

Chapter 5.

How Inclusive are International Discussions on the Sustainable Development Goals? Lessons learned from Youth

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[a] Abstract [/a]

The United Nations Major Group for Children and Youth (UN-MGCY) was created as one of the nine United Nations (UN) major civil society groups after the Rio Earth Summit in 1992. The main goal of the UN-MGCY is to promote meaningful participation of youth and bring youth perspectives in the UN processes. This chapter analyzes the historical development of the UN-MGCY and its roles in the High-level Political Forum (HLPF) on Sustainable Development, that is charged with reviewing the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Our methodology relies on a database of youth participants in the annual HLPF meetings, interviews, and participatory observations. We provide the first in-depth analysis of the UN-MGCY and therefore contribute to the understanding of the role of youth voices and engagements in SDG governance for better inclusion.

Keywords: Children and Youth Major Group; Children and Youth International; Youth Caucus; Youth-serving organizations; Youth-led organizations; Youth-washing.

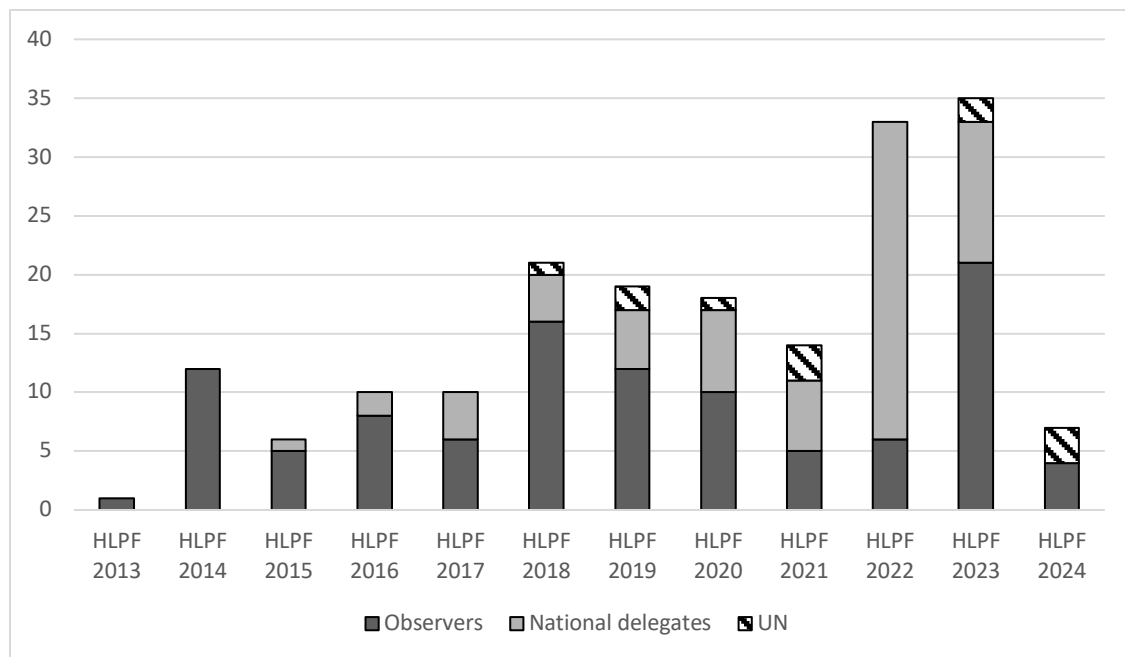
Sustainable development cannot be achieved without the active participation of all sectors of society. The first United Nations (UN) Conference on Environment and Development (Earth Summit) in 1992 recognized the importance of institutionalizing civil society's engagement in sustainable development governance. Agenda 21, the program of action adopted at the Summit, established nine "Major Groups" to channel civil society's efforts for

sustainable development. Children and youth¹ were recognized as one of the groups through its action plan along with women, Indigenous Peoples, farmers, business and industry, labor and trade unions, science and technology, local authorities and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Since then, children and youth have been an official constituency in the UN system.

While the representation of all civil society groups is important, children and youth present specific characteristics that make them even more important stakeholders for sustainable development: (i) they represent a very important share of the world population (current median age of 32), (ii) impacts on children and youth from unsustainable development (environmental change) is greater due to their vulnerability also knowing that children and youth are mostly living in countries vulnerable to climate change; and (iii) the overall ambition of Agenda 21 was to optimize the health, wellbeing, and opportunities for ‘future generations’, and children and youth are often considered as having the closest interests with future generations.

