



Where are Global South youth? Youth interest, identities and participation in global biodiversity governance

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1. Introduction

The triple crisis of global environmental governance, related to climate change, biodiversity loss and increased pollution, requires transformative planetary changes (Guterres, 2022). While many dimensions of global environmental governance could be changed from the top, by, among others, reforming international institutions (for instance the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) annual Assembly set-up) or creating new ones (as the recent international treaty on the high seas or the ongoing negotiations of a treaty on plastics) as supported by recurrent Earth summits, recent bottom-up dynamics, especially by youth, are attempting to disrupt them from below. The worldwide climate marches initiated in 2018 are one of the most visible signs of such new bottom-up dynamics.

There are several reasons why youth are particularly relevant actors of change for Earth system governance (Sloam et al., 2022). Among others, youth will suffer the most from global environmental disruption as most young people are based in developing countries already under climate threat (0–24-year-old represent 60 % of the African population, Cooper et al., 2021, 35); they are also the future implementers of the currently adopted environmental rules. More generally, youth are key for the input and output legitimacy of international institutions: the world median age is just over 30 with 16–30 year old¹ representing a quarter of the world population (Orsini et al., 2024); youth are associated with long-term targets and being considered as closest to future generations (see section on Youth and Future Generations in the 2024 United Nations (UN) Pact for the Future); and, as individuals in the being, are able to question and reshape the boundaries of international politics (Orsini et al., 2024).

As a result, youth have been at the forefront of numerous media

articles and are now starting to be a central object of inquiry in academia, that tends to concentrate on climate change politics (Harriet Thew being a pioneering author). However, the media have had the tendency to frame youth as actors from the Global North, with the salient figure of Greta Thunberg, sometimes even silencing Global South youth on purpose by erasing them from official media pictures (Evelyn, 2020). In academia, research has initially taken an essentialized vision of youth as a unique category (Thew, 2018; Thew et al., 2020) to only recently open the black box of YOUNGO, the official youth platform in global climate politics (Marquardt et al., 2024).

Taking such research as a starting point, keeping in mind the need to orientate research towards Global South youth and to extend it to topics beyond climate change, our article analyses the contribution of Global South youth to global biodiversity politics. Section 2 presents the literature review our research questions and hypotheses are derived from. Because most of the literature is conceptual/theoretical, we decide to develop a quantitative study backed by comprehensive and innovative empirical data. Section 3 presents the methods that we used to develop such data and explains how we confront it to our research hypotheses. Section 4 details the results of our quantitative analyses and Section 5 provides a general discussion, backed by qualitative interviews' quotations. Our contribution is threefold. First, we show that Global South youth have a deep interest in global biodiversity politics, particularly in regions such as Africa and Asia. Second, we show the multiple identities of youth that bring new thinking on the structural hierarchies of geographical origin, age and gender in such politics. Third, we identify the barriers faced by Global South youth, particularly by African youth, to participate in international negotiations. Taken together, these elements enable to provide an accurate picture of Global South (and Global North) youth in global biodiversity politics and to formulate

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¹ Demography defines youth as 0–24. Politically, the UN defines the upper limit of youth to be 30 within the sustainable development goals' framework and for global biodiversity governance; and 35 for climate change international negotiations. 16 is the minimum voting age worldwide. 16–30/35 therefore refers to the political definition of youth in global environmental politics. In this article we use 16–30 as we deal with biodiversity.

recommendations for their greater consideration in global (environmental) politics more broadly.

2. Conceptual framework: the Global South and youth in global environmental politics

North-South debates in global environmental politics have for long been framed as difficult, especially at the occasion of Earth summits (Morin et al., 2020). Developing countries² were initially partly disengaged from global discussions because they suffered from greater struggles, such as conflicts and hunger, that made the environment a less important priority. Moreover, countries in the Global South needed to develop to tackle these challenges, and perceived environmental efforts at best as a Global North luxury, and at worse as a Global North attempt to prevent them from economic prosperity. Engaged in this debate were also issues of environmental degradation responsibility, with the Global North being historically responsible at a greater level of greenhouse gas emissions than the Global South.

Despite reluctance from developing countries' governments to engage in global environmental governance, individual and collective environmental activism within the Global South has been proliferating. Jeff Haynes (1999) and Silpa Satheesh (2021) highlight how activism in these regions has a long history, starting in the 1960s until today. Among others, Peter Dauvergne (2023) discusses the significant role of Global South youth in raising awareness about plastic pollution, with now states negotiating a new global plastic pollution convention by 2025. Similarly, Jacqueline Peel and Jolene Lin (2019) note that the Global South is actively involved in climate litigation efforts, demonstrating a commitment to holding polluters and governments accountable in Asia, Africa and Latin America. Compared to their Global North counterparts, Global South activists, including youth, appear as digital natives, using online platforms to connect with peers across both Global North and South contexts (Kolleck and Schuster, 2022), bypassing traditional organizational channels (Nurmala Dewi, 2022).

Because Global South diplomacy and Global South activism studies have neglected youth, the question of the interest of Global South youth towards global environmental politics remains open: to what extent do Global South youth show interest for global environmental politics? (Research question 1). While the North/South divide literature at the global level insists on the reluctance of developing countries to engage in global environmental governance, the literature on activism enables us to hypothesize that Global South youth have interest for such politics and, as such, are active in transnational platforms dealing with environmental issues (Hypothesis 1).

