urban Governance through City Youth Councils,” UNESCO, 2023; T Macauley et al., “Youth Participation in Policy-Making Processes in the United Kingdom: A Scoping Review of the Literature,” *Policy & Politics* 30, no. 2 (2023): 203–, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1080/10705422.2022.2073308>.
- 6 UNESCO IESALC, “Youth-Informed Policy Papers on Global Goals Released,” UNESCO, 2024 <<https://www.iesalc.unesco.org/en/articles/youth-informed-policy-papers-global-goals-released>> [accessed 3 January 2026]; UNESCO, “Because Youth Perspectives Matter: UNESCO ToolBox for Youth Policy and Programming (Youth Policy Toolkit).”
- 7 Thomas Sheku Marah, Happy David Pradhan, and Fathima Adila Shuhood, “Youth Participation in Global Governance: Opportunities and Challenges,” *Journal of Governance and Public Administration (JoGaPA)*, 2.1 (2024),

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UNESCO youth policy has undergone a transformation from a normative-participatory framework toward more complex strategies, including global citizenship education, peace education, and youth engagement in sustainable development.⁸ Data from UNESCO reports indicate an increasing number of strategic documents that emphasize youth as development partners and sources of insight in policymaking processes.⁹ However, research also highlights uneven epistemic representation, in which youth from the Global South are often not the primary actors in defining the meaning of participation and global citizenship.¹⁰

UNESCO consistently asserts that its youth policies are inclusive and represent the interests of young people worldwide.¹¹ Policy reports emphasize diversity and equality of youth participation, yet scoping review analyses indicate that this normative language may obscure unequal power relations, in which the experiences of youth from developing countries are insufficiently accommodated.¹² In other words, policy universality often functions as formal legitimization, while practical representation remains biased.

Youth in the Global North and the Global South face significantly different social, economic, and political contexts, including access to education, technology, and institutional stability.¹³ Global literature confirms that Global North perspectives are more frequently treated as standards and regarded as universal references, while youth from the Global South often appear only as case studies or objects of intervention.¹⁴ This imbalance creates the risk that global policies fail to capture the complexity of local realities, thereby limiting their effectiveness at the grassroots level.

Knowledge representation in policy can be understood as a mechanism of epistemic selection that determines which actors have the legitimacy to speak, which sources of information are considered valid, and which forms of knowledge are used as the basis for policymaking.¹⁵ This process is not neutral; it is shaped by institutional power relations, normative hierarchies, and

238–49 <<https://doi.org/10.70248/jogapa.v2i1.1718>>; A. Orsini and J. F. Duque, “Where Are Global South Youth? Youth Interest, Identities and Participation in Global Biodiversity Governance,” *Earth System Governance*, 25 (2025), 1–9 <<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.esg.2025.100256>>.

8 UNESCO, “Supporting Evidence-Informed and Inclusive Youth Policymaking (Project Data),” UNESCO, 2024; Douarin et al., “Enhancing Youth Participation in Urban Governance through City Youth Councils.”

9 Marah, Pradhan, and Shuhood, “Youth Participation in Global Governance: Opportunities and Challenges.”

10 Orsini and Duque, “Where Are Global South Youth? Youth Interest, Identities and Participation in Global Biodiversity Governance”; Macauley et al., “Youth Participation in Policy-Making Processes in the United Kingdom: A Scoping Review of the Literature.”

11 UNESCO, “Because Youth Perspectives Matter: UNESCO ToolBox for Youth Policy and Programming (Youth Policy Toolkit)”, UNESCO IESALC.

12 Orsini and Duque; UN Brief, “Meaningful Youth Engagement in Policy and Decision-Making Processes,” *United Nations*, 2023

13 UN Brief, “Meaningful Youth Engagement in Policy and Decision-Making Processes,” United Nations, 2023; Orsini and Duque, “Where Are Global South Youth? Youth Interest, Identities and Participation in Global Biodiversity Governance.”

14 Gunnes et al., “Young Adults Not in Education, Employment, or Training (NEET): A Global Scoping Review”; Douarin et al., “Enhancing Youth Participation in Urban Governance through City Youth Councils.”

15 Gerd Flodgren et al., “Youth Involvement in Policy Processes in Public Health, Education, and Social Work—A Scoping Review,” *Obesity Reviews* 26, no. 4 (2024): 1–16, <https://doi.org/10.1111/obr.13874>.

global tendencies to adopt dominant perspectives from the Global North.¹⁶ In UNESCO youth policy, although normative frameworks emphasize inclusivity and participation, empirical evidence indicates the epistemic marginalization of youth from the Global South, who are often represented only as program subjects or recipients of interventions rather than as equal knowledge producers.¹⁷ A critical analysis of this representation enables a deeper understanding of how global policies affirm the legitimacy of certain forms of knowledge while simultaneously negating local voices and experiences.

Evidence from UNESCO documents and reports indicates significant epistemic inequality: empirical references, case studies, and conceptual frameworks tend to originate from Global North contexts, while Global South perspectives are marginalized.¹⁸ Youth from the Global South are often positioned as vulnerable groups or objects of intervention, reinforcing power imbalances in knowledge production and the definition of policy problems.¹⁹ This pattern is reinforced by limited access to global policy networks, consultative forums, and participatory mechanisms, which systematically construct the dominance of certain perspectives and diminish the legitimacy of local experiences in policymaking.²⁰ Thus, knowledge representation is not merely a matter of technical documentation but an arena of epistemic power struggles that shape the direction and effectiveness of global youth policy.

