



SOUTHERN VOICE



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Towards climate change action and youth participation in Sri Lanka for a sustainable future

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Key messages



Sri Lanka is the world's 30th most climate-impacted nation, yet it contributes just 0.05% to global CO2 emissions. It illustrates the inequitable impact of climate change on Global South countries.



Climate change deeply threatens education, employment, food security, health, and overall well-being of Sri Lankan youth.



Policymakers largely overlook young people's potential as decision-makers in climate action and governance, with few initiatives encouraging their involvement.



Educational and institutional barriers hinder youth participation in climate action initiatives, and constrain their capacity to contribute to climate change adaptation and mitigation strategies effectively.

Low-income countries are especially vulnerable to the effects of climate change, despite having lower CO₂ emissions than high-income countries (Fuhr, 2021). Take Sri Lanka, for example: while accounting for only 0.05% of global CO₂ emissions, it is ranked 30th out of 180 countries most affected by climate change (Eckstein et al., 2021). This small island nation in the Indian Ocean is heavily reliant on agriculture and fisheries for income and food. This means that the effects of climate change have a direct impact on the livelihoods of the nearly 82% of Sri Lankans who live in coastal and low-lying areas. Similarly, an estimated 230,000 households in Sri Lanka have suffered from food insecurity as a result of climate-induced impacts on the agricultural sector, with rainfed farmers¹ and agricultural labourers being the most affected (Coslet et al., 2017). Moreover, climate shocks and changes in weather patterns resulted in the displacement of over 600,000 Sri Lankans due to floods and landslides in 2017 alone (Gunaratne et al., 2021).

Sri Lanka has a significant youth population (aged 15-29), accounting for nearly 25% of the total population (Samranayake, 2022). This demographic offers an important opportunity to better understand the effects of climate change on young people in the Global South, and highlight the significance of their participation in climate change efforts (United Nations Fund for Population Activities, 2021). More specifically, the large youth population can play an instrumental role in envisioning and implementing policies and practices that address and manage the effects of climate change on Sri Lanka's agricultural sector (Coslet et al., 2017). Furthermore, over 85% of young people in Sri Lanka live in rural areas, working in climate-dependent industries that are disproportionately impacted by climate-related consequences. So while youth in Sri Lanka are already particularly affected by the impact of climate change, it is also something that is seriously threatening their future livelihood stability. More broadly, involving young people in climate action is crucial for developing effective strategies to address and mitigate the effects of climate change and charting a path towards a sustainable future.

The growing recognition of youth as key actors in climate action empowers them to actively participate in, and influence, climate change policy (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2022). Their dynamic interactions with government officials and civil society actors make climate issues resonate more strongly, raising wider awareness. Moreover, young people can drive tangible changes on the ground, shaping an environmental culture that is resilient to climate

¹ Farmers who use rainwater as the main water source for cultivation.

change impacts, through innovative solutions and the promotion of sustainable practices (Abeywardena, 2018). By leveraging young people's potential in this area, the Sri Lankan government will be better able to navigate the complexities of climate change, build a more sustainable future, and ensure the resilience of vital sectors like agriculture.

However, the lack of international and national policy discourse surrounding youth participation in climate governance has compounded the absence of youth representation in Sri Lanka's climate response. The potential and insights of young people are neglected, contributing to the underrepresentation of youth in shaping and executing climate strategies. This policy brief aims to address this discourse gap by providing valuable insights into the challenges and opportunities faced by young people in terms of engaging with climate action and governance. Through analysing existing literature, international and national policy initiatives, and based on key informant interviews carried out by the authors, the brief provides policy recommendations to actively involve Sri Lankan youth at the local, national, and international level. These recommendations are aimed at empowering youth to take an active role in combating climate change and adapting to its effects.

■ Background

Youth in the Global South are disproportionately impacted by the effects of climate change, in terms of their education, employment, food security, and health (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change [IPCC], 2019). For example, climate change-induced catastrophes lead to student relocations and educational interruptions (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2020), which widen educational inequality. Students in the Global South are twice as likely to drop out of school following natural disasters than their counterparts in the Global North (IPCC, 2019). In terms of economic prospects, over 40% of youth in the Global South are employed in climate-dependent sectors, compared to a lower Global North average of 29% (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2020). In this way, the capacity for these young people to engage in climate governance is often limited due to their limited resources and opportunities. Industries such as agriculture, fishing, and tourism—central to these countries' economies, and key sources of income for young people—suffer significantly from climate-related consequences like crop failures, declining fish stocks, and damage to tourism infrastructure (Eckstein et al., 2021). Hence, the detrimental effects of climate change on these sectors disproportionately impact youth, highlighting the urgency of their inclusion in climate action and policy-making.

