

# **A New “Age” of Global Climate Governance: The Role of Youth in the UNFCCC Process**

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## Dedication

*For my grandmother, Obie, who taught me my appreciation for all things beautiful in Creation. She is the first activist I ever came to know and has remained one her entire life. I am eternally grateful for her genuine interest and support in all aspects of my existence. Obie learns and loves with intention each day, which I aspire to emulate.*

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*Thanks to my housemates and best friends who endured my stress surrounding this academic endeavor. I am grateful for our friendship that is only just beginning.*

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# CHAPTER 1: Introduction

“Adults keep saying we owe it to the young people, to give them hope, but I don’t want your hope. I don’t want you to be hopeful. I want you to panic. I want you to feel the fear I feel every day. I want you to act. I want you to act as you would in a crisis. I want you to act as if the house is on fire, because it is.”

— Greta Thunberg, World Economic Forum, Davos, 2019

## Introduction

At the age of sixteen, climate activist Greta Thunberg addressed leaders from around the globe with urgency during the 2019 World Economic Forum impressing upon national party delegates the need for collective action against anthropogenic warming. Youth engagement in the climate change fight has risen through their ever-increasing role as activists, stakeholders, and popular figures. Climate change is arguably the most dire crisis humanity will face this century. Despite the irrefutable scientific evidence, governments from around the world have failed time and time again to pass regulatory legislation needed to avoid a catastrophic 1.5 degrees Celsius warming scenario.<sup>1</sup> Quantifying the scope of consequences caused by inaction is a difficult—though crucial—objective because the apathy in the international climate governance space has had and will continue to have immeasurable and unforeseeable economic, social, and health implications. Negative outcomes likely associated with the increased greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions include extreme weather damage, geological shifts, poor water quality, loss of ecosystem diversity, agricultural drought, disease, forced migration, and strains to economic systems to name a few of the numerous repercussions.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> IPCC, (2021).

<sup>2</sup> Rom, et. al., (2014).

Activists such as Greta Thunberg have been fundamental in garnering greater recognition and mobilizing action to address the crisis at hand.<sup>3</sup> However, without tangible power via the right to vote in most nations, it is difficult to represent the voice and will of young people. Furthermore, international organizations, which are typically tasked with setting standards for such expansive global challenges, like climate change, face a democratic deficit as delegates sent to participate are not chosen by popular vote. Public interest groups, formally called stakeholders, composed of civilians from various social, demographic, or business entities are intended to bridge this gap and provide greater democratic legitimacy to multilateral institutions. The United Nations and their climate arm, the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), brings stakeholder groups and international delegations together annually at the Conference of Parties (COP) in order to address the challenges presented by a warming world. Youth and Children are one of these designated UN stakeholder groups that strive to hold parties accountable to upscale their ambitions and engage more democratically with civil society. In this thesis, I seek to clearly establish the growing role that youth play in the UNFCCC process.

## **History of the UNFCCC and Stakeholders**

Established in 1990, the UNFCCC defines global climate governance strategies, commitments, and meeting structures for parties who have signed on under the United Nations. Following the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's (IPCC) first report in 1990 which warned of the dangers of global warming, the UN General Assembly established the Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee (INC) to draft a framework for member states to address the international climate regime. At the 1992 United Nations Conference on

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<sup>3</sup>Sabherwal, A. et al, (2021).

Environment and Development (UNCED) in Rio de Janeiro, the UNFCCC was first opened for signatures. The original text was signed by 155 member-state signatures and currently holds 195 signatures.<sup>4</sup> The UNFCCC is the framework that acknowledges an awareness of the dangers of climate change and attempts to guide an international body in its efforts to mitigate human-generated damage to the environment. Stakeholder groups are not explicitly defined within the UNFCCC; however, they are officially recognized as participants in non-party groups. The history of stakeholders within the Framework is outlined in detail in the literature review section of this paper.

The main objective of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) delineated in Article 2 states the purpose of the organization is to achieve “stabilization of greenhouse gas concentrations in the atmosphere at a level that would prevent dangerous anthropogenic interference with the climate system” within a timeframe that allows the environment’s natural adaptation to climate change.<sup>5</sup> Given the undefined timeline and poor definition of dangerous interference, critics deemed this objective as a “weak and vague target.”<sup>6</sup> Ultimately, the UNFCCC itself lacks significant leverage to formulate and monitor climate policy. The use of “framework” in the UNFCCC’s title is intentional as its primary function is to establish the initial foundations for global climate governance negotiations which will subsequently determine tangible protocols. Furthermore, the Convention is limited in its ability to produce effective results even after protocols are written because emission reduction commitments are non-binding. UNFCCC decisions are made by consensus, meaning they are not determined by a majority but rather an absence of objection from any parties, granting all

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<sup>4</sup> Kuyper, et. al., (2018).

<sup>5</sup>United Nations. (1992). United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, p. 4

<sup>6</sup> Kuyper, et al., (2018), p. 346



participating member states significant power should they protest. Despite its limitations, the UNFCCC has heralded a new era of global climate governance by creating an official framework and increasing the recognition of climate change as a global challenge requiring collective action.<sup>7</sup>

The authoritative body produced by the UNFCCC is the Conference of Parties (COP) which is comprised of all signatory convention members. The first COP met in 1995, one year after the UNFCCC officially entered into force in 1994 a few years after its initial introduction in Rio. The COP is where decisions on national commitments and international climate policies agreements are adopted.<sup>8</sup> With the exception of 2020, given the COVID-19 pandemic, COPs are hosted annually by cities around the globe. COP21 in 2015 produced The Paris Accords which require that parties return to the table to build on their previous climate change mitigation commitments every five years. Since the Paris conference, certain COP years are deemed of great importance and referred to as “big COPs”.<sup>9</sup> The most recent COP26 in Glasgow was considered a “big COP” because it was the first meeting five years out from the Paris Climate Agreement. Outcomes of COP26 will be discussed in greater detail throughout Chapter 3 of this paper. The post-Paris delineation of COP importance is one example of how UNFCCC COPs have changed since the inaugural 1995 gathering. One major component which shifted significantly is the increased role that non-state actors play.

Since the 1992 UNCED Earth Summit in Rio, Brazil, nine constituency groups have been recognized by the UNFCCC as key stakeholders. Youth and Children, qualified as those under the age of 30, are officially designated as one of nine Major Groups who serve a distinct

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<sup>7</sup> Kuyper, et al., (2018).

<sup>8</sup> Kuyper, et al., (2018).

<sup>9</sup> Vatheeswaran, (2021).

stakeholder role. The group is officially designated as the Youth NGO, or YOUNGO. For the last 30 years, the function that youth play in the UNFCCC space has grown year over year, with significant increases in the last 10 years.

At COP21 in 2015, Secretary-General to the UN, Ban Ki-Moon, emphasized the importance of stakeholder groups in achieving climate governance by stating the need for “all hands on deck”.<sup>10</sup> While it has long been recognized that the global climate crisis will require an international effort, scholars contend that Paris was a turning point for stakeholder engagement. There are multiple reasons that existing literature points to 2015 as a significant shift, primarily because of the ambitious national determined contributions (NDCs) which parties committed to, but also because of the delineation of stakeholders as integral pieces in the solution to the climate crisis. Kuyper argues that the Paris Agreement created a form of “hybrid multilateralism” that brings together both state and non-state actors.<sup>11</sup> With this new architecture, non-state actors are the stewards of NDCs as they place pressure on domestic governments to follow through on commitments and continue to augment the NDCs every five years. Scholars have moved away from traditional top-down and bottom-up theories of implementation given the new orchestration role which stakeholders are playing that make a hierarchy of power more difficult to establish. Here, the hybrid nature of the UNFCCC process has begun to replace the traditional duties of non-state actors as key participants rather than on-lookers.<sup>12</sup>

Paris also witnessed greater attention to the rebrand of Article 6 from the original UNFCCC document pertaining to education and training which directly invokes society to be a

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<sup>10</sup> United Nations Press Release, (2015).

<sup>11</sup> Kuyper, (2018).

<sup>12</sup> Kuyper, (2018).

part of the climate solution. Youth are especially involved in the overhaul which is now referred to as the Action for Climate Empowerment (ACE). Since Paris, the UNFCCC Secretariat has designated greater time and funding to ACE which facilitates events that bring non-state actors and state officials together.<sup>13</sup> Youth were particularly impacted by the ACE program which promotes “climate change education, training, public awareness, public participation and public access to information.”<sup>14</sup>

## **YOUNGO Background**

YOUNGO consists of youth from around the world who are motivated by a common fight to encourage ambitious science-based responses to the climate crisis. Over 10,000 individuals and 100 youth organizations are considered members, although much fewer are actually present in the formal COP delegations. Membership is granted by an online forum that is approved by YOUNGO leadership to persons in any nation around the world without a fee. Individuals and group members are divided into thematic and operational working groups. The Global Coordination Team is a sub-group with far greater involvement than the average member.<sup>15</sup> Additionally, two members, who they call “Focal Points,” are elected to lead YOUNGO each year and act as liaisons between other constituency groups and the UN Secretariat. One Focal Point is elected from the Global North and the other from the Global South to form a more representative figurehead for the body of youth.<sup>16</sup> The two Focal Points also take on a great deal of leadership within the YOUNGO organization as point people and organizers of working groups at the more granular levels.

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<sup>13</sup> Thew, et al., (2021).

<sup>14</sup> United Nations Paris Agreement, (2015).

<sup>15</sup> Introduction to YOUNGO, (2021).

<sup>16</sup> United Nations Joint Framework Initiative on Children, Youth and Climate Change, (2010).

The age deficit that youth face presents resource limitations that restrict their ability to participate in Conferences of Parties (COPs) in a manner as effective as other interest groups. Additionally, youth may be perceived by older adults as actors who lack autonomy from traditional authority figures during the developmental years of adolescence, believing them to be non-independent actors. Is it truly possible for youth to make an impact without the traditional leverage afforded to other interest groups? What is the purpose of the youth stakeholder group and do their methods for achieving this purpose work well? This paper attempts to answer these questions by providing a better understanding of the role of youth in global climate governance, particularly within the UNFCCC. The following is a roadmap to the rest of the paper.

## **Roadmap to the Thesis**

Chapter 2 is a literature review that provides background context and identifies gaps in existing literature that this paper attempts to address. The review covers the entrance of stakeholder constituencies into UN processes, including the theories behind stakeholder democracy as well as their manifested involvement. Google Trends data helps distinguish between internal youth actors who engage directly with UNFCCC processes and external youth actors who perform activism online or in the media primarily outside COPs. Literature regarding the increased impact and development of youth policy activism in the international sphere is also included as well as the limited scholarship on the youth climate movement. Finally, a chronological arch explores youth participation through YOUNGO from 1992 to the most recent 2021 COP in Glasgow, Scotland. The expected contributions of this research wrap up the literature review portion.

Chapter 3 tackles the outcomes of recent COPs based on the first-hand experience of YOUNGO representatives. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with youth leaders to

develop a more complete picture of their role. A general overview of the stakeholder negotiation process at COPs is provided. This chapter explores direct inside channels of influence, like speeches given during plenary sessions, and indirect outside channels, like organized protests, through which youth hope to influence delegates. The interview participants share common obstacles as well as successes they have experienced in the UNFCCC space. Youth also share perspectives on how they view the differences between international and external youth climate actors. It is evident that both internal and external activists serve important but separate roles in the youth-led fight for enhanced global climate governance. The interviews spin a personal narrative granting perspective on how youth view their own agency and impact in the UN climate governance domain. The end of the chapter contains recommendations to address the roadblocks that the future of YOUNGO may face.

Chapter 4 synthesizes the information found through previous literature, interviews, and case study data to concretely characterize the role that youth play in the UNFCCC negotiation process. This conclusion considers successes and limitations that youth face in the climate stakeholder realm. The conclusion gives further recommendations to form the link between youth activism and the ultimate goal whereby countries adopt tangible climate change strategies. Strategies can be defined as ambitious material policies aimed at reducing or offsetting greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions that have been signed into binding law. The chapter seeks to determine if youth activists achieve their goals of directly influencing the UNFCCC process to be more ambitious and democratic. Further research suggestions are outlined with a discussion about the future of global climate governance including where youth fit in as an integral piece to the puzzle.