Although extensive research has explored global youth policy and UNESCO's participatory frameworks, there remains a significant gap in understanding how epistemic inequality shapes the representation of Global South youth knowledge within these processes. Studies reveal that global discourses on youth continue to privilege Northern epistemologies and institutional dominance, while Global South perspectives remain peripheral or symbolic.²¹ Broader analyses of epistemic injustice also show that structural asymmetries persist across international forums.²² However, few studies systematically examine how such inequalities manifest in UNESCO's youth policy documents. Addressing this gap, the present study critically investigates the mechanisms through which Global South youth knowledge is legitimized, represented, and integrated into UNESCO's policymaking architecture.

16 Macauley et al., "Youth Participation in Policy-Making Processes in the United Kingdom: A Scoping Review of the Literature."

17 Macauley et al.

18 UNESCO, "Youth Participation in Public Policies."

19 Marah, Pradhan, and Shuhood, "Youth Participation in Global Governance: Opportunities and Challenges."

20 Orsini and Duque, "Where Are Global South Youth? Youth Interest, Identities and Participation in Global Biodiversity Governance."

21 Hernan Cuervo and Ana Miranda, "Youth in the Global South: An Introduction," 2019, 1–13, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-13-3750-5_1; Shannon Philip, "Global South Perspectives on Youth," *Boyhood Studies* 16, no. 1 (June 1, 2023): 90–100, <https://doi.org/10.3167/bhs.2023.160107>.

22 Witold Mucha and Maximilian Wegener, "No Voice for the Global South – Analysing the Annual Convention of the International Studies Association (ISA)," *Acta Academica: Critical Views on Society, Culture and Politics* 55, no. 1 (July 28, 2023): 84–107, <https://doi.org/10.38140/aa.v55i1.6978>; Xuan-Thuy Nguyen, Karen Soldatić, and Hannah Dyer, "Conceptual and Methodological Issues in Research with Disabled Youth in the Global South: Towards Decolonial Futures in Pandemic Times," December 3, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.32920/27953781.v1>.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach with a case study design focusing on the participation of Global South youth in UNESCO's youth policy framework.²³ The analysis centers on two main initiatives: *Youth as Researchers (YAR)* and the *Youth-informed Policy Papers* developed by UNESCO IESALC. This design was selected because both initiatives provide a clear empirical context for examining how youth knowledge is integrated into global policymaking while revealing representational inequalities between Global North and Global South perspectives. The research design positions youth representation mechanisms and knowledge integration as the main units of analysis, as illustrated in *Table 1*, which depicts the relationship between context, actors, and the process of policy knowledge production within UNESCO structures.

Table 1. Overview of Data Sources, Units of Analysis, and Analytical Techniques

Data Source	UNESCO Initiative / Document	Unit of Analysis	Data Characteristics	Data Collection Method	Analytical Technique
Official UNESCO Program Documents	Youth as Researchers (YAR) – Banda Aceh 2025	Youth research outputs and participation mechanisms	Qualitative documents; 15 selected participants; 12-week research cycle; locally grounded research themes	Document analysis of reports, factsheets, and official publications	Content analysis and thematic analysis
Policy-Oriented Documents	Youth-informed Policy Papers (IESALC, 2024)	Youth-generated policy recommendations	Cross-regional consultations; youth from five UNESCO regions; focus on SDGs (poverty, food systems, climate action)	Document analysis of policy papers and consultation summaries	Content analysis and thematic analysis
Supporting Academic Literature	Peer-reviewed journals and policy briefs	Conceptual and empirical framing of youth participation and epistemic inequality	Open-access scholarly articles; global and regional scope	Literature review	Thematic synthesis

Source: Author Analysis

The data collection process was conducted through document analysis of secondary sources obtained from official UNESCO publications and relevant academic literature. The analyzed materials include program reports, policy briefs, and *youth-informed policy papers* reflecting youth contributions to the sustainable development agenda. For example, the *Youth as Researchers Banda Aceh 2025* document records the participation of 15 young researchers over a 12-week training period, addressing local themes such as digital inequality and social change. Meanwhile, the IESALC (2024) *policy papers* were developed through cross-regional consultations involving 50 youth from 23 countries. The overall analytical flow and categorization process are systematically visualized in *Figure 2*, which outlines the stages from document selection to thematic analysis.

²³ John W Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*, 4th ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2014); R. K. Yin, *Case Study Research and Applications: Design and Methods* (6th Ed.) (Sage 8 Publications, 2018).