Climate change is an important concern for Sri Lankan youth. A study by the British Council (2021) reveals that 66% of Sri Lankan youth view climate change as the most significant future risk, which is the highest figure of any country in the South Asian region. This concern is not unwarranted; as noted above, 85% of youth live in rural areas and are reliant on climate-sensitive industries such as agriculture—the highest percentage in the region—thus making them particularly vulnerable to climate change effects (British Council, 2021).

Agriculture, then, is significantly affected by climate change. From 2010 to 2016, Sri Lanka experienced a 3.2% decline in agricultural yields, a 6.7% decrease in crop output, and a 3.2% reduction in crop production land area (Gunaratne et al., 2021). These declines can be attributed to climate-related impacts

such as floods, droughts, and irregular rainfall patterns, which affect crop growth and yield consistency (Gunaratne et al., 2021). In particular, the rice and paddy industry, which is integral to Sri Lanka's economy and food supply, has been severely affected by these climatic changes. It employs one-third of the Sri Lankan labour force (Indrakularasa, 2022), making its vulnerability to climate change all the more concerning. The worst recorded drought in late 2016 led to an almost 40% decrease in paddy production in 2017 (Gunaratne et al., 2021), which caused widespread hunger, increased poverty levels, and left millions without a reliable income source.

These climate-related impacts on agriculture have broader consequences, including driving youth away from agriculture. An Inter Press Service (IPS) survey of youth in Sri Lanka found that 55% of respondents cited the uncertainty and high risk associated with agriculture as reasons for not choosing it as a primary livelihood, with 46% stating low profits as the main deterrent (Sukanya et al, 2018). Climate change is considered as the leading reason compelling many young people to move away from agriculture, with youth citing the uncertainty of the sector and the high risk associated with the sector such as natural incidents that might occur at any time, such as heavy rains, floods, and droughts. (Sukanya et al., 2018). For instance, nearly 55% of respondents to an IPS (Institute of Policy Studies) survey (2022)² in Sri Lanka on youth and agriculture cited uncertainty and the high risk associated with agricultural activities as a reason for not choosing

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² This survey was conducted using 165 individuals online.

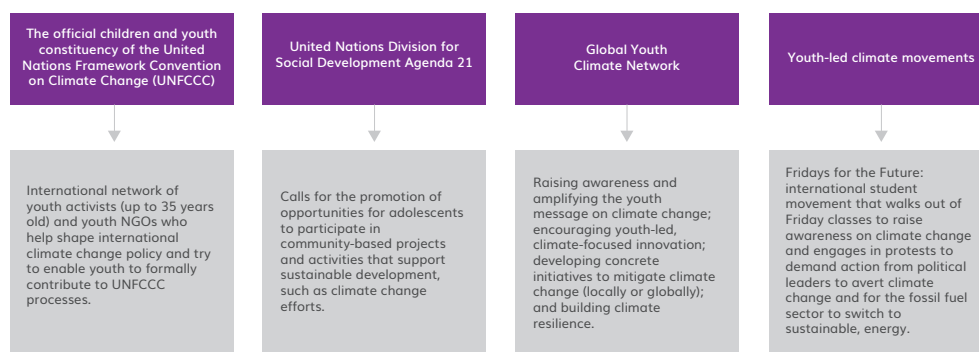
agriculture as a primary livelihood. Furthermore, 46% of respondents stated the low profitability of the agricultural sector as the main reason for moving away from the sector.

