



## CONCEPT NOTE

"Africa's Youth Voices"

A network of young Africans coordinated  
by the UN Office of the Special Adviser on Africa



**United Nations**  
Office of the Special Adviser  
on Africa

## BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

### Introduction

The United Nations [Office of the Special Adviser on Africa \(OSAA\)](#) is dedicated to advancing Africa's interests and priorities on the global stage, in line with the [calls of the Secretary-General](#) to implement "multilateral solutions for a better tomorrow" and his leadership in organizing the "Summit of the Future," a "once-in-a-generation opportunity to enhance cooperation on critical challenges and address gaps in global governance, reaffirm existing commitments including to the [Sustainable Development Goals \(SDGs\)](#) and the [United Nations Charter](#), and move towards a reinvigorated multilateral system that is better positioned to positively impact people's lives."

Recognizing the immense potential and vital perspectives of young people from Africa in accelerating the continent's sustainable development towards the achievement of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the African Union's Agenda 2063, OSAA aims to establish its **Africa's Youth Voices (AYV)** initiative as a global network to provide young Africans with access to a multilateral stage, amplifying their voices and bringing their expertise and knowledge of the African context at the centre of international policymaking. This focus on the role of African youth in shaping global policymaking impacting the development of Africa is also aligned with the Secretary-General's vision of a modern United Nations rejuvenated by a forward-thinking culture and empowered by cutting-edge skills for the twenty-first century, which is enshrined in the Organizations' [United Nations 2.0 initiative](#).

Whether they are professionals, members of academia, think tanks, the creative community, civil society organizations and other fora, the AYV network will bring together the voices and knowledge of **young Africans under the age of 35 established on the continent and across the diaspora** who are actively engaged in the following areas related to Africa's development from OSAA's strategic agenda:

1. Financing for Development
2. Sustainable Development to Promote Sustainable Peace
3. Governance, Resilience and Human Capital
4. Science, Technology and Innovation
5. Industrialization, Demographic Dividend, and the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA)
6. Energy and Climate Action

The network's primary objective is to contribute to and lead the provision of analysis, advocacy, and advisory activities on critical issues related to peace, security, sustainable development, human rights, and humanitarian assistance in Africa, with a focus on youth perspectives. By bringing together African youth from and with diverse backgrounds, the network aims to influence agenda-setting at regional and global levels, reshape the narrative on Africa's development and shift policymaking to align with the realities of the continent.

The AYV ultimately aims to bring African youth voices to shape the outcomes of intergovernmental deliberations on Africa, harnessing the expertise and perspectives of African youth and their network to contribute to global policymaking, accelerate the

transformation of multilateral commitments into concrete actions and impact the lives of communities across Africa in a tangible manner, accelerating sustainable development, bringing durable peace and lasting prosperity throughout the continent.

### **Africa's Demographic Dividend**

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Africa is experiencing a demographic shift, with a significant portion of its population expected to be comprised of young people. This shift creates enormous opportunities for the continent to harness towards the achievement of the SDGs. OSAA recognizes the importance of this opportunity in shaping a resilient, strong and prosperous Africa and aims to leverage this new network of Africa's Youth Voices as a dedicated, multisectoral and multiplatform entry point for young Africans to bring their voices and know-how to the global leadership table. The AYV is, therefore, contextualized within the broader narrative of harnessing the potential of Africa's youth as catalysts for positive change, innovation, and sustainable development on the continent and globally.

The latest data and statistics across multiple sectors, including employment and education, underpin OSAA's approach. First and foremost, Africa's development is closely linked with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which is central to the world's 1.2 billion young people,<sup>1</sup> currently making up 16 per cent of the global population, including the 1.3 billion young people who will call the world home by 2030. Specific to Africa, the percentage of young people on the continent in several age groups is projected to experience a remarkable increase compared to the rest of the world from 2023 to 2050.

- In the 15 to 34 age bracket, the number of young Africans is expected to increase by 73 per cent compared to 6 per cent elsewhere (See Figure 1).
- For the 15 to 24 age group, the growth is 63 per cent in Africa compared to 5 per cent in the rest of the world (See Figure 2).
- For people aged 0 to 34, Africa's youth will grow by 52 per cent compared to 3 per cent across other regions (See Figure 3).
- The growth is expected to be 44 per cent in Africa compared to 2 per cent around the world for the 0 to 24 age bracket (See Figure 4).

