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Forum: Youth as Boundary Actors in International Studies

Abstract:

Youth, represent a great part of humanity and have always been active and intriguing political actors, and yet youth remain side-lined in International Studies. Issues of social identity perception and its consequences have been embraced by post-positivist approaches in International Studies. Yet, while race, gender and class challenges are shaking the discipline age is a key research gap. To fill this gap, the conceptual departure of this forum is to study youth, taking 16-30/35 as an age range, as ‘boundary actors’ in international politics. We assembled contributions that address this conceptual departure on topics including health, conflict, climate change and indigenous people’s rights; across all world regions with specific focuses on Africa and Asia. Overall, the forum demonstrates that youth are able to move the boundaries: (i) of norms in international politics by asking for a more inclusive implementation of human rights and/or environmental justice; (ii) of procedures by suggesting to broaden decision-making; (iii) of international activism by using social media and protests as new strategies. Taken together the contributions show that youth have and are a world building project, not just a world-confirming project.

Keywords:

Boundary Actors; Human Rights; Youth.

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Introduction

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This forum starts from a hardly tackled paradox: while youth represent a great part of humanity and have always been active and intriguing political actors (Bessant 2021), youth are yet not included in core research in international studies. Yet, empirical evidence gathered in this forum indicate the importance of youth at the global level. As climate change catastrophes, new and ongoing political tensions, and health crises have been shaking the international scene, governments and international institutions have so far struggled to mitigate them. As a response, youth have been organizing protests and movements all over the world, including climate marches, color revolutions, and pandemic measures resistance. By doing so, they have been denouncing current policies, which, according to them, underestimate the responsibility of governments with regards to global crises and which, at the same time, have been mostly adopted without them.

Indeed, while the share of the world population made by people between 16 and 30 is currently of about 25 percent; and while the global median age is just over 30, in 2023, the median age of national leaders is 62, twice the median age of the world population (Silver 2023); and in 2022, only 1.7% of the United Nations (UN) international professional staff were 30 or under (UN Chief Executives Board for Coordination 2023, own calculation). Given that, as of 2022, women who worked for the UN Secretariat with a P1 seniority level (first appointment) were 6.7 years younger on average than men occupying the same seniority level (UN Secretary General 2022, 51), it is clear that the UN recruitment requirements do not fully explain the reasons behind the current age distribution patterns in international politics. Such numerical underrepresentation of youth is problematic for the legitimacy of global governance. Moreover, the age disconnect could potentially favor a democratic disconnect as youth might lose interest in global politics. Furthermore, aging leaders have been found to be more inclined to rule non-democratic regimes (Silver 2023).

Governments, international organizations (IOs) and transnational organizations have somehow already intuited these problems. Positions dedicated to youth have flourished internationally: the UN recognized children and youth as an official constituency in 1992; since 1995, the UN Youth Delegates Programme encourages countries to include youth representatives in their delegations to the UN; in 2013, the UN created an Envoy on Youth position, backed by a UN Youth Office since 2022; in 2020, the UN Secretary General created a consultative UN Youth Advisory Group on Climate Change. However, recent youth worldwide protests remind that the creation of such mandates might not have solved the age disconnect within international politics. International studies have gone through a similar path: while research on youth has developed, it is so far insufficient in reflecting on the specific role of youth in international politics. This forum departs from these gaps by introducing a novel perspective of youth as ‘boundary actors’ in international studies.

Youth as Boundary Actors

Our proposal to analyze youth as boundary actors is based on the premise that “insufficient studies have been conducted on boundary concepts in international affairs” (Orsini, Louafi and Morin 2017, 736). Building on this call, we approach youth not as ‘boundary objects’, the term

usually used by scholars in international studies, but as ‘boundary actors’, to underline the need to take youth agency into account.

Boundary actors have been defined in Sociology as “individuals who mediate between incommensurable paradigms in the context of power inequalities” (Keshet et al. 2013, 668). More precisely, Snorek and Bolger (2022) explain: “boundary actors (...) can shorten the distance between actors at the center and periphery of a social network (...) serve as interpreters and constructors of meaning to bridge different rationalities (...) and are essential to social learning processes between divergent social actors (...) to support social innovation.” The relevance of the concept for youth in international studies is primarily related to the fact that youth itself is a boundary notion, meaning that youth are well placed to act as interpreters and constructors of meaning. More precisely, two definitions of youth co-exist: youth as an age range, and youth as a social identity.

The first definition, youth as an age range, is the most agreed type, despite the fact that age boundaries for youth are socially constructed, and therefore may differ. In Geography, youth are usually defined within the age range 15-24, while in Political Science, the range tends to start at 16, the minimum worldwide voting age. Looking at different international youth constituencies defining criteria, it appears that the UN system only defines the upper limit of the youth age range, somewhere in between 30 (UN Major Group for Children and Youth) and 35 (YOUNGO, youth constituency in climate change negotiations). Taking 16-30/35 as an age range means that youth partly include children -the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) defines children as any humans under the age of 18- but that the majority of youth are adults. As the contributions to this forum show, however, many young people in international politics are perceived as children, not adults, and this has an impact on how policies have been imposed upon them.

The second definition of youth consists in defining age as a social identity. In that case, youth is defined as a transitional period of life characterized by creativity, openness, and flexibility (Wyn and White 1997) due to the liminal social characteristic of youth. Moreover, the high degree of intersectionality of youth with other social identities such as gender, race, and origin, increases their social identity flexibility. Defining youth as a social identity implies that such specific identity exists. This forum shows how it is the case in international politics, while also

showing how youth are sometimes dispossessed from their own identity when instrumentalized by other actors.

Both definitions do not necessarily overlap. On the one hand, the youth mandates adopted by governments, IOs, or transnational organizations, do not necessarily have associated age ranges, but consist in the mandated individuals to bring youth identity in these spheres. On the other hand, some young individuals might not identify themselves officially as youth, also to avoid being categorized as such. The forum engages with both definitions and uses the ‘boundary actors’ concept to unravel the diversity of youth identities and contributions to international politics.

Going Beyond Current Conceptualizations of Youth in International Studies

This forum goes beyond the current state of the art on youth in international studies on many aspects. International studies scholars have produced research on youth, although with low attention from the discipline. We can identify four conceptualizations of youth in international studies. The first conceptualization, emerging in the early 2000s, has presented youth as victims who suffer from international conflicts (Faulkner and Welsh 2022; Carpenter 2003), labor trafficking (Holzscheiter 2016), or uncontrolled migrations (Adler-Nissen et al. 2020). The second conceptualization has taken somehow the opposite perspective, insisting on youth as risks for international politics. It has mostly relied on the ‘youth bulge’ hypothesis stating a link (even if never empirically confirmed, see Pruitt 2020) between the share of young people in a population and the rise of instability within the corresponding country. The third conceptualization, youth as potential, has been practiced by international institutions including the UN and the World Bank which have invested in youth-focused programs that provide employment and training, with the idea that those activities would reduce young people’s social disruption and make youth allies for the implementation of the international agenda (Sukarieh and Tannock 2018). Finally, recent studies have adopted a fourth conceptualization, youth as stakeholders, studying how policy programs have increasingly invited youth at the decision table. However, international meetings are at best ‘on youth’ rather than ‘by youth’ (Kwon 2019), with meaningful youth participation being quasi absent (Thew 2018; Grizelj 2019).

What is striking from this brief literature review is the extent to which youth have been assigned passive roles in international studies. Indeed, the four youth conceptualizations share at least

one of the following limits: (i) they grant limited political presence to youth who are often tokenized (Thew 2018; Orsini and Kang 2023); (ii) they tend to replicate adultism, a specific form of discrimination that marginalizes young people due to their age and limited experience (Ceaser 2014; Bettencourt 2020); and (iii) they provide an essentialist vision of youth (Mollica 2017; Orsini 2022). These limits mean that such conceptualizations deny real agency to youth in international politics by assigning to youth a limited social identity that does not fully correspond to its reality.

With this forum, and in line with recent work giving more importance to youth, such as in peace and security studies (Berents and McEvoy-Levy 2015; Berents and Mollica 2022), we suggest embracing youth as agents of international studies. While the impact of race, gender and class on agency have been analyzed in international studies (Best et al. 2021; Shilliam 2020; Tickner 2005), this forum engages with age as a key characteristic for such agency. Conceptualizing youth as boundary actors enables us to study their agency, i.e. their capacity to actively (trans)form global politics.

The Contributions to this Forum

This forum reflects on youth as boundary actors in international studies through multiple topics including health, conflict, climate change and indigenous people's rights; and contexts, covering global politics and specific regions: Africa and Asia. Contributors have diverse academic origins and backgrounds, ensuring inclusive and interdisciplinary discussions.

Anna Holzscheiter examines how discourses and practices of youth representation in global health governance reflect both the institutionalization and the politicization of youth. She uses the theorization of youth as a boundary actor to demonstrate how, on one hand, youth legitimize constitutive norms and actions of international institutions, and, on the other hand, how youth is a zone of conflict that contests the institutionalized orders of age.

Emmanuel Ampomah and Adam Cooper analyze the agency of young Africans, pointing how their activism is constantly and deliberately contesting post-colonial order and ageing leaders. After analyzing three different strategies used by youth-led movements on the continent, they show how their political activities blur the boundary between the haves-and have-nots, and

more precisely between the winners of the imperial conquest and those that continue to struggle to meet their material needs.

Roberto Salva examines how children and youth are addressed in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) policies. The development of ASEAN's policies and mechanisms on children and youth participation shows its desire to track its own way, while multiple internal as well as external factors have influenced such policies. The contribution emphasizes the necessity for ASEAN to give more sway to its initial tendency to overcome traditional boundaries between human being/becoming and child/adult.

Brian Gran employs the World Society Approach to examine the utility of the international framework of children's and human rights for young people, being at the boundary of both, experiencing international conflict. He calls for incorporating UN Special into the rights framework to correct its major flaws: procedures are too complicated, depend on state adoption and young people most of the time rely on adults within governments to exercise their rights.

Anaëlle Vergonjeanne investigates how children and youth have been successful in transforming the participative and environmental agendas of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child with a legal petition on climate change known as the 'Thunberg Petition'. Although the Committee took a depoliticizing, technical approach to the petition, children and youth's agency was able to modify the practices of the Committee, with the adjustment of children and youth participation and of the Committee's environmental agenda.