While not concentrating on the Global South, another important debate in the current literature has been focusing on the identities of youth, in terms of age and gender, as youth are unexpected actors on the international scene. Studies have mostly covered Global North youth, analyzing the profiles of climate marchers in European cities (de Moor et al., 2019). They found that youth engaged in climate mobilizations worldwide have a younger profile (they are school attendees or students) and are predominantly female. This adds up to the recurrent representation of global youth activism in the media through testimonies of young female figures, that contributes to a legitimacy crisis among youth. Indeed, several Global South activists feel disconnected from such highly publicized young female figures of Global North activism, with the landmark example of Greta Thunberg (Yu, 2022). This suggests the existence of an identity gap between the reality of Global South youth identities and how Global youth is usually portrayed in global environmental discourses, a gap that still needs to be scrutinized. Moreover, studies of Global South youth environmental activism tend to essentialize Global South youth by mostly concentrating on

indigenous youth (MacKay et al., 2020; Gomez-Mera, 2024; Ritchie, 2021; with the exception of Ortiz et al., 2024). And yet, understanding youth identities in their diversity is key for adapting our analytical models (of participation and inclusion among others) to empirical reality (Cooper et al., 2021). Building on this major gap, we ask (Research question 2): What are the identities of the Global South youth engaged in global environmental governance? As they come from a high diversity of countries, we expect Global South youth to show a diversity of identities in terms of geographical origin, age and gender (Hypothesis 2).

Another key aspect of the literature is the question of the access of Global South actors to global politics. Studies on the negotiation burden of multilateral environmental agreements (Muñoz et al., 2009) indicate that even states, who are strong political organizations, face high costs to ensure their participation, with "negotiation fatigue (can be) particularly heavy on developing and small countries, whose limited resources are specially stretched by the growing negotiation burden" (p. 4). Most Global South actors encounter significant barriers to participate in international processes, amplifying a potential North-South divide in global environmental negotiations (Vadrot, 2020). The burden also exists for environmental non-governmental organizations that, as a result, mostly come from the Global North and dominate climate Conferences of the Parties (COPs) (Hadden and Bush, 2021; Hanegraaff, 2015) as well as communication on social media (Hong et al., 2020).

Participation in general is even more a challenge for youth, who are not professional international actors, particularly youth from the Global South (Pawelczyk, 2022; Hubbard and Williams, 2021). An analysis of YOUNGO, the official youth constituency within the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, indicates that its members come mostly from the Global North (Marquardt et al., 2024). Moreover, negotiation barriers exist not only between Global North and Global South youth, but also within the Global South itself. Testimonies confirm that urban Global South youth often have easier access to international processes compared to their rural counterparts, highlighting intra-regional disparities due to different resource allocation (Bullon-Cassis, 2021). It is also true that various studies suggest that Global South actors have a different vision of environmental justice (Gonzalez, 2015; Natarajan 2021) and therefore of engagement. Adarsh Badri (2024) describes environmental activism in the Global South as deeply emotional, reflecting the interconnectedness of environmental issues with social and economic struggles. He shows that a specificity of environmental activism in the Global South is to unfold at the individual or collective level but outside the creation of formal organizations or institutions. This might be inherent to Global South youth activism, or related to lack of access to such formal processes. Building on these studies, we ask (Research question 3): to what extent does the negotiation burden impede Global South youth participation in global environmental politics? On the basis of the literature, we hypothesize that such burden is high for youth in general, but higher for Global South youth (Hypothesis 3).

We address three important gaps with our research questions. First, a gap on scientific knowledge about the level of interest of Global South youth in global environmental politics: is such interest real? Does it vary among youth from different regions or countries? What specific topics are Global South youth interested in? The second gap pertains to the identities of Global South youth. While studies have focused on specific youth identities, such as indigenous youth and WEIRD³ youth, there is limited empirical data on the broader profile of youth from these regions, including factors like age and gender. The third gap relates to the participation of Global South youth in international negotiations on environmental issues. Although the literature has noted the existence of negotiation barriers faced by all actors, and presumably by youth

² As detailed below, we define the Global South as encompassing developing and least developed countries.

³ WEIRD stands for Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich and Democratic youth. It comes from Chang (2022). See also Ortiz et al. (2024).

(Kwon, 2019), there is no empirical evidence to determine whether these barriers are stronger for Global South youth and whether they affect youth from different regions of the Global South in the same way.

Finally, in addition to supporting hypotheses-driven research with three hypotheses derived from the literature, we expand existing research by confronting such literature to comprehensive empirical data. Indeed, most (rare) studies of Global South youth mentioned above provide a snapshot of youth at one moment in time (one precise climate COP for instance), without considering a longitudinal, transversal vision of youth involvement. The following section details our case selection and data collection methodology for such a vision.

3. Methods

3.1. Case study

We investigate Global South youth participation in global biodiversity politics. We choose global biodiversity politics as a case study for three main reasons: (i) biodiversity loss is part to the triple crises dilemma; (ii) biodiversity politics are much less studied compared to climate politics; and (iii) biodiversity is a truly Global South/Global North issue, with most of biodiversity resources located in the Global South (Visseren-Hamakers and Kok, 2022). As a result of (iii), biodiversity is a most-likely case for Global South youth engagement.

