

# Youth Geographies: Student environmentalism and the futures of young people in Kenya

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

New stakeholder identities have emerged in the past two decades claiming their place in the environmental governance and sustainable development arena, and these have included representation from indigenous communities, the private sector, the women, and more recently, children and youth. Traditionally, young people were seen as passive participants in matters of governance, without any specific role in society but to see, learn and obey. However, the rising of a new form of subjectivity in environmental governance by the young people is driving the academic community to reconsider the theory of stakeholders, and who has stewardship over the environment.

The movement of young people and environmentalism as an identity-seeking strategy has been perpetuated and is penetrating every circle of governance, including international organizations, governments, regional organizations, local communities, religious movements, and even the private sector. A unique field of interest in these strategies is the emergence and growth of student environmentalism as key to transforming the social-economic and political space. Whilst their existence is indisputable, their motivations, structures and milestones have not been widely studied. There lacks empirical data on the motivations behind these clubs: extent of student environmentalism as an intrinsic interest of the young people; the value of university clubs to environmental governance; and how the university acknowledges the role that these clubs play in pedagogy. The documentation of their nature and form appears to be overshadowed by the growing literature of young people as a 'lost generation'.

## **Background information**

In the mid 1970s, a wave of environmentalism started in Kenya by the Greenbelt Movement, with the work of the Late Prof. Wangari Maathai who successfully mobilized communities to protect the environment as a link to development. Through her work, she demonstrated the significance for government leaders to show responsibility to the environment as an obligation to their citizens, likewise, the role of individuals in protecting the environment and enhancing their livelihoods. Since then, the management of the environment has been the role of, not just the government, but also the civil society. The 1992 Rio Conference and Environment and Development, leading to the adoption of the Agenda 21, affirmed the direction that the country had already started following- that of governing without governments. With the creation of the major groups within the United Nations, and the emphasis on governments to give a voice and a platform to such, there is now the recognition of more than one actor in the governing of the environment. The coming into force of the Environmental Management and Coordination Act a decade later, could be defined as the prime time when the government started taking a central role in environmental management in the country. However, environmentalism was already a household activity of the Kenyan non- state actors then, and hence central in supporting the government in environmental governance.

The rising of a new form of subjectivity in environmental governance by the young people is driving the academic community to reconsider the theory of stakeholders, and who has stewardship over the environment. At the international levels, the United Nations has continued to support young people in all their work through programmes like the United Nations Youth Programme, UNEP Tunza Programme for children and youth, and the UNHABITAT youth programmes among others. Similarly, donor agencies and international financial institutions like the DFID, SIDA, USAID, WorldBank have all shown solidarity with the UN vision of youth and have established youth policies and programmes and

directed governments to take action by providing funding towards youth development projects. In 2010, DFID and UN released a book on how to ensure youth participation in development citing demographic dividend and aid effectiveness as main theories of doing so. The USAID have recently released a youth in development policy, which aims at providing guidance on how best youth can be empowered to contribute to and benefit from their country's development efforts. In response to these international efforts, most governments including Kenya have established Ministries and youth, youth parliaments and programmes to address the youth agenda. The youth agenda has also been integrated in most of the Strategic plans and Visions for the country.

The young people themselves have also established youth organizations shaping their destinies in these contemporary neoliberalized economies. The growth of youth movements in Kenya can be traced back to the early 1990s, and have flourished with more democratic space to express their views and take actions on issues of concern to them. There has also been numerous youth initiatives led from within the country and by international and regional organizations, for instance, the African Union brought into force the Africa Youth Charter in 1995. Further, these youth-focused initiatives could be segregated into youth- led, youth oriented within 'senior' organizations UN- led, rural based, entrepreneurial, and private-sector led programmes.

### **Problem Statement**

Despite the efforts put on the problems of the young people in the past two decades, there has been little efforts to understand and secure the space of the educated young people. The unique realization of the role that university students play beyond achieving beyond university degree is the research interest for this study. Not only is the student activism undocumented, the establishment of youth initiatives locally and internationally is not commensurate to the reporting of the outcomes of their action. Their participation has not

been empirically evaluated and reported *vis a vis* other major achievements of the international acclamations and government action plans on youth.