## **New Contributions to Youth Stakeholder Activism within UNFCCC**

Extensive research has been done on the broad concept of stakeholder constituencies<sup>17</sup>; however, this thesis hones in on a vulnerable population by exploring the role of young people and children. This thesis informs the conversation on youth as stakeholders in the UNFCCC process by providing first-hand accounts from young activists directly involved with YOUNGO. Although previous ethnographic work has captured personal opinions from youth constituencies,<sup>18</sup> the following dialogue chapter presents a new perspective from youth followed by recommendations to ensure more effective outcomes. Additionally, outtakes from the interviews abet in defining two categories of social youth climate actors: internal and external youth activists. Both officially designated (internal) stakeholders and non-official influencer (external) activists are key to the success of the youth climate movement, although their presence and impact are witnessed in different ways. Primarily, this thesis builds on previous literature and current interviews surrounding the UNFCCC process and its constituencies to determine what role in the fight for enhanced global climate governance that youth currently fill and have the opportunity to fill if leaders in YOUNGO and the UNFCCC take the recommended actions.

## **CHAPTER 2: Literature Review**

### **Defining Stakeholders in the Multilateral Organization Context**

Existing literature suggests that multilateral organizations, such as the UN, face a democracy deficit given the limited public participation in the decision-making processes.<sup>19</sup> Stakeholder groups composed of non-state actors serve as an attempted remedy that provides

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<sup>17</sup> Dodds, (2019).

<sup>18</sup> Thew, et al., (2021).

<sup>19</sup> Dodds, (2019). & Kuyper, et al., (2018).

greater legitimacy to the international bodies by creating a more representative democracy format. According to a leading scholar on stakeholder democracy, Felix Dodds, non-state stakeholders are defined as individuals or representatives of a group at large who possess interest in a specific decision, including persons who will be affected by said decision or may influence it.<sup>20</sup> Stakeholders in the UNFCCC process have an investment in the future of international efforts to mitigate climate change. Agenda 21 is a lasting outcome of the 1992 Rio Earth Summit and outlines the role that stakeholders ought to play in the United Nations context.<sup>21</sup>

Agenda 21 defines original stakeholder groups' basis, rights, stratification, purpose, and means of implementation. Delegates believed that the involvement of social groups was essential to ensuring effective implementation of conference policy outcomes determined by international governments in their home states. The normative assumption behind the effectiveness and necessity of democratic stakeholders contends that "the actors affected by particular political decisions should be given the opportunity to meaningfully participate and make their voices heard in the making of such decisions."<sup>22</sup> The nine civil society constituencies which Agenda 21 outlines include Youth and Children; Women and Gender; Indigenous People; Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs); Local Authorities; Trade Unions and Workers; Business and Industry Groups; Scientific and Technological Community; and Farmers. This thesis focuses on the function of youth acting as stakeholders to improve democracy in the UNFCCC as an international organization. The adverse effects of climate change will be felt more drastically in the future if the world continues to warm. These adverse impacts will be a challenge that current youth will bear even more intensely when they reach adulthood. As a

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<sup>20</sup> Dodds, (2019).

<sup>21</sup> United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, (1992), Agenda 21

<sup>22</sup> Hanegraaff, & Poletti, (2018).

result, young people certainly have a stake in ensuring that global climate governance is happening effectively now.

The emergence of stakeholder democracy within the context of the United Nations is largely a result of a few key players in the field, Maurice Strong and Chip Linder. Maurice Strong was the Secretary-General for the Rio Earth Summit in 1992. Under his leadership, stakeholder groups were deemed fundamental to the success of multilateral agreements. Strong was a proponent of Agenda 21 which laid the groundwork for the future influence with interest groups went on to gain. Strong partnered with Chip Linder, the Executive Director of the Centre for Our Common Future, to push for broader involvement of constituencies.

The UN set up the Commission on Environment and Development in 1983 which published its report Our Common Future in 1987 to the UN General Assembly. Once the Commission was finished, Gro Harlem Brundtland, the head chair and Prime Minister of Norway at the time, helped fund the setting up of the Centre for Our Common Future. The Centre's initial aim was the promotion of the report Our Common Future. However, this 1983 Commission took a new approach to disseminating UN report by involving interest groups. Dodds contends that this body took on the "first serious and sustained attempt to engage stakeholders in the work of a UN Commission".<sup>23</sup> The team set out to host 15 public hearings around the world to gather input on common sustainability practices. Chip Linder, as the Director for the Centre ten years down the road, continued the commitment to increasing the role of stakeholders. At the time, these groups were not granted any responsibility to attend hearings and share demands. All stakeholders were grouped together under the broad category of NGO. This inspired the Centre for Our Common Future in the runup to the 1992 Rio Earth Summit to

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<sup>23</sup> Dodds, (2019)



promote the engagement of stakeholders. The UN Secretariat for the Summit reached out to engage with interest groups becoming more of an advocate for their inclusion.<sup>24</sup>

Existing literature on democratic stakeholder theory holds that including diverse constituencies promotes more informed agreements by participating party governments as well as a higher likelihood that sustainable policy is implemented on the ground by these groups. In the context of youth participation within the UNFCCC, this means that youth are more willing to stay involved in the future negotiations if they feel that their ideas are listened to and acted upon. Furthermore, the democratic stakeholder theory implies that youth are able to have their voices heard in a representative way despite the fact that lead negotiators are not popularly elected.

Groups are more willing to partner with each other and national or local governments outside of the negotiations space if they are initially included in the decision-making process. These partnerships increase the likelihood that established commitments included in the agreements are achieved through societal cooperation. Beneath the argument that stakeholders fill a democratic deficit lies a community theory of change. That is, if stakeholders, like youth, are involved in initial advising stages of agreements, then “they are more likely to want to help either individually or collectively in order to implement those decisions.”<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, the categories of stakeholders forming coalitions can motivate domestic governments to act on international agreements when they may have previously been hesitant to their constituencies’ perception of such action. The power in the representation of people is demonstrated in their ability to alter multilateral decisions and orchestrate a favorable agenda on behalf of their new-found multi-stakeholder partnerships.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Dodds, F., (2019).

<sup>25</sup> Hornik, Cutts, & Greenlee, (2016).

<sup>26</sup> Dodds, F., (2019).

One counter argument contends that the involvement of stakeholder groups dilutes the policy process. These interest groups are sometimes viewed as selfish or influenced by a larger power.<sup>27</sup> In reality, constituencies provide greater accountability in multilateral organizations, like the UN, by increasing ambitions and representing subsets of domestic populations. In a report to the UNFCCC that emphasized the importance of interest groups, the International Chamber of Commerce Commission on Environment and Energy found that the involvement of stakeholders would be “critical to achieving current levels of ambition as well as future objectives for mitigation, adaptation, investment and finance.”<sup>28</sup> As stakeholder democracy theories have gained traction in international organizations, the number of stakeholder groups has also increased. The 2030 UN Agenda for Sustainable Development, which was written in 2015, includes more groups beyond the original nine outlined in 1992, such as the education community, elderly people, and people with disabilities.<sup>29</sup>

Using the case study of the UNFCCC to demonstrate the power behind democratic stakeholder theories, it can be determined that groups have had influence since the first COP took place in 1995. Different constituencies have had varied levels of impact over the years, however, the overall membership has grown. 163 accredited NGOs and 14 intergovernmental organizations were registered in 1995. As of 2017, cumulative admissions to COPs had risen to 2,133 NGOs and 126 intergovernmental organizations.<sup>30</sup> This literature review will focus specifically on the increased involvement of Youth within the UNFCCC. Before addressing this specific space, however, a broader context of youth activism in global issue settings is beneficial. The following section outlines prominent theories of the impact of social youth movements.

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<sup>27</sup> Matten, D., (2005).

<sup>28</sup> ICC Commission on Environment and Energy, (2018).

<sup>29</sup> UNFCCC. (n.d). Non-Party Stakeholders Statistics.

<sup>30</sup> UNFCCC. (n.d). Non-Party Stakeholders Statistics.

## Youth as Activists in the International Sphere

A broad body of literature exists regarding youth activism and political involvement around the world. Most often, existing scholarship covers how youth activism manifests, what challenges youth face, and how their impact is perceived by themselves and outsiders. This review will give a brief look into each of these categories with the acknowledgment that academics have long documented youth participation in social movements that is far more extensive than outlined here.

Earl, et al. describe the manifestation of youth activism through varied movements in their paper in the sociology field.<sup>31</sup> Movements covered include campus activism harbored at universities, youth and social movement organizations, fan activism as a result of online popular culture, political socialization of adolescents, and intersectional activism through avenues like youth and gender. They argue the importance of not distinguishing youth activism completely from adult activism as is commonly done in social movement studies. Rather, they suggest academia ought to recognize their differences which cause adults to not take youth seriously. Still, they must also acknowledge the similarities between adult and youth activism that will create legitimacy for their cause. Finding the commonality, helps to eliminate the barriers youth face in the activism space.

A multitude of studies assert that the new age of social media and the internet has been fundamental in the mobilization of modern youth activists.<sup>32</sup> The viral nature of social media content has increased the spread of calls for action and has connected vocal youth from every corner of the globe. Furthermore, some scholars argue that when used correctly, digital media

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<sup>31</sup> Earl, et al., (2017).

<sup>32</sup> O'brien, (2018); Earl & Elliot, (2018); Ludovic & Soler Martí, (2021).

can be an effective tool to recruit youth participation by varied social movement organizations.<sup>33</sup> However, other scholars object to the idea of a digital generation of activists because it ignores the fact that a large gap in access to technologies exists, especially in lesser developed countries.<sup>34</sup> Besides access to technology in the global south, young people face a variety of challenges in the social activism sphere.

For example, scholars have identified economic, political, and cultural challenges as some of the largest obstacles faced by youth advocating for change in the international domain.<sup>35</sup> As previously mentioned, youth battle with a lack of funding and economic resources in their social activism which results from their status as students and children without a consistent income. Oftentimes youth social movements are supported by donors, but this comes with its own challenges. Youth must be able to balance their own agenda without feeling obligated to promote benefactors' ideas or become simply a mouthpiece. Youth's political participation is limited in that they are not customarily included in voting bodies who determine policy items related to a social movement. They also do not possess the power to vote for representatives who are ultimately expected to create policy based on constituent demands. Finally, cultural issues are of particular interest when speaking to the range of youth activists from diverse nations. Global gender norms can limit the participation of young female activists who are viewed to have a more domestic role. Furthermore, ageism poses a threat to the integrity of youth activism by insinuating that youth ought not to hold a place at the bargaining table and if they do, they should follow the lead of older, experienced officials.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Elliot & Earl, (2018).

<sup>34</sup> Richter & Manevski, (2019).

<sup>35</sup> Richter & Manevski, (2019).

<sup>36</sup> Richter & Manevski, (2019).

Many scholars who focus on youth activism place great emphasis on the concept of agency in personal impact.<sup>37</sup> Maintaining a framework of agency refutes the idea that adults are a necessary part of the facilitation and success of activism movements. Scholars define agency in the context of youth movements as the perceived capacity or capability to exert power. The impact that a youth might believe they possess can be driven from their personal understanding of their own power and ability to use that power to make a change. The extent to which youth believe in their own agency also impacts to what degree their goals are realized. Greater perceived agency leads to greater actual agency and therefore more autonomous success.

Thew's ethnographic research finds that "young people's selection of participatory strategies and power sources is shaped by the level of agency which they perceive to be available to them."<sup>38</sup> Essentially, when youth perceive their own agency to be high, then they are able to offer constructive policy suggestions which result in recognition and further increases in agency. Thew conducted this study through the direct observation of YOUNGO participants during an Intersessional meeting of the UNFCCC Subsidiary Bodies and interviews in 2014. Interviews conducted for the purpose of this thesis reflect a similar conception of power and agency. Youth who believed that they possessed the capacity to negotiate in an informed way at COPs felt far more prepared than those who felt they lacked the resources to engage directly with party delegates.<sup>39</sup> Over the course of the UNFCCC's existence, a greater emphasis has continuously been placed on ensuring young stakeholders hold agency and the ability to impact the climate conference negotiation space. The expanding role that youth have begun to play is outlined hereafter.

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<sup>37</sup> Earl, et al., (2017); Thew, (2018).

<sup>38</sup> Thew, (2018). p. 1

<sup>39</sup>YOUNGO Interview Participant. (Conducted January 2021 to February 2021).

## History of UN Stakeholders and the Evolving Role of Youth

Stakeholders retain decided benefits as outlined in Agenda 21 at respective UN conferences. At UNFCCC COPs, constituencies have the opportunity to provide input through formal intervention speeches on the plenary floor. Through access to the plenary floor and their granted office space at COP venues, groups gain entry to delegates through which they can make recommendations on joint statements and agreement texts. Stakeholders are also afforded a sense of transparency through information shared in daily briefings. Finally, constituencies are granted access to government officials in bilateral meetings and admission to meetings with limited capacities.<sup>40</sup>

The UNFCCC does not have formal documentation on the required size or composition of party delegations, including stakeholders. However, they do have quotas that must be met. Certain groups may only have a few representatives while others have thousands, demonstrating the potential for a significant gap based on resources and negotiating power. Additionally, depending on the interests of a country, delegations may include more representation from specific sectors or interest groups. For example, in Canada a large group of youth is usually assembled. while in countries like Brazil, more members from the business side of climate policy organize themselves to attend.<sup>41</sup> Power imbalances resulting from the undefined rules continue to impact the decision-making process at UNFCCC events, especially for constituencies like youth who face an economic resource barrier. Stakeholder groups typically apply for accreditation and the UNFCCC determines how many badges it will grant based on multiple factors such as the size of the conference venue as well as ensuring a mixture of representatives from the Global North and Global South.

