



SOUTHERN VOICE



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Making cities inclusive for youth

Gabrielle Alves and Omer Jamal

Key messages



Global South youth are amongst the most vulnerable to environmental degradation. They face high risks of health issues due to pollution exposure and lack of access to clean water, nutritious food, and safe housing.



International organisations, and national and local governments need to give young people more opportunities to participate in political discussions and policy procedures to influence the development of environmentally just and inclusive cities.



Global South youth require access to information, resources, and opportunities for community-led initiatives and advocacy efforts.



Global South youth are driving urban space reclamation, environmental justice, and sustainability through community-led initiatives, advocating for policies and practices that support equitable resource access.



Just and inclusive policy processes are a top priority for the Global South youth, as they reclaim urban areas and build environmentally sustainable, inclusive cities for their generation and future ones.

Is it hard for you to imagine a city with limited access to green spaces, overly polluted air, and dumped toxic waste in your neighbourhood because of unjust environmental practices and policies? Yet this is the reality that many young people face, particularly across the Global South (World Health Organization [WHO], 2021). Youth in the Global South are increasingly unable to use urban spaces due to the growing risk of health issues posed by environmentally unjust and inequitable policies and practices. As such, young people inherit the consequences of these decisions. The right to the city and environmental justice seek to address these issues by empowering people to shape the design and management of their cities and neighbourhoods, with a focus on creating healthy, sustainable, and equitable communities for current and future generations.

Environmental justice first emerged in the United States in the 1970s and 1980s as a response to hazardous waste disposal in cities, with citizens protesting for their civil rights and their right to the city (Afrouz & Sajadzadeh, 2021). Since then, environmental justice and citizens' right to their cities have been inextricably linked, especially in the face of numerous climate disasters that have had disastrous effects on cities.

Environmental justice refers to the fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people in developing, implementing, and enforcing environmental laws, regulations, and policies regardless of race, colour, national origin, or income (Bullard & Johnson, 2000). Thus, environmental justice embraces the principle that "all people and communities have a right to equal protection and equal enforcement of environmental laws and regulations" (Bullard & Johnson, 2000, p. 572).

Closely connected to the concept of environmental justice is the right to the city, as first proposed by Lefebvre (1968). The right to the city is the idea that all people have a right to access and shape the urban environments they inhabit, including the right to a clean and healthy environment and benefits from social, economic, and cultural opportunities that are unique to cities with quality urbanisation (Harvey, 2008).

Both environmental justice and the right to the city address issues of equity and access in the urban context, with the goal of ensuring that all people have the right to a safe and healthy environment in their communities (Purcell, 2002). They are useful frameworks to ensure that the needs and perspectives of young people, low-income residents, and diverse communities are considered when developing environmental policies and programmes (Shrader-Frechette, 2002; Akbari & Khosravaninezhad, 2014).

Many urban youth in the Global South often have limited access to green spaces and recreational opportunities, which pose a negative impact on their health and well-being. This could be due to urbanisation and the conversion of green spaces into commercial and industrial areas, as well as limited investment in public parks and recreational facilities. According to research, access to parks, forests, grasslands, and other urban green spaces (such as community green squares or greenways) are hugely beneficial for mental health, general well-being, and the prevention of non-communicable diseases and their various risk factors, such as stress, sedentary behaviour and harmful use of alcohol (WHO, 2016; Kabisch et al., 2017).

However, not all urbanisation is created the same. In the context of the Global South, where rapid urbanisation can often be haphazard and unplanned, young people often face challenges in terms of quality education and employment opportunities, owing largely to industrial development projects prioritised by city planning policies.

For example, city planning policies in Mexico City resulted in the proliferation of industrial sites throughout the city, emitting dangerous levels of air pollution and toxins that disproportionately impacted marginalised communities situated near these development sites (Soto-Coloballes, 2020).

Moreover, age intersects with various other identities, resulting in complex, layered marginalisation experiences in urban contexts. For example, a young person's income status, race/ethnicity, immigration status, disability, or living in an informal settlement can all significantly impact their access to opportunities, resources, and basic services. These intersecting factors create unique challenges for young people, making it more difficult for them to gain access to education and employment opportunities, participate in decision-making processes, and enjoy a high quality of life in the city. Understanding and addressing these intersections is critical for promoting social equity, justice, and inclusion in urban contexts.

