

INVESTING IN THE YOUTH DIVIDEND: EQUITABLE CLIMATE-HEALTH FINANCING FOR A RESILIENT COMMONWEALTH

Climate change constitutes the defining public health crisis of our era, exerting disproportionate impacts on youth populations across the globe. Within the Commonwealth, young people - comprising over 60% of the population - are not only among the most vulnerable to climate-health risks including rising mental health burdens, heat stress, and vector-borne diseases, but also represent the key agents of transformative change [1]. While young people are increasingly recognised as key stakeholders in climate and health action—contributing to awareness campaigns, community adaptation efforts, and innovative health solutions—their participation in climate-health financing processes remains limited in many contexts.

I. Climate Change, Health, and the Youth Dividend

Youth constitute an unprecedented demographic dividend within the Commonwealth, representing a tremendous opportunity for social, economic, and health sector transformation. However, climate change increasingly undermines this potential by exposing youth to a cascade of adverse health effects, including greater incidence of respiratory illnesses, malnutrition, waterborne diseases, vector-borne diseases, heat-related conditions, and mental health disorders [2].

Social determinants of health - such as access to education, access to safe water and sanitation, air quality, employment, clean environments, and healthcare - are similarly strained under climate pressures, disproportionately affecting youth in low- and middle-income Commonwealth nations. Nearly one billion children worldwide are currently exposed to multiple, overlapping environmental and climate hazards, with limited access to essential services further exacerbating their vulnerability [3]. The economic burden of these climate-induced health challenges on youth threatens long-term national development, deepening cycles of poverty and social instability [4]. There is also inadequate readiness for public health systems to respond to climate shocks affecting youth, especially in LMICs [9].

With strategic investments in youth-led climate & health action, the youth dividend can catalyze a transformation toward resilient, sustainable, and equitable health systems. Strengthening the agency, capacity, and leadership of young people is a proactive strategy to not merely mitigate the impacts of climate change, but to build enduring systems capable of adaptive governance and innovation. Youth must be recognized not as passive beneficiaries of policy, but as central stakeholders in shaping a climate-resilient future for the Commonwealth.

II. The Role of Youth in Building a Climate-resilient and Healthy Commonwealth

Youth have demonstrated unparalleled capacities as agents of societal transformation; across the Commonwealth, these contributions have been both diverse and impactful. In Ghana, the Green Africa Youth Organization has spearheaded the 'Sustainable Community Project,' a youth-led initiative focusing on waste management, composting, and recycling. This project not only addresses environmental concerns but also improves community health by promoting sanitation and reducing pollution [6]. In Canada, Indigenous youth have led mental health programs addressing climate-induced trauma. By integrating traditional knowledge with modern therapeutic practices, these programs offer culturally sensitive support to communities disproportionately affected by climate change [7]. Medical Students for Climate Action Pakistan, a national youth-led organization, has mobilized youth in extreme heat response campaigns, raising awareness on climate-adaptive behaviors in urban areas of Karachi.

Despite these successes, such initiatives remain the exception rather than the norm. Moving beyond tokenistic engagement requires the institutionalization of youth as structural actors within climate-health systems. This includes:

- **Policy shapers:** Youth must be integrated into the formulation of national climate-health adaptation plans, funding strategies, and implementation frameworks.
- **Accountability champions:** Youth-led monitoring and evaluation mechanisms can ensure transparency, equity, and community responsiveness in climate-health financing.
- **Innovation leaders:** Young professionals and entrepreneurs should be empowered to lead the development and scale-up of climate-smart health technologies, services, and delivery models.

We must shift the paradigm from youth as implementers of externally designed projects to youth as co-designers, co-governors, and co-investors in climate-health systems. Achieving this demands structural reform, not symbolic representation. It requires resourcing, recognition, and resilient partnerships that place young people at the heart of our collective response to a changing climate.

III. Current Gaps in Climate-Health Financing

The current climate financing landscape reveals several critical systemic deficiencies, as highlighted in the joint analysis by the Commonwealth Secretariat and YOUNGO, *The Availability of Climate Finance for Youth* [5]. Youth participation remains marginalized, with their voices largely excluded from the governance of climate-health financing mechanisms, resulting in solutions that fail to reflect their needs. Resource allocation is also notably inadequate; climate finance for youth tends to be limited in both scale and scope, primarily relying on small grants and in-kind support that fall short of enabling sustainable impact. Additionally, there is an overemphasis on mitigation projects, while essential efforts in adaptation, resilience, and loss-and-damage - particularly critical for youth in vulnerable communities - are often neglected. Access to available funds is further constrained by procedural complexities, limited transparency, and centralized fund management - all of which disproportionately hinder grassroots youth organizations. Compounding these challenges is the private sector's general disengagement from youth-centered climate-health finance, representing a missed opportunity to foster innovation and scale impact.