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<sup>40</sup> Dodds, (2019).

<sup>41</sup> Kuyper, (2018).

At COPs, stakeholder groups play both direct and indirect roles in their bargaining methods. For example, designated interventions on the floor of plenary sessions are direct inside channels, while an organized protest near the COP venue is an indirect outside channel. The direct and indirect roles which Youth implement as stakeholders will be discussed in Chapters 3 and 4 in greater detail. Chapter 25 of Agenda 21 pertains specifically to Youth and Children who were deemed critical to the long-term success of the conference objectives:

“It is imperative that youth from all parts of the world participate actively in all relevant levels of decision-making processes because it affects their lives today and has implications for their futures. In addition to their intellectual contribution and their ability to mobilize support, they bring unique perspectives that need to be taken into account.”<sup>42</sup>

Youth are defined by the UN General Assembly as persons between the ages of 15-24 years old and children are persons 0-18 years old, although anyone under the age of 30 may be a participating member in YOUNGO. Their designation in 1992 was the foundational basis that has been built upon in the years and conferences to follow.<sup>43</sup>

Despite their designation in Agenda 21 as stakeholders, Youth were not officially granted constituency status in the climate governance sphere until 2009, about seventeen years after the Rio Earth Summit.<sup>44</sup> The timeline resulted in a slow grind, as with many multilateral processes, to the official recognition of youth in the climate negotiation space. At COP5 in Bonn, which took place in 1999, youth played a more tangential duty through a parallel forum to the conference. The meetings were held in tandem to COP5 but were not directly intertwined.

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<sup>42</sup> United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, (1992), Agenda 21, p. 275

<sup>43</sup> See timeline of youth’s increasing influence in Appendix B

<sup>44</sup> Thew, et al., 2021

However, youth were able to lobby country officials, making Bonn the first true instance of substantial participation.<sup>45</sup>

In 2004, at COP10 in Buenos Aires, youth activists organized the first caucus of young people where they drafted a declaration requesting official status as constituents within UNFCCC processes. Their full confirmation was not granted for another seven years; still, progress was made in the interim period. The first International Youth Summit was hosted in Montreal for COP11, which was a separate conference all together solely for Youth and Child participation.<sup>46</sup> Since Montreal, a Conference of Youth has been held prior to every COP around the world. The Joint Framework Initiative on Children, Youth, and Climate Change from the UN Secretariat answered the call sent out at Buenos Aires and designated YOUNGO as the official group label for Youth and Children stakeholders. The full confirmation of YOUNGO was completed in 2011.

The 2015 COP in Paris was different for many reasons, primarily for the significant commitments which countries signed onto in the Paris Climate Agreement, but also for the way it reshaped the role of constituencies. As previously mentioned, Post-Paris, international climate governance relied on a variety of non-state stakeholders rather than the traditional state actors.<sup>47</sup> The UNFCCC leadership became orchestrators and organizers while the substantial, tangible work was transferred to non-state actor initiative. Beyond 2015, youth especially expanded their participation in UNFCCC conferences. At COP22 in Marrakech, YOUNGO was the fourth largest group, representing 5.2% of total non-state actor participants.<sup>48</sup> While their resources were still limited, youth began to show out in droves. Inspired in part by renowned climate

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<sup>45</sup> United Nations Joint Framework Initiative on Children, Youth and Climate Change. (2010).

<sup>46</sup> United Nations Joint Framework Initiative on Children, Youth and Climate Change. (2010).

<sup>47</sup> Thew, (2018).

<sup>48</sup> UNFCCC. (n.d). Non-Party Stakeholders Statistics.



activist Greta Thunberg, youth awareness grew alongside the 2018 genesis of the Fridays for Future school strikes.<sup>49</sup> Thunberg was 15 when she first skipped class to protest outside of the Swedish Parliament.

The most recent COP, which took place in October and November of 2021 in Glasgow, came highly anticipated after the 2020 COP was canceled as a result of the COVID-19 global pandemic. One of the largest greenhouse gas emitters, the United States, had newly elected President Biden who vocalized support for stricter climate change mitigation policies than his predecessor who had pulled the U.S. from the Paris Agreement. Further, from a youth perspective, Greta Thunberg was twice nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize in 2019 and grew virally popular in the media<sup>50</sup>, increasing the attention placed on youth climate activists. Although Chapter 3 discusses COP26 in-depth, it is worth mentioning significant outcomes here which demonstrate the evolving role youth constituents played.

Thousands of youth filled the streets at a youth march outside of the COP venue where Greta Thunberg, now age 18, rallied the crowd to demand more action from national governments. YOUNGO hosted the 16th pre-conference COY summit days prior to COP26. As an outcome, activists presented a Global Youth Statement declaration, signed by over 45,000 youth, to the President of the UN General Assembly and COP President.<sup>51</sup> On the seventh day of COP26 meetings, approximately 100,000 activists<sup>52</sup> marched in the streets of Glasgow, and the main speaker at the event was 24-year-old Vanessa Nakate of Uganda. Here, the distinct impact that external youth actors, like Greta Thunberg and Vanessa Nakate, possess is evident.

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<sup>49</sup> Sabherwal, et al, (2021).

<sup>50</sup> Sabherwal, et al, (2021).

<sup>51</sup> UK COY 16, (2021).

<sup>52</sup> COP26: Thousands march, BBC, (2021).

## External Youth Actors and Interest in Their Movements Online

As of January 1, 2022, the hashtag “#FridaysForFuture” is attached to over 1 million posts on the social media platform Instagram.<sup>53</sup> Fridays For Future is a global climate strike movement organized and initiated by youth. The start of the movement is attributed to then 15-year-old climate activist Greta Thunberg’s original strike from school in 2018 which grew to become an international movement as the idea spread through the created hashtag online. The viral nature of the internet and social media has played a significant role in bolstering the fame and progress of a global climate movement among youth.<sup>54</sup> This anecdote helps to paint a picture of the potential impacts attributed to external online youth activism in contrast to internal youth organizers in the UNFCCC system.

These external youth actors who publicize their movements through hashtags and rallies on social media are crucial to the broader movements success; however, they must be placed in a distinctive context with other youth activists immediately involved in the UNFCCC process. I will define the influencer-type activists whose main avenues to influence international policy are more indirect, such as social media and public speeches, as “external youth.” Conversely, I will label the actors who are attending UNFCCC conferences, active members of YOUNGO, and conducting a more direct influence on international climate texts as “internal youth.” This contrast does not assert that one role or the other is superior, rather it serves to stress the equal yet different value that both internal and external youth provide.

Google search trends also serve as evidence of increased interest in the global youth climate movement that might be directly attributed in part to Greta Thunberg. Using the tool

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<sup>53</sup> Instagram, (2022), #FridaysForFuture.

<sup>54</sup> Sabherwal, A. et al., (2021).

Google Trends, one can see the frequency over time that certain key words and phrases were searched, including peaks and dips in interest. The Google Trends data examined for this thesis pulls directly from youth inspired movements and figures using the key phrase “Fridays for Future.” The data represent search term frequency from the last four years over the date range of January 2018 to January 2021.<sup>55</sup> The variable is normalized so that each point is divided by the total number of searches through the four year time range resulting in a number on a scale of 0 to 100 demonstrating the terms relative popularity across the globe over time. For example, a score of 100 for a term indicates that this is the period of time when “Fridays for Future” was most searched. Conversely, a score of 0 means there were no searches or insufficient data during that time frame. Other scores span between 0 and 100 exhibiting the search term’s relative popularity over four years.<sup>56</sup>

Due to time and resource limitations, a representative and comprehensive dataset was not available for this thesis. Google Trends does not provide complete data for global countries on the chosen search term. There are multiple reasons for the discrepancies, including language barriers and censorship. The trending search phrases are primarily in English despite the variance in languages around the world that might be translated for an online search. Furthermore, some countries use alternative search engines more frequently than Google, and Google is even banned on the internet in certain regions. Access to the internet and technology with search engines is also a barrier that prevents people who may be curious from searching terms. As a result, insufficient data exists globally to conduct a comprehensive analysis. Acknowledging these limitations, *Figure 1* below displays a thought provoking timeline that visualizes Google Trends

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<sup>55</sup> Google Trends. “Fridays For Future”. (2022).

Google Trends. “Greta Thunberg”. (2022).

Google Trends. “School Strike for Climate”. (2022).

<sup>56</sup> Trends Help - Google Support. (2022).

search data for “Fridays for Future” over a four year period. Significant events related to external climate activist Greta Thunberg are overlaid in a timeline on the visual. Spikes in interest perceived on Google around the world in the climate slogan align with certain climate activism events. This relationship is not causal, but it spurs further questions for exploration.

Realistically, does a large presence by youth on social media and in news media inspire enough concern from the public about the climate crisis to alter votes that in turn change policy? For example, are countries whose population displays a greater online interest in climate movement terms more likely to pass ambitious NDCs? Does a significant relationship exist between interest in a social movement like Fridays for Future at one time and the outcomes of a UNFCCC text written during that same time? Future research should be conducted to explore these questions. Chapter 3 includes a deeper look at the differences between internal and external actors that includes the perspectives from youth themselves on the division. Chapter 4 considers these conclusions and recommends ways that internal and external youth actors might work in greater coordination to amplify each others’ efforts.

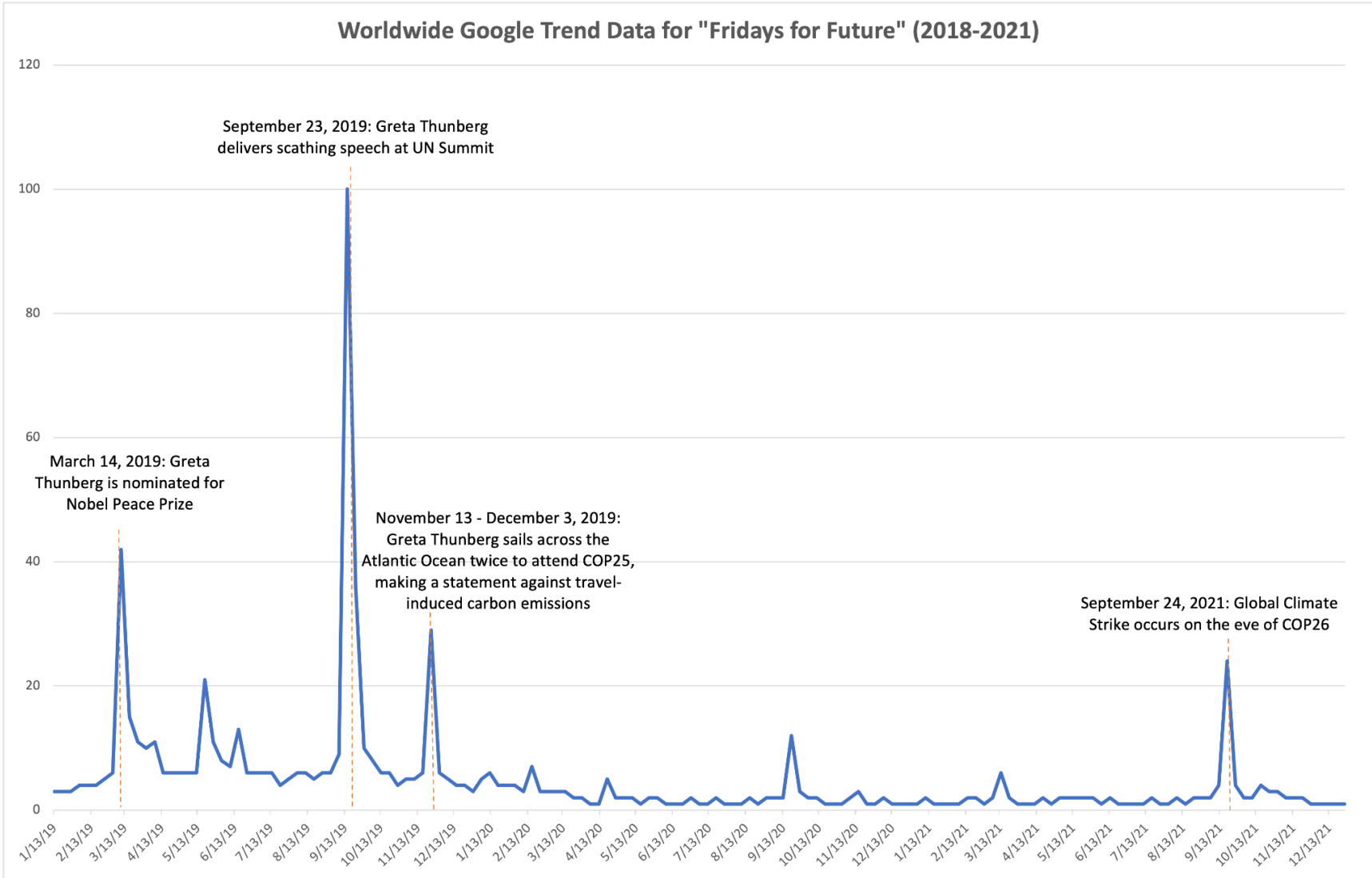


Figure 1: Google Trends Data Visualized Timeline with Significant Events Surrounding Climate Activist Greta Thunberg