And yet data on children and youth participation in the international policy process of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) implementation is missing. No official comprehensive lists of the participants to the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF), that takes place annually since 2013 to review the progress towards the SDGs, exist. Specific reports, annotated programs, and reports by the *Earth Negotiation Bulletin*,² enable us to estimate children and youth presence in the HLPF meetings over time (See Figure 14.1), that we compiled in a database.³ While we interpret the figure with caution because of data availability, it appears that children and youth have been participating both as observers and as members of national delegations. The observed trend is that while there were a few youth representatives initially, the number of youth representatives at HLPF meetings has generally increased.

Figure 14.1. Number of children and youth participants at HLPF meetings over time



Zooming on the data, out of the 186 youth participation occurrences identified in the database, only eight people participated in more than one HLPF meeting. The children and youth turnover is very high: participants change frequently and newcomers often attend these processes. We find the same trend when looking at the organizational level: only four organizations resulting from our keyword search (the European Youth Forum; the Global Indigenous Youth Caucus; the International Movement of Catholic Students; and the International Youth Organization for Ibero-America) have been present at more than one meeting.

A challenge to analyzing engagement of children and youth is that they do not necessarily identify themselves as part of the children and youth constituency when they register for meetings. In the database, 46 participants were identified as children and youth constituency members. Since 2013, the children and youth group is organized around the UN-MGCY (Major Group for Children and Youth).⁴ Membership has been increasing through time and as of 2024, there were over 6,500 members of UN-MGCY from around the world who joined as an individual or an organization (UN-MGCY, n.d.a).

Yet, while children and youth have been active for over three decades in global sustainable development governance, academic attention to them has been rare. To fill this

gap, this chapter analyzes the historical development and current work of the UN-MGCY to deepen our understanding of the inclusivity of global sustainable development governance, particularly since the adoption of the SDGs. The history and challenges of the UN-MGCY point to a lack of an enabling environment with children and youth struggling to create a political space in global sustainable governance. The global youth climate movement⁵ has boosted youth participation in the UN system, but more attention is required to make children and youth engagement meaningful. This chapter highlights how children and youth still have few opportunities to be included in representation during decision-making at the global level, and therefore few opportunities to voice concerns on unsustainable development and inform solutions.

The chapter starts with an overview of the historical development of the UN-MGCY mandate, followed by analyses of its structure and membership as well as its activities. Lastly, we discuss the UN-MGCY's role in SDG implementation and the meaning of such role for sustainable development governance. The historical analysis of the UN-MGCY relies on 21 interviews with youth who participated in the global conferences on sustainable development since 1992, i.e., the Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD) and the HLPF meetings (see list of interviews in the Annex⁶). Additional sections rely on: (i) observation data from HLPF 2021 (online), HLPF 2022 (online) and HLPF 2023 (on site); (ii) our database listing all youth participants who have taken part in the SDGs negotiations (see also Orsini & Kang, 2023); (iii) and results from a survey completed by 15 youth participants at HLPF 2023.

[a]The Historical Development of the UN-MGCY Mandate[/a]

At the time of the recognition of children and youth as an official Major Group in 1992, Principle 21 of the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development acknowledged that “the creativity, ideals and courage of the youth of the world should be mobilized to forge a global partnership in order to achieve sustainable development and ensure a better future for all”

(United Nations, 1992a). Chapter 25 of Agenda 21 emphasized that it is “imperative that youth from all parts of the world participate actively in all levels of decision-making processes” and they should “ensure that the interests of children are taken fully into account in the participatory process for sustainable development and environmental improvement” (United Nations, 1992b). These official documents imply that children and youth bring unique and necessary perspectives into the discussions.

After the Earth Summit, the CSD became “highly participatory in structure and outlook” as stakeholders and partners engaged in formal proceedings (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, n.d.). Youth were organized into an ‘issue caucus’, the ‘Youth Caucus’ until CSD18 in 2010, connected to a single intergovernmental forum, the CSD, rather than as an advocacy network that could act across all forums related to sustainable development issues (Prentice, 2012).

The Rio+20 Summit in 2012 was another major event that catalyzed youth presence (UN-MGCY, 2012). In the run-up to the Summit, the Youth Caucus became more active according to attendees: “The Youth Caucus was also there (at the Summit) and representing 20,000 youth. The group was very organized, very well trained, based on consensus-building. The Caucus was privileging the group as opposed to individuals” (Interview 2). The well-organized preparation, together with proactive engagement of Brazilian youth movement which supported youth from other parts of the world, made the Rio+20 Summit as a “momentous occasion” (UN-MGCY, 2012) to advance the participation of children and youth in global sustainable development governance. However, as a youth platform, the Caucus had no formal structure and could therefore not apply for most funding grants from the UN but also from regional organizations such as the European Union. As a result, its members decided to create a proper youth organization, acting in conjunction with the Caucus: Rio+twenties, which changed its name later to Children and Youth International (CYI). In parallel, discussions about changing the name of the Caucus started around CSD19 in 2011.