RECOMMENDATIONS

IV. Key Recommendations to Commonwealth Governments and Stakeholders

In light of these realities, we request Commonwealth governments, international organizations, and development partners to adopt the following strategic actions, building on the momentum of the Commonwealth Year of Youth and in alignment with the 13th Commonwealth Youth Forum Declaration, which reaffirms youth as key actors in climate resilience and sustainable development efforts. These recommendations also reflect and reinforce the Commonwealth Youth Policy Recommendations on Climate Change developed by the Commonwealth Youth Climate Network (CYCN), which emphasize the institutionalisation of youth participation in climate policy and financing, particularly within national delegations and governance frameworks.

1. **Amplify Youth-Driven Calls to Action from the 13th Commonwealth Youth Forum.** Operationalise the Declaration's call for the mainstreaming of youth considerations into the development work of the Commonwealth Climate Finance Access Hub (CCFAH) and prioritise investments in youth-led initiatives that advance renewable energy development, natural resource conservation, marine life protection, carbon-neutral projects, and effective waste management [8].
2. **Mainstream Youth Leadership.** Establish formal youth representation within climate-health financing decision-making bodies at national, regional, and global levels. Ensure that youth leadership is institutionalized, not occasional or symbolic.
3. **Allocate Dedicated Funding for Youth-Led Initiatives.** Create earmarked funding streams exclusively accessible to youth organizations and initiatives at national, regional and global levels addressing the climate-health nexus. Simplify application procedures, provide mentorship in proposal development, and ensure equitable geographic and socio-economic distribution of funds.
4. **Build Capacity and Foster Innovation.** Invest in comprehensive capacity-building programs, leadership training, and technical skills development for young people working at the intersection of climate and health. Support innovation hubs and incubation programs to enable scalable solutions, along with the development of youth mentorship programs focused on climate-health leadership
5. **Promote Accountability and Inclusive Governance.** Establish inclusive governance structures for climate-health finance that are co-designed and co-led by youth. Implement youth-led monitoring, evaluation, and learning frameworks to ensure transparency and mutual accountability in the management of climate-health financing.
6. **Integrate Innovative Co-Financing Mechanisms.** Leverage tools such as advanced market commitments, climate-health levies, guarantees, and results-based financing to mobilize public and private capital for youth-led climate-health initiatives, ensuring scalable and sustainable impact.
7. **Promote Adaptation and Health Resilience.** Prioritise funding for climate adaptation projects with clear co-benefits for young people included. Ensure that youth-specific vulnerabilities are addressed in national adaptation plans, and that young people are engaged as active partners in the design, implementation, and evaluation of these resilience-building initiatives.
8. **Private sector engagement.** Promote private sector engagement through climate-health innovation targeting youths, including the development and deployment of digital health solutions and green technologies aimed at improving youth health outcomes in the face of climate challenges. Create blended finance models that combine public and private funds to support youth-led innovations addressing the climate-health nexus, ensuring that emerging technologies are leveraged for equitable and sustainable impact.
9. **Institutionalise Youth Representation in Climate Governance.** In line with the CYCN's policy recommendations, ensure the formal, continuous, and meaningful inclusion of youth within national delegations, climate-health governance frameworks, and financing mechanisms [10]. This includes the integration of youth into policy advisory bodies and the co-creation of climate-health solutions that reflect intergenerational equity.

V. Joint Commitment

We, the Commonwealth Youth Health Network, the Commonwealth Youth Climate Change Network, the Commonwealth Asia Youth Alliance and Amplify Health and Development in Africa, stand united in our commitment to advancing equitable, youth-centered climate-health financing strategies that safeguard the health and wellbeing of current and future generations. We recognise that meaningful youth leadership and participation in climate-health financing is not a token gesture—it is a strategic imperative for sustainable development and resilience across the Commonwealth.

As youth-led networks, we pledge to:

- Develop evidence-based, contextually grounded climate-health solutions rooted in community needs and informed by lived realities;
- Build cross-sectoral coalitions to strengthen collective impact and drive unified advocacy across health, climate, education, and economic domains;
- Foster knowledge-sharing platforms to exchange innovations, lessons, and scalable models among young leaders across Commonwealth nations;
- Support capacity-building initiatives that empower youth to meaningfully engage in climate-health financing processes and decision-making;
- Champion accountability frameworks that ensure climate-health financing is transparent, inclusive, and responsive to the priorities of young people.
- We call upon Commonwealth governments, international institutions, and development partners to integrate youth as co-creators, co-investors, and co-leaders at the core of climate-health policy, planning, and financing.

The youth dividend will only pay off if we act and invest in it now.

References

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