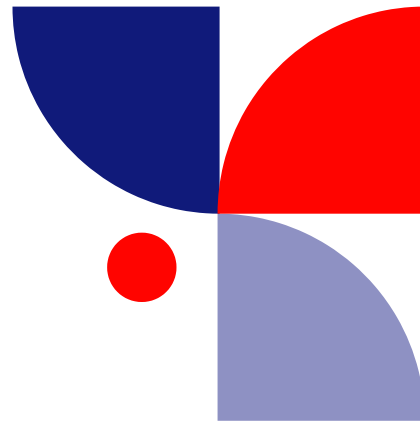
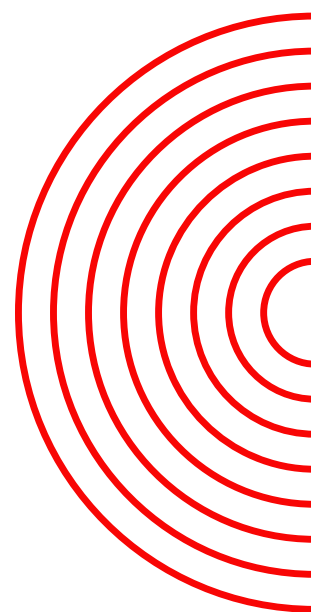




OPINION PIECE

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Why Youth Inclusion in Policy-Oriented Research is Central to Sustainable Development in Africa



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Research Enterprise Systems (RES) is a pan-African, independent, and non-partisan knowledge production, capacity development, communication, and outreach organization. Founded in 2015, RES offers innovative services in knowledge production as well as capacity development to improve decision-making in public, private and civic sectors. It collaborates with local and global organizations, governments and institutions to drive evidence-based solutions, fostering innovation and sustainable development through shared expertise and resources while empowering the supply and demand sides of the evidence value chain for sustainable social, political and economic development. For more, see www.researchenterprisesystems.org

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Introduction

Over the past decades, global frameworks have increasingly recognized youth as vital partners in shaping development trajectories. As part of the efforts aimed at mainstreaming the youth in global development agenda, the United Nations adopted the World Programme of Action for Youth (WPAY) in 1995, explicitly prioritizing the “full and effective participation of youth in the life of society and in decision making.”¹ About two decades later, the Youth 2030 Agenda further reinforced youth commitment and engagement across peace building, human rights, sustainable development, and humanitarian efforts.² Regionally, the African Youth Charter (2006), an African Union treaty, affirmed that development hinges on youth’s “active and enlightened participation,” and tasked member states with promoting equal partnerships in governance, research, and policy.³ Despite these declarations, translating these ideals to concrete set of actions continues to suffer a crucial missing link, which is how evidence is generated through policy-oriented research—defined as systematic inquiry that informs, shapes or evaluates public policy is perceived to be inadequate globally and especially so in Africa.

Africa’s demographic landscape is distinct: a continent of youthful energy, innovation, and aspirations. With over 60% of its population under the age of 25, the continent holds enormous potential to drive transformative development. Yet, paradoxically, this demographic dividend is largely absent from the processes that define and shape the continent’s policies especially in the area of policy-oriented research. This deficiency is particularly stark in Nigeria, where more than 60 million young people (ages 15–35) represent approximately one-third of the country’s population. Official documents, including the 2019–2023 National Youth Policy, classify youth as “creative forces” whose active participation in governance and research is invaluable.⁴ Nigeria has also ratified the African Youth Charter and endorsed global frameworks like WPAY and the Beijing Platform for Action, yet these commitments have not translated to systemic and structural changes that will guarantee increased opportunities for youth inclusion at the highest level of decision making. Policy-oriented research, the body of knowledge generated to inform government decisions and public policy is vital for addressing complex socio-economic issues, ranging from unemployment, insecurity to climate change. However, the role of young people in shaping the knowledge ecosystem should not be neglected. Youth are often recipients or subjects of policy, not co-creators of the knowledge that influences it. This perceived exclusion represents a missed opportunity. The participation of youth in policy-oriented research should not only be seen as a matter of inclusion, it is also a matter of necessity. As such, they are critical to achieving the theme of 2025 International Youth Day “Local Youth Actions for the SDGs and Beyond.” Ignoring young voices in the research space, we risk perpetuating policies that are disconnected from the lived realities of a majority of Africa’s population.

The Blame Game: Exclusion and Oversight in Policy Research

There is a long-standing narrative in African development discourse that blames the disconnect between research and policy on a communication gap between researchers and policymakers. Policymakers argue that academic research is too theoretical and inaccessible. Researchers claim that policy actors ignore evidence and prioritize political convenience. While these concerns are valid, a critical layer is often overlooked: the absence of young researchers in these spaces.

This oversight is both structural and cultural. Structurally, many research institutions are led and staffed by older professionals who have limited incentive to recruit or train young talent. Funding cycles often favor established researchers with long track records, leaving little room for new entrants. Culturally, age hierarchies in many African societies reinforce the notion that expertise is synonymous with age, making it difficult for young researchers to be taken seriously.⁵ This creates a vicious cycle. Young people, despite being educated and exposed to digital tools and global trends, remain on the fringes of policy debates. Their role is often limited to survey enumerators, interns or passive participants in validation workshops—far from the table where research agendas are set or policy briefs are crafted.