After the Rio+20 Summit, the Youth Caucus, together with the CYI, became the UN-MGCY, to better reflect the Major Group's categorization and to give direct visibility to children in the name of the platform. Some recognize the World Conference on Youth in 2014 hosted by Sri Lanka as a key event that helped put in place the functioning of the Major Group as it is known today (Interview 14); while others (Kwon, 2019) recognize that, despite its central focus on youth, the conference faced limits in terms of meaningful youth engagement.

Several General Assembly resolutions and agreements with UN agencies specifying the role of Major Groups and of youth representatives/constituencies⁷ have influenced the development of the mandate of the UN-MGCY since 1992. The objectives of the Youth Caucus were primarily: (i) to advance the role of children and youth within the CSD and related processes; (ii) to facilitate dialogue and collaboration within its constituency, resulting in group dynamism and unity in diversity; and (iii) to encourage and support dialogue and collaboration between Major Groups and civil society at the CSD (CSD Youth Caucus, 2011b, quoted in Prentice, 2012).

Gradually, especially after gaining momentum at the Rio+20 Summit, the UN-MGCY's mandate broadened the scope of youth engagement to bridge youth and the UN system and to promote meaningful participation of youth in all the processes of the UN, not limiting itself to sustainable development processes (Cumiskey et al., 2015; UN-MGCY, n.d.b). Today, the UN-MGCY deals with all "the pillars of the UN itself", namely human rights, sustainable development, peace and security, and humanitarian action (UN-MGCY, n.d.c). The UN-MGCY has reporting obligations towards the UN system and regularly submits periodic reports on its activities to the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA), the HLPF and the UN General Assembly. UN-MGCY has progressively advanced as an institution to serve as a broad youth platform, to address and improve engagement of children and youth in UN processes, and to collect funding to ensure children and youth participation in the global governance of sustainable development.

[a] The Evolution of the UN-MGCY Structure [/a]

The detailed organizational development of the UN-MGCY has not been closely monitored since its creation in 2013. According to the limited available sources on its initial functioning (Prentice, 2012; Stevens, 2015), we can observe that the UN-MGCY has evolved over time, expanding its membership and structure.

[b] Membership [/b]

Detailed information about the UN-MGCY membership is difficult to obtain as members are loosely connected (they mostly sign-up to a common mailing list) and the UN-MGCY has no official records of affiliated organizations (Prentice, 2012; all interviews). Previously, the membership of the Youth Caucus mainly consisted of youth-led NGOs (Karkara, et al., 2012). As of 2009, the Youth Caucus claimed to have over 2,000 youth leaders as members (Earth Charter, 2009).

Currently, membership of the UN-MGCY is open to both organizations and individuals. Any formal or informal organizations that work on children and youth and individuals under 30 can become a member, with no screening process for membership. The group is very open, which means that anyone who agrees with the vision and procedures of the UN-MGCY and the principles of the UN Charter can join. Benefits to members are primarily related to receiving information regarding topics of interests and ways to engage in the UN-MGCY.

In 2020, among more than 8,000 member entities were reported by the group, the largest portion was from West and Central Africa (23.0%), followed by South and Central Asia (16.7%), East and Southern Africa (16.4%), East and Southeast Asia (9.5%), North America (9.1%), Western Europe (7.6%), Latin American and Caribbean (6.1%), Middle East and North Africa (5.6%), Eastern Europe (4.4%), and Pacific (1.6%) (UN-MGCY, n.d.b). While there are no requirements along this line, membership is rather balanced in terms of regional representation, showing a worldwide interest in the group. However, Knappe and Renn (2022)

point out that, in 2015, the spokespersons and conference participants of the UN-MGCY were often recruited from European and North American NGOs. Furthermore, as the UN-MGCY membership and activities are all voluntary without official financial sponsorship, many members consider that they represent a “very specific, privileged fraction of young people” who have the time and resources to be involved at the international level. This is not specific to youth but is aggravated for this constituency as youth are not professionals, compared to NGOs or businesses (Orsini, 2022).

[b] Organizational structure [/b]

Major Groups are coordinated independently from the UN Secretariat. In this context, the UN-MGCY is a self-organized mechanism. The Youth Caucus started with a simple structure that consisted of three parts. It has evolved into a more complex and comprehensive organization after it became UN-MGCY.