Laura Gómez-Mera shows how indigenous youth, as boundary actors from a new generation, have embraced innovative strategies to engage in global governance, adding important reframing of indigenous peoples' messages and helping them to position themselves as essential players. Such strategies include forum shifting, collaboration, reframing and digital advocacy, within climate change governance and beyond.

Overall, the forum demonstrates that youth are able to move the boundaries: (i) of norms in international politics by asking for a more inclusive implementation of human rights and/or environmental justice (Gran; Vergonjeanne; Gomez-Mera); (ii) of procedures by suggesting to broaden decision-making (Holzscheiter; Salva); (iii) of international activism by using social media and protests (Cooper and Ampomah; Vergonjeanne; Gomez-Mera). Taken together the

contributions show that youth have and are a world building project (Bowman 2019, 296), able to move the boundaries of international organizations and international rights, and not just a world-confirming project,

International Institutions as Orders of Age: how Imagined Youth Shapes Contemporary Global Health Governance

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International institutions do not only reflect and encapsulate specific world orders – they are also giving expression to power-infused relations concerning gender, race, class or, in fact, age. This contribution understands international institutions as orders of age, that is forceful hierarchies based on a combination of age and expertise. It argues that studying international institutions from the vantage-point of dynamics between specific age groups that both undergird and challenge these institutions speaks to broader theorizing on global governance rather than merely exposing the (political) agency of hitherto invisible age groups (children, youth, old persons). It puts forward two propositions on why scholarly analysis of youth in international politics adds significantly to our understanding of global governance. First, it argues that the study of youth representation and struggles for recognition in international politics can deliver an overall diagnosis of contemporary political activism inside and outside of international institutions. Secondly, it contends that an exploration of youth as an inherently undetermined identity whose boundaries are contested adds to our knowledge on how both IOs and non-state actors may benefit from this indeterminacy.

This contribution draws on research into the emergence, consolidation and transformation of images of youth in international politics as well as contemporary struggles surrounding the political representation of youth in global health governance. Empirical observations in global health have been collected in a series of interviews surrounding two high-level global health events: the World Health Assembly (every year in May) and the World Health Summit (every year in October). Understanding youth as a boundary actor, it sheds light on how discourses and practices of youth representation in global health reflect both the institutionalization and the politicization of boundaries (Lamont and Molnár 2002). On the one hand, the contribution points out the transformational space that youth, as an inherently unstable notion in international politics, opens up to political actors identifying as ‘youth’. On the other hand, it points to IOs’

interest in maintaining established orders of age by framing youth as becoming rather than being, as political agents of the future rather than the present, serving as an important legitimizing function for organizations who aim to present themselves as forward-looking, transformative and attentive to future generations.

International Institutions as Orders of Age

In today's world of international cooperation, there is virtually no major multilateral organization or diplomatic event that has not integrated youth-specific bodies, dialogue formats or pre-conferences. Accompanying this trend of 'hyper-institutionalization' of youth is an explosion of youth-related vocabulary that is routinely used by IOs. It is tempting to equate these statistics on youth in IOs with a growing influence of youth and a systematic institutional transformation – as, in fact, seminal theories on the transnationalization of international politics and 'opening-up' of IOs seem to suggest. Looking beyond the surface of IOs' youth activities, though, it appears that youth are still confronted with historically grown and sedimented hierarchies based on age and expertise that present them with manifold material and immaterial barriers towards meaningful representation and tangible impact in international institutions. As youth finally join the rank of previously invisible, underrepresented groups in global governance (following minorities, women, indigenous peoples or people living with disabilities), they encounter immensely populated transnational actor landscapes in which the 'shrinking space' diagnosis stems as much from authoritarian repression as it stems from the competitive dynamics of the advocacy market in which they are embedded (Cooley and Ron 2010; Anheier, Lang, and Toepler 2019).

Two core propositions relate on these initial observations: first, the study of youth in international politics can deliver valuable insights on the parameters and dynamics of contemporary political activism and advocacy in international institutions. Since the hyper-institutionalization of youth is the most recent in the sequence of the pluralization of international institutions and since it is unfolding in a particular era of multilateralism, the study of youth activism may be, at once, a story on how activism and advocacy confront a particular international (dis)order with a multiplicity of institutions (fragmentation), an ever stronger influence of private actors (corporate governance, multi-stakeholderism etc.) and struggles for recognition that are marked by intersectional identities (i.e. indigenous youth; young women; first gen etc.).

Second, the study of youth in international studies can contribute significantly to core research on IOs where it succeeds in exposing if and how images of youth circulating in IOs ('imagined youth') serve to legitimize or delegitimize, reproduce or contest, specific orders of age. Both IOs themselves and youth actors may immensely benefit from the circumstance that youth (as an age category) is an inherently unstable concept whose boundaries they may exploit. As empirical insights from the field of global health show below, 'imagined youth' plays a constitutive role in defining the purpose and rationale of IOs and, ultimately, the identity of IOs and the default people working in them (official delegations; experts; IO staff). At the same time, though, not all youth actors in global governance challenge the status quo – in fact, as our own research on youth in global health evidence, they often embrace established orders of age strategically, seeking to work within the limits of institutional orders that encapsulate strong hierarchies of age and expertise and embrace neoliberal philosophies on youth leadership, innovation and problem-solving. They do so particularly when seeking to gain access to high-level venues of international cooperation and diplomacy, accepting the label 'youth' and the images of youth that IOs disseminate.

Youth as Boundary Actors in Global Health Governance – Sitting Uncomfortably on the Fence?

Much has been written about the intricacies of formulating rights and obligations pertaining to specific age groups as the individual holding these rights is in continuous transit through age, moving from childhood to adolescence, from adolescence to young adulthood, to adulthood proper and to old age. These labels and categories as well as their attribution to a numerical age are deeply contested across cultures and societies as well as among IOs that define boundaries between ages differently. Consequently, the boundaries of age are very unstable, and any rights or obligations defined on the basis of age are deeply contested – as the legal and political battles surrounding the lowering of voting rights, the treatment of unaccompanied minors or the accountability of combatants below 18 years of age show.

Youth may thus be described as liminal actors (Wood 2012; Pitti, Mengilli, and Walther 2023), by their in-betweenness, sitting on the fence between childhood and adulthood, between professional-in-the-making and full-blown expert, between intersecting identifiers only one of which builds on differentiation by age (as, for example, with 'indigenous youth' or 'young

women’) (McConnell 2017): “And of course, I would say like, it's maybe a little bit harder, because if you compare it like, for example to research people, like as I think like the definition of youth is so much, like it's so diverse, there are so many people who have come, like so many different backgrounds.”¹ The in-betweenness of youth may lend itself as much to strategic mobilization of boundaries between ages as it may open up opportunities to politicize these boundaries, contesting and challenging established images of the appropriate roles, responsibilities and behavior of youth within the confines of international institutions. Our observations confirm that the ‘liminality’ of youth can turn international institutions into ‘zones of conflict’ and ‘zones of action’ for political agents contesting established orders of age (Abbott 1995, 857). As one of our interviewees stated: “(...) and we need to push the envelope [youth] more, towards the diversity part and getting more people at the stage to just not fill in the check mark.”²

At the same time, a number of studies, including our own, have found that despite their growing willingness to open their gates to youth, youth participation and representation in global governance still confronts institutionalized boundaries (Lamont and Molnár 2002) between adult professional and young future agents and leaders that are mainly defined by diplomats, IO staff and established policy experts. Unsurprisingly, only two organizations that portray themselves as representing youth are in official relations with the World Health Organization (WHO): the International Federation of Medical Students Associations (IFMSA) and the International Pharmaceutical Students Federation (IPSF) and the large majority of youth representatives attending high-profile global health events are students of medicine or pharmacology or young biomedical professionals. This predominance of biomedical expertise comes at the expense of other health professions in which youth may represent a critical, yet often exploited workforce (i.e. nurses and community health workers) or, more broadly, brings with it a devaluation of expertise that results from the lived experience of being youth not only becoming an expert. In our project on youth representation in global health, we conducted around 30 semi-structured interviews with people identifying (partly) as youth, asking them, among many other things, how they confront the in-betweenness of youth, to what extent they

¹ Interview with Annika Kreitlow, representative of bvmd/Globalization and Health Initiative, World Health Summit 2021, 16.11.2021. The author declares that the interviews cited were exempt from approval through an IRB.

² Interview with Brie O’Sullivan, Canadian Youth Delegate, 14.06.2022, youth representative at World Health Assembly 2022. The author declares that the interviews cited were exempt from approval through an IRB.

contest established orders of age and, often, tokenistic ways of including youth in global policymaking. Overall, we found that many of our interviewees complained about IOs' 'youth washing', feeling that their presence in IOs served mainly to legitimize IOs' actions and aspirations rather than enabling meaningful interaction with default policymakers. However, not all our interviewees were contesting orders of age – in fact, we concluded that youth were active in global health for different reasons and not necessarily to advocate for common causes or contest established hierarchies. Rather, some of them identified primarily as young adults who accepted the label youth or young leader out of mostly professional ambitions to become medical experts consulting IOs or even securing positions within them.

IO Legitimation and the Hyper-institutionalization of Youth

In the face of increasingly vocal demands of young people to be adequately and meaningfully represented in international politics, how do IOs engage in the meaning-struggle over the liminal concept of youth? The hyper-institutionalization of youth in international politics described above is, before all, embedded in powerful narratives of youth as being the future and representing the future. These narratives of youth as future fulfil a variety of functions for IOs: first, they may be considered as encapsulating the very *raison d'être* of IOs as institutions whose visions and policies aim to make the world a safer, wealthier, more peaceful place for future generations (e.g. UN Charter, Preamble, “to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war”). Rather than just being another group of stakeholders, the inclusion of youth fulfils a legitimation function for the actions, policies and visions that these international institutions promote. Secondly, while the connection between youth and future brings with it strong claims towards political representation, it also undergirds existing hierarchies of power and expertise. Suggesting that young people are not-yet fully competent actors, that they are 'future leaders' and experts, places those political agents speaking in the name of 'youth' in an emergent, and often inferior, position.