Many cities in the Global South have seen rapid urbanisation, resulting in informal settlements and slums on the outskirts of cities that lack basic infrastructure and services (Agyabeng et al., 2021). As a result, these marginalised communities are increasingly excluded and vulnerable to environmental threats, creating a vicious cycle of poverty and environmental degradation (Anderko, 2021).

■ **Many urban youth in the Global South often have limited access to green spaces and recreational opportunities, which pose a negative impact on their health and well-being.** ■

By recognising and addressing environmental justice and the right to the city issues, policies and programmes can be implemented to ensure that marginalised communities and youth have access to a clean and healthy environment and are not disproportionately affected by environmental hazards. As a result, just and inclusive policy processes are a key concern among youth in the Global South who want to reclaim urban spaces and build environmentally sustainable and equitable cities for their generation and future generations. Accordingly, environmentally just and inclusive cities not only provide spatial rights to entire populations, but also ensure that city planning and policies are environmentally healthy, contributing to the overall health and well-being of youth and current and future populations.

This policy brief aims to provide policymakers with insights on how environmental justice and the right to the city intersect, highlighting the crucial role of youth in fostering environmentally just and inclusive cities. By highlighting successful examples from around the Global South, the brief recommends policy and governing entry points for involving youth and advancing youth interests in (re)designing and (re)inventing environmentally just and inclusive cities.

■ **Environmental justice and the right to the city: Global South youth as a vulnerable group**

When seen from a broader perspective, the right to the city also places communities at the centre of urban agendas. This right implies the freedom to make and redesign cities to be just and inclusive (Lefebvre, 1968). To this effect, promoting environmental justice in connection to the right to the city represents more than just allocating green spaces and protecting the ecosystem. It represents a unique opportunity for inclusion where citizens collectively build urban life through multi-stakeholder dialogue about their daily challenges. Moreover, higher levels of participation, ownership, and space allocation by citizens in public areas demonstrate the realisation of the concept of the right to the city. Therefore, it enables democratic urban decision-making processes and raises awareness of environmental risks, costs and opportunities in policies at all stages of negotiation, implementation and monitoring.

Young people in the Global South are a vulnerable population impacted by environmental degradation due to poverty, lack of political power, and limited access to resources and technology. Nearly 25% of Global South youth live in poverty (earning less than USD 1.90 per day), denying them access to necessities such as healthcare, safe water, and adequate sanitation. Global South youth, like other vulnerable groups, are prone to environmental risks and illnesses that are frequently associated with environmental deterioration (WHO, 2021). As a result, young people in

these communities are at a high risk of developing health issues from exposure to pollution and other environmental hazards, as well as a lack of access to clean water, nutritious food, and safe housing (WHO, 2021). Globally, there has been growing recognition and instances of youth participation in environmental governance and promoting environmentally equitable and inclusive cities. However, this still remains inadequate in the Global South, indicating the urgent need for more concerted efforts to engage young people in sustainable development practices and policy reform and implementation in these regions.

Ignoring the advancement of environmentally just and inclusive cities in policymaking and city planning can result in inadequate responses to climate change, increasing vulnerability to natural disasters, and a lack of resilience in the face of extreme weather events. The effects on young people are especially concerning in this regard. They face higher health risks and fewer chances for healthy recreation and play. They also inherit the consequences of current decisions. As a result, they may face more severe impacts of climate change in their lifetimes, such as food and water scarcity, displacement, and reduced economic opportunities. In addition, a lack of inclusive policy perpetuates intergenerational inequality, denying young people the right to live in a healthy and sustainable environment.

■ Youth initiatives in ensuring environmentally just and inclusive cities

In Our Common Agenda, the Secretary-General acknowledges the role of cities in being a centre for innovative and inclusive approaches of social change. The examples below from the Global South spotlighting youth initiatives in the fight for environmentally just cities indicate the critical role that youth play in ensuring environmentally just and inclusive social spaces.