The Youth Caucus had three main organs that comprised individuals elected through voluntary processes: a Steering Committee, Regional Coordinators and Organizing Partners⁸ (UN-MGCY, 2010). The Steering Committee was responsible for developing a timeline of action, preparing thematic discussion papers, communicating internally and externally, and coordinating activities and events at CSD meetings. Regional Coordinators were responsible for gathering input for discussion papers by contacting youth organizations in their regions, namely Asia, Africa, Europe, Latin America, North America, and Oceania. Lastly, the Organizing Partners, elected for two years in alignment with the post-2002 two-year CSD cycles, played a liaison role between the Youth Caucus and the CSD process, taking charge of accreditation to CSD meetings and funding applications (UN-MGCY, 2010). Prentice (2012, p. 29) observed that all the four Organizing Partners were from the Global North in 2012.

The UN-MGCY structure is much more complex. As of 2024, the UN-MGCY has a Secretariat that comprises two Organizing Partners, six Policy Officers and the Administrative Team of the group (UN-MGCY, n.d.a.; Interview 21). The Organizing Partners are elected

every other year by the MGCY members. Just as it was the case for the Youth Caucus, the financial and legal mechanism of the group is hosted by a separate entity that is registered as a proper organization: the CYI. CYI oversees the Organizing Partners who take the facilitating and chairing role of the UN-MGCY.

Beyond the Secretariat, the governance structure of the UN-MGCY is even more complex: it is organized by topic (31 sub-constituencies and working groups), by region (five regions) and by other platforms liaison groups (six in total; for instance, for National Youth Entities or Regional Youth Entities). Different Focal Points are appointed for certain topics and regions, after going through an open call and election process (UN-MGCY, n.d.c; Interview 10). Because each thematic working group has regional focal points, and these regional focal points are under regional groups, the UN-MGCY has a multi-layered coordination structure. Such a structure does therefore not mirror the 17 SDGs, also because the platform is meant to inform UN processes beyond the goals.

Some activities related to specific topics can be covered by the UN-MGCY but mostly in coordination with other platforms for children and youth, with the UN-MGCY appearing as the constituency of youth constituencies. This allows the UN-MGCY to harness and hone expertise on political processes and substantive expertise. Additional platforms can be oriented around substantive issues or policy goals or be hosted under additional UN intergovernmental processes (UN-MGCY, n.d.a). For example, a formal youth engagement group, the SDG 7 Youth Constituency, exists for SDG 7 (access to affordable, reliable, sustainable, and modern energy for all) (UN-MGCY, n.d.b). A similar logic exists for SDG 13 (climate change), for which YOUNGO is the expert platform acting within the UN-MGCY: “the UN-MGCY is for the entirety of the UN, YOUNGO is specific to the [UN Framework Convention on Climate Change] UNFCCC and also SDG 13 (climate change). So we (YOUNGO) are one of the thematic constituencies under the UN-MGCY umbrella” (Interview 7). Another example is the Global Youth Biodiversity Network, a youth platform

for the Convention on Biological Diversity, which represents the focal point for biodiversity issues. Indeed, collaboration with other platforms is favored for synergies (Interview 7).

The overlaps between thematic groups, regional groups and separate platforms increase the scope of the group. However, it adds up to the complexity of the UN-MGCY structure that renders it difficult to navigate the SDGs for children and youth representation. The voluntary nature of collaboration and commitment to the UN-MGCY often results in uneven cooperation opportunities among different constituencies or regions, making the work dependent on focal points' personal capacity and networks.

[b] Management and operations [/b]

All the UN-MGCY management functions are undertaken on a voluntary basis. The group might receive funding for specific projects from UN agencies, governments, or NGOs, but not for the group's management. On the one hand, it complicates its management and operations. On the other hand, it enables the UN-MGCY to remain independent.

In practice, the UN-MGCY management relies on a limited number of volunteering individuals, with very little funding. Because they dedicate themselves to the platform, the UN-MGCY is somehow in the hands of such individuals, leading more easily to management problems, as happened in 2019-2021. Partly to correct this issue, internal discussions ended up in 2023 with the idea that the secretariat include paid appointments for administrative works (Interview 10).

Member engagements and interactions are managed largely in virtual communication platforms that convene individuals around the world. All UN-MGCY communications have taken place online and/or by phone, even before the pandemic made this a normal professional practice (Prentice, 2012; Stevens, 2015). The emergence of social media, WhatsApp, and cloud services such as Google Docs and the increasing need for rapid communication during international meetings have turned online facilities into central tools for advocacy. Those who have limited access to technology can find this as a hurdle to

participation (Stevens, 2015). In any case, the UN-MGCY and youth constituencies under the UN-MGCY are known to be open to a broad participation of its members and open consultation process. For instance, at the 20th meeting of the Conference of the Parties (COP) to the UNFCCC, YOUNGO used multiple forms of consultation (including online forms) to communicate with its members while the Farmers Major Group maintained one unique form of communication (Kuyper & Bäckstrand, 2016).