# CHAPTER 3: First-Hand Dialogue on Experiences of Youth in the UNFCCC Process

## Introduction

*“Officially, if you’re not a negotiator for one of the countries, it’s very challenging to make any intervention and any meaningful change. And I think that somehow we are shifting our culture to have more youth negotiators, and we have some examples that are very interesting. But there [are] also many challenges related to that, such as tokenism. You just have people there—they’re not trained or they do not have the capacity. Like, we pay for someone to be here and take pictures and to take notes, that’s it.” - Juliana<sup>\*57</sup> (Global South)*

This quotation from a current YOUNGO participant displays that while youth are included more frequently in UNFCCC processes the caveat remains that young people are tokenized and doubted in their capacity to engage meaningfully in global climate governance. Youth still face a multitude of roadblocks and yet have witnessed great success in recognition over the last decade. Through interviews conducted for the purpose of better understanding the first-hand experiences of youth activists, this thesis strives to provide a personal perspective into UNFCCC negotiations from the eyes of a young person. The purpose of this chapter is to use a qualitative data approach to gather an empirical perspective of youth in the climate activism space today, particularly the formal YOUNGO domain.

The next sections will explain methods employed for conducting and coding interviews and their data. Then, the UNFCCC negotiating procedure for stakeholder groups is described in detail with a youth lens. During the analysis portion, the chapter expands on themes and trends discovered throughout interviewee experiences. It identifies core difficulties and recent successes

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<sup>57</sup> \*The names of all interview participants have been changed to protect their privacy.

faced by YOUNGO activists. It must be noted that the data are limited because they are not representative of all youth, but rather are the experiences of several leaders in the youth organization. Finally, this chapter discusses conclusions and recommendations for the future of YOUNGO. These interviews offer important personal narratives as an integral step along the journey to determining the role that youth play as formal stakeholders in the UNFCCC process.

## **Qualitative Methods**

The voices represented in this sample of interviews are composed of young people all within the age range of 21 to 30 years old from around the globe. Participants were included from Ghana, India, Switzerland, Brazil, the United Kingdom, the United States, Lebanon, Peru, and Zimbabwe. Ten former and current YOUNGO participants agreed to participate in interviews for the research purposes of this thesis. The names of all interview participants have been changed to protect their anonymity. The age limit for YOUNGO is 35 years, however few active members stay past the age of 30. The majority of interviewees fell into the later twenties range. All interviews were conducted via Zoom and were recorded as audio files as well as transcribed. The interviews were conducted in English although the majority of interview participants spoke a different language than English as their first language. As a result, some of the quotations have been lightly edited for small grammatical errors, but none of the quotations' meanings were altered. All interviews were conducted with the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill's Office of Human Research Ethics Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval.<sup>58</sup> Each conversation lasted approximately 30 minutes to 1 hour resulting in just over 200 pages of interview transcripts to examine.

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<sup>58</sup> See Appendix C for the sample list of questions asked

ATLAS.ti Web provides a methodical approach to interpreting qualitative data through thematic tagging of keywords and phrases.<sup>59</sup> Using this software, this thesis categorizes specific interactions within the nine interviews to identify recurring concepts. The established tags helped organize the headings and subheadings below and include: “negotiating processes; engagement; organization and governance; ageism; tokenism versus meaningful inputs; capacity building and technicalities; resources; importance of interest groups; increased support; COP26 successes; membership growth; and future of YOUNGO.” In a similar manner, an online algorithm generated a word cloud using all the interview data, visualizing the importance of the most commonly used words during the interview process.

## **UNFCCC Negotiations Process Overview**

Each year parties from around the world come together in June and then again in November to flesh out details and work streams with the ultimate goal of coming together to propose, negotiate, and eventually adopt a text with climate agreements in the form of an international treaty. The first June meeting takes place in Bonn, Germany and the second, the formal COP, is designated to another city around the world. According to YOUNGO participants, the Bonn subsidiary meetings prior to the large COP are the true beginning to the lobbying and negotiating process. It is crucial that stakeholders attend these pre-plenary sessions in order to build rapport with negotiators and plant seeds of their desired outcomes for the larger November or December conference.

*“I think, of course, knowing people is something really, really important. For example, if there is a negotiator that I know very well and I just asked him ‘you have to support us and your group has to support me,’ it would be embarrassing for him to say no. [...] It’s very helpful that they already know that I am a credible person.” - Lily\* (Global North)*

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<sup>59</sup> See Appendix D for a word cloud that visualizes the 50 words used most frequently in the interview transcripts



The parties that attend COPs, who make up the UNFCCC deciding body and sign on to the final treaty, bring national delegations filled with formal negotiators, stakeholder groups, government officials, and observers. To attend, participants must be awarded an entry badge which can come from a variety of sources. Some badges are awarded through a delegation and others come from national parties. YOUNGO members also described fundraising on their own behalf for a badge, which will be discussed in the “Roadblocks” section below.<sup>60</sup> Throughout the year, other meetings are held virtually and in-person to build on climate agreements and prepare for the next COP. Negotiations are held in English with the option of simultaneous interpretation into any of the six official working languages of the UN.

*“National Delegates discuss a particular document of interest, discuss the past actions on the topic and then amend—formulate the subsequent actions on the document to take according to national interests. If the consensus is achieved, it translates into a binding policy for all nations to follow.” - Vijay (Global South)*

*“It can take forever because you can honestly debate on every single word, because each word has its own implication, so ‘shall’ can have a different implication than ‘will’ or ‘should.’” - Asha (Global South)*

All decisions on the final policy document are made based on consensus amongst the parties. If one party’s negotiators disagree with the text, it will not be adopted as written. During the conferences a variety of meetings are held to make text decisions, called informals. Each informal is designated with a varying level of clearance that determines who is allowed to attend. If these meetings are open to stakeholders, youth may have the opportunity to voice demands; however, many of the true negotiating happens outside of these formal meeting walls.

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<sup>60</sup> YOUNGO Interview Participant. (Conducted January 2021 to February 2021).

## The Room Where It Happens: Cafés and Corridors

Within plenary meetings, NGO and IGO delegations have designated times where they may make intersession interventions. An intervention must be approved by the chairperson and consists of a small speech given to the participating parties and subsidiary bodies outlining demands or urgency of action. In this capacity, stakeholders are able to reach multiple parties in one speech, but according to participant interviews, the majority of progress occurs outside of these formal channels.<sup>61</sup> YOUNGO, and other observation and stakeholder groups, have the ability to request bilateral meetings either directly with a national party's delegates or with another constituency's leadership. For example, YOUNGO might hold a private meeting with Austria's negotiators or with the Farmers and Agricultural NGO group if both camps agree to the session.

Realistically, the most impactful negotiating occurs neither at informals nor bilateral meetings, but in external one-on-one conversations. These quiet negotiations take the form of individual dialogues held at a café table near the COP conference space or in the corridors directly outside the meeting room doors. Interview participants shared experiences where they were able to change a key passage, phrase, or even singular word in a working document through such an interaction.<sup>62</sup>

*“The official way to do this lobbying—besides from being a negotiator that’s the first thing—would be to engage with them during the sessions and in the corridors like you said. In the corridors, it’s something of very, very short time and being in the right place at the right moment and getting the person and saying ‘hey, let’s have a coffee or let’s have a conversation about xyz.’” - Juliana (Global South)*

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<sup>61</sup> Herbert, J. & Fleck, J, Hosts, (2021).

<sup>62</sup> YOUNGO Interview Participant. (Conducted January 2021 to February 2021).

*“So a lot of work happens behind the scenes: lobbying with them—maybe just finding them outside, like catching them before they are going in and coming out of certain meetings, sit with them during lunch if they're sitting at a table, anything—just go ask if you can sit with them and discuss something. - Asha (Global South)*

A mutual trust is built between negotiators and observers who are trusted and known for speaking in the COP arena. Conversations over a cup of coffee and a croissant are far more productive than the exchange of technical language in a large conference room. When a relationship develops, an individual party delegate is far more likely to connect with a young person, listen to their agenda, and potentially broker their text requests.

### **Roadblocks for YOUNGO**

Youth in YOUNGO face tacit barriers like resource shortages and ageist prejudice; however, they also express frustration with internal organization roadblocks, tokenism, and capacity training. Young people are not the only stakeholder group that deals with the difficulties of attempting to make a meaningful impact through side conversations or a two minute meeting intervention. Similar difficulties are common throughout constituencies, but this chapter focuses on how these struggles have been distinctly felt by former and current YOUNGO members. A combination of quotations and anecdotes accompanied by analysis shed a personal light on the obstacles they must overcome in the UNFCCC space.

### Engagement

YOUNGO membership is what an individual chooses to make of it. Highly motivated activists can be involved in leadership positions, attend conferences around the world, and take initiative to lead change from within the organization. Conversely, members may decide to join the mailing list and follow social media accounts when they apply for membership without truly ever participating. Membership is attained through a form found online and the only requirement

is that applicants are aged 0-35 years old. Given this accessible but relaxed structure, many youth expressed that maintaining meaningful and broad membership engagement is difficult.

*“One of the biggest challenges in YOUNGO is that, even if it has over 5,000 members, there's a very small number of people who are actually engaged in any activity. People are just floating in the mailing list or the broad network. How can we say that we represent them if they do not know what's happening? That's one thing that needs to change.” - Juliana (Global South)*

*“I think 56% of people around the world would actually be classified as children/youth in our definition of below the age of 35, so we cannot ask 4 billion people [their opinion], right?” - Emilia (Global North)*

*“I think the fact that it is a volunteer network, rather than an organization, is good because it gives you flexibility, but what's missing [...] is to get the members which are inactive, to be more active and involved.” -Mahmoud (Global South)*

One goal of YOUNGO is to represent young people generally in the fight against climate change, so one must wonder how successfully they are able to do so without a greater share of engaged members from around the globe. With a conglomerate the size of YOUNGO, boasting over 10,000 registered members and more than 1,000 affiliated organizations, it is understandably difficult to capture such a vast audience. Further, members come from every corner of the globe and range between 0-35 years of age. The scope of variety in YOUNGO's audience should not be underestimated. Still, the climate crisis affects all citizens around the globe and requires a breadth of engagement unlike any other global challenge facing the world today.

#### Internal Organization and Governance

Most youth are actively involved in YOUNGO for less than a decade before they age out of the constituency and continue their activism in another space. The transient nature of youth

means there is frequent turnover in leadership annually within the organization. As a result, multiple current and previous members expressed the essential component of structure that is easily transferred to new leaders. Whether it is specific mandates which determine duties of working groups and focal points or notes on how meetings are run on a daily basis, detailed records are essential to a more efficient network of activists.<sup>63</sup>

*“After that I decided that we should step up, and we should start writing down our rules, so people really knew what was happening, what is our decision making process, what's our consultation process, how do you create a working group and how do you keep it, how do you recognize people to be part of certain groups or not, so I started writing these down. [...] YOUNGO urgently needs to have a government structure. [...] We need to have mandates, so responsibilities are assigned to specific people, because if we don't assign it then it's everyone's and no one's responsibility and it doesn't move forward.”*  
-Juliana (Global South)

In the coming years, YOUNGO participants suggested that leaders within the organization keep strong internal organization at the core of their work to ensure greater efficacy of all initiatives that span multiple years. Furthermore, some youth mentioned that a clear hierarchy of responsibilities help avoid ego battles and provide transparency.<sup>64</sup> Some participants expressed frustrations as well with who was included in leadership positions, stating that it was often the case that traditional power structures permeated within YOUNGO as they do in much of the global climate governance regime.