Perceived uncertainty and risk are mainly related to the increased likelihood of environmental disasters, such as heavy rains, floods, and droughts. Accordingly, the proportion of young people working in agriculture in Sri Lanka fell from 29.3% in 2003 to 19.6% in 2013 (ILO, 2020). Also, only 23% of young people in agriculture reported having a consistent income, compared to 36% in other industries (ILO, 2020). So, many Sri Lankan youth are moving away from agriculture in search of a more sustainable income (Patel et al., 2020). However, this shift can make them more vulnerable to unemployment and poverty due to a potential skills mismatch with other industries (Patel et al., 2020). The youth unemployment rate in Sri Lanka in 2019 was 22.6%—almost five times the overall unemployment rate of 4.6%—and this shift away from agriculture is thought to be a leading cause (Department of Census and Statistics, 2020). The impact of climate change on agriculture is therefore multi-faceted, affecting the sector's productivity, youth employment, and the overall economic development of Sri Lanka. These realities underline once more the pressing need to address the impacts of climate change to ensure the future economic security of Sri Lankan youth.

Youth in climate action

Young people's increasing advocacy on climate change has meant they have been recognised as key actors in global debates on climate governance and action (see Figure 1). In this regard, several youth-led groups and campaigns, including Fridays for Future (FFF) and Youth Strike for Climate, have gained worldwide recognition. They have sparked significant discussions in the media, academia, and the national and international policymaking arenas on the critical importance of addressing the climate crisis, and involving young people in climate action and governance. In this context, climate-related movements, strikes, and other actions have become increasingly popular among Sri Lankan youth, showing rising concern over climate change. Despite the lack of precise numbers on involvement, Sri Lanka has seen some noteworthy youth-led climate strikes and demonstrations, such as the Global Climate Strike in 2019, and the FFF campaign initiated in 2020, which continues to this day. These actions have mainly focused on large urban centres like Colombo, with varying degrees of involvement and effect. Moreover, youth-led community programmes have demonstrated young people's ability to engage in meaningful climate action governance and reform (see Box 1).

Figure 1. Key global processes of youth climate action and governance³



Note. Elaborated by the author.

Box 1. Youth engagement with climate change through a community programme

In 2019, the Sri Lanka Red Cross Society launched the "Youth Engagement on Climate Resilient Activities" programme as part of its broader project "Wewgam Pubuduwa" or "Climate Resilient Integrated Water Management Project" (CRIWMP). Activities included a creative workshop that brought together over 40 youth and aimed to educate them about climate change and its negative effects on their lives, while also involving them in the development process.

Overall, the programme had significant impacts. It enhanced environmental literacy among youth, educated them about the impacts of climate change, and positioned them as agents of behavioural change, encouraging sustainable practices within their communities. Importantly, the programme mainstreamed these young individuals into the development process, fostering their sense of agency and responsibility. As part of the CRIWMP, the initiative also contributed to bolstering community resilience against climate impacts.

The success of this programme offers a scalable and replicable model for promoting climate resilience and youth engagement in other regions, paving the way for more sustainable communities across Sri Lanka.

Note. Adapted from *Youth Engagement on climate resilient activities and acting as agents of behavioural change* by Kariyawasam & Packeerally (2019).

A notable complaint among young people surveyed by the British Council (2021) was the lack of recognition and support from national and international policymakers. Youth identified educational and institutional barriers that negatively affected their representation in decision-making bodies, and restricted their access to knowledge and awareness, limiting the effect of youth-led initiatives (Chan et al., 2021). Also, even when included in these political processes, young people often do not have

³ The organisations and initiatives in the table cover ages up to 35 years-old.

access to resources and capacity-building opportunities, which can hinder their ability to effectively participate (British Council, 2021).

Finally, political instability in Sri Lanka—particularly in the aftermath of the civil war that ended in 2009, and the nationwide protests of 2022 after the country's economic default—has created significant challenges for the country's youth (Devapriya, 2022). Marked by frequent government changes, policy shifts, and social unrest, this instability has affected youth in several ways. It has created an environment of uncertainty that makes it difficult for youth-led initiatives, including those focused on climate action, to gain traction and effect meaningful change (Punchihewa, 2014). Also, political instability can exacerbate social inequalities and further marginalise vulnerable groups, including young people, which in turn affects their access to resources and opportunities for civic engagement and policy influence (Punchihewa, 2014).

■ **Barriers faced by youth in climate change action/adaptation in Sri Lanka**

Sri Lankan youth striving to tackle climate change face significant hurdles. According to 12 key informant interviews carried out by the authors of a range of climate researchers and government officials, there are two main types of challenges: educational and institutional barriers. These barriers hinder youth participation in climate action initiatives, and constrain young people's capacity to effectively contribute to climate change adaptation and mitigation strategies.