The movement of young people and environmentalism as an identity-seeking strategy has been perpetuated and is penetrating every circle of governance, including international organizations, governments, regional organizations, local communities, religious movements, and even the private sector. A unique field of interest in these strategies is the emergence and growth of student environmentalism as key to transforming the social-economic and political space. Whilst their existence is indisputable, their motivations, structures and milestones have not been widely studied. There lacks empirical data on the motivations behind these clubs: extent of student environmentalism as an intrinsic interest of the young people; the value of university clubs to environmental governance; and how the university acknowledges the role that these clubs play in pedagogy. The documentation of their successes appears to be overshadowed by the growing literature of young people as a 'lost generation'.

Nevertheless, there has been a small but growing body of new literature on young people which has taken an objective stance, and has provided literature on the aspirations of young people in different milieu such as agriculture, ICT, business, and more recently, environment and business. These 'unchosen and unheard identities' form part of a unique and growing field of interest in youth studies which tries to research the young people from an objective point of view. For decades, whilst young people have been portrayed as passive, they have successfully carved out their own identities and negotiated their futures in the same challenging socio-economic and political systems. For instance, the extensive work of Jeffrey on young people in India culminates *Jugaad*, a notion used by the young people to perpetuate corridors of power to earn a livelihood from the corrupt neoliberal states (Jeffrey, 2012 unpublished). It's upon the premise that indeed there is an objective approach to youth studies that this research seeks to follow.

This research will thus try to answer the questions on the motivations, structure, implications, and futures of university students' participation in environmentalism. In asking the question on motivation, the research will seek to understand the reasons for engagement, the subjects involved, and the links with university learning. In understanding the structure of this participation, the research will seek to describe the agency and power dynamics within these clubs, (and how this compares with the world outside the university). Further, the research will analyse the implications of this form of participation on environmental governance and education for sustainable development. Viewing this participation as an identity seeking strategy, I use the words of *Alex de Waal and Argenti* to amplify my research aim and questions:

*“...Young people are finding creative means or articulating their aspirations- and their alternatives to established social and political orders- using cultural idioms and establishing modes of association that may be invisible and obscure to national policy makers. These are crying out for recognition. How are they set up? Who joins and what influence do the organizations have on their members and on the wider society? ...”* (de Waal & Argenti, 2002) .

### **Research aim**

To provide an empirical and methodological case for environmentalism as an identity and space for negotiating youth futures.

### **Research Objectives**

- I. To analyze the nature and form of university students' environmentalism in Kenya.
- II. To understand/explore the relationships between university students' environmentalism and education for sustainable development, environmental governance and youth futures.

## **Research questions**

*I. To investigate the nature and form of university students' environmentalism and its relation to youth futures.*

1. Why is the environment and environmentalism important to young people?
2. How do young people participate in environmentalism?
3. What are the motivations of young people participating in environmentalism?
4. How are university students' clubs set up? How do they interact within and outside the university?

*II. To explore the relationships between students' environmentalism and education for sustainable development?*

5. What is the role of the university in driving and acknowledging students' environmentalism?
6. What value does student environmentalism add to education for sustainable development?
7. How do universities engage in education for sustainable development initiatives in and outside the university?

*III. To understand the implications of students' environmentalism on environmental governance in Kenya.*

8. What value does student environmentalism add to environmental governance of a country?
9. What place should (and is) student (youth) environmentalism place in Kenya and why?

## Chapter 2: Summary of Literature Review

This research will be based on three theories: environmentalism, education for sustainable development and geographies of youth futures. To understand environmentalism, I will focus on post-colonial environmentalism in Kenya, with reference to the state, non-state actors and making of subjects. With reference to making of subjects, as Agrawal aptly writes, “...New environmental subject positions emerge as a result of involvement in struggle over resources (*politics*) and in relation to new institutions (*Institutions*) and changing calculations of self-interest and notions of the self (*identities*)...” (Agrawal, 2005) I will seek to understand how these three elements interact in the case of young people and environmentalism in Kenya. Further, I will look at the theories of environmentalism by the Kenyan population, and how this influences governance.

