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Africanyouth4forests – from science to youth action for sustainable forests

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ABSTRACT

African forests are critical for biodiversity, climate resilience, and livelihoods but face mounting pressures from deforestation, land-use change, and climate impacts. The AfricanYouth4Forests (AY4F) initiative, launched in 2024, mobilises youth as agents of sustainable forestry through participatory science, digital tools, and policy engagement. Workshops in Kenya and Cameroon brought together young leaders, scientists, and policymakers to co-create locally grounded solutions, such as mangrove restoration, bamboo enterprises, digital conservation, agroforestry, and other nature-based enterprises. The resulting AY4F Combined Youth Declaration from the two workshops emphasises leadership, innovation, equity, and green enterprises. AY4F demonstrates youth capacity to transform ecological knowledge into action for inclusive green economies.

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Introduction

Africa's forests are vital for biodiversity, climate regulation, and the livelihoods of millions (FAO 2020). Yet they face mounting threats, with land-use change a major driver, intensified by climate impacts that erode forest health and resilience (FAO 2020; Hubau et al., 2020). These environmental pressures intersect with wider development challenges in part captured by state of the Human Development Index (African Union Commission 2024).

Young Africans will have to confront these ecological and climate risks while also shaping their own futures. Growing sustainability demands will require their skills, creativity, and commitment to steward forests for biodiversity, livelihoods, and resilience (Brown 2021; Carreras, Sumberg, and Saha 2021; Ickowitz Foundation 2024; Sumberg et al. 2021). Their demographic weight adds influence: 20 per cent of the world's youth (20–29 years) live in Africa, compared, for example, to 7 per cent in Europe. As 2030 – the target year for the Sustainable Development Goals – approaches, youth are successively taking on the role of the continent's forest custodians, in their different roles of citizens, entrepreneurs, activists, and policymakers.

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Yet, young people remain largely underrepresented in forest governance, with their priorities and potential receiving little attention (African Union Commission 2020; Brown 2021). Understanding their agency and aspirations is therefore crucial. Research and practice should adopt participatory approaches that recognise youth as capable actors, drawing on historical, ecological, and socio-economic knowledge together with new digital tools (Robson et al., 2019).

The AfricanYouth4Forests (AY4F) initiative, launched in 2024 by the African Forest Forum with the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences and the Kenya Forestry Research Institute, responds to this need. It promotes youth-led communication and stewardship, positioning young Africans as agents of change who turn environmental aspirations into tangible outcomes, linking the continent's forests with its dynamic youth.

Objectives and activities

AY4F creates platforms for exchange between youth, scientists, and policymakers, in activities that integrates indigenous knowledge. It also strengthens young people's advocacy capacity. This account highlights youth workshops for AY4F in Kitui, Kenya, and Mbalmayo, Cameroon (April and June 2025), each three-day event hosting 20 participants selected for geographical and gender diversity and prior environmental engagement, whether community-based, entrepreneurial, or advocacy-oriented (Table 1, Figures 1 and 2). Participants interacted with policymakers, forest researchers, and NGO representatives.

The workshops combined dialogues with researchers and policymakers, presentations by young green entrepreneurs and activists, and interactive activities to outline actions aimed at conservation and sustainable forest use. They concluded with National Youth Declarations articulating shared visions and commitments for Africa's forests.

The setting

Participants in the Kenya and Cameroon workshops stressed the urgent need to place young people at the center of Africa's forest-based green transition. Discussions emphasised forests' roles in livelihoods and ecosystem services, calling for youth engagement in green jobs and sustainable forestry. Invited experts noted Africa's rich forest diversity as well as threats such as deforestation, biodiversity loss, wildfires, and fuelwood dependence. They also pointed to opportunities in the green economy, non-timber forest product value chains, and certification schemes like the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC).

The two workshops advocated strategic tree planting with species-to-site matching and context-specific planning to meet local needs, as well as national and global targets. Policymakers, NGOs, and researchers encouraged youth to use technology, creativity, entrepreneurship, and advocacy to build sustainable business models and shape governance. Cross-cutting themes included gender inclusion, cross-border collaboration, and alignment with emerging African policy frameworks.

Table 1. Overview of the youth participants and workshops.