Educational barriers

The level of awareness surrounding the causes and consequences of climate change among Sri Lankan youth is alarmingly low. A UNICEF (2021) study on "Youth Perspectives on Climate Change and Education in Sri Lanka," involving the participation of 1,030 young people between the ages of 15 and 24 from across the country, found that 67% of those surveyed could not adequately explain the causes and consequences of climate change and global warming. The study also revealed that only 48% of Sri Lankan youth said they learned about climate change 'very often or frequently' in their education, falling well below the regional average of 65% and ranking lowest among the eight countries surveyed in the South Asia region. Consequently, young people remain largely uninformed about the repercussions of climate change and the opportunities available to participate in climate-related efforts and movements (Slycan Trust, 2020). Without the inclusion of climate-related topics in educational curricula, youth participation in initiatives aimed at addressing this urgent issue is significantly limited.

Institutional barriers

Sri Lankan youth face substantial institutional barriers in their efforts to combat climate change, primarily in terms of access to decision-making bodies and processes connected with climate governance. An in-depth analysis of current policy documents exposes a concerning lack of climate measures designed to involve young people. Specifically, Sri Lanka's National Youth Policy of 2014 does not address climate change nor propose strategies for youth involvement in climate initiatives. This absence of youth-focused climate policies curbs youth engagement in climate projects, effectively stifling their input on climate action and governance. Furthermore, policy decisions concerning climate adaptation and mitigation are primarily dictated by industry experts and high-level government officials, leaving out valuable youth perspectives. The presence of youth in decision-making entities like government agencies, NGOs, and community groups is strikingly low in Sri Lanka, hindering Sri Lankan youth's capacity to influence climate-related decisions that deeply impact their lives and the future of their communities.

■ Addressing barriers to youth participation in Sri Lanka

Despite the educational and institutional barriers outlined above, Sri Lanka has made strides in recent years in attempting to bridge the gap and encourage youth participation in climate change initiatives. Significant policy reforms have been introduced to address the lack of youth-focused climate measures noted above. For instance, the National Adaptation Plan for Climate Change Impacts 2016-2025 and the Paris Agreement National Development Plan have included commitments to youth education about climate change, demonstrating a shift in policy perspective.

These plans have led to considerable advancements in climate change education and awareness among youth. The Ministry of Environment, for example, launched a National Climate Change Education Strategy (2019-2024) to provide comprehensive climate change education and training to all sectors of society, including youth. This is a concrete response to the previously noted lack of policy frameworks promoting youth involvement.

Recognising the lack of youth representation in decision-making bodies, Sri Lanka has also initiated programs to elevate the voices of young people in climate action. For instance, the Green School Program by the Ministry of Environment has been implemented in about 1,500 of the 10,165 government schools. This program is part of the National Climate

Change Education Plan, and aims to educate nearly 1.5 million school children—approximately 31% of all school children in Sri Lanka—on climate change by 2025.

However, this progress should not overshadow the gaps that still exist. Despite significant advancements, Sri Lanka's national plans still lack a specific focus on fostering youth engagement and participation in climate action. They fail to provide provisions for youth-led initiatives or youth representation on committees. These oversights suggest that the integral role that youth can play in climate action and governance is not yet fully acknowledged.

To eliminate the remaining barriers, and to ensure meaningful youth engagement, it is imperative that national plans prioritise and incorporate concrete strategies to empower and involve young people in shaping a sustainable future. The progress so far is commendable, but there is still a considerable way to go to fully address the institutional barriers that prevent youth from contributing effectively to climate-related initiatives.

Examples of capacity building and participation in decision making and policy formulation in Sri Lanka

The SLYCAN Trust, in conjunction with the Climate Change Secretariat of the Ministry of Environment in Sri Lanka, launched the Global Youth Forum on Climate Change (GYFCC) in 2016. This forum acts as a conduit for youth involvement, and has been important in fostering youth engagement by facilitating knowledge sharing on key climate change issues. It provides a platform where young minds can propose ideas for research and climate action, enabling them to refine their project proposals through skill-building and networking opportunities. Consequently, the GYFCC is a useful example of an initiative that empowers young people to actively participate in pragmatic climate-related policymaking and decision making. It amplifies the voices of youth, highlights their concerns at national and international levels, and offers them a platform to contribute effectively to climate action. Overall, the forum has provided a critical platform for young climate activists, leaders, and youth groups to engage in dialogue about climate change awareness, mitigation, and adaptation.