While its openness and balanced regional representation of members are the strengths of the UN-MGCY, its reliability on voluntary work is one weakness of its current structure. The financial hurdle to be an active member (for instance, to attend in-person events or to engage as Organizing Partners) has been a constant challenge for the platform, according to all our interviewees. Another weakness is the complexity of the current structure that hinders efficient management. This problem originates partly from the nature of the UN-MGCY as a superstructure in partnership with multiple children and youth constituencies. The complexity of the organization combined with limited financial and human resources diminish the UN-MGCY's advocacy capacities. For example, at HLPF 2023, the UN-MGCY planned to organize an action outside UN Headquarters to push for more ambitious sustainable development policies, but unclear communication and lack of capacities resulted in a low turnout. As a result, the complex but open structure of the MGCY is both an asset and a liability for youth participation strategies. The platform's openness and diversity of topics lower the barrier for newcomers to join the platform. At the same time, however, the dynamism of the platform relies on the personal capacities of the volunteers.

[a] UN-MGCY Actions During International Meetings [/a]

[b] Main positions [/b]

The UN-MGCY has regularly produced and presented statements at HLPF meetings. The group has also elaborated position papers. Although the HLPF meetings do not produce

legally-binding outcomes, the UN-MGCY makes efforts to participate in the discussions and comment on the progress towards the SDGs.

The positions of the platform are drafted according to a consensus driven rule (Interview 2). They have evolved over time, but common trends remain visible. When positions of the UN-MGCY at two different points in time are compared, namely 2010 (the Youth Caucus Opening Statement) and 2023 (Youth Position Paper for SDG Summit 2023), it is clear that the group has continuously emphasized the need for 1) accountability mechanisms for governments and stakeholder participation, 2) transformation of the current system, 3) listening to youth voices as equal partner voices and 4) education as a fundamental prerequisite for the sustainable development objectives to be achieved.

Taken together these elements represent strong ideals that children and youth actively bring to international processes: “youth representatives have very high ideals behind what they are asking for and what they want to see changed. It's exceptionally inspiring to me how many youth had travelled here from places and demographics that are not often represented in a strong or powerful way in international governance” (Interview 8).

[b] Participation strategies [/b]

The main role of the UN-MGCY is to coordinate youth engagement, not necessarily to speak on behalf of all the young people around the world (Interview 14). A few months before each annual sustainable development summit (CSD and then HLPF meetings), UN-MGCY actively participates in the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) Youth Forum, held annually each spring since 2012. While the UN-MGCY is not the host of this event, it is involved in the selection of participants and in the program design. During the ECOSOC Youth Forum, participants discuss the main themes of the forthcoming intergovernmental meeting, and prepare statements for interventions. However, because the ECOSOC Youth Forum is held a few months earlier than the HLPF, participants of both events hardly overlap. In our survey, only 3 out of 15 respondents attended both HLPF 2023 and the Youth Forum.

Thus, the UN-MGCY also organizes a training session called Youth Blast to prepare youth participants a few days before the HLPF, providing basic information about sustainable development, the UN-MGCY's work, and practical guides.

During the annual intergovernmental HLPF sessions, youth participants engage in plenary by presenting statements, organizing bilateral meetings with government representatives and UN agencies, and organizing side events. For statements, as an official constituency, the UN-MGCY has an opportunity to speak at HLPF meetings, although not in every session. It takes rotation of speakers and meeting seats for all its members who would like to take such opportunities while avoiding “hogging of speaker space” (Stevens, 2015) to maximize participation opportunities for all. However, it is not very clear how the speakers are selected during the HLPF (Interview 4). For bilateral meetings with governments, all in-person interested UN-MGCY members may participate. Training on how to approach government delegates is also provided. Among other activities, during the Rio+20 Summit the Youth Caucus “tracked documents in live time. They had developed some documents about participating and lobbying techniques such as the ‘drop technique’ according to which you would just drop by national delegates” (Interview 2).

