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THE ROLE OF THE YOUTH IN NATURAL RESOURCES GOVERNANCE

Introduction and Background Context

The concept of natural resources governance gained popularity in recent decades at the back of the age-old practice of environmentalism, which generally directs attention to the preservation of the environment and to the relationship between environmental issues and development (Pepper 1986). By ‘natural resources’ is meant the “natural assets (raw materials) occurring in nature that can be used for economic production or consumption” (OECD 2022). Natural resources are in four categories, that is, mineral and energy resources, soil resources, water resources, and biological resources. They are also broken down into renewable and non-renewable resources (IDEA 2017). The concept of ‘natural resources governance’ is defined as “the formal and informal arrangements by which decisions over natural resources are being made, how powers, responsibilities and rights over natural resources are exerted, and how populations can access and benefit from natural resources” (IUCN 2017). From this definition, formal arrangements refer to the whole array of legislative frameworks, rules, regulations and policies that are found at the local, regional and international levels. Informal arrangements refer to the processes, norms, and practices found in local communities. In this paper, focus is directed to the role and place of the youth in the governance of natural resources. In the African context, youths are of interest for two main reasons: first, the continent has the most youthful population in the world, with 400 million estimated to be in the 15-35 years age bracket (AU 2023). Second, Africa is the wealthiest region by measure of mineral resource endowments in the soil. However, generally, there is poor participation of groups such as the youth, women, and the disabled in natural resources governance (Bukar 2013). The African Union acknowledges the existence of several barriers militating against the inclusion and active participation of the youth and minority groups in public programmes, governance and decision making (AU 2020).

The deepening global concerns about environmental governance, and about mineral extraction and community rights make the broad-based participation of women, youths and minority groups in natural resources governance very critical for realising sustainable and equitable development. Practical evidence across many countries of the Global South with natural resource endowments depicts strong linkages between the exploitation of mineral resources and conflicts/ political instability; and between the exploitation of natural resources and environmental damage/ climate change. These have been confirmed by a recent study of natural resources governance in the Sahel region by the OECD (2022) which unearthed significant linkages between natural resources governance and fragility along economic, environmental, political, security, and societal dimensions. The study concluded that the observed dimensions of fragility had a destabilising effect on the implementation of effective natural resources governance frameworks.

While mineral resources have the potential for spurring economic development, in many cases resource extraction has produced the ‘resource curse’ phenomenon whereby a country’s mineral wealth, on the one hand, does not translate to economic development, and on the other, increases chances for internal conflicts (Cuvelier et al. 2014). Sub-Saharan Africa has remained a classic case of the ‘paradox of plenty’ whereby its vast natural resources make it the richest, but its bank balance shows it is the poorest (King 1997). The consequences of poor natural resources governance, which include illicit financial flows, money laundering, elite accumulation, and corruption, have thus far triggered intense activism by local, regional and

global rights movements advocating environmental justice, sustainability, and good governance of natural resources.

Trends of Natural Resource Governance in the Global South

The Global South is generally rich in natural resources such as land, forests, minerals, and water. Access to, and control of these natural resources are executed through hybrid governance structures involving formal (governmental) and informal (societal) arrangements (Cuvelier et al. 2014). The arrangements, however, do not particularly accommodate the youth, which may explain why the youth are forming advocacy movements aiming to address the exploitation and mismanagement of natural resources in their respective regions. A cursory review of literature indicates that most of the youth movements are coalescing around the mobilization of climate action and sustainable environmental governance. Evidence from parts of Africa (e.g. the SADC countries) shows that governments have maintained a preference for community-based natural resources management (CBNRM) regimes. The community-based entities created so far (e.g. CAMPFIRE) have multi-level, multi-stakeholder governance structures, and operate on the basis of devolved power and authority from central governments (Harrison 2015). However, in such initiatives, experiences have shown that the power and resources devolved to the decentralised structures are insufficient (Chêne 2017). In addition, the youths are not visible players in those arrangements because they are treated as a subset of the broader ‘community’ group. They are subsumed in the bigger, all-inclusive social group, yet past experiences of combining all age groups on the participation platforms have mostly produced tokenistic participation for the youth because of the domineering and exclusive influence of elders and local leaders (Masuku and Macheke 2021). Several governments across Africa have also created structures such as youth parliaments, youth councils and youth representative groups, but their effectiveness in bringing in youths into natural resources governance is yet to be seen.

Policy Gaps on Youth Participation in Natural Resources Governance in Africa

At the AU level, ‘youth development’ is a key thematic area underpinned by several policies, instruments and strategies including the African Youth Charter, Youth Decade Plan of Action, the Malabo Decision on Youth Empowerment, TVET Continental Strategy, African Mining Vision (AMV), and APAYE: African Plan of Action for Youth Empowerment 2019-2023. In the African Youth Charter, interest is on its provision for the prevention of discrimination against the youth as well as promotion of ownership of property and participation of the youth in society. It does not explicitly cover the participation of the youth in natural resources governance in their respective countries. In the Youth Decade Plan of Action two of its five pillars are of relevance to the role of the youth in governance issues, that is, the governance, peace and security pillar and the agriculture, climate change and environment pillar. The African Mining Vision obliges African countries to improve the governance of natural resources and ensure the equitable distribution of economic benefits from mining activities. The TVET Continental Strategy provides for the development of policies and strategies for the creation of national wealth through youth empowerment strategies. APAYE, in addition, guides youth development programmes in Africa and seeks to drive a continental youth empowerment agenda. An evaluation of all these instruments and policies reveals that besides their obvious lack of direct provisions for youth participation in natural resources governance, they are invariably affected by challenges at the implementation level in individual member countries (AU 2020). Often, the operationalisation of continental programmes is affected by the limited engagement of young people, meaning most of the programmes are not genuinely youth-driven. In a number of cases, a disconnect exists between the continentally-determined

programmes and their implementation at country level. Youth programmes further suffer poor coordination, weak synergies, and programme design dysfunctions.