Bridging the Gap: From Tokenism to Transformation

To bridge the gap between knowledge and policy, Africa must rethink how it engages youth in policy research, not as passive consumers but as active producers of knowledge. Tokenistic involvement—where a few young people are included to check boxes—will not suffice. What is required is a transformational shift in how we conceptualize expertise, participation, and research value. Youth inclusion should begin at the conceptual phase of research. What problems are we investigating? What questions are being asked? Who decides the research methodology? These are critical decisions that shape outcomes, and young voices should be part of these conversations.

In recent years, we've seen isolated examples of good practices. The West African Think Tank Challenge fosters mentorship among senior and early-career researchers. The Mastercard Foundation's Young Africa Works initiative supports youth-led studies centered on employment. Similarly, Research Enterprise Systems (RES), a pan-African knowledge enabling organization, has evolved sustained commitment to youth inclusion in the research space. Aligned with its vision of a decision-making ecosystem driven by reliable, credible and timely evidence and mission to empower supply and demand sides of the evidence value chain for sustainable social, political and economic development. Through their innovative programs, RES equips emerging researchers with key skills—from crafting methodology suitable for policy inquiry to communicating with stakeholders and navigating feedback loops.⁶ By integrating practical training into a broader strategy, RES demonstrates that youth participation in policy research is neither peripheral nor temporary but essential and enduring. While initiatives like these mark significant progress, there remains ample room to broaden their reach and deepen their impact. Many young Africans are yet to gain consistent access to mentorship, equitable funding, or meaningful roles in shaping research priorities. To unlock the potential of youth engagement, inclusion must also be inter-sectional. Focusing solely on urban university graduates limits the richness of perspectives available. Rural youth, young women, persons with disabilities, and those outside formal education systems all bring vital insights to the table. Expanding opportunities to include this full spectrum of voices will only strengthen Africa's knowledge ecosystem.

What Makes Youth-Inclusive Policy Research Different?

Including youth in policy-oriented research fundamentally changes the nature, direction, and relevance of the research itself. Young people bring new methodologies, fresh perspectives, and often a deep awareness of current socio-political trends shaped by their everyday realities. Firstly, young researchers are more inclined to

use digital tools—GIS mapping, mobile surveys, big data analytics, and social media scraping—to gather and interpret data. These methods not only increase efficiency but also make research outputs more relatable to modern audiences.

In addition, youth tend to approach research questions with a greater sense of urgency and moral clarity. Issues like climate change, police brutality, mental health, and unemployment are not academic topics for young Africans—they are existential threats. As such, the research they produce tends to be more action-oriented, solution-driven, and people-focused. Moreover, youth-involved research can break disciplinary silos. Many young researchers are self-taught or operate across multiple fields—economics, technology, gender studies, and the arts—allowing them to produce hybrid, innovative insights that better reflect the complexity of contemporary African societies. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, several youth-led organizations in Nigeria conducted rapid-response surveys on the impacts of lockdown on informal workers and students.⁷ Their findings informed community-level interventions long before any government policy adjustments were made. When youth are involved, research outputs also become more accessible. They tend to write in plainer language, leverage multimedia tools, and disseminate findings through podcasts, infographics, and Twitter threads. This democratization of knowledge makes it easier for broader segments of society, including other young people, to engage with research evidence.

Call to Action: A Paradigm Shift is Needed

If Africa is to craft policies that are forward-looking, equitable, and evidence-based, it must make a deliberate choice to elevate youth voices within the policy research ecosystem. This involves both mindset shifts and structural changes. Institutions must stop viewing young people as inexperienced liabilities and start seeing them as knowledge partners. It is not enough to ask, "How do we include youth?" Instead, we should be asking, "How do we redesign our systems so that youth co-lead the research process?" This shift requires bold investments, leadership buy-in, and the dismantling of bureaucratic and age-based gate-keeping in research institutions, universities, and policy think tanks.

Recommendations

For Researchers and Academic Institutions;

- establish innovation hubs within universities and research centers that specifically support youth-led policy research projects, with seed funding and access to institutional infrastructure;
- pair experienced research experts with early-career researchers in structured mentorship programs that include collaborative publications, proposal writing, and policy engagement;
- introduce policy research and evidence-based advocacy into university curricula with practical modules that equip youth with skills in data collection, analysis, and policy translation;
- encourage methods that engage communities directly, allowing youth researchers to co-create knowledge with the people affected by the policies in question; and
- remove paywalls, promote open-access journals, and build youth-friendly platforms for sharing research data and findings.

For Policymakers and Policy Actors;

- create long-term fellowships for young researchers within government ministries and agencies to work on policy formulation and evaluation;
- adopt national frameworks that make youth engagement a legal or procedural requirement in policy-making processes, particularly in areas affecting young people directly;
- channel part of national research and development budgets into independent youth-led policy organizations, particularly those focused on innovation and social justice;

- ensure that national statistics and policy research are disaggregated by age, gender, and geography, and incorporate youth-designed indicators of well-being; and
- train and include youth in monitoring and evaluation (M&E) of public policies and development programs to ensure feedback loops are grounded in lived experiences.

Conclusion

Youth inclusion in policy-oriented research is not a symbolic gesture—it is a strategic necessity. It is about rethinking how knowledge is produced, who produces it, and whose realities inform our public decisions. Africa’s development cannot be driven by data that excludes the voices of its majority. It is time for the continent to transition from researching for youth to researching with youth and ultimately being led by youth in shaping a more just and evidence-driven future.

Endnote

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