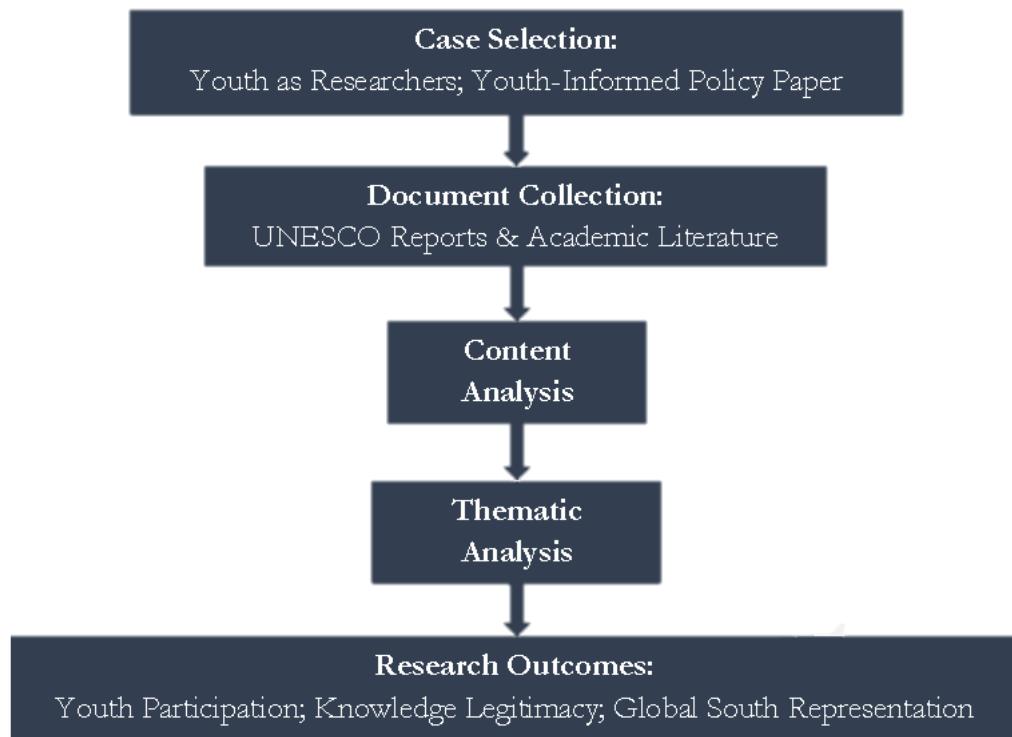


Figure 1. Research Design and Data Analysis Flow

Source: by Author

Data analysis applied content and thematic analysis to assess how youth-generated knowledge is recognized, legitimized, and integrated into UNESCO's core policy frameworks. The main analytical themes include youth participation, knowledge legitimacy, Global South representation, and inclusive policymaking mechanisms. Academic literature was incorporated to strengthen the theoretical framing on epistemic inequality in global knowledge production. The results were interpreted in relation to *policy influence* and *knowledge inclusion*, as shown conceptually in *Table 1* and methodologically in *Figure 2*, illustrating the dynamic relationship between research processes, representation structures, and policy formulation within UNESCO's youth initiatives.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Academic Literature on Inequalities in Youth Knowledge Representation

Academic literature indicates that inequalities in the representation of youth knowledge in global policy often reflect the dominance of Global North perspectives. For example, Orsini and Duque in Earth System Governance highlight that Global South perspectives are frequently minimal in global knowledge production, including in issues of environmental governance and youth participation. The article states:

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“...the media have had the tendency to frame youth as actors from the Global North, with the salient figure of Greta Thunberg, sometimes even silencing Global South youth on purpose by erasing them from official media pictures...”²⁴

This statement reinforces the need for a critical evaluation of how Global South youth knowledge is constructed and positioned within global policy, and affirms that the representation of Global South youth in UNESCO policy documents, such as youth-informed policy papers for the Summit of the Future, continues to face challenges of legitimacy and recognition.²⁵

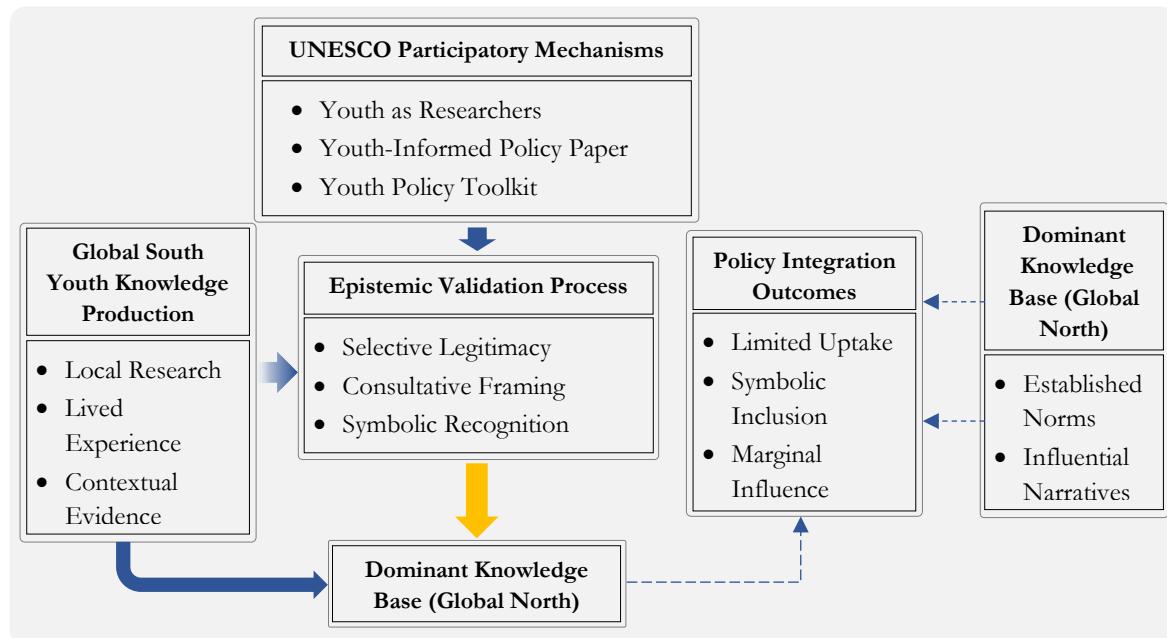


Figure 1. Analytical Framework of Epistemic Representation of Global South Youth in UNESCO Policies

Source: by Author

Youth Participation in UNESCO Policy

Youth participation in UNESCO policy is evident through their involvement in several formal mechanisms, although levels of representation still vary significantly between the Global South and the Global North. One of the main participatory mechanisms is the Youth as Researchers (YAR) program implemented by UNESCO in collaboration with academic partners in Banda Aceh, Indonesia. According to UNESCO documents, during the 2025 YAR cycle there were 15 selected participants from diverse educational backgrounds who underwent intensive training and research over a 12-week period to enhance their capacity to generate evidence-based findings related to real issues affecting society, including inclusive digital transformation, disinformation, and its impacts on social vulnerability.²⁶ This underscores that youth from the Global South are not only present in deliberative forums but are also actively producing contextualized findings and policy recommendations.