Similarly, Biodiversity Sri Lanka (BSL) spearheaded the Youth Leadership for Climate Action (YLCA) initiative, mainly targeting young people in the Colombo district. YLCA's mission is to catalyse youth-led interventions in climate action by enhancing knowledge, skills, and connections.

■ **Although young people in Sri Lanka are disproportionately affected by the impacts of climate change, they have been largely ignored in climate governance policy and planning.** ■

It aims to design and implement effective and inclusive youth-led climate action plans, inspire young people to undertake positive climate actions, and acknowledge youth contributions to climate change mitigation and adaptation.

Despite the significant progress made by the GYFCC and YLCA in involving young people in climate action, they have yet to fully address certain governance issues. These issues include insufficient representation and participation of youth, particularly those in rural areas, in climate action. Although the focus of these initiatives on capacity development and awareness raising is commendable, they have not entirely tackled educational and institutional barriers obstructing young people's access to decision-making processes on climate action. These initiatives, while effective in certain areas, need to broaden their scope and ensure a more inclusive and equitable involvement of all youth in climate action.

■ Conclusion

Findings show that a number of significant hurdles to youth engagement in climate action persist, including a lack of information and awareness, as well as a lack of youth participation in policy-making and decision-making processes at the regional and national levels. Although young people in Sri Lanka are disproportionately affected by the impacts of climate change, they have been largely ignored in climate governance policy and planning. This has prevented them from taking effective climate action and from being heard at the policy and decision-making levels. Despite recent attempts to involve Sri Lankan youth in climate change mitigation to address these barriers, there is still a need to improve their access to policy-making and decision-making bodies, and to implement more inclusive knowledge and awareness-raising initiatives relating to climate action and governance.

Overall, it is crucial to give Sri Lankan youth the opportunity to engage in, and eventually lead, initiatives to mitigate and adapt to climate change consequences. Youth involvement in climate action initiatives brings with it a distinct dynamism that can garner significant attention, and lead to new levels of societal awareness. Furthermore, young people have the potential to instigate tangible actions on the ground, fostering a culture more able to mitigate climate change impacts through their innovative solutions and advocacy for sustainable practices (Abeywardena, 2018).

■ Policy recommendations

The following policy recommendations focus on two key areas for youth engagement which emerge from Sri Lanka's climate action strategy: educational and institutional reform.

First, incorporating climate change education throughout pre-university curricula would be a positive step. It would enhance student awareness of climate change issues, consequences, and mitigation strategies. More broadly, climate-related educational resources could be made available digitally, meaning these could be accessed via mobile devices, thereby increasing access to this information especially among youth. Government funding to support climate-related teaching and research at vocational schools and universities may be a useful strategy to encourage young people to pursue degrees in environmental, sustainability, and climate-related fields. Such a strategy could potentially foster a generation of skilled professionals capable of influencing change in their fields and raising awareness about critical environmental issues, particularly in agriculture.

Second, a key avenue to increased youth participation in climate change-related decision-making processes would be to include young people in the policy formulation process, nurturing their engagement and inclusion. Specifically, this could involve consulting young representatives on their climate change and environmental challenges and needs. Possible methods of consultation could include focus groups, town hall meetings, and online forums and social media platforms. These interactions could potentially lead to the creation and local implementation of youth-led projects, positioning young people as agents of change and role models for sustainable practices. In this context, the Sri Lankan Red Cross Society's initiatives, comprising tree planting, small tank upgrades, climate-smart agriculture, and various awareness-raising and educational activities, could serve as examples of initiatives that can be facilitated and expanded to encourage community engagement with, and resilience to, climate change.

Also, young people could be encouraged and helped to lead climate change adaptation and mitigation efforts through active government support of their participation. For example, young people working on climate change projects could be provided with financial and technical assistance. The government can invest in capacity-building and training initiatives for young people, equipping them with the knowledge and skills needed to participate effectively in policy formulation and implementation. Topics could include environmental science education, policy and advocacy training, as well as training in leadership and speaking skills.

Overall, such investments would result in a generation of young people who have the information and skills required to lead climate action and create positive environmental change.

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