Our study on youth representation in global health allows the conclusion that youth participation in global health is embraced as particularly valuable where it comes across as visionary (i.e. future-oriented) yet apolitical and disciplined (i.e. not challenging the status quo). We analyzed major health IOs' official discourse on youth (as reflected in their annual reports and youth-specific publications) over time (1970-2023), concluding that it is only very recently that health IOs have acknowledged youth not only as an object of concern (as regards health

problems and interventions) but also as agents in their own right (Stadelmann et al. 2023). This acknowledgement and the relentless advocacy of the few, but large youth organizations in official relations with the WHO have enabled the establishment of high-level youth-focused bodies such as the WHO Youth Council inaugurated in 2023.

Despite this gradual change in status of youth in global health, though, our interviews with youth representatives still revealed a significant rift between IOs' promises of participation and their actual room for maneuver in global health policy-making (Holzscheiter and Pantzerhielm 2023). This finding corresponds to a prevalent portrayal of global health as a domain of evidence-based policy making that is populated primarily by biomedical experts and thus somehow beyond politics. Observing the two major global health events (World Health Assembly and World Health Summit) – we were able to conclude that the inclusion of youth as a stakeholder group reflects the desire of a range of global health actors (IOs, philanthropies, firms) to be perceived as inclusive, diverse and responsive to the grievances of different societal groups. It is particularly hybrid global health institutions following corporate governance logics and philosophies, which are eagerly embracing a vocabulary of young leadership and innovation. Youth, thus, is being reduced to ideas of inspiration, innovation and future leadership, rather than being a discrete and potentially contentious group with its own interests, valuable expertise or transformational force in the here and now.

Conclusion

Studying youth representation in contemporary global (health) governance does not only bring about valuable insights on the potential discrepancy between discourse and reality – it also has a lot of potential when it comes to questioning the progressive-liberal bias of much research on how international institutions have become, over time, more pluralist and open to a great many (non-state) stakeholders and perspectives. Taken together the progressive-liberal bias of this research program and IOs' self-portrayals as being particularly responsive to (a very specific) youth agenda lead to significant blind spots in our understanding of youth activism in international studies. First, there is the danger of overlooking or downplaying the regressive, corroborating potential of politically active and transnationally connected youth on the illiberal, nationalist, anti-democratic end of the spectrum. Secondly, it glosses over the many ways in which youth themselves take advantage of access to IOs also for instrumental purposes (career-building, diplomatic experience) while engaging in political advocacy and contestation. Thirdly,

it deflects from the many ways in which youth representation is embedded in neoliberal philosophies underpinning much recent institution-building in global governance, with individualist, elitist, meritocratic and solution-oriented ideas of global policymaking at their core. Future research on youth should leave their liberal, progressive comfort-zones and venture out to address these critical issues – their study might reveal that there are invariably more zones of conflict surrounding youth as a boundary actor than currently under investigation.

Contesting the Global Inequality Boundary: Young Africans and Political Change in the 21st Century

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Social boundaries function to create a division between ‘us’ and ‘them’ (Tilly 2003). Currently, in the global arena, young people function as one prominent form of boundary actors, highlighting a particular ‘us’ and ‘them’ in international relations through their role in illuminating different visions for a planetary future. Internationally, youth are often portrayed as the vanguard of a humane, concerned and caring ‘us’, railing against the greed of a global capitalism ‘them’ that is intent on destroying everyone and everything in its wake. This may be a crude depiction of a set of relations that are obviously far more complex, but it serves to over-emphasize one current division, one ‘us’ and one ‘them’ that is playing out in the international relations limelight. This contribution highlights a quieter, more submerged ‘us’ and ‘them’, one that exists further from the international limelight, but which is just as important for contemporary understandings of planetary divisions. We focus on young Africans as boundary actors in the post-colonial world.

Africa is the youngest continent in the world, with a median age of 19, but it is one whose politics is notorious for being dominated by old men (Green 2023). The median age of political leaders on the continent is 63 years compared to 53 years in Europe which has a relatively older population (Hutt 2023). The age disparity between the continents’ political leaders and its young

citizens reflects ongoing tensions between Africa's youth and its elected and sometimes self-imposed leaders. Accordingly, the exponential increase in youth-led political actions and demonstrations is not surprising (Honwana, Hodgkinson and Melchiorre 2021).

Political elites in Africa have been characterized as leading gatekeeper states: their position is not one of representing a broader population in democratic ways, but in positioning themselves squarely at the gate between the outside world and internal territories, reaping the benefits that come with taking and remaining 'at the gate' (Cooper 2002). Despite often taking that position through violent contestations with former colonial masters, in some important ways post-colonial leaders have become an extension of the preceding colonial states, illuminating a set of historically embedded international relations. In Africa, imperial powers rarely settled and entrenched their own institutions of the market, state and judiciary, instead working with local leaders to extract resources from the colonies most effectively. Imperial powers created their own gates and post-colonial leadership often simply replaced them, even if their ideological framings were radically different.

Read in this way, current African leadership represents the descendants of colonial rule, against which a generation of young Africans is currently railing. If boundary actors are "the individuals who mediate between incommensurable paradigms in the context of power inequalities" (Keshet et al. 2013, 668), young Africans mediate between a problematic colonial heritage and a future still unfolding. They contest current, historically situated boundaries, an 'us' and 'them' that mirrors former metropolises and colonies, divisions at the heart of contemporary global inequalities. Given this context, this contribution analyses approaches leveraged by young Africans -individually and collectively- in advancing political change and transformation in the face of marginalization at the national and regional levels. Marginalization has resulted in most youth experiencing extensive periods of 'waithood', a liminal phase in which they are unable to attain conventional markers associated with adulthood, including desirable work, and starting a family, because of their material conditions (Honwana 2012). We describe three political strategies leveraged by young people in contesting boundaries on the continent, before discussing the responses these movements have elicited from regional powers.

Contesting Boundaries in Three Ways: Young Africans' Political Strategies

The preponderance of youth-led political activities on the continent emphasizes the fact that a self-identified younger generation is constantly and deliberately contesting African rulers, with age-based discourses integral to their politics (Ampomah and Cooper 2023). The activism of young Africans needs to be interpreted historically, forged in relation both to anti-colonial

struggles and post-colonial rulers. Read in this way, African youth operate as boundary actors that mediate power inequalities on the African continent, relations that form part of global histories. Post-colonial intergenerational tensions have been particularly characterized by contestations over governance and economic policies considered inimical to the future of young people. These political activities have been premised on multiple strategies ranging from violent tactics to placatory approaches. Young people's efforts at challenging political and economic systems have also been multi-layered and tailored to suit the exigencies of the context within which they occur. Regardless of the approach used, the intentions of Africa's youth have always been clear and unambiguous: they seek access to dignifying and legitimate livelihood opportunities as well as a chance to participate in governance and political processes. For the purposes of this paper, three strategies will be discussed.

First, young Africans are increasingly establishing political parties to rival the dominance of gerontocratic and elite-driven political parties. An example is the emergence of Julius Malema's Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) in South Africa (Braun 2021). Over the past decade, the EFF has emerged as South Africa's third leading political organization with the party's share of votes increasing in successive national and municipal polls while that of the governing African National Congress continues to see a decline. By centering their political engagements and discourses on youth unemployment and other economic challenges, the EFF has gained the support of many young South Africans. Similarly, in Uganda, Bobi Wine has challenged Yoweri Museveni's 37-year presidency while Nana Kwame Bediako's New Force movement is contesting Ghana's two-party system. Youth-led political parties champion the cause of young people; promote youth participation in political and democratic processes; as well as provide young people with alternative avenues to challenge the monopoly dominant parties have on political discourse. The efficacy of these political parties is, however, constrained by young people's lack of financial and social capital and anti-youth cultural norms that impede young people's political aspirations. Also, the scope of engagements of these youth-led parties is often centered on becoming a formidable political force at the national level, rendering their impact on sub-regional and continental institutions inconsequential.

The second strategy leveraged by Africa's youth is their politicization of social media usage (Gyampo and Anyidoho 2019). Despite the intransigence of regional and sub-regional institutions towards protests on the continent, young people's activisms and demonstrations have been costly to African governments. Digital technologies and social media platforms have enabled mass demonstrations and change in a way that is faster and more efficient than previous

organizing strategies. These platforms have particularly contributed to the blurring of spatial frontiers during protests and have enhanced the internationalization of youth-led protest movements. The #Bringbackourgirls protests in Nigeria (2014) for instance gained international traction because of hashtag politics, compelling the Nigerian government to respond to the crisis (Oriola 2021). The #Rhodesmustfall movement in South Africa equally reinvigorated the decolonization debate, igniting similar protests in European universities (Ahmed 2017). However, social media as a tool for protests is not necessarily inclusive as it only amplifies the voices of a small group of young people -mainly educated and urban youth- who have access to technology.

The third strategy leveraged by Africa's youth in challenging gerontocratic political systems is their support for coup d'États, some of which are staged by young military officers. This phenomenon has been prominent in West and Central Africa since the recent upsurge in military putsch beginning in 2020. In Burkina Faso, 34-year-old Captain Ibrahim Traore toppled Paul-Henri Sandaogo Damiba's military regime to emerge as the youngest head of state in the world. In neighboring Mali, Colonel Assimi Goita seized political power in 2021 at age 37. The toppling of constitutionally elected regimes by young military officers is not new in Africa. However, the unprecedented support the new generation of military leaders enjoy evinces a shift in public response to military takeovers. Young people's telling support for military regimes has become particularly notable and speaks to the increasing faith the continent's youth have, in certain circumstances, of the military providing more equitable political and economic outcomes than failing political elites (Ndiloseh and Hudson 2022). The findings of Afrobarometer's 2021-2022 round of surveys -conducted in 28 African countries- attest to the fact that majority of young Africans between ages 18 and 35 have tolerance for military intervention in politics (Sanny 2023).