*“You can see some of those politics playing out in YOUNGO between, you know, who has a voice within the constituency, whether that's folks who are, let's say, academics from the global north. And like myself, even when I would engage with YOUNGO, I would find that I didn't necessarily want a lot of authority, but because of my credentials, I was sort of deferred to in some ways as an academic with a Ph.D. from the global north. [...] I*

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<sup>63</sup> YOUNGO Interview Participant. (Conducted January 2021 to February 2021).

<sup>64</sup> YOUNGO Interview Participant. (Conducted January 2021 to February 2021).

*think one of the major roadblocks in participation in climate negotiations in general is just, you know, participation of most affected youth.” -Frederick (Global North)*

Chapter 4 discusses the importance of supporting those youth most affected yet most marginalized like participants from the global south and indigenous communities in the context of future research. One problem that often occurs when discussing marginalized groups that interview participants mentioned frequently is tokenism.

### Tokenism and Providing Meaningful Input

Rosabeth Moss Kanter popularized the formal term tokenism in her research on token women in the workplace, where she defines the term as a merely symbolic effort to mend representation inequities.<sup>65</sup> Interviewees described similar visually symbolic practices, extending Kanter’s theory to youth in the UNFCCC process.<sup>66</sup> YOUNGO members described negotiating actors using youth as a photo opportunity, granting them a short inspirational speech that never resulted in tangible actions.

*“Like, it’s so beautiful, we should include youth, and shake hands, and put them on a podium and give them a microphone and then we can clap and it’s going to be so nice. [...] You don’t have the agency to change how things are written down. It’s just inspirational. I think it’s more of this reference—‘Oh the future is you and you’re going to have to solve the problems and the next generation is going to save us’—That’s just outsourcing responsibility for all the bullshit that has been happening.” - Juliana (Global South)*

In the instance of tokenism, the obligation to fix the system falls outside of youth purview and onto the actors perpetrating the symbolic responses. National party delegations ought to be conscious of their engagement with youth to ensure intentionality rather than simply creating the

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<sup>65</sup>Kanter, R. M., (1977).

<sup>66</sup> YOUNGO Interview Participant., (Conducted January 2021 to February 2021).

image that young people are fairly included. Other interview participants shared similar sentiments expressing that youth often felt their presence was more about visual aesthetics than impactful conversations. Indigenous youth activists have felt their presence tokenized in two-fold manner, both by presenting themselves as a BIPOC and a young person.<sup>67</sup> The key is to give underrepresented groups space in the conversation without focusing solely on their token features but rather on what other insights they bring to the table.

### Ageism

When discussing barriers that youth face in the UNFCCC arena, prejudice as a result of age is an intrinsic and glaring obstacle. YOUNGO participants described a common perception that youth are viewed as lacking legitimate knowledge, authority, and autonomy in the negotiation space.<sup>68</sup> Unfortunately, these labels are a result of bias from actors with more traditional views that greater experience is synonymous with greater legitimacy.

*“We meet a lot of prejudices as young people—young people are not experienced, they do not know what they’re doing, they are naive, they are—whatever—dreamers and so on. This is all there, which can be extremely frustrating.” - Emilia (Global North)*

*“In general I think I tend to agree with many countries [...] who have been supporting us for a very long time and then there are countries I certainly don’t agree with, like the Arab group and also China, [...] who literally used the word ‘cute’ to describe me in a negotiation.” - Lily (Global North)*

During COP26 Chinese negotiators referred to a young female, age 21, with a passion to change the slow global response to climate change as “cute,” exhibiting an air of superiority and belittlement. According to present and previous YOUNGO members, references to naivety about

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<sup>67</sup> Shapiro, A., Host, (2021).

<sup>68</sup> YOUNGO Interview Participant., (Conducted January 2021 to February 2021).

the reality of the global climate governance system are frequent. Additionally, this anecdote displays sexist undertones that diminish a grown woman's invaluable insight. Still, others felt that youth are generally more seen and heard today than in the past.<sup>69</sup>

*“I mean before it was more or less ‘young people are not experts or they do not have the technical knowledge and they don't understand, and their inputs are not the same as an expert on the topic’ or something like that. I think that is changing, gradually.” - Isaac (Global South)*

Although COPs include participation from nationalities all around the globe with increasingly progressive stances, interviewees described a predominately traditional space of white, heteronormative, older men in positions of power.<sup>70</sup>

*“There [are] always biases, and this is still a very old white man cis heterosexual male occupied space. Being young by itself brings this tool that you have to overcome.” - Juliana (Global South)*

Emilia (Global North) explained that these ageist biases present a barrier to consequential youth participation, but they may also be leveraged to young people's advantage. Naiveté is the type of relentless optimism and ambition that a sufficient response to the climate crisis will require. Young people offer a curiosity to discover what is unknown rather than defending the familiar norms which have created a broken system. Inexperience creates a “willingness to embrace the unknown and the yet to be discovered as opportunity as opposed to risk.”<sup>71</sup> While ageism is a constant affront to YOUNGO's participation, others' biases can be used to pursue seemingly unattainable solutions.

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<sup>69</sup> YOUNGO Interview Participant., (Conducted January 2021 to February 2021).

<sup>70</sup> YOUNGO Interview Participant., (Conducted January 2021 to February 2021).

<sup>71</sup> Myatt, M. (2014).



## Capacity Building and Technicalities

In almost all nine interviews and previous literature read on struggles and successes which youth face in the global climate governance space in preparation for writing this chapter, the word “capacity” was highlighted. In fact, in an analysis conducted to determine trends throughout the conversations, “capacity” was one of the top 50 words that appeared most frequently.

*“I think it’s all about meaningful youth engagement, because if you’re talking about meaningful engagement, it is not only about supporting young people to attend conferences like the Conference of Parties, but it’s also making sure that they have clear action points that they need to achieve that they need to meet. It’s also making sure that their capacity to understand the language that is being spoken within the UNFCCC circles. Not only capacity to understand, but also capacity to mix it in interventions and lead on certain negotiated topics. This is what will make the constituency better.” - Sarah (Global South)*

*“I think it’s absolutely crucial to strengthen YOUNGO as a constituency and young people in general, with the capacity, the tools and the knowledge and access to these meetings. [...] Very often we see that young people are taken into delegations and either they are there for the side events and the photo opportunities or they are there to handle the social media of a delegation, or they’re there [making] the coffee and printing documents and taking notes. Very, very, very, very, very few have the right to actually negotiate and are well trained, well resourced.” - Emilia (Global North)*

Capacity in the context of roadblocks fell into two categories: the first being a broader term referring to youth’s preparedness to attend COPs with an understanding of the climate negotiations system, and the second referring to technicalities of specific climate issues. An example of the first form of capacity building would refer to leadership and public speaking training that could benefit YOUNGO members.<sup>72</sup> In the second technicalities camp, an example would be that youth must learn the terms used when referring to Article 6 of the Paris Agreement

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<sup>72</sup> YOUNGO Interview Participant., (Conducted January 2021 to February 2021).

pertaining to carbon markets which are not written in layman's language.<sup>73</sup> Below, Mahmoud describes his first experience at a COP before he received any formal training in the YOUNGO space. Similarly, Juliana expresses that the technical details are critical if youth want to make any impact on negotiators in corridors and café conversations.

*“It was overwhelming at some points. [...] It was all like Chinese for me. I couldn't understand what was happening because the language is very technical and it was normal because if you don't follow at least 150 years of negotiations, then you don't really understand what people are talking about it.” - Mahmoud (Global South)*

*“It's advocacy strategies. You have to have a very specific ask. [...] It's not just ‘Oh, we need to be more climate ambitious’— if you go to a climate negotiator and say that, it's going to be a waste of time. It's very tactical. People have to understand the technicalities, the language, and the subtleties and what is the history of the whole negotiation and what is the specific topic that you want to talk about.” - Juliana (Global South)*

## Resources

Resources were the final recurring roadblock demonstrated throughout the interview process. Both capital and human resources were an obstacle that youth face in the UNFCCC sphere. It is common that young people are either full or part-time students or working at an entry level position with a limited salary. These characteristics both hinder their financial contributions and require a great deal of time outside of volunteer work conducted in YOUNGO. Young people often require sponsorship to cover travel, lodging, and badge fees for COPs or other subsidiary meetings. Interview contributors expressed how the lack of resources restricts their full participation in climate negotiations.

*“I think what probably is the challenge is the amount of resources that people are willing to commit to young people, compared to other stakeholders is rather the question. So they*

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<sup>73</sup> United Nations Paris Agreement, (2015).

*acknowledge that they need to engage with young people and young people are relevant and important, and all of that, but they are not matching that with [an] equal amount of investment to prove what they are saying. [...] Outside verbally saying it, it is not backed by resources to really prove the commitment that these stakeholders have toward young people.” - Isaac (Global South)*

*“To participate in negotiations you have to be supported with funds but also if you don't, you have to use your own money. Negotiations are truly expensive. This COP26 I did it with my own money. [...] It was a huge impact, but also it was an opportunity to be more connected.” - Diane (Global South)*

Multiple current YOUNGO members told stories of fundraising money for their most recent COP experience. Their dedication to purchase flights, train tickets, housing, food, appropriate professional dress, among other miscellaneous expenses demonstrates the importance that the climate issue holds for them. Furthermore, one activist, Frederick, shared that travel visas to attend COPs were difficult to secure without the knowledge and contacts necessary. Frederick also shared that during the latest COP26, vaccine cards were an issue as well given the global disparities in vaccine availability. Certain youth from the Global South were some of the last to receive a verified vaccine which was strongly recommended for attendance.

The lack of financial resources and accessibility barriers are not the only or even most devastating resource roadblock for youth. Throughout the entire rest of the year, youth must balance the resource of time with competing calls for attention from jobs, school, family, and the desire to enjoy their remnants of childhood with the obligation to take up action for the climate crisis.

*“On the other hand it's all a question of capacity. We are doing all of this next to our work, next to our studies, next to our family commitments. One has to ask themselves, is it doable? And, is it also fair and just and to ask volunteers to commit to an almost 100% job to run such a network?” - Emilia (Global North)*

Youth expressed a desire for national parties, climate organizations, and other stakeholder groups to commit greater human and capital resources to supporting youth throughout the year to make full youth participation more feasible. Of course, youth cited that it is crucial these resources come without qualifications requiring that youth take certain issue positions. The contradiction between youth desiring independence without being independently funded is another layer to the resources challenge. For all the difficulties YOUNGO members face, there are also great achievements in the UNFCCC arena.

## **Milestones for YOUNGO**

Recounting successes that YOUNGO and young activists have had within the UNFCCC system helps answer what role youth play as official stakeholders in the UN global climate governance structure. The first positive outcome of YOUNGO's involvement at conferences is a greater recognition of the importance of constituencies, particularly youth interest groups. Increased support from multiple parties in the UNFCCC framework is a tangential success to growing recognition. Furthermore, membership growth is evidence of YOUNGO's prominence as a youth climate organization. Higher membership implies a larger audience of the next global generation that is inspired today to solve the problems of their future. Finally, the most recent COP26 in Glasgow resulted in two tangible milestones for YOUNGO. Multiple interviewees underscored the youth constituency's acquisition of their first seat on an advisory board as well as the publication of a global youth statement on climate as breakthroughs. The section on these milestones elaborates on the significance of the advisory board set as well as the youth statement. Quantifying stakeholder groups' impact is not an easy task since they are mostly granted soft powers, but this section provides a personal reflection from youth on the ground at UNFCCC negotiations of their perceived influence.

## Recognition of Importance of Interest Groups

Admitted stakeholder constituencies have grown significantly since the first 1995 COP1 in Berlin where 163 NGOs were admitted. COP26 boasted its greatest number of observer organizations with 514 admitted NGOs. Of the 514 organizations, YOUNGO accounted for 128 or 4.4%.<sup>74</sup> Youth categorized the increased involvement of observer groups as a success of the UNFCCC process and YOUNGO's efforts. Making a change begins with access to the spaces where essential texts are drafted and signed into law. Stakeholder groups first and foremost must be recognized for the benefit that they bring and be included in the process before subsequent milestones are achieved.

*"I think, absolutely, observers should be included, and if they weren't there, ambition will probably be lower because, at least, you have the social pressure of people being there on the ground." - Juliana (Global South)*

Youth add value in their ability to hold national leaders accountable for their delegations commitments to mitigating climate change. Dodds' theory on the democracy deficit that is implicit within the global climate governance structure is fundamental to supporting Juliana and other interviewees' sentiments. Dodds claims that since negotiators are not directly elected by the people of a nation, they must be amenable in a different context. This democratic deficiency is the gap that stakeholder constituencies can help fill.<sup>75</sup> Youth conveyed that they felt the importance of stakeholders was being recognized to a greater extent than ever before.