Country	Number of participants	Women	Men	Age range (years)	Participants' experiences in forest and nature-based activities	Outcome document
Kenya	20	9	10	20–31	Environmental conservation, bamboo crafts, tree nurseries, community planting drives, degraded land recovery, policy advocacy, ecosystem restoration, awareness and education, agribusiness and marine action	National Youth Declaration (Kenya)
Cameroon	20	11	9	24–35	Land restoration, tree nurseries and reforestation efforts, eco-tourism and nature-based enterprises, non-timber forest products (NTFPs) marketing and technology-driven conservation	National Youth Declaration (Cameroon)



Figure 1. African Youth 4 Forests workshop participants, Kenya.



Figure 2. African Youth 4 Forests workshop participants, Cameroon.

During the discussion, participants expressed strong emotional, spiritual, and educational ties to forests, viewing them as sources of healing, nourishment, inspiration, and knowledge. They highlighted regional challenges – from mangrove loss along the coasts to water scarcity in dry areas – while emphasising the need for youth leadership in conservation, innovation, and policy engagement.

Youth-led green innovation in Kenya and Cameroon

Youth participants reported diverse experiences in sustainable forest management in their home regions (Table 1), showing how local action links community well-being to global climate and biodiversity goals.

In Kenya, several youth-led projects strengthen ecosystems and livelihoods. In Kwale County, the Vanga Blue Forest project restores mangroves to enhance climate resilience and support local communities. The Global Youth Biodiversity Network combines advocacy with ecological action, planting 15,000 mangroves (with an 80 per cent survival rate) and targeting 100,000 by 2030. In other locations, through participatory forest management, youth monitor carbon stocks using global positioning system (GPS), satellite imagery, and field surveys, with 60 per cent of carbon credit revenues funding schools, healthcare, and food distribution, while enabling participation in global climate forums such as COP26 and COP30. In Western Kenya, youth-organised bamboo restoration stabilises wetlands, supports dyke construction, reduces flood risks, and enables cooperatives producing bamboo-based eco-charcoal briquettes, linking restoration to sustainable energy and livelihoods.

In Cameroon, youth innovations focus on digital tools and green entrepreneurship. Initiatives like Young Farmers for Development use social media, websites, and digital tools to promote activities such as the sale of non-timber forest products, urban nurseries, landscaping, and eco-tourism. Conservation projects such as Tech for Trees & Wildlife employ GIS, drones, GPS, and participatory mapping. Agroforestry ventures in the Western Highlands – including coffee cultivation and sustainable honey production – combine ecological restoration with gender-inclusive value chains and commercial markets. Other youth-led grassroots solutions include eco-bricks, organic fertilisers, clean cookstoves, and regenerative farming.

Together, these initiatives show the transformative potential of youth in climate action, conservation, and sustainable development. From restoration and sustainable value chains in Kenya to conservation technology and agroforestry in Cameroon, they create green jobs, enhance community resilience, and safeguard natural resources. Despite challenges like funding gaps and limited institutional support, youth remain central to building inclusive green economies that benefit people and nature.

Group work sessions

Youth participants were organised into groups representing distinct forest landscapes. In Kenya, these included coastal, dryland, inland terrestrial, and urban forests, while in Cameroon they included dense forest, Western Highland montane forest, dry savanna, and coastal mangroves. This structure enabled each group to draw on lived experience and local knowledge of their ecosystems. Group memberships were maintained to promote cumulative learning and allow strategies to evolve progressively across sessions. The sessions included: (1) Participatory sketch mapping, where youth visualised the forests around them, and their values and challenges; (2) Design of youth-led solutions for sustainable forestry and the green economy, building on the participatory sketch mapping; and (3) Action planning to translate the ideas into implementable projects identifying key stakeholders, necessary resources, and action steps.

Participatory sketch mapping

In Kenya, youth conducted participatory sketch mapping across the different landscape types. Coastal ecosystems – terrestrial and mangrove forests, rivers, and the Indian Ocean – were valued

for carbon storage, fisheries, and coastal protection but faced deforestation, pollution, and unsustainable development. Opportunities included ecotourism, research, and nature-based enterprises. Dryland forests in Laikipia, Kitui, Kajiado, and Machakos were valued for wildlife, medicinal plants, honey, and cultural sites, confronting wildfires, overgrazing, invasive species, and policy gaps. Here, non-timber forest products, education, and community management offered livelihood benefits. Inland forests like Mau, Cherangani, and Kakamega provided water security, timber, and ecotourism but faced deforestation and encroachment. Finally, urban forests such as Karura and Ngong' were linked to city infrastructure expansion, threatened by pollution and illegal logging, yet presented prospects for urban ecotourism, corporate partnerships, and youth employment. The mappings highlighted both vulnerabilities and the potential of Kenya's forests, grounding conservation priorities in youth-led, place-specific perspectives that connect ecological stewardship with livelihoods and climate resilience.