More precisely, we analyze the negotiation meetings of the international Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), an international treaty having COPs every two years during which governments and stakeholders gather to establish the global biodiversity agenda. Among others, in 2012 at COP11, the CBD recognized children and youth as a constituency (Curlo, 2021) and the Global Youth Biodiversity Network (GYBN) became the main youth platform within this constituency. CBD COP11 Decision XI/8 acknowledged “the importance of youth participation in decision-making process at all levels” and invited “Parties to continue to provide support for youth initiatives and other networks that support the three objectives of the Convention, such as the Global Youth Biodiversity Network” (Secretariat of the CBD, 2012). Within global biodiversity politics, we investigate both the membership to GYBN and youth participation to the biodiversity COPs. Our twofold analysis is therefore based on two novel databases that we built for our empirical investigation.

3.2. Data collection

The first database is an anonymized Excel file containing 8,190 membership requests received by GYBN through their online membership form⁴ between May 14, 2013, and January 1, 2024.⁵ This database includes, among others, the date of birth, gender, nationality, country of residence, membership type and thematic preferences of GYBN members' applicants. The data was cleaned and coded to remove duplicate and invalid responses, resulting in 8,180 valid responses. Some variables were recoded (such as “age” and “geographical region” that we derived from the “date of birth” and “nationality” fields respectively) before proceeding with the analysis. For geographical regions, we used the UN categorization in 7 regions (Africa, Asia, Europe, North America, Central America and the Caribbean, Latin America and Oceania). There exist different definitions of the “Global South” in the scientific literature (Cooper et al., 2021) but we decided to use the most common one in the literature, categorizing Global South countries according to their level of development. More precisely, we used the International Monetary

Fund's 2022 World Economic Outlook country classification and the list of Least Developed Countries published by the UN Committee for Development Policy, to categorize countries into three categories: Developed (Global North), Developing, and Least Developed (Global South).⁶

The second database contains information about youth participants in CBD COPs held between 1995 and 2022. As part of a broader project on youth goals in Earth politics,⁷ it was built in two steps. First, the lists of participants in CBD COPs published by the Secretariat of the CBD were compiled to create an inventory of youth participants. Then, keywords like “youth,” “young,” “child,” “jeune,” “joven,” “student,” “estudiante,” “étudiant,” “scout,” “girl,” “boy,” and “kid” were used to trace the presence of youth. Additionally, we developed a methodology to include youth actors in the database who did not necessarily have keywords related to youth in their organization names or functions. To do so, we collected the lists of organizations accredited to UNEP under the youth constituency and searched back these organizations within the biodiversity COP lists. The final compiled database includes 1488 entries that refer to individual participation. The CBD provides information about the name, gender, organization, status, country, address, and sometimes telephone number and email of participants. However, information about age is not available and had to be retrieved from public sources. We based the “geographical region” variable on the “country” information with the same categorization as for the GYBN database.

As both databases span over more than 10 years, they provide a longitudinal study of youth engagement in biodiversity politics, where the effects of particular historical events (e.g., the launch of climate marches in 2018, the COVID-19 pandemic) and broader tendencies can be identified and discussed. To complement our quantitative analyses, we conducted 36 interviews with 41 individuals at COP15-2 and at the Youth Summit preceding it (in English, French and Korean) and 6 additional interviews with 6 youth representatives at COP16. Additionally, we analyzed survey responses from youth involved in the COP15-2⁸ negotiations (in English and French, 42 full answers). Over half of the interviewees (24 out of 47) were from the Global South, whereas 43 % (18 over 42) of survey respondents had citizenship from a Global South country. Section 4 details how we used the databases to quantitatively test our three research hypotheses. Section 5 includes qualitative elements to further illustrate and contextualize the main findings.

4. Results

4.1. The interest of Global South youth for global biodiversity governance

To enquire about the interest of Global South youth for global biodiversity governance (Hypothesis 1), we analyze the number, type and nature (in terms of working groups) of their membership requests, compared to Global North youth.

Graph 1 presents the evolution of GYBN membership requests through time, differentiating membership applicants according to the development category of their country of origin.

Graph 1 illustrates how GYBN membership requests have been increasing through time, with the highest numbers for the years 2018, 2020 and 2022. While figures are decreasing for 2020 and 2022

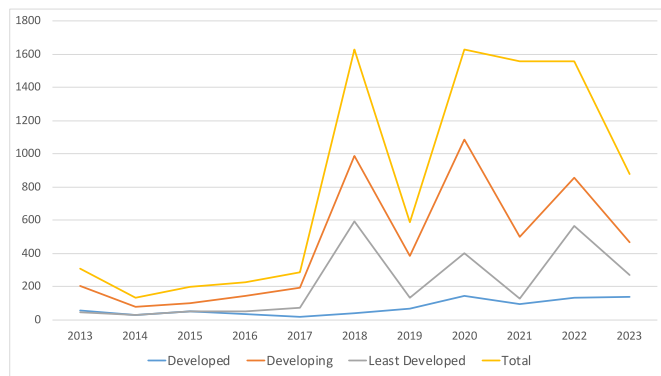
⁴ The form is first and foremost available in English but some national GYBN offices propose it in French.