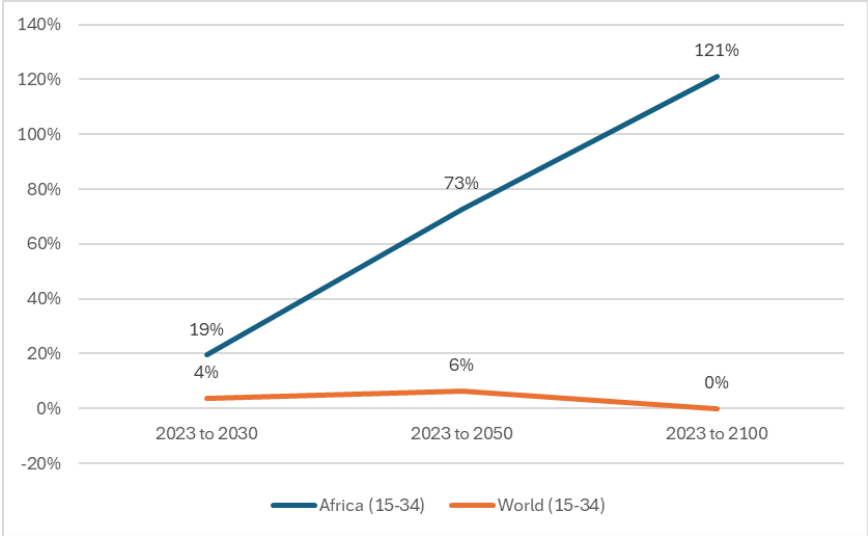
This demographic shift, expected to occur in the next 25-plus years, holds significant economic, social, and political potential to accelerate Africa's development, providing the continent with enormous potential to boost prosperity, achieve durable peace and assume its rightful place at the global leadership table. With a growing young population and the appropriate investment in education, social protection and job creation, Africa could harness a large workforce to fuel unprecedented economic growth. There is potential for greater innovation, creativity, and cultural vitality with a vibrant youth demographic. A growing youth population can also influence political dynamics, as young people often seek representation and opportunities for participation in governance. Youth-led movements and activism can shape policy agenda and drive social change in Africa towards the achievement of the 2030 Agenda and Agenda 2063 of the African Union.

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<sup>1</sup> [United Nations Global Issues: Youth](#)

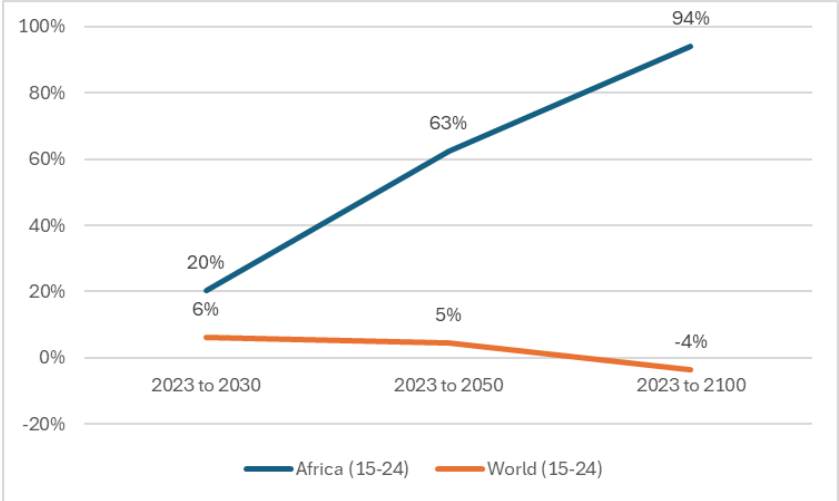
The impact of this demographic dividend could extend beyond Africa's borders. With a young and growing population, Africa could become a significant market for goods and services, as well as a vital source of a skilled labour force and innovation, which would impact global labour markets and cultural diversity around the world. Young Africans opting to stay within the continent rather than seeking opportunities abroad may also shift global migration patterns. Overall, the projected increase in Africa's young population presents clear opportunities for the continent and the world. Effective policy responses that prioritize education, social protection, job creation, and sustainable development will be essential for harnessing this potential.