Multiple young people referenced the rise of Greta Thunberg, a prominent 19-year-old Swedish activist who rose to fame at COP24 in 2018, as a paradigm shift in the way climate negotiators viewed youth. Increased public recognition translated into increased party

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<sup>74</sup> UNFCCC. (n.d). Non-Party Stakeholders Statistics.

<sup>75</sup> Dodds, (2019).

recognition.<sup>76</sup> The support following the recognition has been fundamental in YOUNGO's next steps as an organization.

Support from UN Secretariat, Parties, and Constituencies

Various youth echoed that they had experienced greater support of some scope from either the UNFCCC leadership, party participants, or other constituencies.<sup>77</sup> Support from the Secretariat came in the form of accepting and encouraging a Global Youth Statement, which will be discussed below, from young people at the start of the conference in a somewhat symbolic display of cooperation. On the side of parties, youth expressed that they have felt better connected with negotiators from previous COPs and other meetings throughout the year making them more inclined to listen to their requests during interventions or informal chats. Youth also described other constituencies' willingness to meet bilaterally with YOUNGO members and aid in their push for certain textual edits. Multiple youth specifically cited the Women and Gender (WGC) and Indigenous Peoples Organizations (IPO) Constituencies as strong partners.<sup>78</sup>

*“The Secretariat also has [been] increasing support for us, and although the Secretariat should be neutral, there are actually areas that they can push forward themselves. There are things that they don't need to get agreement [on] from countries all the time, so there are things they can make decisions on by themselves. So I think they've been increasingly supportive. In terms of parties, I think they also start to understand more of the innovative ideas we bring and also the critical technical inputs and value that we add to their work.” - Lily (Global North)*

*“How do you support the movement as a whole? Throughout the whole year. [...] How do you support them to organize, to plan, to set the agenda, to build their capacity towards these significant milestone events?” - Isaac (Global South)*

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<sup>76</sup> YOUNGO Interview Participant., (Conducted January 2021 to February 2021).

<sup>77</sup> YOUNGO Interview Participant., (Conducted January 2021 to February 2021).

<sup>78</sup> YOUNGO Interview Participant., (Conducted January 2021 to February 2021).

The leadership of COPs can aid in working around the confusing bureaucratic system that the UNFCCC presents in its sensitivities to all parties and need for consensus. Their support for YOUNGO helps activists around all the red tape that can exist for the simplest action. One example of such an action is rearranging the order that stakeholders speak so that YOUNGO representatives have time to make an intervention when they are often last on the list which is alphabetical.

Parties and constituencies have expressed to youth that they enjoy working with them and would like to increase their partnerships given the freedom that comes with being a young person. Many negotiators or stakeholders work under a larger company or country administration and are therefore tightly bound in what they can and cannot say. Although working with a larger corporation or country might provide essential resources and funding which youth lack, they do reap the benefit of complete freedom of demands. Other parties appreciate the unchecked ability which youth possess to call out system abusers without repercussions from whoever they are representing.<sup>79</sup> Growing support from the UNFCCC Secretariat, parties, and stakeholder constituencies can be thought of as a success for YOUNGO.

## Membership Growth

Membership has grown significantly since YOUNGO's creation in 1992 to tens of thousands of young people from around the world in 2022. Strength comes in numbers, so an ever increasing base is a positive sign for youth in the social climate movement space. Activists shared that a lot of tangible work done throughout the year is most effective at a grassroots

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<sup>79</sup> YOUNGO Interview Participant., (Conducted January 2021 to February 2021).

level.<sup>80</sup> YOUNGO is a platform that publicizes funding opportunities and educates youth who hope to make a difference in their local and national climate governance as well as the global space. Every new member offers the possibility of becoming the next leader of a movement, creating an innovative solution to a problem, or convincing the next world leader to change a text with the resources YOUNGO can provide.

*“YOUNGO is the largest constituency of the United Nations. It is the largest and [one of the] oldest constituencies. So, more than 10,000 individuals are working in YOUNGO and more than 1,000 organizations are also working in YOUNGO. In that way, we are not only able to create negotiations for general topics, but also we can create them for finance, climate education, gender, indigenous communities, and other topics that are very important for our members.” - Diane (Global South)*

*“In our Focal Point term [since 2020], we actually reset the membership list back to zero and again [now] we are like 10,000. [...] It's growing enormously, which in one aspect of course is amazing because we need more young people being interested, being engaged, voicing their concerns and ideas.” - Emilia (Global North)*

The membership growth that participants discussed is doubly impressive given that the membership was reset to zero sometime in the last two years. One Focal Point from the Global North and Global South are elected as leaders of the YOUNGO organization each year. In 2020, Focal Point leadership decided to clear the logs of members who might still be on the mailing list but were no longer engaged, had aged out of the youth/child requirements, or had feigned their age. In this timeframe, the membership was regained and continued to expand. With the strength of their largest membership to date, YOUNGO entered COP26 in November 2021 wielding ambitious targets.

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<sup>80</sup> YOUNGO Interview Participant., (Conducted January 2021 to February 2021).



## Successes at COP26

Youth left COP26 with two wins that stood out to many youth beyond their increasing membership, recognition and support in the UNFCCC arena. The first landmark was the award of a seat on an advisory board for the Climate Technology Center and Network (CTCN) which is the implementation arm of the UNFCCC's Technology Mechanism. This seat means that youth will play an integral role in CTCN's work to guide lesser developed nation's transition to low-carbon, environmentally-friendly technology to improve climate resilience.<sup>81</sup> The seat grants YOUNGO its first true hard power through funding and decision-making autonomy on a board. When asked about the impact YOUNGO has been able to provide in recent years, almost every interviewee mentioned this CTCN Advisory Board Seat.

*“I think the idea of the seat came up way before my time, so 2018-2019. [...] In the lead up to COP26, we had so many one-on-one chats with different parties and tried to explain to them why we would deserve the seat.*

*“Especially because the seat comes with money, so we do need to make sure that—and many countries are still struggling with budgets—so we do need to make sure that they understand the importance of us getting this seat, the importance for youth, women, indigenous peoples getting the seat, and how much value it can actually add. For example, outreach, credibility, and technical solutions that we can bring to the advisory board and actually generate profit instead of [them] thinking of it as just charity money that they give out and receive no return.” - Lily (Global North)*

The second important outcome for YOUNGO from Glasgow is the Global Youth Statement which they presented before the start of the conference on November 5, 2021. The statement was signed by over 45,000 youth and children in more than 130 countries at the Conference of Youth (COY16) preceding the larger conference in Scotland. The final document was presented to the COP Presidency and Secretariat.<sup>82</sup>

<sup>81</sup> Advisory Board: About the Climate Technology Centre and Network (CTCN), (2014).

<sup>82</sup> Evans, S. et al. (2021).

*“This time we had a global youth position statement which was extremely complete at 77 pages of outcome. And that was really, really well received. [...] It was not just youth-led but also very structured to the UN process, so it was really fitting in a way that they can accept and in a way that they can really understand as well.” - Asha (Global South)*

*“It has so much impact because the constituency, it's a young, youthful, vibrant, energetic constituency. Their ideas are fresh and their interventions, they are fresh.” - Sarah (Global South)*

The Global Youth Statement is broken down into 15 thematics including categories such as climate finance and underrepresented groups. The ultimate goal of the text is to urge decision-makers to scale up their fight for the crucial 1.5 degree Celsius mark and demand accountability.<sup>83</sup> The document will likely be revised and revisited in future years as a foundational example of youth directly using their voices to inform policymakers in the UNFCCC process of their negotiation demands. The Global Youth Statement is an example of a direct deliverable produced by internal youth, but external youth also impact the framing of the social climate movement.

## **Two Roles: External Public Activist or Internal Conference Participant**

The Google Trends Data in Chapter 2 demonstrated the impact that some external youth actors have in garnering public interest and subsequent pressure. The YOUNGO participants themselves had their own perspectives on the distinctions between the two types of actors: internal and external. The quotations here come from internal youth activists, so they should be considered with the bias that these actors carry. Again, this interview analysis is not meant to place one form of activism above another. These distinctions can be leveraged for greater benefit to both sides of the social youth climate camp to advance their ultimate goal of increased

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<sup>83</sup> UK COY 16. (2021).

participation in the global climate governance sphere to promote ambitious and democratically legitimate outcomes.

*“There is a little bit of overlap, but we’re still now very distinctly structured in two different ways. It’s safe to say we don’t need just one or the other.” - Asha (Global South)*

External youth often rise to recognition through social media and internet campaigns which raise awareness about the importance of the fight for a stronger international response to climate change. Their public pressure on politicians to act is heard around the world, increasing voting citizens’ demands for change. Climate activist Greta Thunberg boasts 14.1 million followers on Instagram and 5 million followers on Twitter making her audience vast and global.<sup>84</sup> Through public statements, speeches, and organized rallies, one individual still has a broader reach than an organization with thousands of members such as YOUNGO. Interview participants shared their appreciation for the work that external activists do in and out of the UNFCCC space.

*We wouldn’t have so much support and the public wouldn’t have so much attention or have the awareness of the importance of youth if the people and the fellow youth activists on social media didn’t do so much.*

[...]

*It’s so important for there to be people on the street but also so important to have people within the blue zone actually advocating for things that might look very boring for most people. I think both sides are important.” - Lily (Global North)*

Internal youth activists expressed concerns with the individualization that comes with the influencer status. The climate crisis requires collective action that a singular leader cannot bring alone. In addition, the voices highlighted often come from the Global North in line with traditional power dynamics.

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<sup>84</sup> Instagram. (2022). Greta Thunberg.

Twitter. (2022). Greta Thunberg. <https://twitter.com/GretaThunberg>

*“I guess one of my concerns watching the creation of the celebrity of someone like Greta Thunberg is that it continues to perpetuate the erasure of other voices of the most impacted. Even though she herself works against this or tries to. She tries to draw attention to the fact that actually it's the voices of the most affected people that matter. It's not necessarily mine, but there's this kind of representation machine that creates Greta as the figurehead and some other activists from Europe and other places to have the kind of privilege to speak, I think.” - Frederick (Global North)*

One YOUNGO participant recalled meeting Greta Thunberg for the first time and explaining to her the process of the UNFCCC constituency groups.<sup>85</sup> Even though these same participants taught her the intricacies of the COP events, they still view her as an essential figurehead in the fight for more ambitious global climate governance.

*“I think back in 2018 when Greta came to her first COP she joined a couple of our YOUNGO meetings. I remember sitting and explaining to her and her father what YOUNGO was, like, how we engage, and so forth. [...] That was the COP where she spoke at the closing and then really shot to fame. After that, the movement really picked up [...] That was her very first COP so she had no idea of what the negotiation process looks like. There was a lot of learning also for her.” - Asha (Global South)*

*I think, first of all, Greta was a turning point for youth participation, because before her we had a history of over a decade of youth participation in those spaces, but it was inconvenient. Youth participation was something that was not looked at. [...] From Friday's for Future onwards, it started being seen as hopeful.” - Juliana (Global South)*

Other YOUNGO members felt like external youth's actions held little influential weight.

Although these activists' work is tremendous in garnering public support for climate change mitigation, their direct fingerprint on UNFCCC agreements is less evident.

*“Look, I'm gonna be honest with you: social media doesn't do anything. [...] When it comes to this particular process of the UNFCCC, and the negotiation itself, social media plays—like I mean literally it—it doesn't do anything.” - Isaac (Global South)*

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<sup>85</sup> YOUNGO Interview Participant. (Conducted January 2021 to February 2021).

Additionally, tokenism is ripe within multilateral organizations as displayed in the participant interviews chapter.<sup>86</sup> Unfortunately, young activists are often asked to give impassioned speeches at opening and closing COP ceremonies that realistically incite little change. The parties feel good about themselves for discussing the future, including young voices, and catering to public sentiment, however, their actions rarely reflect a legitimate impact.

In contrast, internal youth, such as YOUNGO and other youth conferences participants, fill a more direct part when it comes to global policy change in their official role as stakeholders. Internal youth possess specialized knowledge about technical details in document proposals. They must understand the inner workings of climate conference structure, the UN negotiating process, and the complex characteristics of international policy documents.