⁵ To collect and use the data according to ethical research standards we signed a research data agreement with GYBN “Information and consent document for data transfer for academic research” in December 2023.

⁶ This classification has remained relatively stable throughout the period analyzed in this paper (2013–2024): the 2014 World Economic Situation and Prospects report reveals no significant changes across the three categories.

⁷ FNRS Youth Earth research project (2021–2024): www.crespo.be/youth-earth/.

⁸ COP15 initially planned in China in 2020 was organized in two parts because of the COVID pandemic: COP15-1 in October 2021, held virtually and COP15-2 in December 2022 organized in Canada, that played the role of the “real” COP15.



Graph 1. New GYBN membership requests through time, with development-type of country of origin.

compared to 2018, there is no major effect of the COVID pandemic on membership requests and trends are similar across the three categories. Zooming on our data, in 2018, most requests (76.5 %) were received after August 2018. This might imply an indirect spillover effect between the climate movement initiated by Greta Thunberg and interests for biodiversity politics.

Throughout the years, most GYBN members' applicants have been coming from the Global South: 56 % of requests have come from developing countries, 26 % from least developed countries, and only 9 % from developed countries. The dominance of the Global South is primarily driven by a significant proportion of members from Africa (48 % on average) and Asia (33 % on average). Zooming on these regions, the four most represented countries in Africa are Kenya (17 %), Nigeria (12.4 %), Cameroon (4.4 %) and South Africa (4 %). In Asia, the leading countries are India (28 %), the Philippines (12.7 %), Indonesia (8 %) and Bangladesh (4.7 %). All are developing countries, except for Bangladesh, which is listed as a least developed country by the UN Committee for Development Policy. Moreover, data shows a dominance of English-speaking countries, with English among the official languages of most of these countries in both regions. This dominance is particularly strong in Africa (all four most represented countries), whereas English is an official language in two of the most represented Asian countries (India and the Philippines). Taken together, these results indicate that Global South youth with a higher social capital (not from least developing countries and mastering English) are more likely to request membership. This does not show a lack of interest for global biodiversity politics of other Global South youth, but rather a lack of access to international processes for these less privileged and non-English speaking youth (see also 4.3).

4.1.1. Membership type

GYBN offers three membership types that can help assess the level of activism of its members: Type A membership "I would like to receive GYBN updates, take an active role in the GYBN internal decision-making process and join projects and actions"; Type B membership "I wish to receive GYBN updates and join projects and actions, however currently do not have the time capacity to fully engage with internal decision making process"; and Type C membership "I would like to be an external advisor/observer of GYBN (GYBN "graduates", NGO members, observers ...)". The overall distribution of membership types corresponds to 66 % for A, 25 % for B and 9 % for C. However, the proportion of membership A is notably higher for Least Developed countries (69 %) and Developing countries (66 %) compared to Developed countries (53 %). This highlights a higher level of interest for active involvement of Global South youth, compared to youth from the Global North.

4.1.2. Working groups joined

GYBN has 17 different working groups. Overall, the most popular

working groups are "Climate change and biodiversity" (mentioned as first choice in all 7 geographical regions); "Biodiversity education" (mentioned in the top 3 themes of 4 regions); and "Forest biodiversity" (in the top 3 themes of 3 regions). There are no major variations across Global North and Global South youth for the working groups: once they express interest to join, they tend to work on similar topics.

These results confirm Hypothesis 1, i.e. that youth from the Global South are particularly interested in global biodiversity issues: in particular their membership requests are higher and their membership type stronger. Our analysis however already shows the existence of barriers for membership for youth from least developing and/or non-English speaking countries (see also 4.3).

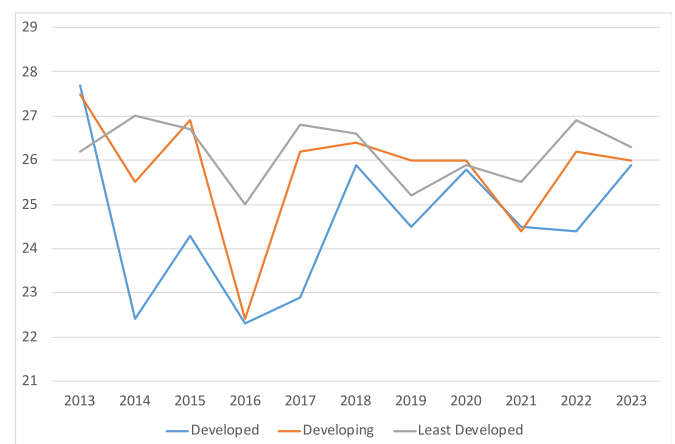
4.2. The identities of Global South youth in global biodiversity governance

To enquire about the identities of Global South youth (Hypothesis 2), we investigate their age and gender, on the basis of the GYBN membership requests.

4.2.1. Average age

Graph 2 shows that youth requesting GYBN membership are on average 25.6 years old, which appears in contrast with the usually very young youth activists pictured in the media: youth in global biodiversity politics are mostly grown-up and experienced adults. Graph 2 indicates no clear pattern in the evolution of the average age of GYBN members across the three country categories through time. Nevertheless, it shows that Global South youth (25.8 for developing countries and 26.2 for least developed countries) tend to be on average older than their counterparts from the Global North (24.6).