**Figure 1: Projected African youth population growth trends (age 15-34 years)**



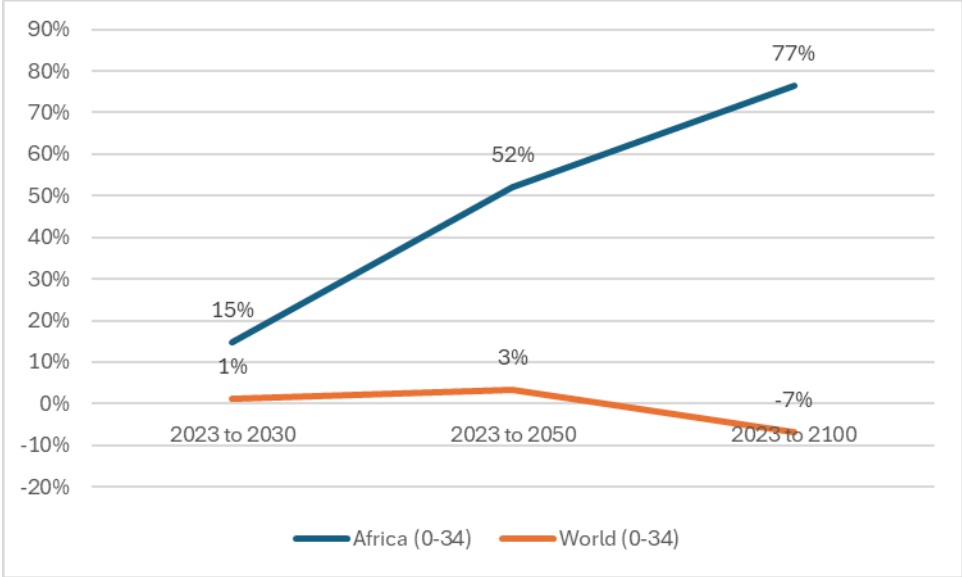
Growth by per cent	2023 to 2030	2023 to 2050	2023 to 2100
Africa (15-34)	19	73	121
World (15-34)	4	6	0

**Figure 2: Projected African youth population growth trends (age 15-24 years)**



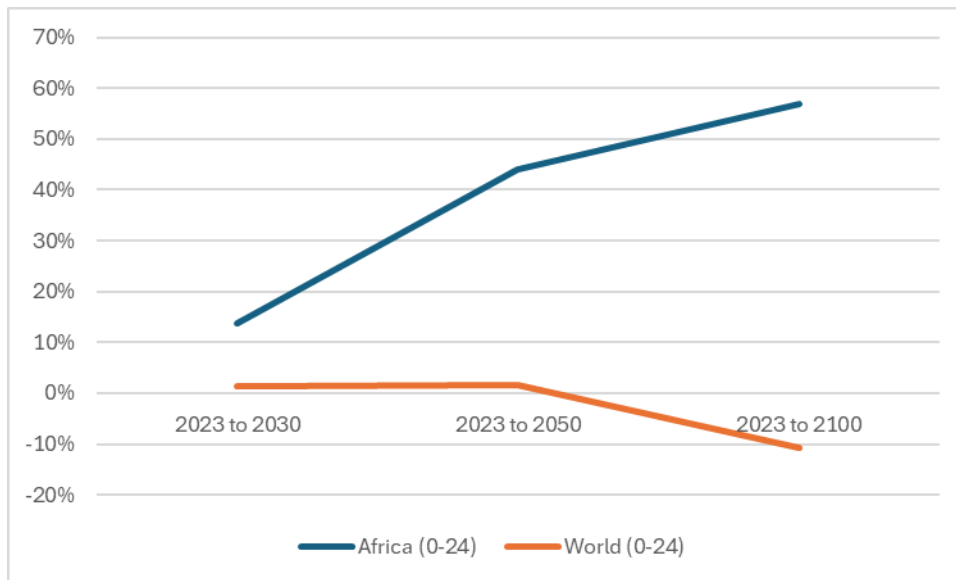
Growth by per cent	2023 to 2030	2023 to 2050	2023 to 2100
<b>Africa (15-24)</b>	20	63	94
<b>World (15-24)</b>	6	5	-4