In Niger for instance, Niamey's youth continue to rally behind the leaders of the July 2023 junta, with thousands volunteering to join the armed forces in the event of an external intervention. Unsurprisingly, the response of regional and sub-regional political actors to these crises have always appeared to contradict the domestic legitimacy military regimes appear to enjoy. In the case of military takeovers in West Africa for instance, the posture of the regional bloc ECOWAS (Economic Community of West African States) has always appeared to be antithetical to the wishes of young citizens. ECOWAS has been primarily concerned with the restoration of democratically elected governments after military takeovers amongst its member states. While

this approach is consistent with the organization's institutional framework on good governance and democracy, it often ignites tension with young people whose hope of attaining a dignified livelihood is consistently stifled by poor governance and economic challenges that usually precede coup d'états. Viewed this way, young citizens have on various occasions supported juntas, not because they have a strong preference for anti-democratic regimes per se but as a reflection of their frustration and dissatisfaction with the inability of governments to deliver on their promises.

Each of these very different forms of youth-led protest and resistance has functioned to recreate social boundaries in different ways. When youth are to be interpreted as boundary actors, mediating historically situated power inequalities, these different strategies 'work' the boundaries quite differently. The establishment of political parties entrenches democratic processes, with the potential to build greater levels of sustainable equality and eradicate the divide between (post)colonial 'haves-and-have-nots'. This phenomenon also repositions youths in decision making processes and challenges the conventional notion that young people are passively waiting for a better future to unfold. Similarly, online movements connect with democratic social justice causes globally, in attempts to break with colonial era forms of violence, minority rule and racism. On the other hand, youth-led military interventions connect with older forms of colonial violence, engaging post-colonial rulers in ways that recreate earlier terms of engagement.

Results and Responses: Regional Powers' Reactions to Youth-led Protest

Some youth-led forms of resistance have culminated in significant political transformation, whereas others have gone unnoticed. In certain instances, demonstrations have contributed to redefining established political norms and resulted in the toppling of political regimes (Honwana 2019). A quintessential example of this is the Arab Spring. Starting in Tunisia in December 2010, the Arab spring culminated in regime changes in Libya, Egypt and Tunisia (Frangonikolopoulos and Chapsos 2012). Despite the impact of these and many other protests on national and regional politics, the response of continental and sub-regional institutions to demonstrators and their demands have been inconspicuous.

The response of the African Union and its Regional Economic Communities during periods of youth protests has normally been to take the backseat and assume the posture of passive

observers rather than political entities with the agency and capacity to act. In instances where these institutions respond to youth-led demonstrations, their approach has often been undergirded by concerns about the potential impact of protests on peace and stability and not necessarily on the substantive issues young people protest against. Accordingly, demonstrations that turn out peaceful are usually ignored by regional actors who have over the years viewed youth protests as an exclusively domestic affair; an assumption which has in some instances turned out to be false considering the ripple effects of prolonged and violent youth protests.

Also, the response of regional organizations to youth-led protests has normally been reactive, rather than proactive. For instance, the December 2018 youth-led protests in Khartoum that eventually resulted in the toppling of Sudan's strongman, Omar al-Bashir, received little attention from regional actors at the onset of the demonstrations. Similarly, Blaise Compaore's attempt to extend his 27-year rule in Burkina Faso- though contrary to ECOWAS' protocol on good governance and democracy- was allowed to fester until young Burkinabe's revolted. The youth-led uprising in Burkina Faso, Sudan and other parts of the continent casts a dent on the capacity of multilateral organizations to ensure compliance with regional frameworks geared towards consolidating the minimal democratic and development gains on the continent. Given the apathy of regional groupings towards youth-centered protests and demands, young Africans are increasingly embracing the support of the military in effecting the change they desire.

The posture of regional and sub-regional groupings towards youth-led protests is driven by the unwillingness of these institutions to engage in issues perceived to be the internal affairs of member states. In reality, this approach is deliberately instrumentalized to protect the interests of incumbent leaders rather than the interests of citizens of member states. The silence of regional organizations is therefore geared towards preserving the 'brotherhood' and camaraderie among African leaders at the expense of the continent's youth. Accordingly, regional powers have reacted to youth protests in ways that reproduce the status quo, supporting authoritarian and gerontocratic leadership. If young people are contesting boundaries, acting as mediants 'between incommensurable paradigms and power inequalities' (Keshet et al. 2013), these regional institutions have positioned themselves as allies to the 'old guard', generally resisting social change and standing in the way of more equitable post-colonial societies.

Conclusion

Youth-led protests and social movements, normally non-partisan and organically organized, have emerged as the norm rather than the exception in 21st century Africa. These demonstrations have increasingly become a part of political life on the continent, with young people leveraging

various strategies to demarcate the frontiers of political and economic processes. Africa's youths have protested as a response to concerns national and regional institutions have either failed to redress or allowed to fester, but as we have argued, they have pertinent historical roots that stretch out across continents. In certain important ways, the political activities of young Africans contest a global boundary between the haves-and have-nots, between the victors of imperial conquest and those that continue to struggle to meet their material needs. In response to their protests and political activities, young Africans have been repeatedly confronted with systemic repression, alienation, and outright exclusion from political and economic processes (Ismail and Olonisakin 2021), with the obstinate posture of successive governments continuing to shape how young Africans view themselves in relation to the state. While the activities of youth elsewhere hog the international relations limelight, we believe that the political action of African youth deserves more attention, as does the rampant and ever-growing forms of global inequality.

We recommend that continental and sub-regional institutions prioritize policy dialogues and engagement with young people. These fora should not be top-down as we have seen in the past where regional organizations limit youth engagement to interactions with a few prominent youth activists. A way to democratize these dialogues is for regional institutions to collaborate with institutions of higher learning to create avenues where students can engage with regional actors. Also, these fora need to be institutionalized and not treated as ad hoc policy interventions. We also recommend that regional organizations proactively redress threats to youth-led protests, supporting more robust, democratic forms of participation and youth-led campaigns for social justice.

Nascent Communitarian Construct in ASEAN Intergovernmental Child and Youth Participation Policies

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The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has policies and mechanisms for the participation of children (<18 years old, ASEAN 1992) and youth (15-35 years old, ASEAN 2017) in its intergovernmental processes. Thus, ASEAN policies and mechanisms for children

apply to a segment of the youth and for the youth to a segment of the children with youth as boundary actors across the age categories of children and adults. These policies and mechanisms developed jointly, however, took decades to develop and are still developing. This contribution analyzes them and reveal ASEAN's desire to track its own way as it haggles with internal and external forces, and in the process, has facilitated the emergence of a communitarian construct in need of further development.

ASEAN's extant policies are expected to reveal childhood, youth, and participation conceptualizations that can be mapped in the schools of thought on children's rights. However, they also reveal a different construct that is more communitarian and that emerged from the member countries' collectivist-leaning cultures (Triandis 2018; Min and Takai 2021). In this communitarian construct, children and youth are simultaneously human being and human becoming and participation means community-building. In this construct, as boundary actors, children and youth contribute to their present community and to bringing and building the community to and of the future

Centuries of colonization have influenced ASEAN member states' social constructions (see Petcharamesree et al. 2016 on the member countries' extant colonial-era laws). Western powers colonized all member states except Thailand. While there are indigenous constructs of childhood, youthhood, and participation that have survived colonizations (Sinnott 2014; Salva 2022), international law continues the West's imperialist project (Anghie 2005) and the UNCRC, ratified by ASEAN member states, universalizes childhood and participation constructs (Twum-Danso Imoh et al. 2022) and functions as an instrument of colonization (Montgomery 2017). In a review, Theis (2007, 11) notes of the region's "continuing dependence on ideas and inspiration from Europe and North America at the expense of an independent regional discourse" on child and youth participation.

However, ASEAN child and youth participation policies have posed an underdeveloped communitarian construct. ASEAN issued its first policy on youth in 1983, sixteen years after ASEAN's formal formation in 1967 (ASEAN 1983). It issued its first policy on children in 1992, *the Singapore Declaration of 1992*, without addressing children's participation, that was addressed only in 2001, with *the Declaration on the Commitments for Children in ASEAN*. The different bodies in the ASEAN hierarchy (from the ASEAN Summit of the heads of state/government to the different senior official commissions directly under the ministerial

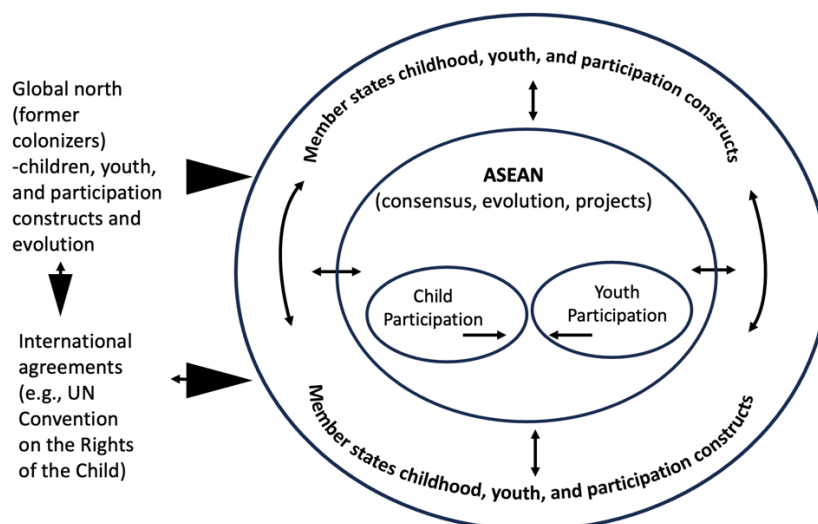
Socio-Cultural Community) have issued these policies directly addressing the region’s children, youth, and their participation from 1967 to 2022.

Within children’s rights field, Hanson (2012) identifies four schools of thought belonging to a continuum bookended by the paternalist and liberationist schools. The paternalist school views children as dependent, human becomings who are generally incompetent to make rational decisions and thus, in need of protection and special rights. The liberationist considers children as “independent actual citizens (beings) who are competent to make well-founded, rational decisions” and have participation and equal rights with adults (Hanson 2012, 74). The welfare and emancipist fall between these two and hold that children are both human becomings and beings. In terms of competence, the welfare school considers children incompetent unless proof to the contrary is presented; the emancipationist considers children competent unless proven otherwise. In ASEAN policies, perspectives on youth can also be mapped along these schools in addition to the communitarian construct the intergovernmental body promulgates. ASEAN’s experience presents a path that may resonate with other IOs working or hoping to include children and youth, especially in the global south, in their processes.