Youth for improving air quality and fighting air pollution in India

The Youth Clean Air Network (YCAN) for Indian cities is a project of Clean Air Asia, a non-profit organisation, aiming to improve Asia's air quality.¹ The project combines youth activism, research, collaboration, and innovation to design better policies and plans for addressing and mitigating urban air pollution. Thus, by bringing together young people from various academic backgrounds and utilising their distinct and new perspectives, the initiative has developed solutions to the problem of air pollution.

¹ See <https://www.youthforcleanair.com/>

For instance, YCAN has worked with numerous organisations to conduct air pollution studies in Indian cities. Critically, the data gathered and presented to policy actors provide youth perspectives and concerns about air pollution in India. As a result, the data gathered on air pollution have been utilised to influence policy- and decision-making at the governmental level, with a focus on youth voices and opinions driving the information presented. YCAN has also collaborated with the Indian government's National Clean Air Program and the United Nations Environment Programme to combat air pollution in Indian cities, bringing youth perspectives and voices to the national and international levels of environmental justice in cities across India. Moreover, YCAN has effectively implemented capacity-building initiatives, with over 800 young people from across India being educated in air quality monitoring and activism through YCAN's training programme.

As such, the project has proven to be an effective form of youth-led intervention that provides youth perspectives in data gathering, interpretation, and presentation in order to ensure environmentally just and inclusive cities. The initiative also prioritises youth voices in developing policy recommendations and actions to ensure cities are environmentally just, address major climate-related issues such as air pollution, and are inclusive of their population.

Youth reclaiming urban spaces and inspiring environmental action in Indonesia

In Bandung, Indonesia, a youth-led organisation called the *Komunitas Taman Kota* (City Park Community or KTK) has proven incredibly effective at reclaiming urban spaces for youth (Alam & Nilan, 2015). A group of community youth leaders founded the organisation in order to address the city's lack of trees and green space as a result of development projects that have encroached on urban parks for youth. In response, the organisation conducted 'guerilla seed bombing' on curbsides to reclaim green spaces. The KTK has fostered a sense of ownership and responsibility for public areas through their initiatives and activities, as well as engaged the local population in urban development. This has encouraged community involvement in maintaining and enhancing parks and public areas. In this regard, according to an Asian Development Bank report, KTK's community engagement strategy has enhanced social capital and community empowerment (World Bank, 2015).

Similarly, the *Sahabat Kota*—a youth organisation established in 2008 by university students concerned about Bandung's severe lack of playgrounds—has partnered with local stakeholders such as the Nature Conservation Agency and Construction Work Agency to develop

effective and representative sustainable city planning plans and policies (Alam & Nilan, 2015). With its community organising and capacity-building programmes, Sahabat Kota has empowered communities to address environmental challenges. In this regard, Sahabat Kota-led community initiatives and lessons have educated over 10,000 people in the community about environmental justice (Alam & Nilan, 2022).

Additionally, *Sahabat Kota* collaborated with the Kampung Sawah community in Jakarta to create a community-based garbage management programme. The initiative reduced garbage production by 30% while also creating job opportunities for local individuals (Alam & Nilan, 2022). On a policy front, Sahabat Kota successfully lobbied to include climate change adaptation and mitigation measures in Bandung's mid-term development plan (Alam & Nilan, 2022).

As such, these two youth-led organisations have played a key role in sheltering their cities from environmentally unjust developmental policies that affect youth and children. Moreover, the two initiatives show effective youth practises in reclaiming urban spaces and partnering with stakeholders to advocate for cities that are environmentally just and inclusive living spaces for all populations, which are often overlooked in city development practises and policies.

Youth-inclusive policy-making and planning processes on climate change reform in Ecuador

Youth participation was also evident in Ecuador's inclusive planning process. For example, the Youth National Convention on Climate Change mobilised youth support by bringing together young people from all over Ecuador to address major concerns and develop suitable policy measures (Han & Ahn, 2021). The national convention provided municipal agencies with youth-relevant policy recommendations, which proved to be the platform for climate action that youth organisations ultimately adopted. These key suggestions included the most effective use of resources for reducing climate risks, the deployment of human and financial resources for climate adaptation, and the development of green urban networks for biodiversity preservation.