²⁴ Orsini and Duque, “Where Are Global South Youth? Youth Interest, Identities and Participation in Global Biodiversity Governance.”

²⁵ UNESCO IESALC, “Youth-Informed Policy Papers on Global Goals Released.”

²⁶ UNESCO, “Youth as Researchers: Grounded in Local Realities (Banda Aceh),” UNESCO, 2025.

In addition, the Youth-informed Policy Papers facilitated by UNESCO IESALC for the Summit of the Future 2024 illustrate a broader consultative process. The documents show that these policies were developed through youth consultations from five UNESCO regions—Africa, Asia-Pacific, Arab States, Europe & North America, and Latin America & the Caribbean—with the support of the BIBO Network, to ensure that youth perspectives from different parts of the world were incorporated into policy recommendations addressing sustainable development targets such as poverty alleviation, inclusive food systems, and climate action.²⁷ This case demonstrates the existence of mechanisms that allow contributions from Global South youth in the global arena, although the integration of these recommendations into international decision-making still requires further evaluation.

Content analysis of both mechanisms indicates that although youth from the Global South are able to make substantive contributions through research and consultation, there are structural factors that limit the effectiveness of their participation. Key barriers include unequal access to technology, limited language proficiency in international forums, and technical capacity in drafting formal policy documents. Empirical studies show that youth participation is often symbolic, where formal involvement does not always translate into substantive recognition in decision-making processes.²⁸

Academic literature emphasizes that although UNESCO mechanisms can enrich global policy, institutional structures and global norms still tend to privilege Global North narratives, which possess stronger resources and lobbying experience. For example, the study by Marah, Pradhan, & Shuhood asserts that although youth have the potential to act as agents of change, challenges such as fragmented networks, limited structural support, and unequal access to resources remain obstacles to effective and sustainable participation in global governance.²⁹

Thus, the findings of the analysis indicate that UNESCO has provided participatory platforms through structured programs and inclusive policy documents. However, the participation of Global South youth remains constrained by structural barriers. This underscores the need to strengthen access mechanisms, enhance capacity building, and ensure representation so that their contributions can be more equitable and impactful in the formulation and implementation of global policy.

Legitimacy of Youth Knowledge

The legitimacy of youth knowledge in global policy refers to the extent to which the voices, perspectives, and recommendations produced by young people are recognized, accepted, and considered by policymakers as a basis for policy decisions. Analysis of formal UNESCO mechanisms such as presentations of Youth as Researchers (YAR) outcomes, youth-informed policy papers, and youth consultations indicates that although the knowledge produced is often presented in the form of official documents and recommendations, recognition of youth knowledge is frequently limited and not yet fully integrated into core policy decisions.

In the context of youth participation, UNICEF emphasizes that meaningful participation must involve genuine recognition of young people's capacity to make relevant contributions to decision-making based on their experiences and insights, rather than merely symbolic representation in consultative forums.³⁰ This is important because the legitimacy of knowledge

27 UNESCO IESALC, "Youth-Informed Policy Papers on Global Goals Released."

28 Miguel Vera, Adriana Tordoya Huanca, and Mateo Nicolás Villalpando, "The Impact of Information Framing on Youth Engagement in Public Policy Debates," *Southern Voice*, 2025.

29 Marah, Pradhan, and Shuhood, "Youth Participation in Global Governance: Opportunities and Challenges."

30 UNESCO, "14th UNESCO Youth Forum," UNESCO, 2025 <<https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/14th-unesco-youth-forum>> [accessed 3 January 2026].

is determined not only by the presence of youth in the process, but also by the official acknowledgment of the value of the analyses, recommendations, and evidence they produce.

Several academic studies indicate that despite global efforts to involve youth in policy processes, many participatory mechanisms still face serious challenges in validating and positioning youth knowledge as the basis for substantive policy. Ramos, Tavares, and da Cruz, through their scoping review, assert that youth participation in local governance often remains at the consultative level, with limited impact on final policy decisions.³¹ The study reveals a persistent gap between normative claims about the democratization of youth participation and empirical evidence of their actual influence on policy outcomes.

Public policy literature in national and local contexts also reveals similar patterns. Yuslizar, Jaes, and Mohd Ali show that the capacity of youth to contribute to public policy formulation is strongly influenced by policymakers' perceptions of youth competence, configurations of political power, and limitations in institutional support.³² Under these conditions, the legitimacy of youth knowledge is not determined by the quality of the ideas proposed, but by how political and bureaucratic structures interpret the position of youth within decision-making hierarchies. These findings indicate that participatory design alone is insufficient to guarantee substantive recognition of youth voices.

Limitations in the legitimacy of youth knowledge are also evident in the realm of e-participation. Juusola and Varsaluoma, in their case study of the Virtual Youth Council in Finland, found that although digital platforms expand opportunities for participation and inclusivity, youth contributions are often not systematically integrated into policy decisions.³³ The lack of feedback mechanisms and two-way dialogue between youth and policymakers causes e-participation to function more as a channel for symbolic expression than as an institutionally recognized source of knowledge.