Looking at different age groups, only 3 % of GYBN members are minors, mainly from developing countries (71 % members under 18). 78 % are between 18 and 30. 19 % are over 30⁹, with 62 % of them from developing countries and 32 % from least developed countries. This means that Global South youth tend to present a more contrasting age pattern, with a higher overall age average. This reinforces the relevance of including them, as truly adult and experienced individuals, in the global governance of biodiversity.



Graph 2. Evolution of average age of GYBN members, with development-type of country of origin.

⁹ Meaning they can be members of GYBN but cannot run or vote in elections, see <https://shorturl.at/QO7Hp>, consulted on 24/06/2024.

4.2.2. Gender¹⁰

Between 2013 and 2023, more women asked for GYBN membership compared to men among the members from developed countries including Europe (69.7 %) and North America (65.4 %) as well as Latin America (60.5 %). There are more men requesting membership than women in Africa (67.3 %), Asia (55.8 %), Central America and the Caribbean (63 %) and Oceania (64.2 %) (see Graph 3).

On average, women represent a large majority in developed countries, making up to 70 % of membership requests. Conversely, female presence is significantly lower in developing countries (44 %) and even more in least developed countries (26 %). Global South youth are predominantly male within GYBN, confirming that their identity is different from what is usually pictured in the media.

Our results confirm our second hypothesis: there is a diversity of Global South youth identities, especially in terms of age. Most of all, Global South youth and Global North youth share different patterns in terms of age and gender, and all move away from the mediatic figures of very young female activists.

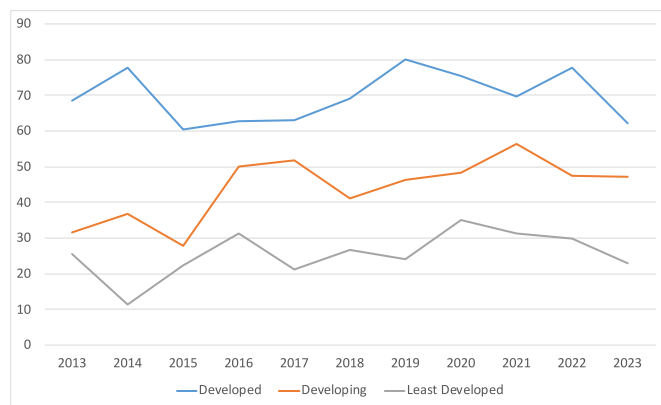
4.3. The negotiation barrier for Global South youth

To investigate the negotiation barrier for Global South youth (Hypothesis 3), we analyze the profiles of the youth participants in biodiversity COPs. We also compare these profiles with the ones of GYBN members, considering that GYBN members are potential candidates for participation to biodiversity COPs.

4.3.1. Global North/Global South categorization of youth attendees at COPs

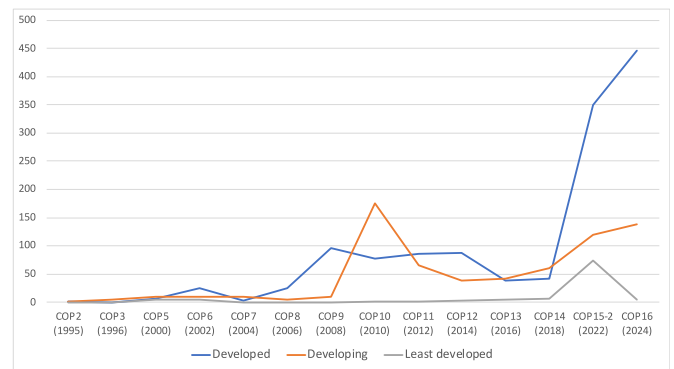
Graph 4 shows the evolution of the number of youth representatives at CBD COPs since COP2. On average, youth representatives from developed countries accounted for 62 % of youth representatives at biodiversity COPs, while those from developing countries (33 %) and least developed countries (5 %) had significantly lower representation. The only COP with strong presence of youth participants from developing countries has been COP10 held in Nagoya, Japan. Otherwise, the data shows the dominance of developed-country youth.

The three most represented regions are Europe (525 youth participants), Asia (432) and North America (278). The four most represented countries in Europe are Germany (52.8 %), Switzerland (16.6 %), the



Graph 3. Evolution of the percentage of female GYBN membership applicants, with development-type of country of origin.

¹⁰ Gender and age are somehow correlated. On average, men (26.3) are older than women (24.8). One exception is South America where men (24) are younger than women (25.4).



Graph 4. Youth representatives at CBD COPs through time, with development-type of country of origin.

Netherlands (8 %), and the United Kingdom (4.2 %); in Asia, Japan (44.7 %), India (17.4 %), South Korea (15.5 %), and Indonesia (7.9 %); in North America, Canada (56.8 %), the United States (30.6 %), and Mexico (12.6 %). The significant representation of Japanese youth in Asia and of Canadian youth in North America suggests a COP location effect (COP10 and COP15-2). The high number of European youth at COP15-2 is a counter-example, rather illustrating the privileged position of European youth in biodiversity COPs. This can be nuanced considering that GYBN is hosted by a German organization that is used as entry point for youth delegates from all over the world to register for COPs (Orsini, 2023).