Occasionally, the UN-MGCY gathers opinions of youth around the globe through online platforms and offline meetings (e.g., ECOSOC Youth Forum) to deliver input to major events. The *Youth Position Paper for the SDG Summit 2023* (UN-MGCY, 2023) and the *Voices of Youth: Young People's Perspectives on the 2024 Summit of the Future & the Acceleration of the 2030 Agenda* (UN-MGCY, 2024) are two examples. However, this is not a regular practice for HLPF meetings. While the ECOSOC Youth Forum provides opportunities for building capacity and raising awareness of children and youth engagement in sustainable development decision-making, no formal written position paper was produced at the forum for HLPF 2023. Instead, different working groups and constituencies made their own interventions based on their expertise and interests during the conference. Our observations

during HLPF 2023 reveal that bilateral meetings are mostly organized for networking purposes and collective discussions, not to deliver a unique message to government authorities.

Still, as a group, the UN-MGCY members share the overarching objective to advocate for the importance of promoting children and youth participation, engagement, and increasing opportunities. Because this objective has still not reached after more than 30 years of existence of the Major Group, advocacy is still mostly organized around those lines, not around the review of precise SDG goals.

[b] Impact [/b]

Youth are increasingly visible in international sustainable development governance and interacts more frequently with government delegates and UN offices than in the past. At HLPF 2023, many youth participated through the UN-MGCY or as national youth delegates. According to a UN-MGCY member, this was the largest number of youth participants on record with a significant increase compared to previous HLPFs (Interview 10). Moreover, official youth statements and bilateral meetings with youth significantly increased at HLPF 2023 compared to previous HLPFs. Almost every official session at HLPF 2023 had at least one youth speaker or discussant: “The MGCY has been able to have youth speakers in the official sessions as well as side events for I think more than 80% of them” (Interview 19). Several interviewees who had already attended previous HLPFs indicated Greta Thunberg and the Fridays for Future movement as a major explanatory factor for such an increase in youth participation. As explained by one of them who attended HLPF 2019 and HLPF 2023: “Greta Tunberg really, I think, energized youth as a meaningful stakeholder in international processes” (Interview 15).

However, the increased youth presence at HLPF 2023 does not mean that children and youth are more listened to in the decision-making processes. One survey respondent explained that children and youth still struggle to get a seat at the table, while they should be struggling

to get their ideas adopted by international declarations and governments: “Not only should our voices be heard, but our ideas should be considered to policy level” (Survey respondent 5). Countries increasingly report that they consult children and youth in the preparation of voluntary national reviews presented at HLPF, but in most of the cases, it is unclear how youth’s opinions are reflected in the SDG policy process. The UN-MGCY statements’ similarities through time could be a sign of the stagnating political influence of youth in global sustainable governance, where the importance of their presence has to be constantly recalled.

Recent major conferences on sustainable development acknowledge the importance of youth participation, but the outcome documents still touch only on the basic principles. The governmental political declaration adopted at the 2023 SDG Summit has one paragraph that specifically addresses children and youth “as critical agents of change and torchbearers of the 2030 Agenda for current and future generations” (United Nations, 2023). This is a partial reflection of what the UN-MGCY expressed in its Youth Position Paper (UN-MGCY, 2023). In particular, the UN-MGCY’s emphasis on more meaningful participation and institutionalization of youth participation in decision-making processes is still unaddressed with the Summit declaration. The Pact for the Future adopted at the Summit of the Future in 2024 had a greater focus on youth, showing states’ commitment to strengthen meaningful youth participation at the national as well as the international levels. However, youth observers at the Summit pointed out that the language regarding youth participation in decision-making processes had been “watered down” during the preparation process of the Summit (Mwangi et al., 2024).

Several interviewees also believed that youth are still often underestimated as stakeholders due to their age. This is visible through youth-washing practices whereby governments or UN agencies are trying to make their collaboration with children and youth visible (by taking pictures, adding youth to their event programs, etc.), while not engaging meaningfully with

them (taking their claims seriously, supporting their long-term participation, etc.). The impact of the SDGs on children and youth is also unclear. Overall, there is a lack of tracking how the SDG implementation influences children and youth because relevance indicators are lacking: “I think that is one of the areas that we have shortcomings on, we really do not have KPIs (Key Performance Indicators)⁹ (for children and youth). I would say we do not have proper tracking measures, accountability measures” (Interview 3).

[a] Discussion and Conclusion [/a]

The UN-MGCY has continuously and progressively made efforts to ensure children and youth participation in global sustainable development governance since its inception in 2012. Since then, and especially after the Fridays for Future movement for climate spread worldwide, youth participation in environmental politics has increased dramatically. The combination of these internal efforts and external pressure resulted in the reinforced presence of youth at HLPF meetings.