Multiple Influences on ASEAN Children and Youth Participation Policies

This contribution underlines the forces within and outside of the ASEAN region that have influenced the creation and development of children and youth-related policies (see Figure 1). ASEAN decision-making is marked by consensus—observed as “lowest common-denominator convergence” of its members’ national interests (Weatherbee 2019, 32)—consultation, and compromise (Seah 2009; Masilamani and Peterson 2014). The consensus arrived at in the ASEAN children and youth participation policies should reflect how ASEAN member states have socially constructed children, youth, and participation over the years. While children and youth’s biological reality is a fact, how they are understood is socially constructed and negotiated within their milieu (James and James 2012).

Figure 1. Multiple Influences of ASEAN Children and Youth Participation Policies



Colonization and its legacy in the international law system (Anghie 2005) and in the UNCRC more specifically (Montgomery 2017; Twum-Danso Imoh et al. 2022) should have influenced ASEAN and its member states’ constructions. In addition, the ASEAN children and youth participation policies have influenced each other over the years and developed along ASEAN’s evolution as an IO since 1967.

ASEAN children and youth participation policies

In its first policy addressing children, the *Singapore Declaration of 1992*, ASEAN (1992) defines children after UNCRC’s definition (below 18 years old). It has not formally defined youth. However, for the ASEAN Youth Indicator, the data source for ASEAN’s evidence-based policies, member countries agreed to categorize youth as those between 15 and 35 years old (ASEAN 2017). In addition to age categories, the overlap also emerges in how ASEAN policies conceptualize ‘participation’ for children and youth. From 1983 to 2022, different ASEAN bodies issued policies addressing children (totaling 11) and youth (totaling 20) participation. However, between 1983 and 2000, ASEAN only issued participation policies addressing youth (Table 1).

Table 1. Thematic Focuses in ASEAN Children and Youth Participation Policies (1983-2022)

Focus	Addressee	1983-90	1991-00	2001-10	2011-20	2021-22
	Children					

1. Participation as/in ASEAN Community Building	Youth					
2. Participation in decision making process	Children					
	Youth					
3. Participation as contribution to development (present and future)	Children					
	Youth					
4. Participation as/in realization of rights	Children					
	Youth					

In the policies' four most salient thematic focuses, on what ASEAN bodies mean by participation, two overlap and were issued first to the youth. The first is participation in ASEAN community building. The Declaration of Principles to Strengthening ASEAN Collaboration on Youth stipulates that each member shall endeavor “[t]o facilitate youth exchange and youth cooperation... to strengthen the relationship among the youth of ASEAN” (ASEAN Ministerial Meeting 1983, para. 6). ASEAN premised the establishment of the ASEAN Children’s Forum (ACF), the biennial gathering of the member states’ child representatives (12-18 years old) to discuss regional policies and issues, by recalling that one of ASEAN’s aims is the encouragement of all sectors of society to participate in, and benefit from, the process of community building (ASEAN 2011).

The next overlapping thematic focus reveals that by participation, the ASEAN bodies also mean inclusion and involvement in decision-making processes. The blueprint containing the strategies and plans of/for the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community, one of the three main subdivisions composed of sectoral minister representatives, stipulates that strategies should “[e]nsure inclusive, participatory and representative decision making at all levels with special attention” to, among others, children and youth (ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community 2016, para. 13.B.2.ix).

From the onset, policies addressing youth mention participation in the context of decision-making processes. In contrast, policies addressing children mention participation in terms of

the realization of their right to be heard. All ASEAN members states are parties to the UNCRC and realizing children's right to be heard is ASEAN's response to the members' international commitments (see ASEAN 2012, para. 3, for example).

A third thematic focus, addressed only to youth, talks about participation in the context of contributing to ASEAN's development, in the present and future. The ASEAN Youth Development Plan Towards the Year 2000 and Beyond, issued alongside the 1992 Declaration of the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on Youth, noted that one of the four main objectives of ASEAN youth cooperation is the preparation of the "youth in the region for future ASEAN leadership" (ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on Youth 1992, II).

These thematic focuses show that the ASEAN bodies construe participation in multiple ways. One of the focuses, 'participation in decision-making process', aligns with the child participation definition given by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (in 2019) and that leading Western scholars (Freeman 2007; Lundy 2007; Lansdown 2010) have adopted. The definition primarily comes from UNCRC Article 12 stipulating (1) children's right to freely express their own views in all matters that affect them and (2) their right to have these expressed views given due weight in accordance with their age and maturity.

The 'adult youth' (18-35 years old), on the other hand, hold civil and political rights stipulated in the ASEAN Human Rights Declaration that overlap with child participation rights except for the right to have their expressed views given due weight. These adult youth's rights are also not legally established as 'participation rights' and are not legally monitored as such unlike the Committee's periodical monitoring of children's participation rights implementation in UNCRC state parties. In the context of 'adult youth', participation is an aspiration in democratic societies where the governed are involved in their government (Fung 2006).

Conclusion

Discussing youth at ASEAN means recognizing the role of youth as boundary actors between children and adults. This contribution reveals that ASEAN has a view of children as social actors, human beings, whose competencies, views, and experiences are current. The ACF concretizes this view (ASEAN 2011). However, while ASEAN created the biennial forum so that children can participate in ASEAN community building, express views on regional issues,

and contribute to regional development (ASEAN 2011), the child representatives must be accompanied by adult mentors throughout the processes.

ASEAN seems to position itself as either a welfarist or emancipist in the schools of thought of children and youth participation policies. The ACF was created with the assumption that children are competent to discuss regional issues and propose policies; but before becoming child representatives, children must prove their competence to get the national nomination.

However, both categories may not be the most apt to describe the diversity and evolution of ASEAN children and youth participation policies for emphasized in these policies are also relationality and community. ASEAN children and youth are part of ASEAN and therefore, they are part of building the community (see ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community 2016, para. 13.B.2.ix, for example).

While the extant policies reveal the relational and communitarian children and youth participation construct it promulgates, ASEAN still needs to further develop this construct and be explicit and deliberate in its development. If it continues to be part of the global order, ASEAN should harmonize the construct's development to the UNCRC and other human rights treaties the member countries are parties to with a view to contribute to the expansion and further development of these international agreements (see Salva 2022). In its construct development, ASEAN can be more mindful of the children and youth's role as boundary actors between its present and future community, and of the youth as generational boundary actors.

The Ignored Rights of Young People in Conflict Areas

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This contribution investigates how the international framework of children's rights is able to shed light on the impossibility for young people who encounter governments that refuse to recognize their rights when those young people seek to exit international conflict. Despite near-global ratification of the UNCRC, the rights of minors and in domino effect of young people are frequently ignored in international conflicts. This contribution seeks to make two advancements by analyzing whether and how children's and human rights, both contained when one considers the rights of youth as boundary actors between age groups, are useful to protect

young people in the context of the international conflict in Syria. First, the contribution contends that World Society Approach (WSA) scholars should consider UN Special Rapporteurs could be critical components of an international rights framework for young people. Such Rapporteurs are typically external to specific human rights instruments and their committees, and their objectives are to remove obstacles to and bolster human rights. Second, the contribution points to a limit of the current international framework of children's rights, which is that it is limited in its scope, complicated in its procedures and when implemented young people under 18, they must rely on adults to exercise many of their rights. For rights for young people to be meaningful, UN officials, government leaders, and other adults must take those rights seriously in situations of international conflict. These two advancements are illuminated through analysis of an international conflict young people are experiencing.

The World Society Approach

The WSA (see Meyer and Rowan 1977; Meyer 1980; Hafner-Burton and Tsutsui 2005; Wotipka and Tsutsui 2008; Cole 2012; Gran 2017) contends that, despite differences in approaches to governing, nation states share values and norms. WSA scholars examine how international institutions, such as the UN, employ norms, structures, and rules and processes to guide nation states (Meyer and Rowan 1977; Meyer et al. 1997; Boyle and Kim 2009; Cole 2012; Gran 2017). This is the case for the international human and children rights framework through instruments and their associated processes, including "structural templates" and norms on how to act (Cole 2012, 1131; Hafner-Burton and Tsutsui 2005). As part of the framework, UN Special Procedures, such as Special Rapporteurs, can shape children's rights values and norms.

Scholars employing the WSA acknowledge that many states endorse human rights principles but do not implement those principles at home (Cole 2013; Hafner-Burton et al. 2008), which is called decoupling (Cole 2012, 1132; Hafner-Burton and Tsutsui 2005; Gran 2023). These scholars are often interested in whether ratification of a human rights instrument, such as the UNCRC, is meaningful domestically (Hafner-Burton and Tsutsui 2005, 1383; Boyle and Kim 2009). Ratification may merely be an act to maintain appearances and pursue international legitimacy (Meyer and Rowan 1977, 355; Cole 2012, 1133; Hafner-Burton 2008) as well as promote other national interests (Stinchcombe 1997). WSA scholars moreover point to differences in willingness of societies to respond to international human rights norms (Hathaway 2007; Kim et al. 2013).

Cole (2012, 1133) turns to Meyer and Rowan's (1977, 359) idea that a nation state can only maintain decoupling if "shielded from rigorous scrutiny." Meyer and Rowan (1977) contend that surveillance will force nation states to steer clear of decoupling their international legal commitments from domestic practices (Cole 2012). During international conflict, nation states may decouple their international human rights commitments to their peoples when those people live outside national borders. Can surveillance prevent rights decoupling young people experience when residing outside national borders?

The individual communication (sometimes called complaint) procedure as well as monitoring and reporting by Special Rapporteurs may be effective means to undertake rigorous scrutiny (Gran 2023). Today UN member parties may ratify optional protocols attached to various UN human rights instruments. One type of optional protocols establishes an individual communication procedure that individuals can employ to make human rights complaints to particular UN treaty committees (Cole 2012; Gran and Ngana 2024). An entity that may perform rigorous scrutiny is a UN Special Rapporteur. Special Rapporteurs are often not associated with a specific human rights treaty. Instead, they focus on specific problems. This contribution seeks to provide insights into whether individual communications procedures and Special Rapporteurs are valuable tools to scrutinize decoupling by looking at young people's rights in conflicts areas.