Except for India and Indonesia (developing countries according to our categorization), all countries from the three most represented regions within CBD COPs are developed. The five most represented countries from the Global South in CBD COPs are also all developing countries, and not least developed countries: India (75 youth representatives at CBD COPs), Mexico (35), Indonesia (34), Brazil (25), and Kenya (20). However, there is no dominance of English-speaking countries among the most represented countries at CBD COPs, as was the case for GYBN membership.

4.3.2. Gender of youth attendees at COPs

Graph 5 illustrates the evolution of the percentage of women youth representatives participating in biodiversity COPs, categorized by the development level of their country of origin. No clear overall tendency is identifiable for earlier COPs, due to significant fluctuations in the number of women from each region across these COPs. More recent COPs show a predominance of female representatives from developed and developing countries, while female representation from least developed countries remains more uneven. On average, female youth representatives make up the highest percentage in developed countries



Graph 5. Evolution of the percentage of female youth representatives at biodiversity COPs, with development-type of country of origin.

(52 %) and developing countries (49 %). In contrast, least developed countries have the lowest percentage (35 %). The predominance of men from these countries is therefore less visible at the COPs.

4.3.3. Characteristics of youth multi-attendees at COPs

To refine our analysis, we look at the characteristics of the youth participants who attended several CBD COPs. Indeed, attending several COPs is a sign of greater political resources and potential influence. Among our COP database, 101 youth attended more than one CBD COP (89 attended 2; 8 attended 3; 2 attended 4; 2 attended 5).

Graph 6 illustrates the geographical and gender characteristics of multi-attendance youth. It highlights that most youth representatives who attended multiple COPs are from developed (55) and developing countries (42). Additionally, women constitute the majority of them (59) and, among the 12 individuals who have attended three or more COPs, ten are women. This confirms that female youth representatives comprise a greater share at COPs for all country categories.

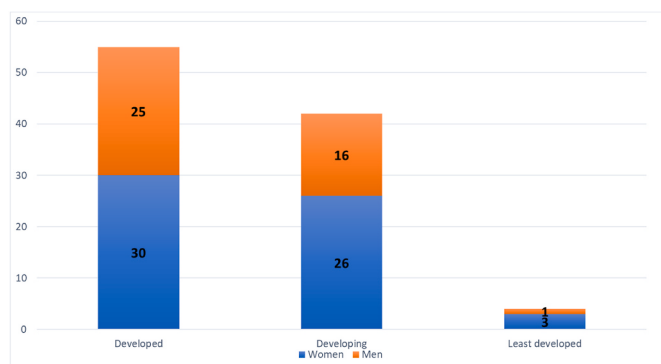
Most of these 12 youth representatives were aged between 18 and 25 (10 individuals; average age of this group 24), and two were 30 and 50 (this last individual working for a youth-serving organization) at their first COP. Five come from Latin America (two from Brazil, and one from Argentina, Bolivia, and Colombia), three from Asia (two from India and one from Singapore), two from Europe (Germany and Denmark), and two from Africa (Madagascar and South Africa). As a result, two come from developed countries, while 9 are from developing countries and one from a least developed country, suggesting a dominance of Global South youth among this group. However, while some Global South youth are able to multiply their COP participation, most of them do not make it to these international processes, compared to Global North youth.

4.3.4. Correspondence between GYBN members and youth attendees at COPs

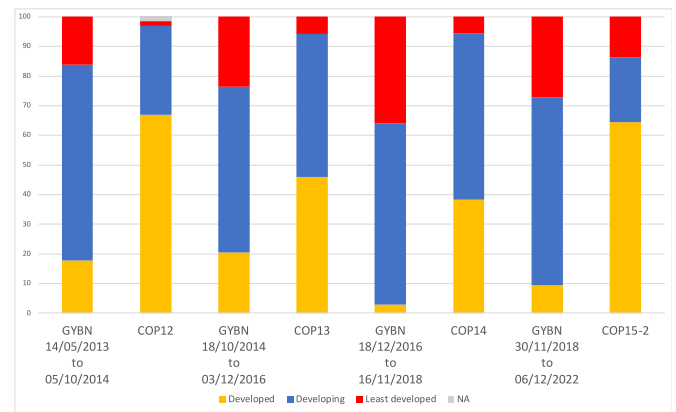
To refine our results on the negotiation barrier, we analyze the potential correspondences between the socio-economic characteristics (geographical origin and gender) of GYBN members (pool of potential youth participants) and of actual youth participants to COPs.

Graph 7 illustrates that youth from developed countries consistently have higher representation at COPs compared to their GYBN membership requests since COP12. Youth representatives from developed regions such as Europe dominate at CBD COPs: Europeans comprise 35 % of youth representatives at COPs despite constituting only 7 % of GYBN member requests. Similarly, North Americans make up 19 % of CBD COPs youth representatives, with only 4 % GYBN membership requests. Developing and least developed countries are significantly underrepresented in biodiversity COPs. This is especially pronounced for African youth: despite 46 % of GYBN membership requests coming from Africa, they account for only 10 % of youth representatives at CBD COPs.