**Figure 3: Projected African youth population growth trends (age 0-34 years)**



Growth by per cent	2023 to 2030	2023 to 2050	2023 to 2100
<b>Africa (0-34)</b>	15	52	77
<b>World (0-34)</b>	1	3	-7

**Figure 4: Projected African youth population growth trends (age 0-24 years)**



Growth by per cent	2023 to 2030	2023 to 2050	2023 to 2100
Africa (0-24)	14	44	57
World (0-24)	1	2	-11

### Young Africans, Education and the Labour Market

The potential of Africa's growing youth population is significant from the perspective of the labour market. For example, 10 to 12 million young Africans are expected to enter the workforce according to the African Development Bank (AfDB), which are much higher figures than in other regions. There are also clear growth areas for African youth on the continent. For example, most entrepreneurs leading start-up ventures in Africa are Africans younger than 35. This entrepreneurial market has enormous financing potential, highlighted by a milestone achieved recently. The year 2021 marked a significant milestone for the start-up ecosystem in Africa, witnessing \$2 billion<sup>2</sup> in funding. This remarkable achievement has been primarily attributed by the African Development Bank (AfDB) to the advantageous economic climate and growing population trend. Overall, the record-breaking influx of funding into Africa's start-up ecosystem in 2021 signifies a significant milestone in the continent's economic development journey. It reflects the growing confidence of investors in Africa's potential as a hotbed of innovation and entrepreneurship and underscores the opportunities that lie ahead for unlocking sustainable growth and prosperity across the continent.

Economic shocks, such as recessions, also impact young people more significantly in the labour market: they tend to be the first group to be downsized and suffer more than older workers from interruptions to hiring because they constitute a disproportionately large share of jobseekers. Therefore, employment policies must consider the importance of the youth perspectives and policy and decision-makers across Africa and globally must listen to Africa's youth voices. Implementing band-aid solutions does not work and perpetuates

<sup>2</sup> [Africa: youth by educational level 2000-2040 | Statista](#)

the status quo in creating youth labour policies. The AYV brings young Africans and policymakers together to shift the mentality from this “business-as-usual” approach.

The challenges of unemployment and access to decent work impacting African youth are also multifaceted, with more than 8 in 10 people on the continent employed in informal work.<sup>3</sup> With 95 per cent of young Africans earning their living in the informal economy, they are exposed to poor job quality, inadequate earnings and heightened job insecurity. The impact is particularly severe in conflict-affected areas where economic disruptions and instability force many into informal work. In addition to the unemployment rate, other indicators paint a sombre picture. For example, in Sub-Saharan Africa, 145 million people were in extreme working poverty in 2023 (at the \$2.15 per day threshold, in purchasing power parity terms), equating to a third of the employed population, with young workers finding themselves in extreme poverty at higher rates than adult workers.<sup>4</sup>

Beyond further entrenching poverty, the lack of decent work opportunities for African youth also impacts peace and security on the continent, increasingly creating fertile ground for alienation and radicalization. Extremist groups such as Al-Shabab actively recruit in coastal areas and isolated provinces, where poverty and deprivation concentrations are higher and youth unemployment rates can be up to 50 per cent higher than the national average.<sup>5</sup> Such groups exploit experiences of marginalization to mobilize recruits, targeting frustrated young people across communities with limited access to education, decent work, resources and opportunities.

In terms of education, Africa's average youth literacy rate stands at 80.26 per cent, one of the lowest by region. Europe and Central Asia's rate is nearly universal, and for East Asia and the Pacific as well as the Latin America and the Caribbean region it is above 95 per cent. South Asia, with a more than 85 per cent youth literacy rate, also shows a higher rate. These data highlight the continent's challenges but also clear potential for growth with the implementation of adequate policies, investments, and focused educational initiatives.<sup>6</sup>

Africa's resilience and potential for growth in education and labour is further highlighted by Africa's median youth unemployment rate. While more than one in four young people in Africa – around 72 million – are not in employment, education or training (NEET),<sup>7</sup> this median youth unemployment rate, at 12.37 per cent, indicated a concerted effort towards integrating young people into the labor force in Africa. This value is favorably positioned below the Middle East's rate and that of the Latin America and the Caribbean region at 22.12 and 17.25 per cent respectively. Even with Europe and Central Asia's rate at 14.47 per cent and South Asia's at 15.13 per cent, Africa's median youth unemployment rate suggests the continent's resilience and potential.