The International Framework of Children's Rights

Employing a WSA to the study of children's rights, we observe an international framework of structures and rules supporting their implementation. Such framework is based on the UNCRC, its optional protocols, its committee, national governments' commitments to the Convention, and processes set up to advance children's rights, including Special Procedures. After reviewing the overall framework, we examine particular rights and processes of importance to young people experiencing international conflict.

As is well known, the UNCRC is central to children's rights across the world. All but one UN member party, the United States, have ratified the Convention. Once a national government ratifies the UNCRC, it promises to implement domestically the rights and procedures articulated in the Convention. Two years following ratification, the member party is expected

to file its first report to the UN Committee. This report describes national efforts to implement principles and rights articulated in the UNCRC. The member party is usually expected to file subsequent reports to the UN Committee every five years. Most member parties, however, do not follow these timelines. For instance, eleven years transpired between Finland's fourth and fifth report. France's last report was made in 2012.

After filing its report, officials representing the member party appear before the UN Committee to discuss national implementation and respond to questions of UN Committee members. Following this appearance, the UN Committee files Concluding Observations, which provide feedback to the member party, including praise of the member party's efforts to implement the UNCRC and optional protocols, as well as criticisms of gaps and failures. These Concluding Observations are available via the Committee's website.

Three optional protocols to the UNCRC are the protocol on children in armed conflict, the protocol on the sale of children, and the protocol on the communication procedure. These are distinct from the UNCRC; a national government must ratify each optional protocol. As of March 12, 2024, 173 UN member parties have ratified the optional protocol on children in armed conflict, 178 have ratified the optional protocol on the sale of children, and 50 have ratified the optional protocol on the communication procedure. Although the U.S. Government has not ratified the UNCRC, it has ratified the optional protocols on children in armed conflict and on the sale of children.

What happens if a national government fails to report in a timely manner? The UN Committee cannot impose penalties on governments that have not reported according to guidelines. What the committee can do is announce that a particular member party to the UNCRC or an optional protocol has not filed its report. Is this strategy effective to encourage member parties to adhere to norms and procedures? For countries without censorship, the answer seems to be yes. In countries where the press face restrictions in criticizing their national governments, the UN's approach does not seem to work (Gran 2021). The same problem applies to UN Special Procedures, such as Special Rapporteurs. Special Rapporteurs can only visit a country at the invitation of the government (UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. Nd). While Special Rapporteurs can publicize state shortcomings, governments may censor their reports. In those countries, residents, including young people, will not be aware of their governments' failures to meet commitments to the international children's rights framework.

The optional protocol offers a procedure by which a young person may request the UN Committee's assistance with a rights violation. To use this procedure, multiple conditions must be fulfilled, including that the individual's national government has ratified the optional protocol. As mentioned, only 50 UN member parties have ratified the optional protocol. Young people from other countries are out of luck. If the young person is from a country whose national government has ratified the optional protocol, the young person is expected to submit their complaint electronically using English, French, Russian, or Spanish. If the young person cannot communicate using one of these languages, the UN Committee will not review the complaint. To submit a written complaint requires justification and must be mailed to the UN Committee. The UN Committee will only accept a complaint from a group of young people if all group members live in countries that have ratified the optional protocol. The UN Committee will not review the individual communication unless the young person demonstrates that they have exhausted national remedies. It is an understatement to say that all these criteria are difficult for any young person to meet. Because meeting these technical requirements is difficult, the communication procedure sometimes is ineffective for scrutinizing violations of young people's rights. A notable example is the UN Committee's failure to respond to a 2019 complaint filed by Greta Thunberg and colleagues that sought redress of rights violations arising from climate harms (see also 'The Thunberg Petition,' this forum).

This weakness of the optional protocol on the individual communication procedure points to a dilemma for the international children's rights framework: young people under 18 must rely on adults to exercise their rights. This reliance is a problem when adults, such as UN officials and government leaders, do not take seriously children's rights. Young people often encounter the children's and human rights frameworks limits problem when experiencing international conflict.

Young People Experiencing International Conflict

Problems are revealed in situations of young people experiencing international conflict. This contribution examines international conflict in Syria. People living in the Al-Hol and the Al-Roj camps and the Hourai Center in Syria everyday experience isolation and human rights violations. Neither displaced, refugees, nor prisoners, individuals live in these camps because their home societies, over sixty countries, do not welcome their return. Frontiers around the

camps are established because of their relationship to an Islamic State member. While all national governments have ratified the UNCRC, the Convention means little in the camps. Young people routinely experience violations of their rights to education, health, nutrition, and living conditions they need to grow and develop. Rather than attend school, young people experience economic exploitation. Fires, flooding, and violence, such as shootings and knifings, are common. The Hour Center erects a boundary that separates boys from families due to fear the boys will become terrorists. By remaining in the camps and the Hour Center, young people are precluded from working as boundary actors who can engage the international children's rights framework. Failures to overcome boundaries may be passed down to their children.

In their home societies, government leaders, on whom young people rely to enforce the international children's rights framework, fail to do their jobs in ensuring that young people can exercise their rights. The conditions that the camps and center impose as objective living conditions undermine the subjective abilities needed to support these young people's evolving capacities, including capacities needed to engage rights frameworks (Kilkelly 2020; Liebel 2014; Alderson 2008; Lansdown 2005).

The UN Committee has called on some member parties to repatriate their children. Adult relatives living in France and Finland brought complaints for repatriation of their grandchildren and niece through the UNCRC individual communication procedure. For the boys living in the Hour Center, only Finland, France, and Germany have ratified the optional protocol on the individual communication procedure. Afghanistan, Algeria, Morocco, Pakistan, Russia, and Trinidad and Tobago have not. The UNCRC individual communication procedure is out of reach for young people residing in the Al-Hol and Al-Roj camps, as well as the Hour Center, from inability to exhaust national procedures to submitting an individual complaint to the UN Committee.

The former UN Special Rapporteur on counterterrorism and human rights, Fionnuala Ní Aoláin, has forcefully spoken out about 'citizenship stripping' of people living in Al-Hol, Al-Roj, and the Hour Center. According to Ní Aoláin, stripping individuals of their citizenship denies their fundamental rights as people. Through a position paper and speaking events, the Special Rapporteur has called for paying attention to young people's reliance on adults when it comes to the problem of citizenship stripping (UN Human Rights Special Procedures 2022, 19). As an independent entity not tied to a particular human rights instrument and committee, the Special

Rapporteur on counterterrorism and human rights has served as a catalyst to urging leaders of national governments as well as UN officials to restore rights of individuals detained in Syria (Lawfare 2023). Yet the Special Rapporteur's Mandate does not endow the officeholder with powers to deploy individual complaint procedures and other UN processes to ensure government and UN leaders enforce rights of their young people who live outside national borders. The Special Rapporteur's ability to advocate for adherence to international human rights norms and values can be powerful but may be limited in societies where governments censor the media and civil society organizations (Human Rights Watch 2017).

Conclusion

This contribution demonstrates the utility of the WSA for the study of the international framework of children's and human rights while arguing for incorporation of Special Rapporteurs into the framework. It points to an inherent problem of the international framework, evidenced by an analysis centered on young people as boundary actors across age categories, which is that procedures are limited to state adoption; too complicated; and young people mostly rely on adults to exercise their rights through this framework. Many young people experiencing international conflict cannot have the required resources to cease the framework and/or cannot rely on adults, particularly government and UN leaders, to ensure their rights are enforced and advanced.

The 'Thunberg Petition': Young People Disrupting the Multilateral Agenda

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On September 18, 2023, the Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC or 'the Committee' hereafter) officially launched its General Comment n°26 (GC26; CRC 2023) on 'children's rights to a clean and healthy environment with a special focus on climate change.' After gathering in Geneva teenagers of their Child Advisory Team, Committee experts strongly highlighted the importance of youth participation in rule drafting. IOs have shown repeated interest in acting upon recent climate youth mobilizations. This contribution develops to which extend these calls for action resulted in the transformation of those institutions, both thematically and procedurally.

In particular, a 2019 petition by sixteen children against five states led the CRC to remodel its child participation procedures while taking upon the environmental challenges faced by children and youth. The petition, official known as ‘Sacchi et al. v. Argentina et al.’, but often referred to as the ‘Thunberg petition’ in mediatic spaces, given the highly symbolic presence of Greta Thunberg among the petitioners, was referred to as ‘the climate case’ by Committee members. Petitioners ranged from 8 to 17 years old, as they had to be under 18 to be eligible for filing a communication to the Committee, but over half of them were 16 or older, hence qualifying as both children and youth under commonly used UN definitions. Coming from across the five continents, several of them had led climate marches for state’s compliance with international climate commitments. The petition was in that continuity, claiming that their five states’ inaction on climate change harmed their specific rights as children and asking states to review and amend their laws and policies to accelerate mitigation and adaptation efforts according to the 2021 Paris Agreement on climate change, and increase binding international cooperation. Following the reception and analysis of the petition, the Committee embraced a new environmental agenda on children’s rights of which the GC26 is the latest manifestation. How did a child/youth-led petition transform an international institution’s agenda?

This contribution details how, by using a legal petition, children and youth transformed the participative and environmental agenda of the CRC. It relies on twenty-five qualitative interviews conducted with current and former Committee members, with Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) experts, with non-governmental organizations, and with petition lawyers. It additionally draws on five months of empirical observation of the CRC at the OHCHR. The climate case, widely relayed, brought an unusual spotlight onto the CRC and its optional protocol on a communications procedure. Claiming political change, it raised a moral and political dilemma for the Committee, between protecting children’s rights governance and protecting the agency of children and youth. The way out reflects the dilemma: a depoliticizing technical approach of the petition was favored (Louis and Maertens 2021), but at the same time greater children’s and youth agency was recognized (Pickard 2022; Thew 2018), bringing also a novel long-term climate and environment agenda. Working as boundary actors between age categories, and between the international climate and children’s rights regimes, the petitioners’ demands for rights and environmental accountability disrupted the usual CRC procedures. Breaking the invisibility surrounding children and youth agency (Holzscheiter 2023), they opened the path for institutional change.