Country Case: State of Affairs in Zimbabwe

Zimbabwe has formulated policies and enacted laws to promote youths' economic advancement and empowerment, but none of them precisely promotes youth involvement in the governance architecture of natural resources in the country. The national constitution provides for the right for a fair representation of the youth at all levels of governance, and in line with that provision, the government amended the Electoral Act in 2022 to make provisions for a 30% quota for the women and the youth in parliament and local government. The provision reserves 10 seats for the youth in the national assembly. This development helps in giving voice and agency to the youth in policy making processes across sectors. However, this is a new development whose impact is yet to be seen.

The country also has the National Youth Policy and structures such as the youth parliament and youth council which are all meant to advance youth issues. Thus far, these have not succeeded in pushing youths into governance structures. In the recent past, the country once had indigenisation and economic empowerment laws which provided for youth empowerment. Practically, the policy did not go beyond ensuring the financing of youth projects and start-up businesses. The lack of explicit provisions for youth involvement in most of the policies and laws confirms the observation on natural resources governance that “there is lack of youth involvement across natural resource governance and their voices are rarely captured speaking out against impacts of flawed mineral governance” (Mpahlo cited in [Masekesa 2022](#)). A few factors account for youth exclusion and marginalisation in governance and policy development. Youths in the 15-17 age bracket are technically excluded from the platforms of active participation because the national constitution (section 81) sets the legal age of majority at 18 years, and therefore anyone below that age is deemed to be a child. Well-meaning youth participation in governance is also complicated by the politicisation of the youths by the youth wings of political parties. This has come with massive indoctrination and subsequent weaponisation of the same youths in advancing and protecting ideological standpoints of their respective political parties ([Oosterrom and Gukurume 2019](#)). Other players such as non-governmental organisations (NGOs) with a thematic focus on governance and development could be an alternative conduit for promoting youth involvement and participation in policy development across sectors. Unfortunately, most of such NGOs have an “existentially conflictive relationship” with the government ([Masuku and Macheka 2021](#)). As a result, only a few are running social programmes to promote the involvement of the youth in mineral resources governance and environmental justice.

Recommendations

To comprehensively address the challenge of limited involvement of the youth in the governance of natural resources in their respective countries, recommendations are made to three categories of actors, that is, the regional bodies, national governments, and the youth.

Recommendations to the Regional Bodies

- The African Union and its regional blocs should prepare instruments and strategies specifically targeting capacitation of the youth to actively participate empowerment in natural resource governance in the respective countries;
- Youth programmes for participation in natural resource governance should be built with strong monitoring and evaluation mechanisms at national and African Union level. This

should be steered from a centralised digital dashboard for regional youth empowerment programmes;

- There is need for designing capacity building programmes for relevant agencies of central governments tasked with implementing youth-in-governance programmes.

Recommendations to National Governments

- Governments should formulate policies that go beyond the generalised youth empowerment agenda, and make specific provisions for integrating the youth in the governance of natural resources.
- Governments should foster partnerships and collaborative arrangements between youth representative groups, civil society organisations, private sector and government agencies in natural resource governance.
- Across local, provincial and national tiers of governments, youth participation in governance and decision making on natural resources should be scaled up through explicit measures. Governments have to foster a culture of ‘public interaction’, which involves the exchange of policy-relevant information between the youth, policymakers, and decision makers. Public participation literature further identifies what are called ‘public partnerships’ as one of the best ways of enhancing youth and public participation. It is a practice that gives citizens the space to shape the ultimate decisions that are taken by authorities. When a decision to adopt a certain course of action has been made, the youth will be directly involved in the processes of planning, designing, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the programmes.
- The national governments should spearhead national programmes for capacitating the youth to enable their meaningful contribution to natural resources governance.
- Central governments should enhance participatory decision-making practices and inclusive spaces for genuine youth involvement in the governance of natural resources.
- Central governments should decentralise participation platforms, devolve sufficient resources and create an enabling environment for unconstrained youth participation in natural resources governance in both the rural and urban contexts.

Recommendations to the Youth

- Youths and their community groups should spearhead the demand for accountable environmental governance. This should extend to calling out poor corporate social responsibility (CSR) practices amongst mining firms dotted across rural communities.
- Realising the policy gaps in youth involvement in natural resources governance, organised youth groups have to intensify lobbying and advocacy work until relevant policies and instruments are put in place to specifically address the youth question in natural resources governance.
- To make the burden lighter, non-governmental youth groups should form collaborative synergies for advancing the youth agenda in natural resources governance.

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