This has also resulted in neighbourhood climate risk awareness programmes organised by youth supporting climate change as a new and developing topic (Chu et al., 2016). In addition to assisting policy input and project implementation, young citizens led local discussions on inclusive methods of urban climate adaptation, climate policies, and gathered evaluations of various climate initiatives. As such, this initiative aided in the development and enactment of national policies, addressing climate change's impact on the country. Moreover, such

initiatives proved the value of youth-led organisations in bringing about sustainable and actionable policy reform, resulting in actionable items aimed at mitigating the effects of climate change in cities and across the country. By engaging in constructive dialogue with key stakeholders and policymakers, youth were able to offer their insights and perspectives on policy actions that could be taken to develop environmentally just and inclusive cities.

Information is crucial in the fight against air pollution across Cape Town, Lagos, Accra, and India

The Cityzens for Clean Air campaign, which is part of the UrbanBetter Cityzens initiative, aims to amplify youth voices on air pollution, climate change, and health by utilising citizen-scientist data generated by young people (Oni, 2022). Empowering youth to monitor air quality is a first, and often powerful, step in giving them the knowledge they need to fight for their rights. Since many Global South cities are rapidly urbanising, the campaign draws attention to the gaps in current air quality measurements, the importance of having access to safe public spaces that encourage physical activity, and the critical role that young people can and should play in developing interventions that shape the urban health environment for resilience to both health and climate change.

For example, the #Cityzens4CleanAirRUN used wearable sensors to monitor air quality throughout the runs. Citizen scientists used a customised smartphone application that geocoded multimedia (pictures, audio, video, and text) data to document the run's perceived sources of contaminated or clean air as well as the environment's impact on health. The youth part of the campaign then presented the data recorded from the runs to policymakers and stakeholders in their respective governments to inform policy recommendations to combat air pollution (Clean Air Fund, 2023; Oni, 2021).

A notable outcome of the initiative was the creation of the 'Green Budget' in 2018, in collaboration with the Delhi government, which provided funds for programmes aimed at reducing air pollution in the city, such as electric buses and solar energy installations (Deb et al., 2023). As such, the Cityzens for Clean Air Campaign was hugely successful in bringing youth voices to the fore in policymaking. The campaign underscored the youth's ability to envision and implement innovative ideas for addressing effects of climate change and providing useful information to create policy reform in developing environmentally just and inclusive cities.



Promoting environmental justice in connection to the right to the city represents a unique opportunity for inclusion where citizens collectively build urban life.



Youth pushing local and national governments for environmental justice in South Africa

Finally, the Waterberg Environmental Justice Forum (WEJF), based in Lephalale, South Africa, is an important example of youth-created and youth-led projects aimed at ensuring environmentally just and inclusive cities (Lockett, 2022). The WEJF, which operates in six municipalities, was founded in 2012 by youth activists seeking to mitigate the impacts of coal development and the negative effects of such projects in the region for Lephalale and the greater Waterberg region. In doing so, the WEJF intervened with local authorities and businesses in designated areas to hold consultation meetings, citing environmental concerns and the negative impact of such projects on vulnerable populations and districts in the city.

In this regard, the WEJF was successful in its fight against coal mine development in the Waterberg region, resulting in significant reductions in greenhouse gas emissions and better air quality for local residents. In 2016, for example, the group opposed the development of the Makhado coal mine, which would have resulted in the clearing of 6,000 hectares of land and the relocation of many villages (Centre for Environmental Rights, 2022). Consequently, the mining licence was suspended, and the expansion plans were cancelled as a result of the organisation's legal action. The WEJF has also pushed for better water access for communities affected by mining, by collaborating with local authorities and civil society groups to develop water management strategies and provide clean water to marginalised communities.

Conclusion

Environmentally unjust policymaking and city planning disproportionately affect the Global South youth. This, in turn, impacts their right to the city and perpetuates poverty and inequality cycles. As a result, addressing these environmental injustices and involving young people in decision-making processes are crucial for safe, healthy, and resilient communities. To maximise their impact, youth must be empowered and supported to engage in local and national political debates and policy processes. This includes giving them access to information and resources as well as providing them opportunities to participate in community-led initiatives and advocacy efforts. In addition, it is important to identify and address the barriers that prevent young people, particularly those in the Global South, from fully participating in environmental justice efforts. This includes addressing issues such as poverty, lack of access to resources and technology, and limited political power. By working together and utilising the full range of their abilities and resources, youth have the power

to advance environmental justice and the right to the city significantly. Ultimately, this will benefit not only them, but future generations and the planet as a whole.