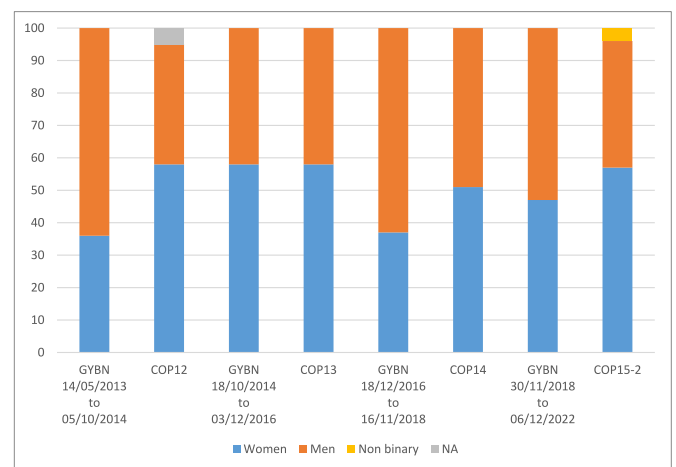
Graph 8 shows that women are consistently overrepresented at CBD



Graph 6. Youth representatives who attended more than one CBD COP according to gender, with development-type of country of origin.



Graph 7. Correspondence between the geographical origin of GYBN members and of COP attendees (in %).



Graph 8. Correspondence between GYBN memberships and youth COP attendees on the basis of their gender (in %).

COPs compared to their representation within GYBN. On average, women comprise 55 % of youth representatives at biodiversity COPs, whereas they represent only 43 % of GYBN members.

Overall, the analysis validates the hypothesis of a negotiation barrier faced by Global South youth, particularly by African youth. This barrier influences the geographical composition of youth representatives at CBD COPs, with attendees from the Global North outnumbering their counterparts from the Global South. Additionally, this barrier has implications for the gender composition of youth representatives at COPs. The predominance of Europe and North America (regions with a higher percentage of female GYBN members), combined with the underrepresentation of Africa (where 67 % of GYBN members are men) at CBD COPs could explain higher proportion of women at these international events.

5. Discussion and conclusion

Our quantitative results enable us to discuss the three hypotheses that we built on previous research on Global South environmental activism. Regarding interest, they confirm the awareness and interests of Global South youth for global biodiversity politics: their involvement within the transnational youth platform GYBN is very high, especially for African youth. What our research also reveals is a variety of situations within the Global South, with African youth particularly mobilized compared to Asian youth.

Regarding identities, our results confirm our initial hypothesis that

Global South youth present a diversity of identities; most of all, their identity is different from the one of Global North youth. One difference relies on gender: youth from the Global South tend to be rather male, especially when they come from Africa. On the contrary, developed countries' youth are mostly female. As male are usually dominant within societies, especially in the developing world (Momsen, 2019; Walters, 2024), the predominance of male youth among African participants could be a sign of the social resources needed to engage at the global level. Moreover, Global South youth also tend to be older than Global North youth. If young age is perceived as a vulnerability factor at the international level (Yunita et al., 2018) a similar explanation could be given here to older youth from the Global South. However, what our study of youth characteristics also confirms is that there exists a diversity of situations within the Global South: Asian youth tend to be younger and female, while African youth tend to be older and male. This confirms that there should be no unique narrative on youth in global biodiversity politics, and that a perspective picturing youth as very young and female does not correspond to the diversity of youth identities in such politics.

Regarding participation, a negotiation burden exists for youth to participate in global biodiversity policymaking and is even stronger for Global South youth. First, such barrier was already identified for GYBN membership requests: the network receives more requests from English-speaking developing countries. Second, in Section 4.3, the COP effect observed is a sign that the resources needed to travel to different locations have an effect on the geographical origin of youth participants. Third, the lack of developed countries' youth within GYBN members, compared to developing countries' youth, and, to the contrary, their dominance at COPs is likely a sign that Global North youth do not need transnational youth platforms to get informed and active in global biodiversity politics. Fourth, the gap between the composition of GYBN membership and the composition of the COP youth group with regards to Global South youth is a sign of their lack of capacities to participate within official negotiation processes.

The interviews conducted with youth participating to the CBD COP15-2 and COP16 give several insights to nuance these quantitative results. Regarding interest, compared to Global North youth, several Global South youth confirmed that being a member of GYBN and attending international events was for them rather a way to influence their governments back home, following a "boomerang" effect (Keck and Sikkink, 1998), a tendency that was not verified for Global North youth. For instance, a female representative from Uganda stated that her presence at COP15-2 was "impactful" because she made her government representatives "aware of her existence" and hoped that "when we get back home, they shall not look at each other as strangers" (interview 19¹¹). Moreover, many Global South youth are under threat at home for advocating for environmental protection. Such a difficult situation has been visible in their reluctance to join the biodiversity march in Montreal during COP15-2, for example, as they were fearing to get retaliation for demonstrating in the streets (while it is fully allowed in Canada), something they would never dare doing in their home countries. In that sense, GYBN membership, for some Global South youth, is also a sign of their interest in increasing the awareness of their national government, rather than an interest in having an impact on international processes. In addition, many Global South youth are also involved in concrete biodiversity protection implementation projects and see GYBN as a way to exchange good practices. Some said that they were less interested in global "bla bla" talks but were much more motivated in benefiting from a transnational network to improve their own biodiversity actions. For instance, a female representative from Argentina expressed hope that her presence at COP16, a forum "where such important decisions are made" would "contribute to better implement [her projects] in

Argentina" (interview 40). Compared to Global North youth the interest of Global South youth therefore tends to be also directed towards national politics and concrete implementation of biodiversity projects.