A number of cross-sectoral studies then emphasize the importance of participatory approaches that position youth as equal knowledge actors. Flodgren et al., through a scoping review in the fields of public health, education, and social work, show that meaningful youth engagement occurs only when there is a redistribution of power, clarity of roles in decision-making, and institutional recognition of their contributions.³⁴ This principle aligns with the normative framework articulated by UNICEF, which asserts that youth participation must go beyond symbolism and be realized through authentic collaboration so that resulting policies are more relevant, equitable, and responsive to the social realities of youth.³⁵

Overall, although UNESCO has provided platforms and mechanisms to recognize youth knowledge, the legitimacy of this knowledge remains insufficiently strong, as youth contributions are often positioned as supplementary or illustrative inputs rather than as foundational or primary references in policymaking. This reflects the need to strengthen

31 Flávio Ramos, Antônio F. Tavares, and Nuno F. da Cruz, "Between Promise and Practice: A Scoping Review of the Democratic Outcomes of Youth Participation in Local Governance," *Children and Youth Services Review* 18 (2025): 1–11.

32 Yuslizar Kamaruddin, Lutfan Jaes, and Adi Syahid Mohd Ali, "Factors of Youth Participation Capability in The Public Policy Making Process," *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences*, 12.13 (2022), 234–40 <<https://doi.org/10.6007/IJARBSS/v12-i13/14596>>.

33 Henna Juusola and Jari Varsaluoma, "Stakeholders' Perception on Youths' e-Participation in Finland: Case Virtual Council," *Journal of Applied Youth Studies* 6 (2023): 75–93.

34 Juusola and Varsaluoma.

35 UNICEF Innocenti, "Why Participation Matters: The Evidence for Involving Children and Youth in Policy and Decision Making," UNICEF, 2025.

validation mechanisms, foster more balanced policy dialogue, and develop institutional structures that genuinely value youth knowledge as an asset in global policy formulation processes.

Representation of the Global South in Knowledge Production

The representation of Global South youth in UNESCO knowledge production is one of the key indicators of the extent to which global policy reflects diverse and inclusive perspectives. Analysis of the UNESCO Youth as Researchers initiative shows that although the program aims to expand the research capacity of youth from various regions and enhance their engagement in policy-relevant research, the participation of youth from Global South countries continues to face structural barriers related to access to resources, support, and substantive pathways of influence within the global policy arena.³⁶ UNESCO underscores that while the Youth as Researchers platform creates space for youth to generate important local knowledge, the quantitative representation and substantive influence of Global South youth in international knowledge production remain limited due to constraints in access and resource capacity.³⁷ Orsini and Duque, in their study of Global South youth engagement in global governance, also emphasize that the identities and contributions of youth from these regions are often insufficiently represented in global processes due to the dominance of knowledge production structures based in Global North countries, resulting in inadequate opportunities for Global South youth to influence international research and policy agendas.³⁸

In the 2025 YAR cycle implemented in Banda Aceh, 15 selected participants from diverse educational backgrounds received intensive 12-week training to conduct evidence-based research on social and digital issues relevant to their communities. Analysis of UNESCO documents states that these activities aimed to “*strengthen their capacity to generate evidence-based insights on real-world issues affecting communities*”.³⁹ These findings indicate that Global South youth are not merely present as participants but play an active role in producing contextualized knowledge that can inform policy formulation.

Meanwhile, the Youth-informed Policy Papers 2024 facilitated by UNESCO IESALC included youth consultations from five UNESCO regions—Africa, Asia and the Pacific, Arab States, Europe and North America, and Latin America and the Caribbean—with the support of the BIBO Network, with the aim of ensuring that “*youth perspectives from across the globe inform recommendations addressing sustainable development goals*” through a series of regional consultations.⁴⁰ Empirical data from the literature on youth participation indicate that although formal mechanisms such as global consultations increase geographical representation, youth from Global North countries tend to appear more frequently as primary contributors in international publications and policy documents than youth from the Global South, due to asymmetric epistemic access that reinforces the dominance of northern knowledge in global policymaking

36 UNESCO, “14th UNESCO Youth Forum”; Orsini and Duque, “Where Are Global South Youth? Youth Interest, Identities and Participation in Global Biodiversity Governance.”

37 UNESCO, “Youth as Researchers – Policy Factsheet,” UNESCO, 2023.

38 Orsini and Duque, “Where Are Global South Youth? Youth Interest, Identities and Participation in Global Biodiversity Governance.”

39 UNESCO, “Youth as Researchers: Grounded in Local Realities (Banda Aceh).”

40 UNESCO IESALC, “Youth-Informed Policy Papers on Global Goals Released.”

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processes.⁴¹ This condition indicates persistent representational inequality within UNESCO's knowledge production mechanisms, where formal participation does not always correspond with substantive influence or access to the pathways of academic recognition that underpin global decision-making.

Academic literature reinforces this analysis. Orsini and Duque highlight that Global South perspectives are often minimal in global knowledge production, particularly in issues of environmental governance and youth participation, resulting in youth from these regions being more frequently positioned as supplementary contributors rather than as primary agents in international policy.⁴² These findings are further supported by studies emphasizing that Global North epistemic dominance continues to shape the legitimacy and visibility of knowledge produced by Global South youth.⁴³

Comparative analysis between Global South and Global North youth shows that the primary difference lies in access rather than capacity. Global South youth are capable of producing contextual and relevant knowledge. However, limited international networks, the dominance of global languages, and a lack of lobbying experience constrain their influence. Their contributions often stop at the consultation stage. Their position remains subordinate within global knowledge production structures. Participation is more frequently recognized symbolically rather than substantively.