In Cameroon, youth mapped five characteristic landscape types. Dense forests near Dja Faunal Reserve and Lobéké National Park faced deforestation, poaching, and governance gaps. Proposed solutions included drone and satellite monitoring, AI-enabled biodiversity sanctuaries, climate-smart cocoa, carbon credits, clean energy, and land-conflict mitigation. The dry savanna in Pitoa contended with desertification, overgrazing, and fuelwood pressure, which could be addressed through eco-stoves, solar cookers, agroforestry, farmer-managed regeneration, drought-tolerant crops, water-harvesting pits, rotational grazing, fire brigades, and ecotourism. Montane forests faced encroachment, erosion, and illegal logging with potential responses such as vertical farming, drone monitoring, gene banks, native tree restoration, beekeeping, medicinal plant cooperatives, buffer crops, and environmental education. Coastal mangroves were threatened by urbanisation, waste, land reclamation, and climate impacts, yet offered ecotourism, aquaculture, cooperatives, research, and education opportunities.

Collectively, these sessions showed how youth combine technology, traditional knowledge, and community engagement to analyse forests, address threats, and solutions advancing conservation and the green economy across diverse ecological landscapes.

Innovative solutions brainstorming

The second group session on innovative solutions built directly on prior sketch mapping, specifying further how technology, creativity, and local knowledge could address forest challenges and advance the green economy. In Kenya, the coastal and marine group proposed digital awareness campaigns, environmental, social, and governance (ESG) financing for afforestation, waste-to-construction recycling, seaweed farming for carbon sequestration, biodiversity credits, predictive climate models, and stronger regulations via transparent impact assessments. The dryland group suggested the use of drones, AI-enabled satellite monitoring, and blockchain technology for timber tracking. The dryland group furthermore proposed environmental apps, exploration of new uses of invasive species, firefighting drones, and harmonised digital forest governance. The inland forest group also focused on drone monitoring, forestry apps, e-commerce for forest products, youth project funding, social media campaigns, and AI-driven climate-smart forestry. The urban forest group recommended reward-based litter apps, AI fire detection, invasive species management tools, tree-cutting sensors, and GPS-based deforestation tracking.

In Cameroon, the dense forest group proposed drones, mobile reporting apps, gamified tree-planting, youth cooperatives, blockchain tools, digital financing, climate-smart agroforestry, carbon farming, and green leases. Dry savanna solutions targeted desertification, biodiversity loss, and bushfires through eco-stoves, solar cookers, farmer-managed regeneration, agroforestry, drought-tolerant crops, zai pits, rotational grazing, fire brigades, SMS alerts, participatory forest management, and ecotourism. The montane group addressed encroachment, erosion, bushfires, monocultures, and weak enforcement via regenerative farming, apiculture, aquaculture, fire-watch programs, planting fire-resistant native trees, and alternative species promotion. The coastal

mangrove group tackled deforestation, pollution, overfishing, sand mining, and urban expansion with clean cookstoves, waste-to-briquette schemes, satellite monitoring, fish sanctuaries, mangrove clean-ups, biodegradable packaging, blue-green urban planning, floating architecture, ecotourism, and community watchdogs. The youth combined technology, entrepreneurship, and local knowledge to develop practical, scalable solutions that strengthen forest conservation and green economy opportunities across diverse ecosystems.

Action planning: turning vision into reality

The third group session moved youth from mapping and brainstorming to designing implementable forest conservation and green economy projects. Participants developed nine context-specific concepts with defined actions, stakeholders, and resources. The coastal forest group in Kenya proposed seaweed farming and biodiversity credits through seagrass protection, detailing government engagement, site selection, training, resource mobilisation, production, and marketing. The dryland group focused on beekeeping and honey production, alongside *Azolla* farming for livestock feed. It also incorporated community mobilisation, capacity building, equipment provision, and value addition, involving community forest associations and county governments. The inland forest group developed a youth-led bamboo briquette enterprise, indigenous tree restoration, and agroforestry initiatives, emphasising cooperatives, training, market links, and ecological restoration, with relevant agencies and local communities as partners. The urban forest group designed tech-driven initiatives, including the use of mobile phone apps to incentivise waste collection and an Adopt-a-Tree program, planning around digital design, stakeholder engagement, prototyping, and scaling. All concepts mapped full project cycles, demonstrating multi-stakeholder pathways to translate ideas into action.