An Uncomfortable Public Political and Moral Dilemma over Child Participation

The CRC's optional protocol on a communications procedure allows children to fill petitions directly at the international level. Most of the 92 cases analyzed since its adoption in 2013 aimed at solving individual issues, often concerning unruly deportation of families or medical tests on migrating children wrongly considered as adults. While some were grouped cases, such as a 2018 demand by German youth for lowering voting age, the Committee seemed to prefer addressing individual cases, and sending back general demands for political change to national courts. Consequently, the CRC chose to split the climate case into five country-specific cases. Beyond its format the petition was unusual, asking for increased international cooperation on climate change rather than for personal reparation.

The very mediatized launch of the petition at the same time as Greta Thunberg's speech in front of the UN General Assembly and backed by the well-established communications department of the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) in New York came as a surprise and brought a lot of media attention to the CRC. Committee members usually stay out of the spotlight: their role is unknown by the public, and the optional communications procedure is rarely used. State parties initially reacted negatively to the petition, with most refuting any link between climate action and rights violations and several even threatening to opt out from children's rights cooperation if it meant environmental accountability. This created a strong dilemma for Committee members suddenly under mediatic spotlight: how could they support child activism while maintaining functional international rights cooperation?

It was impossible not to support children and youth, finally expressing their voices politically. However, it seemed necessary to maintain a low-profile not to exceed the CRC original mandate. The CRC experts feared that showing strong support for a political protest might present a risk for the rest of the CRC agenda. To stay within its mandate, the Committee adopted a legal approach to the case in its 2021 decision, framing its answer in terms of legal procedural issues (CRC 2021, §9.16-9.17). This decision to concentrate on procedures can be related to a depoliticization strategy through dilution, carried on by adding "sophisticated technical instruments (substantial complexification) to the discussion" (Louis and Maertens 2021, 92).

In fact, legal treatment was an obvious way to deal with the case's complexity for the Committee members. In the framework of optional communications procedures, the Committee acts as a

quasi-jurisdiction. Over half of its experts are lawyers, whether academic, professional lawyers or magistrates. Consequently, confronted to a politically charged intervention from young people, experts chose to deal with it in a technical legal way, which, beyond being coherent with the procedure, offered a comfortable way out of a political dilemma. Debates on the case decision during Committee's 86th to 88th sessions were framed with the help of OHCHR's Secretariat dedicated to human rights petitions, a team also gathering primarily human rights legal experts and headed by a former judge.

The decision indicated that the case was not admissible because petitioners did not exhaust domestic remedies, which is one of the many restrictive conditions set by the CRC for accepting cases (see also 'The Ignored Rights of Young People', this forum). Petitioners had warned that it was nearly impossible for them to do so, because it meant for each of the sixteen children to take the case individually to the highest court of the five countries. The teenage activists were thus disappointed and angry that the Committee had overlooked their environmental demands, and reacted strongly to its reading, calling out such void technical legal speech as empty "blah blah blah".

Given the political and mediatic outreach of the case, the Committee feared that negative publicity might affect its legitimacy as a norm-setter and promoter of child participation. After ruling on the political dilemma, the CRC consequently had to find a way back to moral compromise between international cooperation and youth's demands.

Turned into Agenda Adjustments towards Children's Environmental and Participative Rights

The CRC went two ways to overcome this uncomfortable situation. One way was to increase its engagement with children through direct participation and child-friendly documentation, eventually leading to revised rules of procedure and to the production of working methods for individual communications. The second way was the addition of climate change to its agenda.

While deciding on the case, the Committee decided to hold oral hearings during its 87th and 88th sessions, in spring and fall 2021. It first invited the petitioners and their lawyers, in two different meetings, and then each of the five states, to defend their case. Hearings were new as recalled by one Committee member: "this is the first time that we had a hearing for an optional communications procedure case. [...] It was very informative to actually get the input from the

children. So that participation element is absolutely critical.” The idea behind it was to give children and youth the opportunity to have their voices heard, in the perspective of fostering their agency, even if their demands did not succeed. Several members explained that hearing directly the petitioners changed their perspective on the case, and sometimes strengthened their doubts about rejection, as they felt empathy for the young petitioners’ cause. Many were moved and impressed by the well-informed speeches of the youngest during the hearings, like Ridhima, an eleven-year-old Indian girl who had already taken her country to court. Direct participation initiated for the climate case resulted in lasting institutional change: the Committee amended its rules of procedures afterwards to allow for such hearings to take place again at the stage of admissibility. Another innovation brought by the case was the edition of a document summarizing the decision in a language adapted to children. This child-friendly practice was also settled in the new Rules of Procedures in November 2021, and repeated later. It forced the institution to go out of its legal technicity and manifest care towards young people.

The petition was also a turning-point in the Committee’s environmental agenda. Committee members sometimes argued that environmental issues were already on their agenda and the petition did not change their positions. However, empirical research contradicts this point and shows that young people asking the Committee for change and putting it in the spotlight did impact its priorities. The CRC took up environmental issues as early as September 2016, when it first led a Day of General Discussion on the topic (Vergonjeanne 2023). It was considered as a success, with wide interest for environmental issues and strong child participation. However, when a year later the non-governmental coalition which had led it and two Committee members suggested to turn these results into a more binding instrument of jurisprudence – a General Comment –, they were met with failure. A concurring option, children’s digital rights, got the votes of the Committee and the environmental agenda was temporarily dropped out. Before the petition, this issue was not on top of the agenda.

While deciding on the petition, in June 2021, the Committee unanimously decided to draft its next General Comment on ‘Children’s Rights and the Environment, with a Special Focus on Climate Change’. Members urged for fast-tracking slow institutional processes of decision, and the Comment was adopted two years later, in September 2023. This GC26 functioned as a path to re-politicize environmental issues, as many sympathized with the youth climate movement (Fridays for Future) from a participatory point of view, whilst avoiding the constraints of focusing on a single group of states as the petition had forced them to.

The drafting process of GC26 put an unusual emphasis on participation. For this draft, the Committee organized two major worldwide online consultations with children. It asked them to inform the drafting process with their demands, their experiences of climate change and their expectations for international cooperation. For this purpose, a website dedicated to informing the wider audience on the drafting of GC26 was created, which had never been set up for a general comment before, reflecting stronger engagement. Terre des Hommes, the convening non-governmental organization, helped the CRC put together a Child Advisory Team of fifteen young activists selected for geographical and gender fair representation. Child Advisory Teams are a usual practice of the Committee, but this time engagement with youth was stronger and a lot of space was left for them at the launch. Some agenda items originally left aside, such as ‘future generations’ and ‘climate justice’, have been included following their demands and have led Committee members’ position on the matters to evolve in between drafts. This positive outcome should be nuanced however, with the participation process still tough for petitioners. Moreover, despite GC’s impact being politically weaker on states than petition decisions, the communication procedure wasn’t revised in the process.

Conclusion

Unruly participation from young activists thus may have created a small electric shock on the CRC’s agenda and participatory practices. Working as boundary actors, young people played the role of brokers between child rights stakeholders and the international climate regime, between children’s’ rights protection and youth agency, with Committee members participating to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) Conference of the Parties (COPs) 27 and 28, in 2022 and 2023 to promote GC26. The uncomfortable political dilemma youth claims created in children’s rights institutions raised a long-lasting stamp, despite depoliticization strategies from the institution. This case of the reception of a claim brought by teenage activists to an international institution illustrates here the transformative power of children and youth agency. Unused to such type of direct political agency, the CRC had to adapt to the obviously politicized demands of children and youth, a situation not planned for by the old-fashioned framework of the Convention.

Indigenous Youth and the New Generation of Climate Activism

Laura Gómez-Mera

Since 1994, the UN has observed the International Day of the World's Indigenous Peoples on August 9th, the date of the inaugural session of the UN Working Group on Indigenous Peoples in 1982. In 2023, the commemoration focused on the role of 'Indigenous youth as agents of change for self-determination'. Such a theme is illustrative of the growing attention to indigenous youth in global fora, especially in international environmental negotiations. Indeed, according to the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues website as of December 2023, indigenous youth are "at the forefront of some of the most pressing crises facing humanity today."

This contribution examines the growing engagement of indigenous peoples and indigenous youth in global governance since the 1990s. To account for their success in gaining access and visibility in international fora, it focuses on three aspects of indigenous youth mobilization strategy: their embrace of cross-institutional strategies such as venue shopping and issue-linking through the collaboration with youth environmental activists in the fight for 'climate justice'; the reframing of their message to present themselves as a solution to the environmental crisis; and their strategic reliance on social media to educate and turn their followers into activists. The study draws on document analysis from various intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations, as well as publicly available information from media sources, websites, and social media accounts. Focusing on data from Instagram (emerging from the results of the search term #indigenouslyouth, #nativeyouth and #jovenesindigenas), a list of 30 Indigenous Youth influencers based in 12 countries was identified and their posts analyzed.

Despite their growing visibility, it may be too soon to draw conclusions about their actual influence on global governance. Yet, indigenous youth have successfully positioned themselves as important boundary actors in global politics, bridging the international environmental and human rights regimes and contributing to intergenerational equity. As their versatile on and offline advocacy strategies show, young indigenous activists have also broken the boundaries between traditional and modern transnational activism and in doing so contributed significantly to the promotion of indigenous rights

Indigenous Engagement in Global Governance

Ignored by the UN human rights system until the 1980s, indigenous peoples' rights were first addressed by the 1957 International Labor Organization Convention 107 concerning the Protection and Integration of Indigenous and Other Tribal and Semi-Tribal Populations (C107). In 1989, C107 was replaced by Convention No. 169 (C169) concerning Indigenous and Tribal Peoples. At the UN, transnational indigenous activism led to the creation of the Working Group on Indigenous Populations in 1982, followed by the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues in 2000. In 2007, following three decades of protracted negotiations, the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People was adopted. Given the strong connection to their lands, and the obvious impact that climate change was having on them, indigenous peoples also sought to influence international environmental negotiations. At the 1992 Earth Summit, lobbying by indigenous activists led to greater recognition of their rights both in Agenda 21 and the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) (Sellheim and Ojanpera 2021; Recio and Hestad 2022). By contrast, the UNFCCC made no direct mention of indigenous peoples' rights. Despite the establishment of the International Indigenous Peoples Forum on Climate Change in 2008 to represent their position during the COPs, indigenous leaders were only accorded observer status (Comberti et al. 2019).