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that the existence of participatory mechanisms within UNESCO policies has not yet adequately ensured epistemic equality for Global South youth. The core issue lies not in the absence of participatory spaces, but in the limited structural transformation that would allow youth-generated knowledge to be recognized and positioned as legitimate policy-relevant evidence. As long as knowledge validation processes remain governed by uneven epistemic standards, the contributions of Global South youth are likely to be confined to normative or symbolic recognition. This condition indicates that participation, without substantive reform of validation and policy integration mechanisms, risks reproducing existing inequalities in more subtle forms. Therefore, a reorientation of policy is required—one that moves beyond the expansion of participation toward the restructuring of epistemic pathways that determine how knowledge is elevated, prioritized, and translated into global policy—so that the engagement of Global South youth can function as a substantive force within international decision-making processes.

41 Ozioma C. Oguine et al., "Online Safety for All: Sociocultural Insights from a Systematic Review of Youth Online Safety in the Global South," *ArXiv*, 2025, 1–30.

42 Orsini and Duque, "Where Are Global South Youth? Youth Interest, Identities and Participation in Global Biodiversity Governance."

43 I. J. Visseren-Hamakers and M. T. J. Kok, "Global South Perspectives in Biodiversity Politics: Challenges and Opportunities," *Environmental Policy and Governance* 32, no. 2 (2022), <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1002/eet.1945>; Vera, Huanca, and Villalpando, "The Impact of Information Framing on Youth Engagement in Public Policy Debates."

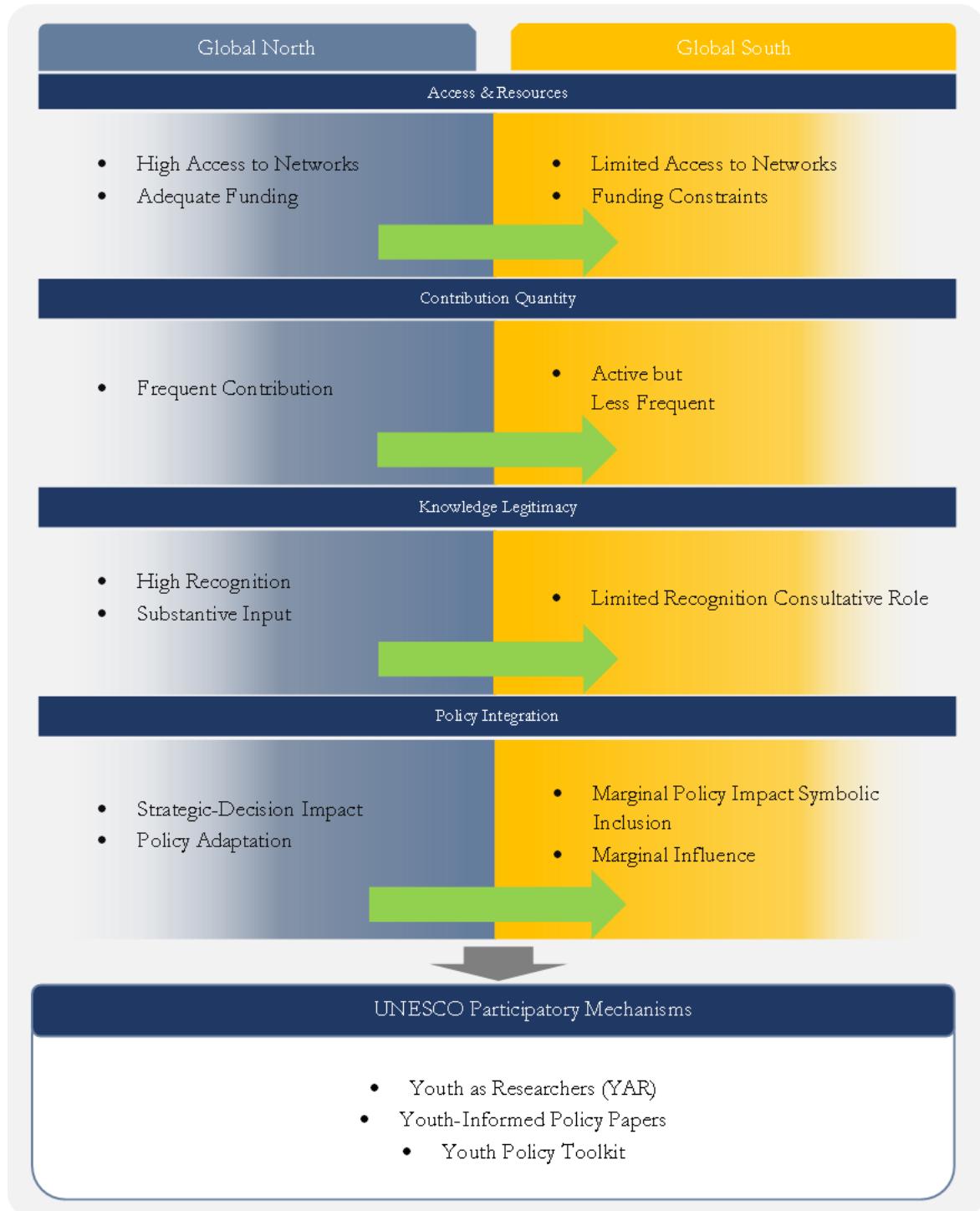


Figure 3. Comparative Representation of Global North and Global South Youth Knowledge in UNESCO Policy Processes

Source: by Author

Inclusive Policy Mechanisms

UNESCO has developed various mechanisms and tools to ensure that youth voices are represented in policy formulation processes, both at national and global levels. One of the main instruments is the Youth Policy Toolkit, which was designed to guide Member States in developing youth policies that are inclusive and based on active participation. The toolkit emphasizes that all stages of policy formulation—from issue identification to evaluation—must

Unequal Representation of Global Youth Knowledge in UNESCO Youth Discourse

directly involve youth, so that the resulting policies reflect the real needs of younger generations.⁴⁴

In addition, UNESCO has implemented the Supporting Evidence-Informed and Inclusive Youth Policymaking project, which aims to integrate youth-generated data and research into policy decision-making. This project combines research conducted by youth with the technical knowledge of policymakers, so that the policy process is not based solely on formal narratives but also on empirical evidence generated in the field.⁴⁵ This approach demonstrates efforts to strengthen the legitimacy of youth knowledge while simultaneously creating inclusive spaces for their contributions to the sustainable development agenda.