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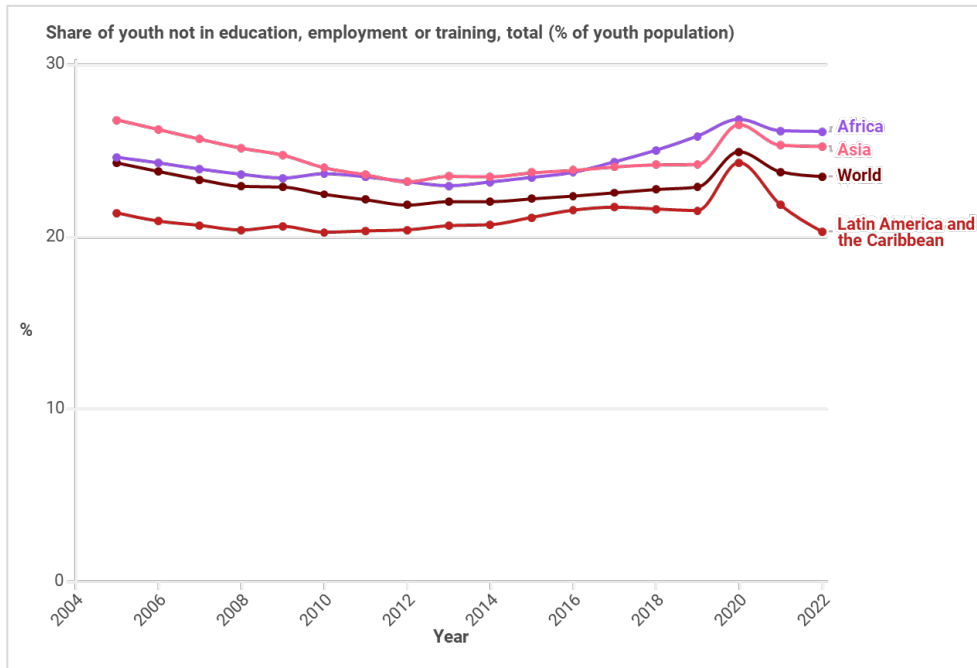
<sup>3</sup> ILO, World Employment and Social Outlook: Trends 2024 (2024)

<sup>4</sup> ILO, World Employment and Social Outlook: Trends 2024 (2024); ILO STAT, Spotlight on Work Statistics: The working poor or how a job is no guarantee of decent living conditions (2020)

<sup>5</sup> ILO, Promoting Decent Employment for African Youth as a Peacebuilding Strategy, Evidence Synthesis Paper Series 4/2020 (2020)

<sup>6</sup> OSAA staff calculation based on UNESCO data

<sup>7</sup> [African youth face pressing challenges in the transition from school to work](#)



Source: [UN SDG Indicators Global Database](#)

By providing a space for young Africans to articulate their perspectives, AYV acknowledges the unique insights and experiences that young Africans bring to the table. This network extends beyond traditional modes of engagement, embracing multifaceted collaboration through peer-to-peer exchanges but also engagements through digital communications channels, including social media, Artificial Intelligence-generated content, short- and long-form videos, fine arts and other forms of creative expression that enables young people to co-create, co-innovate and convey their ideas effectively. Through OSAA’s AYV, young people will have a seat at the global leadership table to claim their rightful place, make their voices heard and work together towards articulating African solutions to African challenges in global policymaking.<sup>8</sup>

### Youth-Driven Multilateral System Reform

Meaningful youth engagement is a cornerstone of the work of the United Nations and a priority of the Secretary-General. As outlined in [Youth 2023: Working with and for Young People](#), the Organization’s youth strategy aims to “facilitate increased impact and expanded global, regional and country-level action to address the needs, build the agency and advance the rights of young people in all their diversity around the world, and to ensure their engagement and participation in the implementation, review and follow-up of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development as well as other relevant global agendas and frameworks,” including the African Union’s Agenda 2063.