The Achievements of Indigenous Youth in Global Governance

Indigenous youth received formal recognition within the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues in 2006, with the creation of the UN Global Indigenous Youth Caucus (GIYC). The GIYC brings together 77 youth indigenous organizations from around the world and seeks to coordinate their position and represent them at UN meetings. In the late 2010s, indigenous youth activists also began participating more actively in climate change fora, joining a broader coalition of youth environmental activists in their fight for inter-generational climate justice (Ritchie 2021).

Over the last decade, indigenous youth have broadened their ties with various other UN agencies and programs, including the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), World Food Programme (WFP), the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), the OHCHR, the World Bank, the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO), and the UN Development Programme, among others. Three types of engagement suggest they are increasingly recognized as relevant stakeholders and key partners in the fight against the main transnational challenges of the 21st century.

Consultations and information exchange. Indigenous youth are recognized as holders of crucial “traditional knowledge to mitigate and adapt to climate change and other adverse occurrences” (Van Uffelen et al. 2021, 2). In addition to attending the UNFCCC and CBD COPs, indigenous youth participate regularly through the GIYC in multilateral meetings of various UN bodies besides the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, such as UN General Assembly High Level meetings, Sustainable Development Summits, and Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples talks. In 2017, for example, GIYC collaborated with FAO in the establishment of a Rome Statement on the Contribution of Indigenous Youth Towards a World Without Hunger (FAO 2017). The FAO and GIYC have also been working to establish a Global Indigenous Youth Consultative Forum to Eliminate Hunger within the FAO. More recently, in August 2023, the UN Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR) hosted the virtual Global Indigenous Youth Summit on Climate Change, bringing together indigenous youth leaders “to accelerate global engagement with indigenous youth communities” (UNITAR 2023).

Capacity building. Indigenous youth have come to be perceived as intermediaries between their less internationalized local communities and international policy makers. Recently, they have participated in several educational and capacity building initiatives aimed at enhancing their livelihoods and adaptation to the climate crisis. In Bolivia, for example, Uru Chipaya Youth have participated in WFP-led training on alternative livelihoods in the face of climate change (WFP 2023). In the Andes, young indigenous Kichwa women have participated in WIPO’s Women Entrepreneurs from Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities, which offers training in IP issues. WIPO, like the IMF, and the OHCHR also have Indigenous Fellowship Programs, which although not limited to youth, offer important capacity building for Indigenous Youth.

Funding and implementation. IOs have come to view investments in indigenous youth as “essential to fight climate change” and improve food security (IFAD 2019). The latter have thus benefited from and led the implementation of various initiatives funded by UN agencies, including the World Bank, IFAD, and UN Development Programme. With funding from IFAD’s Indigenous Peoples Assistance Facility, for example, female Indigenous Youth leaders have managed programs promoting food security and forest conservation in Colombia and Peru (IFAD 2021; 2022). In Brazil, Guarani youth leaders have received UNESCO financial and

technical assistance for biological diversity conservation attempts (UNESCO 2023). In the Philippines, FAO funding and innovative ways enabled Lake Sebu young indigenous women to ensure food security during the pandemic (Van Uffelen et. al 2021).

Explaining Outcomes: The Strategic Mobilization of Indigenous Youth

The increased recognition and involvement of indigenous youth in the agendas of IOs over the past decade is related to this group's ability to mobilize strategically and to navigate an increasingly complex international institutional landscape. Three aspects of this rational strategy differentiate them from the previous generation of indigenous activists.

Forum shifting and collaboration with youth climate activists. The new generation of young indigenous activists have been particularly instrumental in moving indigenous concerns from international human rights to climate change fora. As scholars of international regime complexity have argued, the existence of multiple institutions governing a specific issue allows rational actors to engage in venue shopping, selecting the one where they can expect to obtain their preferred outcomes (among others Alter and Meunier 2009). In the 1990s, the slow progress in negotiations over the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People frustrated indigenous leaders, who sought alternative institutional channels through which to defend their rights. As international attention to environmental issues grew and as indigenous peoples experienced first-hand the negative effects of climate change on their lands, they shifted the focus of attention from the UN human rights system to the environmental regime (Keck and Sikkink 1998). By engaging in mutually beneficial cooperation with tropical forest activists, they succeeded in placing indigenous issues on the forest and biodiversity agreements. In contrast, the convergence with climate change activists was less straightforward, given concerns about the potentially adverse effects on indigenous rights of initiatives such as the UN Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Degradation (REDD) (Recio and Hestad 2022). Nevertheless, indigenous peoples engaged in a 'forum-linking' strategy of 'climatization,' seeking to benefit from financial resources available through REDD and other facilities such as the Green Climate Fund (Dupuits 2021, 570; Doolittle 2010).

Whereas some traditional indigenous groups such as the Mesoamerican Alliance of Peoples and Forests eventually sought to reverse this climatization approach (Dupuits 2021), indigenous youth activists instead embraced it openly, viewing the UNFCCC as a 'rare' access opportunity

(Thew, Middlemiss, and Paavola 2020; Ritchie 2021). It also allowed them to join a broader coalition of environmental youth activists in the fight for climate justice and to link it with the fight for self-determination (Grosse and Mark 2020). The COP gatherings worked as ‘movement building sites’ where activists collaborated to demand greater inclusion in decision-making (Grosse and Mark 2020, 151). Thus, despite the limits that the hierarchical UN structure placed on their participation, indigenous youth welcomed their engagement in COPs as contributing to “the historic inclusion” of their interests in direct negotiations (Sherwood-O’Reagan 2018).

Reframing their role in global governance. Indigenous youth have succeeded in reframing their message and repositioning themselves and their ancestors as ‘green custodians’ and ‘guardians of the future’, by emphasizing their non-transferrable traditional knowledge, their special relationship to the land and natural resources, and their ancestral experience maintaining and preserving these resources (Verde 2022). In the words of Nunes Macedo and Pereira (2020), “Indigenous Peoples have maintained the Amazon for millenniums. They can keep doing so, if we let them”. The statement reflects the growing global perception of indigenous communities as potential ‘stewards’ that can ‘teach’ Westerners how to coexist with their ecosystems and combat climate change (Cernansky 2021). It is the result of the successful reframing of the narrower traditional positioning of indigenous peoples as oppressed, disempowered communities, to one that emphasizes their agency and potential leadership in global attempts to save the planet. Indeed, recent scientific research has demonstrated that protected areas governed by indigenous peoples have more biodiversity than other lands (Corrigan et al. 2018).

In addition, this frame stresses the importance of intergenerational links within indigenous communities. From this perspective, indigenous elders teach the younger generations, the planet’s future custodians, how to care for its resources. The co-organizers of the 2023 Global Indigenous Youth Summit on Climate Change argued in a recent scientific commentary: “we call on Indigenous Peoples around the world (...) to take active roles in the global discourse on climate resilience. We also call on decision makers worldwide to involve Indigenous Peoples in (...) biodiversity conservation endeavors (...) Indigenous youths are most crucial to engage” (Sogbanmu et al. 2023, 274-275).

Indigenous digital advocacy. Social media have provided new political pathways through which indigenous peoples can express their views and political agency (Carlson and Frazer

2021). According to Duarte (2017, 2), given the limited avenues for direct political participation, social networking sites become “compelling mobilizing grounds for indigenous connective activism.” Indeed, social media such as Twitter, Tik Tok, Instagram, and YouTube have emerged as important tools through which the new generation of indigenous youth activists have advocated for their cause and connected with supporters as well as with allies in the climate justice movement. As Brazilian youth activist Samela Satere Mawe put it “just like our ancestors fought with the tools that they had,” indigenous youth can now weaponize social media and the internet to defend their interests– “We are digital guerrilla fighters” (Conti 2022).

The emergence in recent years of indigenous youth ‘influencers’ on various social media sites has been key in spreading a reframed message about indigenous peoples’ centrality in the fight against climate change. There are at least two ways in which indigenous youth digital activists have utilized these platforms. First, indigenous influencers have used Instagram, YouTube, and Tik Tok to educate the wider population about the unique relationship of indigenous peoples to the land and the environment as well as the disproportionate burden that they bear from environmental degradation and climate change. For example, Satere Mawe, recognized as “a leading voice among Brazil’s Indigenous youth” uses Instagram and YouTube to share “didactic” videos to explain complex topics to an indigenous audience, to “simplify and democratize the news” and “decolonize” the cultural debate (Conti 2022).

Second, through this type of “digitally enabled distributed campaigning” indigenous youth influencers also empower supporters and turn them into activists. This was evident in the campaign by Native American youth activists against the Dakota Access Pipeline in 2016. Their effective use of technology, especially Facebook live, Twitter, and Instagram, helped spread awareness and support for the #noDAPL movement not just in the United States but also around the world (Ferguson 2018). They attracted the attention of celebrities like Leonardo Di Caprio, Ezra Miller, and Susan Sarandon, who used their own social media accounts to repost and express their support (ABC News 2016). More generally, social media has also helped other non-indigenous allies of the movement to collaborate with indigenous youth. Through his account @indigenousgeotags, American PhD Student Joseph Winston seeks to raise awareness about the “indigenous history of public land in the United States” among the white outdoor and tourist community in the US.

Conclusion

Indigenous youth have embraced, as boundary actors from a new generation, innovative strategies, adding an important reframing of their message and positioning themselves as essential players in global governance. They have done so through climate change politics but not only. Their strategy helped increase the visibility of indigenous peoples demands and concerns. However, growing attention and visibility should not be mistaken for effective or meaningful influence. As others have argued some institutional concessions create “an appearance of inclusion for indigenous peoples that belies their marginal status” (Comberti et al. 2019, 17). Nevertheless, the remarkable rise of indigenous youth from virtual anonymity to a seat at the conference (if not decision-making) table not only showcases their growing instrumental agency. It also has implications for other transnational activists seeking to succeed in a rapidly changing 21st century global scenario. It highlights the importance of cross-issue collaboration, of flexibility and adaptability of frames, and of technological innovation.

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