*“What has influence on this process is really to have the capacity, the mandate to be in that room when the negotiation happens and to be able to negotiate yourself. [...] But I mean just being on social media and being loud or being outside of the room and being whatever and having media attention here and there, [...] on the policy side it doesn't do much.” - Isaac (Global South)*

Time surrounding the conferences is spent capacity-building so that youth come prepared to have a genuine impact on COP outcomes. Within YOUNGO, 18 active working groups specialize in topics ranging from green jobs to indigenous solidarity.<sup>87</sup> Each of these working groups conducts climate-related information sessions, meetings with other stakeholders, and local work in respective home countries throughout the year. Once in a COP setting, leaders with badges who attend are responsible for advocating for predetermined goals in their sector of

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<sup>86</sup> YOUNGO Interview Participant. (Conducted January 2021 to February 2021).

<sup>87</sup> YOUNGO Interview Participant. (Conducted January 2021 to February 2021). YOUNGO Working Groups Spreadsheet [Google Sheets].

influence.<sup>88</sup> Although these duties are not in the public limelight, they are crucial to the representation of youths' voices in the UNFCCC process.

The Google Trend data in combination with outtakes from the YOUNGO interviews demonstrate a clear distinction between internal activists with direct access to UNFCCC texts as well as negotiators and external activists with indirect influence to the process through speeches as well as the media. Internal youth possess the ability to discuss specific changes, down to the punctuation marks used in a legal UNFCCC document. Whereas, external youth possess the ability to reach millions of people around the world through the attention that their fight gains online or through media-publicized activism. This section is not meant to emphasize internal or external youth actors as more important than the other. Both roles are unique and important to the ultimate goal of encouraging prompt, targeted, and consequential action from global climate governance structures like the UNFCCC. Again, further research ought to be conducted to explore the difference between internal and external actors. One quandary to consider is the extent to which the two roles work together including where their roles overlap. The final recommendations section in Chapter 4 considers this avenue.

## **Conclusions and Recommendations on the Future of YOUNGO**

Past and current YOUNGO participants shared their personal insights on the behind the scenes processes of COP negotiations, roadblocks, and milestones in the UNFCCC systems through these interviews. Generally, youth seem encouraged by the successes they have experienced especially at the most recent COP in Glasgow, but emphasized multiple domains of the organization that need reform both internally at the YOUNGO level and externally at the UNFCCC level. Using strategies in line with progress achieved such as growing recognition,

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<sup>88</sup> YOUNGO Interview Participant. (Conducted January 2021 to February 2021).

support, and membership as well as the COP26 victories, I will present recommendations to address the barriers that youth continue to face.

The lack of engagement from the 10,000+ YOUNGO members is a major lost opportunity for a body that is based out of global community organizing. YOUNGO must consider new incentives to engage all of their membership more intentionally without creating barriers to entry that would deter a high volume of applications. One recommendation would be to create a weekly newsletter rather than a mass forwarded mail chain with climate activism correspondence. Currently, the email structure floods inboxes with upwards of four messages daily, which may be viewed as clutter rather than impactful information and unique opportunities for youth. Additionally, a more rigorous application process could incentivize members who are more intentional about their involvement to join. I understand the hesitation to make access a multi-step process, but adding a section requiring some proof of age or previous and current climate activism might encourage youth who want to do more than read the emails to get active. YOUNGO could also focus on sponsoring fun events that feature community building activities to better connect youth from around the world. A sense of unity and friendship could inspire activists to be involved for reasons beyond their passions for climate justice.

Internal organization is crucial in an organization like YOUNGO where leadership is changing frequently and members age out in a short period of time. I would expand upon three suggestions from youth who participated in interviews. First, all mandates, roles, and decision-making structures should be written down. This process has been started internally, but it must be finished with excruciating detail so that members for years to come have a clear roadmap. Second, an organizational chart visually displaying a hierarchy of responsibilities would mitigate confusion for new members and ensure that no job was left undone. The laddered

structure may simultaneously incentivize greater engagement if there is a distinct path to leadership positions. Finally, all of this information including the written mandates, procedures, electoral processes, organizational charts, leadership contacts, funding opportunities, and YOUNGO priorities should be put on a current website or SharePoint site that is accessible to all members. Having essential direction and guidance in one location would provide clarity and structure to such a large conglomeration of stakeholders.

Tokenism and ageism should be addressed at the UNFCCC level first and foremost. Mandatory bias training should be required of all delegation negotiators to keep the dangers of prejudice at the forefront of all COP gatherings. Three key features that UNFCCC actors must focus on moving forward to prevent tokenism are diversity, equity, and inclusion of youth. Diversity would mean establishing that a varied range of ages are represented in all negotiation spaces. Equity would guarantee that all participants, including youth, have access to resources—which will be discussed shortly as another roadblock youth often face. Finally, inclusion would mean not only giving youth space to speak but also acting on the demands they make after listening and debating in a manner that demonstrates the value of their participation.

Capacity building and resources both require bringing increased human and monetary capital to YOUNGO. Youth with greater capacity to lead, understand technical terminology, and interact tactfully with negotiators will have an overall higher impact both in the negotiating space as well as at home in their domestic fight for more ambitious climate targets. Resources can be a part of providing the knowledge and skills needed to grow youth capacity. One suggestion is to create a working group or branch within YOUNGO that is dedicated to fundraising. The funds could go towards professional development and English language training, UNFCCC badges and COP expenses, or the salaries of full-time positions for YOUNGO leadership. Creating a few



paid positions within YOUNGO could eliminate the barrier that volunteer youth face. These youth likely have bolder ideas than any presented here, but lack the capacity in time and funds to commit themselves completely to improving the organization. This same fundraising team could lobby UNFCCC leadership and other global climate NGOs to provide monetary support for these initiatives as well. Some of these recommendations are echoed and built upon in the final recommendations section hereafter. The goal of these suggestions is to ensure that the horizons of YOUNGO are only expanded so that youth can be as effective as possible in the global climate governance sector.

# CHAPTER 4: Conclusions, Recommendations, & Future Research

## Introduction

Youth play a growing role as ambitious stakeholders in the UNFCCC negotiation process which brings national delegates from around the world together in a multilateral format to address the most dire threat the global community faces: climate change. Since the 1992 Rio Earth Summit, stakeholders have been defined and given specific rights in the UN sphere. Youth and children are one of the nine original constituency groups. Since the creation of YOUNGO, the UNFCCC has witnessed an increasing recognition of the importance of interest groups. Over the course of the last 10 years, overall participation from youth has increased steadily.<sup>89</sup> Still, there is room for improvement to ensure greater future youth participation and influence in the global climate governance arena.

The literature review in this thesis grants context to the historical origins of the UNFCCC, YOUNGO, and their development hereafter. The interviews with former and current YOUNGO participants provide a unique first-hand perspective on the most pressing challenges that the group face in and out of COPs. The interviews also shed light on significant milestones that young people can continue to build upon. The Google Trends data in combination with outtakes from interviews also help distinguish the role of internal and external actors in the social youth climate movement. This distinction bolsters the claim that youth play a definite two-pronged role in influencing the global fight to mitigate climate change. Using the research compiled in an investigation of existing literature and an analysis of semi-constructed interviews, the subsequent conclusions answer the question of what role youth play in the UNFCCC space.

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<sup>89</sup> UNFCCC. (n.d). Non-Party Stakeholders Statistics.

Following the discussion, the conclusion provides recommendations to enhance youth's function within the UNFCCC and evokes future research paths.

## **Discussion: The Role of Youth**

The main roles of youth stakeholders in the UNFCCC process are to fill the democratic deficit and to encourage more urgent climate change policy action to protect the planet which they will inherit. Delegates sent to UNFCCC plenary meetings, while beholden to their national government, are not representative of a nation's popular opinion. Without elections, there is little tying these climate negotiators to the interests of constituency groups at home. For this reason, the stakeholder groups were created and given voice in Agenda 21. The small number of designated actors writing the UNFCCC agreements should not possess the sole power to address climate change, which is one of the largest challenges facing society. Here, stakeholder conglomerates are meant to fill the gap by providing input as citizens in crucial groups who hold an interest in preventing further environmental degradation. Youth have a unique role as the stakeholders who will be severely impacted in future if action does not increase in the present.

Young people will be the ones left with a world disrupted by climate change created from generations of abusive practices. Therefore, youth hold a legitimate stake in the future of climate policy. The activists in the UNFCCC space are fighting to increase pressure for pioneering rehaults to the broken systems that continue to harm the planet. These youth recognize their role through small actions like becoming a YOUNGO member which provides the opportunity for further education and activism that some young people choose to grasp. Those who do take greater initiative fulfill their stakeholder role by taking leadership in the organization. Moreover, youth who attend COPs and other plenary meetings where they directly engage with negotiator

parties are able to directly influence texts that ultimately impact each nation's climate change mitigation commitments. Their active participation remedies, in part, the democracy deficit inherent to the UNFCCC structure. Not only are youth helping to create a more democratic process, but they are leveraging a societal belief that they are naive to demand swift, aggressive measures are taken to mitigate climate change. Like other interest groups, YOUNGO "has much to contribute to increasing ambition on climate action."<sup>90</sup> They aid in holding the negotiators accountable through a more representative form of debate and pressuring them to think bigger.

As discussed previously, youth's role as stakeholders is filled by two distinct actors: internal and external youth. Internal youth are directly connected to the negotiation processes through their relationships with UNFCCC leadership, other constituencies, and negotiators. Their immediate connection to the texts come to fruition through café and corridor chats with their partners in the space. In contrast, external youth fill the stakeholder role in an indirect way. Their coercive influence is witnessed through massive online followings and social movements, including large demonstrations and public speeches. More research is necessary to determine how these actions translate to tangible outcomes or mindset changes. However, in a similar way to the explicitly defined stakeholder position that internal youth hold, external youth actors are taking initiative to secure a more urgently climate-conscious approach to international dialogues regarding the future of planet Earth.

Moving forward, YOUNGO and external youth actors must capitalize on what has worked well and make adjustments to enhance their effectiveness in the UNFCCC process. The opening for youth is already carved out in foundational documents through Agenda 21. This

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<sup>90</sup> ICC Commission of Environment and Energy, (2018).

position is deserved and vital to the authority of the United Nations; however, their stated recognition as a key interest group must not be squandered.

## **Recommendations**

YOUNGO, supporters of the youth climate movement, and the UNFCCC have the opportunity to enhance the meaningful participation of young people in the United Nations' global climate governance body. The following recommendations are based on a culmination of research conducted for this thesis. The inputs from YOUNGO members directly involved in the space must be taken into consideration. While the interviews for this thesis are not representative of the YOUNGO constituency at large, they provide a basis for understanding what issues are most prevalent in the youth climate space and ways to remedy these difficulties. Furthermore, research on the background of the UNFCCC process and stakeholder rights provide insight into how to change existing norms to more intentionally allow for youth to engage. The Google Trends analysis examines the reach external youth can leverage through media coverage and social media—a strategy through which internal youth might also benefit. These following recommendations are more easily suggested than implemented; however, critical examination of current practices and hard work to make needed changes are necessary to strengthen the role youth play in the global climate governance structure.

The UNFCCC could better support young activists than they do under the current stakeholder-party negotiator relationship. Most importantly, UNFCCC leadership and delegates must follow-through on the partnership built at COPs and plenary meetings throughout the entire year beyond June and November sessions. This means working to negotiate with domestic actors to increase ambitions, maintaining the youth's future perspective, in preparation for the next

plenary meeting. The continued backing also requires the provision of resources like capacity development funding and allotted meeting time all twelve months the year. Additionally, UN leadership could sponsor a few part or full-time time YOUNGO positions with living wages. The ability for YOUNGO to maintain permanent staff would allow those positions to engage in a deeper capacity than volunteer activism. Those opposed to this recommendation might argue that a paid position takes away the stakeholders neutral independence from the UNFCCC. In reality, almost all other stakeholder constituencies are funded by a larger body whether that be a corporation or broader NGO. Youth, to some extent, lack established connections to the professional world and public life given their limited experiences as students or recent graduates new to the work force and civic participation. The UNFCCC could fill this void by providing paid-positions that would allow youth to commit more intentionally to their activism work. Moreover, increased funding directly related to plenary meetings and COPs is still hugely impactful as well. The UNFCCC should provide scholarships for young attendees who do not have the means themselves to afford travel, housing, and other expenses during the conference. A final suggestion, previously mentioned in the interview chapter, to reemphasize is that the UNFCCC require bias training for all national party delegations prior to plenary meetings. This training should spur an awareness among negotiators to potential tokenist and ageist tendencies that belittle youth participation. The UNFCCC can do more to encourage and bolster young people's position in the battle for international cooperation to tackle climate change, but they are not the only ones who have work to do.