<sup>8</sup> [Young People’s Potential, the Key to Africa’s Sustainable Development](#)



OSAA's youth advocacy strategy aligns closely with the goals and principles outlined in the [United Nations Youth Strategy](#), fostering meaningful, action-oriented engagement with young Africans, highlighting the impact of youth-led innovation on the continent and scaling up youth actions that are making a difference across African communities. This alignment underscores the importance of Africa's Youth Voices as we marshal support for and mobilize actions to implement the Secretary-General's call for reforming the global multilateral system, making it more equitable and in line with current global realities. Young people, and young Africans in particular, in a continent that has the "[youngest population in the world](#)," according to the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA), are the future. They deserve a central role at the leadership table in driving this transformation of the global multilateral system.

The reason is two-fold. First, empowering young Africans to play a central role in the global multilateral system to create the space for Africa-centric policymaking is a critical investment in the future of African economies. Africa, with a large proportion of people under the age of 24, has an opportunity to reap a substantial "demographic bonus" in accelerating economic development, resilience, sustainability, and productivity across the continent. This systematic investment in young people aligns with the [United Nations 2.0](#) strategy. OSAA, therefore, emphasizes that "empowering young people, particularly young women, within the United Nations system is our priority. Fully aware that new solutions must be developed side by side with young people, we will work with Member States to rejuvenate our workforce, amplify young voices, and nurture their leadership potential. We commit to setting a global benchmark for youth engagement."<sup>9</sup>

Second, it is especially important that young people in Africa are not only included in the decision-making process and given access to decent work and innovation but also provided equal access to policymaking mechanisms impacting their own future. Involving young Africans goes beyond inclusion and the customary token participation. It sends a clear, unequivocal signal that business as usual is over, and young people are in the space to decide about their lives and livelihoods. Young people contribute daily to the benefit of their communities and nations across Africa. From providing support to the elderly to advocating for justice and equality, consistently proving their centrality to building and sustaining peaceful, resilient and sustainable communities. As such, in a transformed multilateral system, it is crucial to "[engage youth, create a space for them, and give them a seat at the table](#)."

### **Harnessing the Summit of the Future**

As the world prepares for the upcoming [Summit of the Future](#) from 22 to 23 September 2024, the role of young people takes centre stage. Several key strategies are outlining this approach, including the establishment of dedicated national youth consultative bodies that will be delivered at the Summit. These bodies will allow young people to connect, share experiences, contribute their perspectives and create the necessary policy space to mobilize actions on critical issues impacting their lives. Furthermore, a global standard for meaningful youth engagement will be developed to ensure that youth participation is

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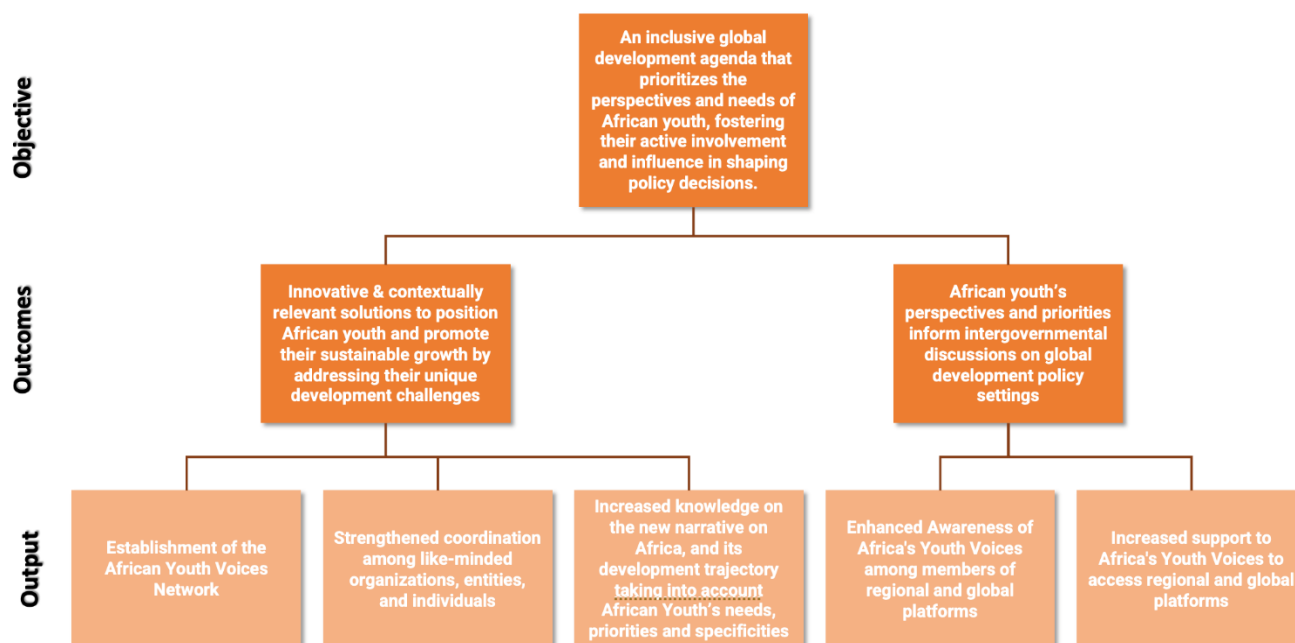
<sup>9</sup> [Our Common Agenda - Policy Brief 11](#)