Content analysis of these two mechanisms reveals that, although procedurally inclusive, the effectiveness of Global South youth participation continues to face structural and practical barriers. Factors such as limited access to technology, unequal language proficiency in international forums, and limited experience in policy advocacy affect the extent to which the knowledge produced can be substantively adopted or accepted.⁴⁶ Other studies affirm that such formal mechanisms often face challenges in ensuring that Global South perspectives are genuinely integrated, rather than merely treated as symbolic inputs archived within documents.⁴⁷

On the opportunity side, these mechanisms continue to provide space for youth to develop research capacity, build cross-country networks, and deliver policy recommendations grounded in local contexts. This is important because it strengthens the position of Global South youth as legitimate producers of knowledge within global governance. Critical evaluations of the implementation of the Youth Policy Toolkit and the evidence-informed policymaking project indicate that the successful integration of Global South perspectives is highly dependent on institutional support, technical capacity, and political commitment from policymakers.⁴⁸

Thus, the inclusive policy mechanisms provided by UNESCO hold significant potential to strengthen youth participation and the legitimacy of the knowledge produced; however, their effectiveness still requires sustained efforts to address structural barriers and to ensure substantive representation of Global South youth in international policy.

Integration of Global South Youth Recommendations into International Policy

Analysis of the Youth-informed Policy Papers documents and the Youth as Researchers (YAR) mechanism shows the existence of consultative processes that enable youth from the Global South regions to convey evidence-based recommendations. For example, in YAR Banda Aceh 2025, participants produced recommendations related to digital inclusion, disinformation, and social vulnerability, while the Youth-informed Policy Papers for the Summit of the Future 2024

⁴⁴ UNESCO, “Because Youth Perspectives Matter: UNESCO ToolBox for Youth Policy and Programming (Youth Policy Toolkit).”

⁴⁵ UNESCO, “Supporting Evidence-Informed and Inclusive Youth Policymaking (Project Data).”

⁴⁶ Vera, Huanca, and Villalpando, “The Impact of Information Framing on Youth Engagement in Public Policy Debates”; Marah, Pradhan, and Shuhood, “Youth Participation in Global Governance: Opportunities and Challenges.”

⁴⁷ Orsini and Duque, “Where Are Global South Youth? Youth Interest, Identities and Participation in Global Biodiversity Governance”; Visseren-Hamakers and Kok, “Global South Perspectives in Biodiversity Politics: Challenges and Opportunities.”

⁴⁸ UNESCO, “Because Youth Perspectives Matter: UNESCO ToolBox for Youth Policy and Programming (Youth Policy Toolkit)”; UNESCO, “Supporting Evidence-Informed and Inclusive Youth Policymaking (Project Data).”

included youth input from five UNESCO regions concerning poverty alleviation, inclusive food systems, and climate action.⁴⁹

However, content studies and policy analysis indicate that although youth recommendations are systematically collected and documented, the level of their integration into binding international policies remains very limited. A scoping review by Ramos, Tavares, and da Cruz shows that in many global governance processes, youth input is often treated as a consultative element separate from the main decision-making mechanisms.⁵⁰ Similar findings are also revealed by Flodgren et al., who note that across various cross-sectoral policy documents, youth contributions are rarely traced in terms of their influence on changes in policy substance or implementation strategies.⁵¹ In the context of consultation-based global policy, Juusola and Varsaluoma emphasize that the absence of institutional mechanisms to follow up on youth recommendations causes such input to often be placed as appendices or supporting documentation.⁵² This condition is reflected in the documentation of the Summit of the Future, where youth input is listed in additional sections of policy documents, without explicit evidence that these recommendations influenced formal decisions or the direction of strategic implementation.⁵³

Critical analysis of the literature supports these findings. Orsini and Duque (2025) emphasize that epistemic dominance of the Global North in multilateral forums causes youth recommendations from the Global South to be frequently ignored or only symbolically integrated.⁵⁴ This phenomenon is reinforced by Vera et al. (2025), who find that structural constraints—such as limited access to international networks, lobbying capacity, and language barriers—restrict the substantive influence of Global South youth in global agendas.⁵⁵ These conditions indicate a significant gap between the contributions made by youth and actual policy implementation.

Furthermore, the concept of epistemic justice emphasizes that recognition of knowledge produced by Global South youth is not merely a matter of documentation, but also involves legitimacy and adoption within decision-making processes.⁵⁶ The gap that emerges between contribution and actual implementation reveals inequality in knowledge representation, which can reduce the effectiveness of global policies in responding to the contextual needs of youth in disadvantaged regions.

49 UNESCO, "Youth as Researchers: Grounded in Local Realities (Banda Aceh)"; UNESCO IESALC, "Youth-Informed Policy Papers on Global Goals Released."

50 Ramos, Tavares, and Cruz, "Between Promise and Practice: A Scoping Review of the Democratic Outcomes of Youth Participation in Local Governance."

51 Flodgren et al., "Youth Involvement in Policy Processes in Public Health, Education, and Social Work—A Scoping Review."

52 Juusola and Varsaluoma, "Stakeholders' Perception on Youths' e-Participation in Finland: Case Virtual Council."

53 UNESCO IESALC, "Youth-Informed Policy Papers on Global Goals Released."

54 Orsini and Duque, "Where Are Global South Youth? Youth Interest, Identities and Participation in Global Biodiversity Governance."