■ Policy recommendations

Involving youth in the Global South to (re)design and (re)invent inclusive cities

As noted, the right to the city and environmental justice are critical issues affecting youth from the Global South disproportionately. To promote justice and inclusion, it is essential to engage youth in decision-making processes and give them the resources and support they need to fight for their rights. By founding youth-led organisations, building partnerships with existing organisations, offering training and capacity-building opportunities, encouraging participation in decision-making processes and providing financial resources, the Global South youth play a key role in promoting the right to the city and environmental justice. To this effect, a number of policies and practises can be implemented that bring youth to the fore in policy making and implementation, ensuring environmentally just practices and the right to the city:

- Increase youth participation in policy- and decision-making processes. Municipal governments and established civil society groups can actively engage youth groups and create opportunities for meaningful youth participation. As cities can benefit from the unique perspectives and experiences that young people bring, it is important for youth to take steps to participate and engage in the planning and decision-making processes that affect their lives and communities. This can lead to more innovative, creative, and inclusive solutions for urban design and planning. Hence, the onus is first and foremost on youth to proactively engage themselves at the decision-making level and participate in social and political dialogue to have their voices heard in demanding environmentally just and inclusive policies for their cities. Global organisations could offer intergenerational workshops to facilitate experience sharing and learning exchange between different age groups in the Global South and Global North.
- Increase youth's technical capacity to participate in urban planning and policymaking. Technocrats and qualified experts all too frequently rule policy forums. Young people's confidence and ability to affect good change in their communities will grow as a result of targeted capacity building. This may have long-term benefits for both the city and the young people themselves, as they become more active and empowered citizens, ensuring

that the city reflects their wants and demands. To this effect, providing financial resources to support the Global South youth's participation in advocacy and organising efforts can help to level the playing field and ensure that their voices are heard.

- Increase material resources for youth-led climate, environmental and urban justice initiatives. Support from national policymakers, municipal governments, multilateral organisations, and international civil society for youth-led initiatives focused on inclusive urban design and sustainability can foster youth ownership and responsibility. This can lead to more sustainable and resilient cities, as well as an engaged and active youth population. For example, city and national governments could establish a grant programme for youth climate action, or multilateral donor organisations could require that youth participation be integrated into their programmes.
- Adopt youth-friendly participatory planning and governing mechanisms. By engaging a range of key stakeholders, such as local governments, civil society organisations, and private sector actors, in the process of (re)designing and (re)inventing inclusive cities, cities can benefit from a more collaborative and inclusive approach to urban planning and design. This can help to build stronger partnerships between different sectors and can also guarantee that the perspectives and experiences of young people in the global south are considered. As a result, bringing key stakeholders from various sectors together to form coalitions to create more inclusive and accessible cities can lead to the development of integrated approaches to urban planning and design that take into account all stakeholders' needs and perspectives. To monitor their needs and facilitate their connection to decision-making processes, it would be useful to map out the organisations and coalitions that prioritise environmental justice in the Global South cities.
- Mainstream the well-being of children and youth in urban policies and planning decisions. Consideration of youth's needs and experiences in (re)designing cities can contribute to more inclusive, accessible, and livable urban environments. Thereby potentially improving the quality of life for youth in the Global South and enhancing overall sustainability and resilience of cities. The creation of a legislative youth commission, the appointment of a dedicated secretary of youth, or the institutionalisation of youth-centred participatory mechanisms could all support this.

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About the authors

Gabrielle Alves holds a Bachelor's degree in Political Science from the University of Brasília, with an exchange program at the Sorbonne Nouvelle Paris III University. Gabrielle is currently a law student at the Brazilian Institute of Education, Development and Research (IDP). She is a researcher at Plataforma CIPÓ.

Omer Jamal is Project Officer at Southern Voice. He holds a Bachelor's degree in Political Science from the University of Calgary and is currently pursuing an LLB International and European Law at the University of Groningen. His interests include international human rights law, sustainable development, and exploring efforts to address and mitigate the Global North-Global South development gap.



Southern Voice
Website: www.southernvoice.org
E-mail: info@southernvoice.org

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