In Cameroon, youth converted conservation concepts into five actionable projects. The dense forest group proposed community forests to empower local stewardship, covering legal recognition, participatory land delimitation, forest management, ecotourism, reforestation, and non-timber forest products, enhanced through digital marketing. The dry savanna group focused on biofertiliser production from Siam weed (*Chromolaena odorata*) and *Jatropha curcas*, linking sustainable agriculture with conservation by means of processing units, training, and market strategies. The montane group developed a Climate-Smart Community Enterprise to strengthen agroforestry value chains, including renewable-energy-powered processing for eucalyptus, coffee, and agro-waste. The initiative was designed to collaborate with government ministries, research institutions, and the private sector. The coastal mangrove group designed biochar production from agricultural residues and eco-bricks from plastic waste, integrating clean energy, waste management, and ecotourism, with women's groups, youth cooperatives, and universities supporting training and market development. All projects emphasised multisectoral collaboration, pilot-to-scale approaches, and inclusive participation, reflecting youth commitment to translating conservation visions into sustainable, locally owned enterprises. This step illustrated how youth in Kenya and Cameroon moved from ideas to actionable projects, based on technology, local knowledge, and entrepreneurship to advance forest conservation and the green economy.

Youth declaration

At the final workshop phase, youth participants in Kenya and Cameroon drafted declarations later merged into the Combined Youth Declaration on Forests, Climate Action, and the Green Economy, AfricanYouth4Forests – Kenya & Cameroon Workshops, 2025. The declaration frames youth as active leaders in sustainable forest governance and green economic development rather than passive beneficiaries. It highlights multiple threats to African forests' conservation and long-term use for livelihoods and economic growth. The declaration envisions resilient forests that sustain biodiversity, provide livelihoods, mitigate climate change, and promote inclusive green

growth, intergenerational and gender equity principles. Youth are recognised as innovators, watchdogs, and entrepreneurs blending scientific knowledge with Indigenous wisdom and digital tools. Commitments include establishing nurseries, restoration projects, and agroforestry; developing green enterprises in ecotourism, bamboo, bioenergy, non-timber forest products, and circular economy solutions; advancing climate-smart agriculture, carbon farming, and community-based carbon markets; preserving Indigenous knowledge through storytelling and education; and promoting behavioural change in communities.

Policy recommendations urge governments to streamline processes, provide accessible permits and internships, introduce incentives and green financing, mainstream environmental education, and institutionalise youth participation. NGOs, private actors, and international partners are called on to mentor youth, expand digital literacy, and collaborate in forest management, ecotourism, and circular economy initiatives.

Key messages stress forests' centrality to Africa's survival, youth as current and future change makers, green jobs as viable livelihoods, inclusive decision-making, and the value of Indigenous knowledge alongside modern science. The declaration rests on five pillars: Leadership and Inclusion; Innovation and Green Enterprise; Education and Capacity Building; Digital Advocacy and Technology; and Equity, Solidarity, and Financing. The Kenya and Cameroon AY4F workshops mark a pivotal moment, consolidating knowledge, solidarity, and purpose into a shared framework positioning African youth at the forefront of the continent's forest and climate future.

Youth actions after the workshops

Since the workshop, participants have actively applied their new knowledge and skills through youth-led projects. They have promoted sustainable forest management and value addition to non-timber forest products, strengthening both local livelihoods and ecosystem restoration. Participants reported high satisfaction, noting that the workshop inspired youth initiatives, enhanced forest and sustainability skills, fostered green entrepreneurship, and boosted youth advocacy. They agreed it positively influenced their personal and professional growth, motivating them to join youth networks and deepen their understanding of forest governance and sustainability.