55 Vera, Huanca, and Villalpando, "The Impact of Information Framing on Youth Engagement in Public Policy Debates."

56 Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Visseren-Hamakers and Kok, "Global South Perspectives in Biodiversity Politics: Challenges and Opportunities."

Several cases show that the integration of youth recommendations into policy can occur under certain conditions. Flodgren et al. (2024) show that youth involvement in evidence-informed policymaking projects influences the early stages of program planning, particularly in developing countries.⁵⁷ Ramos, Tavares, and da Cruz (2025) emphasize that such influence emerges when youth hold formal positions and are supported by clear institutional structures.⁵⁸ UNICEF emphasizes that youth participation must be collaborative and sustained in order to generate policy impact.⁵⁹ These findings confirm that the core issue is not the absence of participation, but rather the weakness of substantive integration. This condition reinforces the objective of this study to examine how participation mechanisms can be reformulated so that the knowledge of Global South youth is recognized, integrated, and exerts real influence in global policy.

Synthesis of Findings and Implications

Analysis of UNESCO youth participation mechanisms—including the Youth as Researchers (YAR) program, Youth-informed Policy Papers, and evidence-informed policymaking projects—reveals several key findings. First, participation of youth from the Global South is evident in deliberative processes, but the quantity and quality of engagement remain limited compared to youth from the Global North. The YAR 2025 program in Banda Aceh, for example, involved 15 competitively selected participants, demonstrating opportunities for Global South youth to develop research capacity and produce evidence-based recommendations, although access to technology, language proficiency, and technical capacity remain constraints.⁶⁰

Second, the legitimacy of knowledge produced by youth is often partial. Although recommendations are included in Youth-informed Policy Papers or discussed in official forums, their integration into high-level policy decisions is inconsistent. This confirms the existence of a gap between youth contributions and actual adoption in global policy, in line with the findings of Vera et al. and Orsini & Duque regarding the epistemic dominance of the Global North and the limited influence of Global South youth in international arenas.⁶¹

Third, representation of Global South youth in knowledge production remains uneven. Analysis of YAR Banda Aceh and Youth-informed Policy Papers indicates cross-regional participation, yet contributions from Global North youth remain more extensively documented and recognized in official documents. Academic literature emphasizes that the existence of formal platforms does not necessarily guarantee epistemic justice or substantive influence.⁶²

57 Flodgren et al., “Youth Involvement in Policy Processes in Public Health, Education, and Social Work—A Scoping Review.”

58 Ramos, Tavares, and Cruz, “Between Promise and Practice: A Scoping Review of the Democratic Outcomes of Youth Participation in Local Governance.”

59 UNESCO, “14th UNESCO Youth Forum.”

60 UNESCO, “Youth as Researchers: Grounded in Local Realities (Banda Aceh).”

61 Vera, Huanca, and Villalpando, “The Impact of Information Framing on Youth Engagement in Public Policy Debates”; Orsini and Duque, “Where Are Global South Youth? Youth Interest, Identities and Participation in Global Biodiversity Governance.”

62 Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing*; Visseren-Hamakers and Kok, “Global South Perspectives in Biodiversity Politics: Challenges and Opportunities.”

Fourth, UNESCO's inclusive policy mechanisms, including the Youth Policy Toolkit and evidence-based projects, provide a normative framework for youth participation. However, their effectiveness in integrating Global South perspectives remains constrained by institutional structures and resources. These challenges highlight the need for strengthened capacity building, institutional support, and systematic advocacy strategies so that recommendations from Global South youth are not merely symbolic, but also substantive and impactful on international policy.

Overall, these findings carry several practical implications. For UNESCO, there is a need to strengthen access mechanisms, mentoring, and technical support for Global South youth so that their recommendations can be more readily implemented in global policy. For member states, strategies are required to reinforce youth participation through resource allocation, capacity-building training, and the facilitation of inclusive consultative forums. Meanwhile, for the broader empowerment of Global South youth, strategies should emphasize the development of international networks, the enhancement of policy literacy, and the recognition of local knowledge as an important contribution to more just and contextual global policies.

Thus, the synthesis of findings indicates that although participatory platforms are available, the successful integration of Global South youth knowledge requires a combination of the reformulation of institutional mechanisms, capacity enhancement, and normative support to ensure more equitable representation and tangible policy influence.

CONCLUSION

This study highlights the dynamics of Global South youth participation in UNESCO policies and the global arena, with a focus on formal mechanisms such as Youth as Researchers (YAR), Youth-informed Policy Papers, and evidence-informed policymaking projects. The analysis shows that Global South youth have opportunities to contribute substantively; however, the quantity and quality of participation remain limited compared to Global North youth. Recommendations generated through these mechanisms often possess formal legitimacy, but their integration into global decision-making is not always consistent, leaving some contributions largely symbolic.

The representation of Global South youth in knowledge production reveals persistent inequalities, with Global North perspectives being more extensively documented and exerting greater influence in official documents. Structural barriers, including access to technology, language capacity, and technical skills, further constrain the effectiveness of participation. Inclusive mechanisms provided by UNESCO, although offering normative platforms, still require strengthening to ensure substantive recognition of knowledge produced by youth from disadvantaged regions.

The implications of this research underscore the importance of strengthening the capacity of Global South youth, improving access to international policy forums, and providing systematic institutional support so that their recommendations can be more equitable and have tangible impact. Furthermore, the findings reinforce arguments in the literature on epistemic justice and the need to integrate local perspectives into global policymaking, in order to ensure policies that are inclusive, contextual, and responsive to the needs of youth worldwide.

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