To understand youth agency and youth futures, I will use the work of Honwana & De Boeck (2005) which claims that the environment in which the young generations are living will highly determine how they identify with and participate in decision making and bring about change. I refer to the work of Bourdieu (Bourdieu, 1990) to understand how young people transform their social status through environmentalism. Whereas young people have always been perceived as passive participants in decision-making and implementation, their heightened participation in environmentalism is an indication of more profound questions that need to be understood in the motivations of young people in designing new structures where their voices are heard and legitimized.

Further, a historical study of youth agency reveals that the early colonial leaders in Africa were drawn from students' activism movements. The post-colonial student movements in Kenya were viewed as a form of resistance to the ruling governments, (Hughes, 1987, Klopp & Orina, 1994). Their prevalence is a sign of socio-political vigour, and signal of their refusal to accept deplorable social and political circumstances in which they find themselves, and a determination to find new ways to give meaning to live in an environment in which almost all

avenues for self- advance are closed (de Waal & Argenti, 2002). Understanding the historical motivations of students' activism in Kenya will help analyze how notions of environmentalism and youth agency, can be used to describe the geographies of the future. I will explore how environmentalism and youth agency have been portrayed in framing the geographies of the future, specifically focusing on education for sustainable development. A deeper understanding of generations, and intergenerational justice, thus I will refer to the work of Mannheim (Mannheim, 1970) on problems of generations, Barry (Barry, 1989) on intergenerational justice, and linking this with recent international dialogues for Rio + 20 conference on Ombudsperson for the future generations (World Future Council, 2012) .

The subject 'youth' has become highly politicized in both national and international scenes. This politicization has taken varied narratives and frames, most of which are subjective to the identity of the young person in question. The most common narrative is of a demographic dividend, especially in developing countries, as with the UNFPA annual population reports which emphasis on the need to capitalize on the demographic dividend. The subject is framed by some governments as that of a national security issue, taking the examples of Sierra Leone during the civil war, and the wide mention of the Arab spring as steered by restless young people due to unemployment.

Contrary, seen as a double-edged agenda, the innovativeness of the young people as portrayed in their use of ICT, is a frame that has attracted both national and international focus. For instance, international bilateral organizations, are advocating for the enhancement of the use of ICT by young people to drive other sectors like agriculture. The subject has also been presented both as a frame applicable in claiming the future and intergenerational justice, through legal processes, as currently being advocated by international organizations like the World Future Council in the Ombudsperson for the future generation.

A health narrative has been adopted to help the young people deal with sexual and reproductive health issues including HIV/AIDS, early pregnancies, drug and substance abuse.

An education narrative has also tagged along for as long as the health frame, where providing free and compulsory education in primary and secondary level has been emphasized in most developing countries. Recently, the African Union with support from its member states, and the international community has established a Pan African University (PAU) with an aim of providing high-level postgraduate training for the young people which would otherwise be sought abroad.

These, and many other narratives, are addressed as the youth solutions of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. They demand certain youth identities; they are led from top down to the young people. However, these narratives all lack in common the participation of young people in the design of the programmes/initiatives, and the pre-supposed motivations and aspirations that would be fulfilled by such programmes. An interest in what it means to have an objective identity, developed from an everyday life, is thus important for the scholarly community. The study of these identities seeking strategies among university students will not be a new research field. It advances previous research on the student activism in Germany, Sudan, Kenya and other places, which paid emphasis on their zeal to steer social-political and economic changes in their countries in times of turmoil.

## **Chapter 3: Methodology**

### **Introduction**

Gathering data for the study has been categorized in three sections, as drawn from each of the research objectives and questions below. Both quantitative and qualitative data collection will be employed in the study including, semi- structured interviews, focus group interviews and online surveys. The study will also incorporate participant observations and review of secondary data.

### **Scope of the Research work**

Taking a case study approach, the research will be conducted in 8 Kenyan public universities. These universities have been selected from the database of MESA (Mainstreaming Environment and Sustainability in African Universities Partnerships) partners (UNEP, 2012) in Kenya. The assumption is that, such universities will have knowledge and experience in education for sustainable development, one of the key focus areas for this study. Students and university lecturers will be targeted as respondents. Further, I will target university students around the world (through an online survey) who are going to contribute a broader view of the subject, and then use the Kenya specific case to ground the context.