not just tokenistic but truly impactful. This standard will outline best practices and guidelines for involving young people in decision-making at all levels.

The Summit will create opportunities for young people to participate directly in UN decision-making processes through various channels, such as consultations, forums, and advisory groups. A standing UN Youth Townhall will also be established for young people to engage with global leaders and changemakers, including UN principals. This Townhall will empower youth to channel their knowledge and experience in a process that directly impacts global agenda and policymaking, prioritizing actionable initiatives. This participative process is at the heart of the Summit and a model framework for Africa's Youth Voices, as it stems from the Secretary-General's [Our Common Agenda](#) report, a response to a call from Member States for ideas on how to respond effectively to current and future challenges.

Through Africa's Youth Voices, OSAA will leverage the opportunity of the Summit of the Future to advance African youth's agenda, working with a wide range of UN and external partners, including the United Nations Youth Office and the Office of the African Union's Youth Envoy, to maximize the participation of young Africans in shaping policies impacting their future. The network will feed African ideas, experiences and knowledge into the Summit, including the UN Youth Townhall and the [Pact for the Future](#), a concise, action-oriented outcome document of the Summit agreed in advance by consensus through intergovernmental negotiations. This approach recognizes the unique experiences and insights of African youth and seeks to amplify their voices throughout the Summit of the Future, cementing the role of Africa's Youth Voices as a concerted effort to harness the energy, creativity, and expertise of young Africans in shaping a more inclusive, equitable, and sustainable future for all.

## OBJECTIVE, OUTCOMES AND OUTPUTS



### Key functions and objectives of Africa's Youth Voices include, but are not limited to:

- Knowledge production: Inspire collaboration between the network and [OSAA's strategic agenda and clusters](#) to feed into knowledge production, ensuring that the youth perspective is considered in knowledge products positioned to shape policymaking in Africa.
- Create an entry point for young Africans to influence agenda-setting at regional and global levels while reshaping the narrative surrounding Africa. The network contributes to the development of knowledge products and policy documents that inform intergovernmental discussions on African issues. This includes providing insights and recommendations to policymakers at both regional and global levels.
- By bringing together youth of diverse backgrounds, aim to **influence agenda-setting, contribution to knowledge and policy** at regional and global levels while reshaping the narrative on Africa. To underscore African Youth's Sole Ask: Action Over Words.
- Provide a space for African youth to conduct in-depth analysis, share expertise, and advocate for policies and actions that address pressing challenges facing African youth and their specificities.
- Facilitate engagement with UN Bodies, and intergovernmental committees focused on African issues, as well as with the African Group to the United Nations. This ensures that the perspectives and expertise of African youth lead and meaningfully contribute to decision-making processes.

## **PARTNERS**

- UN entities and focal points working on youth issues
- African Union entities and focal points working on youth issues
- Pan-African Youth Union
- National African Student Association (NAFSA)
- Think Tank Network
- Africa Knowledge Network

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