YOUNGO can also modify their strategies and structures to increase the effectiveness of their involvement in the UNFCCC negotiations. One way to do so would be to strengthen the organization's internal order. Action items to aid in making YOUNGO's internal scheme clearer

might include the creation of a top-down position chart as well as detailed descriptions delineating the responsibilities and authorities of each working group. These actions will ensure the frequent leadership transition is smoother. In a similar way, the arrangement of intentional membership engagement could be enhanced. The decentralized nature of the organization makes broad global engagement difficult. The decentralization, compounded by the voluntary aspect of the group, makes active participation a constant barrier that YOUNGO faces. One aforementioned avenue for engaging the huge membership more intentionally is to move beyond the email chain structure of communication about seminars, speaker opportunities, and important climate updates. Much of the key information is likely lost in participant's inboxes as a result of the volume of materials sent daily. Consolidating the opportunities in one weekly email or on a website would make the details far more accessible. Another way for YOUNGO to more intentionally capture the membership is to curate a more active presence on social media.

Young people get much of their news and information from online websites and social media in the modern world. In fact, 42 percent of people aged 18 to 29 say that their primary digital way to get the news is through social media.<sup>91</sup> Social media is an efficient way to post messages, updates, and attractive content that can be seen all around the world. Social media could be leveraged to grow membership by enticing young people around the world who find the pages on Instagram, Facebook, Tik Tok, and Twitter to be intriguing.<sup>92</sup> YOUNGO currently has profiles on all four of these social media platforms as well as a Communications Operational Area group. However, given the potential that we have witnessed through other external climate activists online, the platforms should become a primary focus for YOUNGO moving forward to increase following and original content creation. A strong presence on social media would allow

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<sup>91</sup> Shearer, E., (2021).

<sup>92</sup> Buckley, C., (2022).

actors to double-down on their pressure in the UNFCCC space. YOUNGO would maintain their direct communication with negotiators on the one hand, and on the other, indirect persuasion created by the massive social movement.

Counter arguments claim that social media influence is a role for external youth and realistically ineffectual. Internal actor interview participants claimed that online activism had little tangible impact.<sup>93</sup> However, the success of certain young activists online through their trending taglines and poignant speeches is undeniable.<sup>94</sup> Why should internal activists not seize the opportunity where they have witnessed their peers' recognition? Even if internal YOUNGO representatives would rather maintain their separate role, they could partner with external activists who already have large followings online to spread awareness about the work they are doing in the UNFCCC space. For example, having a renowned YOUNG activist like Vanessa Nakate, with over 235,000 Twitter Followers, to post an explanatory "What's YOUNGO?" video or thread could get more youth from around the world seeking an avenue to get involved in the climate conference process to become active members.<sup>95</sup> The crossover could encourage broader cooperation and enhance all participants' knowledge about the other sides' role. Coordination between the two groups would amplify both sides' abilities to influence global climate governance.

The final recommendation is for YOUNGO to find ways to create more opportunities for capacity building. Creating a peer network for non-English speakers to chat informally on video or phone calls with other members around the world would be an impactful way to ensure that all participants felt more confident in their English-speaking abilities. All the negotiations are

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<sup>93</sup> YOUNGO Interview Participant. (Conducted January 2021 to February 2021).

<sup>94</sup> Sabherwal, A. et al., (2021).

<sup>95</sup> Twitter, (2022), Vanessa Nakate.



conducted in English at COPs, so it is crucial that young people in attendance have a solid grasp on the language. Another way to leverage a peer group would be to create partnerships between old and new members in a mentor format. The returning members could connect with new members to share insights about the organization, work at COPs, and answer questions. Additionally, YOUNGO alumni could participate in scheduled calls both to help build English knowledge in technical climate areas as well as education sessions on special topics. Many of the members who have aged out of YOUNGO continue to work in the climate governance space and could provide resources that would increase current youths' capacity. These alumni connections could also be a source of fundraising, which is an integral part of the final suggestion. If the UNFCCC is not willing or able to fund full or part-time positions within YOUNGO, the organization itself could increase capacity by beginning a fundraising campaign. The fundraising efforts could also take the shape of a partnership with a larger climate NGO or philanthropic investor that is willing to sponsor the paid positions. The capacity of YOUNGO would increase if they had staff fully committed to their development and growth year round.

These suggestions are simple to write but much harder to implement. They are not meant to place the burden of successful climate negotiations on the shoulders of young activists. Rather, the recommendations, based on compiled research, are meant to inspire a spirit of change that bolsters the intensive work which youth are already conducting. Further research would enhance the breadth of effective recommendations and even track the success of adjustments that either the UNFCCC or YOUNGO may make in future years.

## **Future Research**

Future research must be conducted focused on young people in global climate governance to build on the foundations of this exploratory thesis. First, a deeper look into

quantitative and qualitative data regarding both internal as well as external youth activism would be beneficial. A survey of all YOUNGO members or more interviews with a greater number of participants could present a more representative picture of the constituency's successes and difficulties. Furthermore, a broader study on external youth's role through social media and public activism could determine an actual generalizable relationship exists between interest on Google and tangible climate policy outcomes in the UNFCCC space. The study would require information from search engines beyond Google and the key terms in each country's official language to create a more complete dataset. Another option could be a network analysis of external activist social media pages that includes which lead negotiators follow and engage with their content online. Research at a global level on internal and external youth actions would improve the validity of this study and allow for more definite conclusions to be made on their future cooperation. In-depth research must also be conducted in specific regions of the world.

Another area of more granular research determined to be beneficial in consideration is the role that youth from the Global South play in the UNFCCC space. Citizens from countries in the Global South contribute the least to total emissions; yet, these are the people who will suffer the primary adverse impacts of climate change. Climate change is an interdisciplinary challenge that is deeply intertwined with equity issues. Research that strives to determine how these young activists are best supported begins with developing an understanding of the largest obstacles they face. Many indigenous groups are located in the Global South as well, and although indigenous people have their own stakeholder group, young people are less represented there than in YOUNGO. It is critical that these voices which are often marginalized are lifted and listened to in the global climate governance domain since it is their generation and their environments that will be the most immediately affected. More research to better understand the best way to engage

with young people from the Global South is necessary to ensure justice is a key piece of the global climate negotiation regime.

Other remaining questions are a part of the larger youth climate activism arena beyond the UNFCCC. Are youth voices more impactful in other climate spheres? Should young activists focus more attention at the grassroots, regional, or national levels? The UNFCCC, like many multilateral institutions, lack enforcement power in their non-binding consensus-based treaty structure. In this framework, youth—although not officially recognized as stakeholders in other circumstances—may be more impactful outside of the UN structure. Further research may help demonstrate how young people can gain legitimate recognition in key non-multilateral spaces which lack guidelines like those outlined in Agenda 21. The social climate movement led by youth stakeholders and external activists is a growing area of research that deserves greater attention. The movement itself along with its perceived impacts have grown in coordination with the world's increased sense of urgency to tackle the climate crisis.

*“In the last, let's say, three to four years, the [...] movement got a lot of momentum so the whole UN is now focusing more and more on the youth and climate.”*

*- Emilia (Global North)*

The research conducted for this thesis is merely a piece to the climate crisis puzzle that presents an existential threat if apathy and inertia are the norm. Youth in the international climate governance space are in the fight of their lives to alter the future of our one and only precious planet.

# Appendices

## Appendix A: Abbreviations Index

ACE - Action for Climate Empowerment

COP - Conference of Parties

COY - Conference of Youth

GHG - greenhouse gasses

INC - Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee

IPCC - Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change

NDC - Nationally Determined Contribution

UN - United Nations

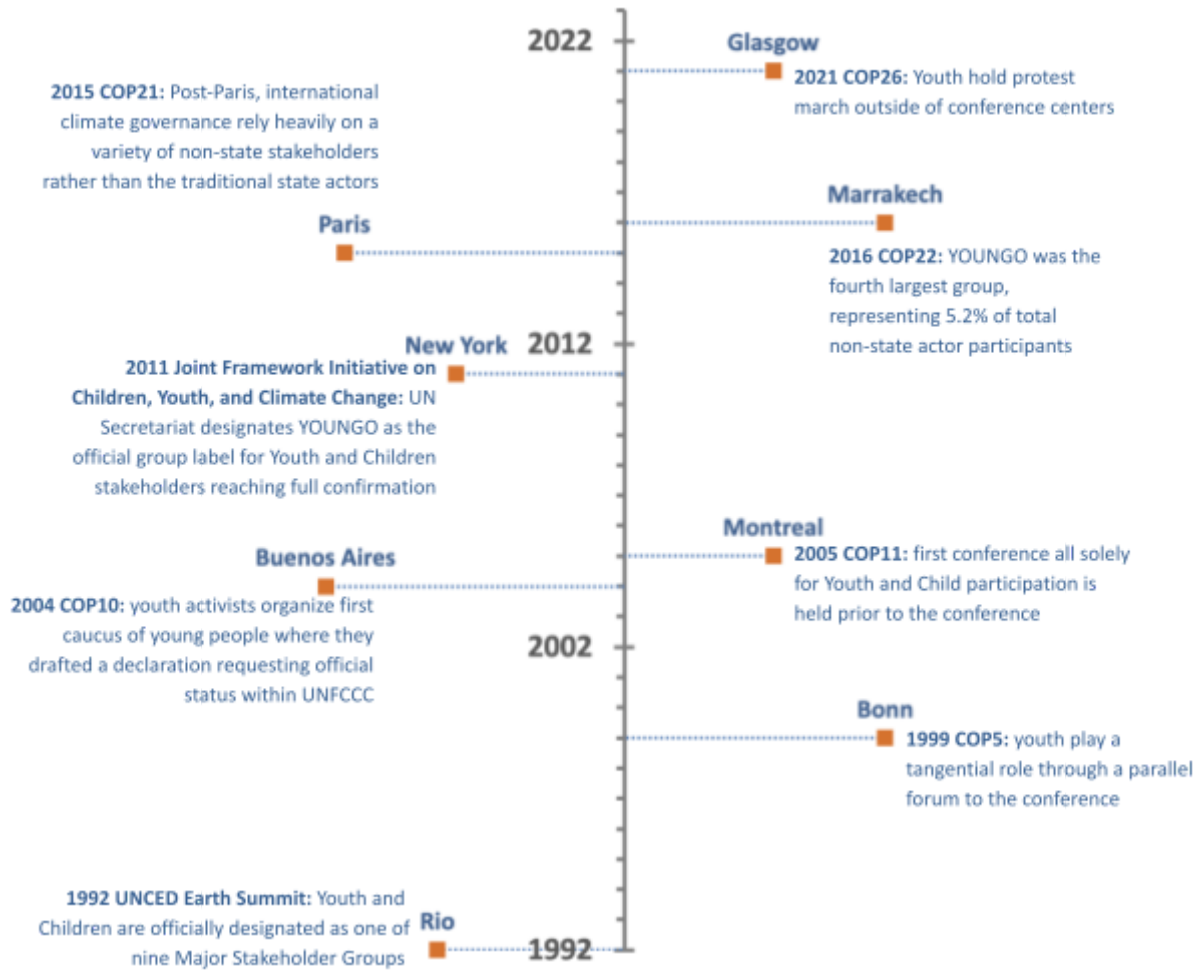
UNCED - United Nations Conference on Environment and Development

UNFCCC - United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change

YOUNGO - Youth NGO (Official name for the Youth Constituency within UNFCCC)

## Appendix B: YOUNGO Timeline

### Youth Involvement in the UNFCCC



## Appendix C: List of Guided Interview Questions

1. Can you give me an overview of your role within YOUNGO?
2. How did you first get involved with climate policy activism?
3. What is the age range of those that are members of YOUNGO? May I ask your age?
4. Can you describe what the negotiating process looks like at conferences?
  - a. Describe both meetings with interventions as well as café/corridor processes.
5. Can you describe what the negotiating looks like throughout the year? What advocacy goes on outside of conferences?
6. How would you describe the impact youth have as stakeholders?
7. How would you characterize other COP participants' perspectives of you as a Youth stakeholder?
8. How do you think youth could have a stronger influence in the negotiating process at UNFCCC?
9. What was the biggest priority for youth in the most recent COP in Glasgow?
10. How do you see youth influence growing, shrinking, and/or changing in the global arena?
11. How do you think social media and the internet have affected the role of youth as stakeholders?
12. Anything else you would like to add?

## Appendix D: Interview Word Cloud



The word cloud above contains the 50 most frequently used words in the interviews conducted for this thesis. The larger words were used more commonly than the smaller words. Many of the largest words are expected outcomes including “YOUNGO, negotiations, climate, youth, and young.” However, a couple less anticipated words worth highlighting from the cloud are “capacity” and “social media”.

These two words underscore the importance of building on these two issue areas that both have room to be improved. YOUNGO participants are clearly considering the impact that both capacity and media attention have on their work. The best way to leverage these elements to the youth climate movement’s advantage rather than detriment is something that actors in the space must continue to evaluate.

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