### **Target groups**

The target group has been categorized as follows:

#### ***Category 1: Leaders of environmental clubs and Category 2: Members of the clubs***

The first and second target groups will be university students enrolled as members of the students' clubs to provide information on their motivations, actions and futures with regards to environmentalism. This target group will also include university students participating in events as the YES course and the WSCSD in Nairobi in November 2012, who will respond through focus group discussions and online surveys. This will be combined this with

responses from an online survey shared with university students around the world on the perceptions of their identity as university students.

### ***Category 3: Faculty members and Category 4: Others –Key informants***

The third and fourth category of target groups will be faculty members in the universities selected on the basis of 1) Involvement with the students' clubs 2) involvement with MESA programme 3) leading programmes relating to students life at the university and 4) involved in environmental initiatives at the university. Key informant interviews will also be included in this category as identified during the fieldwork.

### **Data Collection Methods**

**Focus group discussions:** In each of the 8 universities, 3 sets of student groups will be selected for participation in the focus groups discussions. Focus groups will also be extended to events like the YES and the WSCSD events in Nairobi. The focus groups will also include control groups of other university clubs like the to compare with the responses of the main target group.

**Semi-structured interviews:** These will be conducted with the faculty members in each university and with individual students to probe on individual perceptions of their futures.

**Online Surveys** will be sent out to university students around the world with a main aim of getting diverse responses on the motivations of university students' environmentalism. This survey will apply methods used by other scholars to measure the public environmental

concerns like the new environmental paradigm (NEP). The results of this survey will be used to compare with the results of the focus groups and interviews in the Kenya universities.

**Participants' Observation:** Young people are best observed at the prime of their actions, when they let themselves be, without any social and political order upon them. I will participate in student-organized forms of environmentalism to understand their day-to-day aspirations as they take part in these activities and relate them to their studies and their futures. Noting that as a researcher my presence may affect the kind of responses I generate from my subjects, I will take part as an observer.

**Review of documentation:** This will include the clubs' official documents, reports, websites, blogs, activity reports and communication within and outside the university. In addition I will review the university documents to see how well the clubs have been presented and recognized in the university wide programmes and communication both within and outside the university.

## **Research Sections**

### ***1. Investigate the nature and form of university students' environmentalism and its relation to youth futures.***

1. Why is the environment and environmentalism important to young people?
2. How do young people participate in environmentalism?
3. What are the motivations of young people participating in environmentalism?
4. How are university students' clubs set up? How do they interact within and outside the university?

***II. Explore the relationships between students' environmentalism and education for sustainable development.***

5. What is the role of the university faculties in driving students' environmentalism?
6. What value does student environmentalism add to education for sustainable development?
7. How do universities engage in education for sustainable development initiatives in and outside the university?

***III. Understand the implications of students' environmentalism on environmental governance in Kenya.***

8. What value does student environmentalism add to environmental governance of a country?
9. What place should (and is) student (youth) environmentalism place in Kenya and why?

**Research Significance**

The significance of this study is the lessons we can learn from youth aspirations as portrayed in student environmentalism at the university level and what implications this has on their pre-conceived identities in the society. The findings from this research will challenge the pre-conceived identities that the state, the community, the international community hold of the young people. The research will provide information critical in challenging existing narratives on the role of young people in the future of the country, and more specifically in governance.

University life could be seen as the prime time for the young people to make important decisions of what career paths to take, what to become and what not to be. It's a prime time that is also critically affected by the fast neoliberalizing African economies- constrained

opportunities for the educated, low quality education, high living costs, highly competitive business environment. It's the prime time they define their space in the society. The young people are not only carving out new identities to overcome the pre-existing youth subjectivities; they are also carving out identities to enable them fit into a rapidly neoliberalizing continent. This then marks the beginning of the notions of youth identity and space in a neoliberalized Kenya. Understanding what drives their motivations at this stage will assist the policy makers in better understanding youth identities and narratives that guide policy making not only in Kenya but across the globe.

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