Besides trying to raise youth profile in sustainable development negotiations and SDG monitoring meetings, the UN-MGCY has also expanded its scope, community of practice, and network potential by engaging with other youth platforms in parallel international processes that support achievement of the SDGs, such as climate COPs. UN-MGCY shares knowledge for and from children and youth across global decision-making processes. Youth constituencies and youth-related institutions in the UN system have been created, inspired by UN-MGCY’s practices. Furthermore, experiences at the UN-MGCY motivate young people to initiate action beyond the UN space. According to a member, “so essentially what we were able to do is expand the coordination of young people, bringing a lot of the good practices and learnings that we had from the SDG process into other processes and therefore creating almost like a confederation” (Interview 14). Overall, children and youth have been raising their profile “to the point now where everybody at the UN, including the Secretary-General, is

constantly saying the words of youth” (Interview 18). The establishment of the UN Youth Office in 2022 followed by the appointment of the Assistant Secretary-General for Youth Affairs is another example that shows the importance of youth voices within the UN system.

Despite these improvements, even at recent HLPF meetings, the contribution of youth to international discussions regarding the implementation of the SDGs has been limited. Some explanations for such limited impact are common to several other Major Groups. Civil society organizations are currently concerned about the shrinking space for civil society in global SDG governance (Major Groups and Other Stakeholders, 2022). Gabizon (2016) explains, based on her own experience in the Women’s Major Group, that the struggle to maintain space for civil society has continued since 1992. They constantly have to request ‘re-commitments from governments’ to be allowed to participate in the process in an official capacity (i.e. with badges; slots for statements; access to all governmental sessions). Moreover, another persistent limit for Major Groups is that the HLPF and other major relevant meetings are “resource intensive processes” (Interview 20), held at UN Headquarters in New York, one of the most expensive cities in the world. For the Women’s Major Group, Gabizon (2016, p. 103) explains that “since most of the negotiations for the SDG process took place in New York, finding funds to bring Southern women’s organizations to the United States has been one of the major challenges.”

Yet, some challenges are inherent to the UN-MGCY and could be addressed to accelerate and expand its potential. The group has limited resources and capacities, being run in practice by unpaid volunteers who are not professionals. UN agencies including the UNDESA and some governments regularly support UN-MGCY, but such support is limited to financing conference participation for a limited number of individuals, and to partnerships that do not support long-term financing for organizational stability. The UN-MGCY is particularly affected by a lack of financial resources as its members, being minors, students, or people at the beginning of their career (with finite or temporary jobs or internships), may not have

regular or disposable income. At HLPF 2024, the vulnerability of youth participation due to limited financial resources was even more visible: the UNDESA budget to sponsor youth participants has been significantly reduced amidst of the global trend of austerity, resulting in 25 funded places and only five for youth participants (Doran et al., 2024). These factors limit the inclusion of children and youth in sustainable development governance.

Visa requirements may also inhibit children and youth participation. The visa rejection rate for youth is considerably higher, especially for those from the Global South (Interviews 7, 10 and 11). According to an UN-MGCY member, the number of youth participants at HLPF 2023 could be “doubled or tripled” if visas were issued to all those who wanted to attend (Interview 10). Unpredictable and limited funding, visa challenges, and slow bureaucratic processes for UN meeting registration compound each other, leading to additional issues, such as insufficient time to prepare a trip or identify speaking opportunities (Interview 12).

There is another drawback of the existing structure of UN-MGCY. As UN-MGCY staff and members are not remunerated, the platform tends to self-select young people who can finance their own engagement, resulting in disproportionate representation of privileged youth. In addition, communications within the UN-MGCY are mostly done in English (again, due to a lack of resources for translation), adding to regional imbalance (Interview 8). Some recognize that UN-MGCY membership can serve individual profile development purposes and convey that for some members the main objective is “to raise personal qualifications for higher education or employment” (Prentice, 2012, p. 37) rather than to advocate for youth interests.

However, most youth members struggling to attend SDG negotiations and meetings, even with their own money, do so for moral, ethical, and practical reasons. Nine out of the 15 youth who responded to our survey did not receive any funding to attend HLPF 2023, but they attended the event anyway. Even when they receive financial support, youth try to maximize

the resources by choosing cheap accommodation or by sharing their budget with other youth (Interviews 1, 6, and 12).