Examples of youth activities following the workshops in April and June 2025 include, in Kenya, the establishment by a 27-year-old woman environmentalist of a tree nursery to support afforestation and mangrove restoration in coastal Kwale County; the initiation by a 26-year-old woman climate justice activist of afforestation drives and waste management campaigns, along with climate education programs across Garissa County; and training initiatives by another woman participant in Taita Taveta County, focusing on farmer education, nursery management, and tree planting. A 20-year-old woman participant has worked on developing a proposal for regenerative agriculture, while a 22-year-old man participant has established a nursery for indigenous trees and developed green enterprises. Another 25-year-old man has distributed seedlings to schools, individuals, and community groups through a tree nursery initiative. A 27-year-old man has organised digital climate justice workshops, and a 23-year-old man has engaged in forest rehabilitation through women's empowerment and nursery establishment.

Similar examples from Cameroon include a 25-year-old woman participant who has established two nurseries focusing on fruit and multipurpose tree species for reforestation, as well as leading environmental programs. A 28-year-old woman activist from Yaoundé has promoted eco-friendly entrepreneurship and the sustainable use of wood resources beyond cooking and heating. A man participant has advanced community involvement in sustainable forest management to foster green economic opportunities that enhance local livelihoods and environmental sustainability. Another 29-year-old Cameroonian participant has established a tree nursery integrating forestry, agriculture, and pastoral systems. Using the Age-Gender-Diversity (AGD) approach to identify community needs, the initiative promotes inclusive solutions — such as silage production, eco-friendly

charcoal manufacturing, and organic pesticide development, supporting both conservation and sustainable livelihoods.

The workshop inspired strong action among women participants, who have shown leadership and commitment to environmental conservation, climate action, and community empowerment. These initiatives showcase how women participants have applied workshop knowledge in regenerative agriculture, afforestation, and mentorship programs. They have also focused on community empowerment through projects such as “Empower Her”, which mentors girls on using renewable sanitary pads while supporting afforestation activities in local project areas. In addition, one participant leads the Ecological Justice Movement (Eco Vista), an organisation dedicated to environmental conservation and community mobilisation, while another trains farmers and engages youth through addressing both environmental awareness and social challenges such as drug abuse. Collectively, these initiatives show that the workshop strengthened women’s capacity for leadership, entrepreneurship, and both social and environmental awareness. Both women and men participants successfully translated workshop insights into tangible community actions that empower women and youth and advance climate resilience at the grassroots level. Minimal gender differences were noticed in this aspect: both men and women were inspired to actively participate in afforestation, conservation, community initiatives, biodiversity action, and advocacy. Any minor variations appeared incidental.

Several participants (both men and women) have also joined youth and environmental networks – including the Kenya Forest Working Group, Inter-University Environmental Students Association, Let’s Go to COP, Siaya Young Agripreneurs, and Cameroon’s Science-to-Policy Workshop – facilitating ongoing knowledge exchange, policy advocacy, and the scaling of youth-led environmental action across Africa.

Discussion and conclusion

Young environmental leaders from Kenya and Cameroon, convened through the AY4F initiative, affirm their central role in advancing forest conservation, climate action, and the green economy. Recognising Africa’s youth as digitally adept, innovative, and closely connected to local communities, the declaration positions them as current drivers of sustainability and green innovation.

Participants identified urgent threats to forest ecosystems, including deforestation, illegal logging, agricultural expansion, weak enforcement, urbanisation, limited youth participation in governance, and restricted access to finance, technology, and training. Despite these challenges, they expressed strong commitment to transformative change through science-informed, community-based, and entrepreneurial approaches. Pathways include forests and associated landscapes’ restoration, agroforestry, nature-based enterprises, advocacy, sustainable forest management, biodiversity conservation, biodiversity conservation, green financing, and development of non-timber forest products.

Youth emphasised that forest protection and livelihood creation are complementary: forests are both ecological treasures and engines of economic empowerment. They called for enabling environments that integrate youth into governance, expand access to green finance and technical training, and embed environmental education across curricula. Private sector actors, NGOs, and international partners were urged to provide mentorship, digital platforms, and resources to scale youth-led forest initiatives.

The declaration asserts that by combining scientific knowledge, Indigenous ecological wisdom, and digital innovation, youth can implement locally grounded, globally relevant solutions. Through AY4F, participants were equipped to transform knowledge into adaptive, inclusive, and scalable projects that protect biodiversity, mitigate climate change, and generate green livelihoods. The declaration calls for immediate action and meaningful youth inclusion: young people are prepared to lead, innovate, and safeguard the continent’s forests, ensuring ecological balance, community prosperity, and a sustainable future for generations to come.

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