Regarding the identities of youth, in particular age and gender, several Global South youth denounced the false depiction of youth as being very young (and maybe immature) and vulnerable (through very young feminine figures put into the spotlight) while most of them are adults and experienced enough to have a proper environmental protection agenda. Most of our interviewees raised concerns about the persistence of a tokenistic approach to youth in international events, that could partly derive from this depiction. For example, a female youth representative from Bolivia recalled during COP15-2 that "a lot of political figures [were] trying to get photos of us" (interview 34), without looking for more meaningful interactions. A similar situation was recalled by a female youth representative from Paraguay at COP16, as she criticized the prevalence of "youth-washing—where everyone likes taking pictures with young people and saying they're inclusive but fail to ensure meaningful participation" (interview 41). The way international actors shape the identities of youth as immature individuals easily manipulated or as vulnerable victims to protect is problematic. Paraphrasing Durham "From this perspective, (African) youth is not a particular age group, but rather a discursive instrument (like gender, race, ethnicity, or class) to position people in relation to one another and to stabilize and shift social levers of power" (2004 quoted in Batan et al., 2021: 60).

All youth, from the Global South and the Global North, confirmed the existence of a negotiation barrier for them to attend international negotiation processes. Just as for climate COPs (Thew, 2018; Thew et al., 2020), youth are often facing difficulties to get a visa authorization, a situation complicated by the precarious status of most youth (as students or unemployed). Our interviewees recognized that their participation was mostly self-funded. Additionally, several interviews suggest that, in addition to material resources, a symbolic dimension might make the negotiation barrier stronger for Global South youth. For instance, a female youth representative from Brazil explained a North-South divide in the self-perception of youth representatives' own legitimacy: "the people from the North come with that like self-confidence and self-entitlement, you know, like I have to be here, I have a right to be here, [whereas an individual from] the South is always going to be 'ohh, should I be there?'" (interview 24).

Despite different participation possibilities in international negotiation processes, solidarity exists to some extent between Global South youth and Global North youth at COPs. First, Global North environmental organizations are offering accreditation possibilities for youth from the Global South, a practice that is visible by looking at the co-affiliation dynamics of the participants' lists. Second, several Global North youth declined interviews for this research, rather giving us Global South youth contacts for interviews as they considered Global South youth as more central for global biodiversity politics. By doing so, they tried to give more visibility to their Southern counterparts. Third, several youth from the Global North have been very active in organizing the Youth Summit prior to COP15-2, with the precise aim to increase the capacities of Global South youth (often newcomers) to influence the COP. Finally, hosting every other CBD COP in Global South countries helps facilitate the participation of youth from developing and least developed countries. While regretting the continued underrepresentation of African youth, a female youth representative from Uganda at COP16 in Colombia emphasized: "the youth in South America are very lucky that, you know, the COP is a little bit, you know, closer to them" (interview 38).

By scrutinizing interest, identities and participation, our study speaks back to questions of power and legitimacy in global biodiversity politics. On power, asymmetries are visible between youth and other non-state actors: among others, the perceived identity of youth as very young and female tends to sideline them even more as actors of global biodiversity politics. This is problematic due to the numerical

¹¹ We have assigned a random number to our interviews to preserve their anonymity.

importance of youth, meant to be engaged on a longer term. Power asymmetries also appear within the youth category, between Global North and Global South youth but also between the youth who are able to become members to international youth platforms and the ones who can not; between the ones who are able to afford the participation to international processes and the ones who can not. On legitimacy, the low presence of youth from the Global South at COPs appears problematic for input legitimacy: it is probably accentuating a disconnect between international processes and the youth from less privileged background who correspond to a majority of youth and an important share of the world population. For output legitimacy, studying Global South enables to question the need to engage exclusively in global processes while concrete actions on the ground, or advocacy at the national level of policymaking, are also key priorities, especially in countries lacking enforcement at the national level.

Our study enables to draw recommendations for current practices and future research in global environmental politics more broadly. The practice of silencing Global South youth in media coverage of and in participation in global environmental events should be corrected as they give the wrong perception that youth from the Global South would not care about the environment. Moreover, involving Global South youth in international processes should be a priority for more inclusive and relevant policymaking: youth not only can contribute to global objectives setting, but they also use the international level as an opportunity to move forward the situation back home, at the national and local levels. Our study therefore invites to follow “the idea of seeing ‘youth’ not as a fixed category but as a form of ‘social shifter’” (Batan et al., 2021, 60). Regarding future research, additional longitudinal research on Global South youth involvement in other negotiation processes would be needed to assess whether our results are confirmed in other environmental domains. Moreover, studying in details the claims and concrete actions of Global South youth would be essential to broaden our knowledge of the potential solutions they offer, to solve the global (bio)diversity crisis.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Amandine Orsini: Writing – original draft, Validation, Supervision, Software, Resources, Project administration, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Juan Felipe Duque:** Writing – review & editing, Visualization, Methodology, Data curation.

Declaration of competing interest

“We have nothing to declare”.

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Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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