With current challenges, there is a risk that youth, who represent the future of the SDGs, are not meaningfully involved in the process, and the process not fully in line with youth expectations. UN-MGCY may benefit from three future areas of focus to address challenges and improve its impact. First, a more systematic debriefing after intergovernmental and international meetings could support retention and growth of institutional knowledge and hand-over processes. Strengthening internal management and communications with members could bring more effective engagement of youth within sustainable development governance. Second, collaboration among youth constituencies and platforms could be more structured. Some interviewees at HLPF 2023 explained that collaboration between the platforms was difficult, as their participation within each of them was not fully supported. Third, networks between the UN-MGCY and youth-led activism or national youth delegates could be strengthened. While the UN-MGCY has inspired youth and non-youth actors in global sustainability governance and motivated many states and UN agencies to engage with youth, more efforts for structured collaboration could be beneficial for effective engagement. For example, our observation at HLPF 2023 found that collaboration between the UN-MGCY and national youth delegates at HLPF meetings was not systematized. More coordinated activities among youth participants at HLPF would increase attention to their positions and might, ultimately, increase their impact on sustainable development politics. The same synergies could be created with youth from transnational protest movements who chose not to engage in the policy process but often share similar claims.

While it is challenging for the UN-MGCY to invest in internal reorganization and monitoring of the platform, given their limited resources, fast turnover, and open structure, it would be beneficial for the group to make their work more effective with a clear focus of streamlining. In any case, support from the UN system and state actors that have already

acknowledged the agency of youth in sustainability governance remains critical in realizing meaningful and impactful youth participation.

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List of interviews

Name	Position at the time of the interview	Date
Saba Loftus	Former MGCY member, senior research coordinator, APC Microbiome Ireland	6/07/2020
Hiroataka Koike	consultant, Sustainable Urban Development Section, Environment and Development Division, UN ESCAP	8/07/2020
Alice Junqueira Terra Caffaro	consultant on social development, Sao Paolo	17/07/2020
Christopher Dekki	policy advocacy strategy & engagement at SLOCAT Partnership on Sustainable, Low Carbon Transport,	6/08/2020
Judith Kuriansky	adjunct professor of Psychology and Education, Teachers college, Columbia	10/08/2020
Sachini Perera	postgraduate student at King's College London	11/08/2020
Yugratna Srivastava	MGCY member	17/11/2022
Pramisha Thapaliya	Former MGCY thematic group global focal point	10/07/2023
Sameh Kamel	MGCY OP 2023	11/07/2023
Daniel Helmer	MGCY Actions team, March for our planet	11/07/2023
Diandra Ni Bhuachalli	Irish UN youth delegate in 2022	11/07/2023
Alison Renna	PhD student at Yale University	12/07/2023
Ian Alvarez Galan	Mexico Pre-COP member	13/07/2023

Jean Servais	Belgian youth delegate 2023	13/07/2023
Maria Boge Blenstrup	Danish youth delegate 2023	13/07/2023
Lateefat Timole	Community Care Collective (USA youth mental health organization)	14/07/2023
Zipporah	Girls in Movement (Sierra Leon local NGO)	14/07/2023
Rosie	Former MGCY Latin American Regional coordinator and founder of the Millennium movement	16/07/2023
Hemavathi S Shekhar	YOUNGO Global South focal point 2023	17/07/2023
Priyanka Pandey	GYBN Nepal Chapter	17/07/2023
Karuna Rana	MGCY - global focal point for small island developing States (SIDS)	18/07/2023

¹ Within global sustainable development governance, youth refer, according to UN standards, to individuals below 30.

² The Earth Negotiations Bulletin is a reporting service on UN sustainable development negotiations published by the International Institute for Sustainable Development. See <https://enb.iisd.org/>.

³ 12 keywords were selected for identifying youth participants on these documentary sources. Those keywords are ‘youth’, ‘young’, ‘student’, ‘child’, ‘scout’, ‘boy’, ‘girl’, ‘kid’, ‘jeun’ (young in French), ‘étudiant’ (student in French), ‘joven’ (young in Spanish) and ‘jugend’ (youth in German) and their derivatives (children, students, etc.). When the names of organizations, sub-organizations, departments or positions included one of those keywords, we counted the participants as youth participants.

⁴ While the UN-MGCY commonly refers itself as ‘MGCY’, we keep UN-MGCY in this chapter to distinguish it from UNEP-MGCY, a different youth constituency for UNEP that is, since 2023, known as CYMG.

⁵ We refer here to the Fridays for Future movement initiated in 2018 by Greta Thunberg that mobilized thousands of youth worldwide around marches for the climate and school strikes.

⁶ We anonymized the interviews by allocating random numbers to the interviewees.

⁷ The General Assembly resolutions that refer to the role of major groups include (but are not limited to) Agenda 21, the Resolution on the HLPF (A/RES/67/290), and the Resolution on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (A/RES/70/1). The UN agencies and institutions that formalized youth constituencies include the UNFCCC, the Convention on Biological Diversity, the World Health Organization, and UNEP.

⁸ Sometimes referred to as Organizing Parties.

⁹ Key Performance Indicators are measurable values which show the progress towards a goal.