



Clean Technology Hub
Energy Innovation Centre

Beyond Symbolic Participation: Youth Climate Engagement and Structural Integration at ACS2

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Introduction

The Africa Climate Summit (ACS) has established itself as the continent's premier platform for shaping climate and development policy. As Africa grapples with rising climate risks, the inclusion of youth voices has become not only desirable but essential. Youth represent both the largest demographic in Africa and the generation that will inherit the consequences of today's climate decisions. For this reason, their participation in the second edition of the African Climate Summit (ACS2), held in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, in September 2025, offered a unique opportunity to observe how far the summit has evolved in embedding intergenerational equity.

Given this critical juncture for youth climate engagement, Clean Technology Hub (CTH) attended ACS2 with particular interest in assessing the evolution of youth inclusion. The summit provided direct engagement with youth networks, opportunities to evaluate progress since the inaugural ACS, and insights into how structured platforms can effectively amplify young voices in continental climate governance.

This paper reviews the youth experience at ACS2, contrasts it with the inaugural summit, and proposes ways forward to deepen youth inclusion in Africa's climate governance framework.

Youth Engagement at Africa Climate Summit 2 (ACS2): Key Initiatives

The Africa Youth Climate Assembly (AYCA)

Youth presence at ACS2 was not marginal but central to summit proceedings. The Africa Youth Climate Assembly (AYCA) served as the cornerstone of youth engagement, convening over 200 youth delegates from across the continent, a significant increase from the inaugural summit's youth participation. The Assembly produced the [Nairobi Youth Declaration](#), which articulated a comprehensive vision for systemic youth inclusion across climate governance, financing, innovation, and research.

CTH representatives noted that this declaration represented a significant evolution from previous youth statements, with more specific policy demands and clearer implementation pathways. This declaration was formally presented to the ACS plenary, signaling the intention for youth priorities to feed into high-level policy discussions and final summit outcomes.



Photo Credit: By AYCA

Green Jobs and Skills Pavilion

The Green Jobs & Skills Pavilion, convened by Jacob's Ladder Africa (JLA) in collaboration with the African Union Commission, represented another significant milestone. Operating for three days, this pavilion provided a dedicated youth-centered platform focused on employability, skills, and opportunities in the green economy.

Sessions highlighted renewable energy, sustainable agriculture, and e-mobility as critical sectors for youth-led transformation. This represented a fundamental departure from symbolic participation toward a pragmatic approach where youth engagement was tied to livelihoods and capacity building, addressing one of the most pressing concerns for Africa's youth demographic.



Institutional Pavilion Contributions

Youth voices resonated across several institutional pavilions broadening their influence beyond dedicated youth spaces. At the UNDP Pavilion, sessions including *Young Leaders Powering Africa's Green Industrialization* and *Leveraging AI for Climate Solutions* spotlighted youth as innovators and change agents in Africa's green transition.

Regional youth networks also made significant contributions. Congo Basin Youth issued declarations linking climate and peacebuilding, demonstrating how youth perspectives extend beyond environmental concerns to encompass security, governance and social cohesion. These activities reinforced that ACS2 was not only about representation but also about producing actionable recommendations rooted in the lived experiences of young Africans.

CTH Engagement and Learnings

For Clean Technology Hub, ACS2 offered opportunities to observe and interact with youth-led initiatives across multiple platforms. CTH representatives engaged directly with AYCA participants, attended Green Jobs Pavilion sessions, and participated in institutional pavilion discussions.

Key observations included the sophisticated policy understanding demonstrated by youth delegates, their emphasis on practical solutions over rhetoric, and their ability to connect local challenges with continental policy frameworks. Interactions with youth session participants opened doors for potential collaboration with established youth climate networks and provided insights into effective strategies for amplifying young voices in institutional settings.

These engagements revealed that youth networks have evolved significantly in their organizational capacity, policy expertise, and strategic thinking since the inaugural summit. This evolution presents opportunities for more substantive partnerships between established organizations like CTH and emerging youth-led climate initiatives.

Progress Assessment: ACS1 VS. ACS2 Improvement at ACS2

A comparative analysis reveals substantial progress in youth engagement architecture. At the inaugural ACS, youth involvement was visible but confined largely to side events and symbolic speaking opportunities. Many youth networks struggled to access decision-making spaces and lacked meaningful opportunities to influence main summit outcomes. The AYCA, though present, was in its developmental stages, and its outputs were not systematically integrated into primary ACS declarations.

ACS2 marked notable improvements across multiple dimensions. Youth secured dedicated institutional spaces through AYCA and the Green Jobs Pavilion, providing structured platforms for policy articulation and skills development. The AYCA Declaration was formally integrated into summit outcomes, representing a shift from parallel to integrated youth engagement.

Youth participation also demonstrated greater diversity, with continental representation extending beyond traditional environmental advocacy to encompass finance, technology, peacebuilding, and economic development. This broader thematic engagement reflected youth networks' growing sophistication and their understanding of climate change as a multisectoral challenge.

Remaining Challenges

Despite these advances, significant gaps persist in youth climate engagement. Youth access to high-level plenary sessions, where heads of state and ministers make binding commitments, remained limited. While youth voices were heard in dedicated spaces, their direct influence on the most consequential policy decisions was constrained.

Financing commitments for youth-led climate action were minimal, with aspirational declarations significantly outweighing concrete financing mechanisms. Many youth delegates expressed concerns about inadequate preparation timelines, noting that content, scripts, and presentation materials often arrived too late for meaningful review and input.

These constraints reflect broader challenges in transitioning from symbolic to structural youth inclusion: visibility has increased substantially, but decision-making influence remains uneven across different summit components.

Recommendations for Strengthening Youth Inclusion

Based on ACS2 experiences and comparative analysis with the inaugural summit, the following strategic interventions can deepen youth inclusion in future continental climate governance:



1. **Institutionalize Youth Representation:** Establish a permanent youth advisory board linked to ACS planning committees, ensuring youth involvement in agenda setting, speaker selection, and outcome formulation rather than limiting participation to event attendance.



2. **Guarantee Funding and Resources:** Create a dedicated Youth Climate Fund under the AU or ACS secretariat to provide direct financing for youth-led climate initiatives and to support participation from marginalized communities across the continent.



3. **Strengthen Pre-Summit Engagement:** Provide youth delegates with preparatory materials, session content, and presentation frameworks at least one month before summit commencement, enabling meaningful contribution development and peer collaboration.



4. **Mainstream Youth into High-Level Sessions:** Ensure that youth are not confined to side events but integrated into ministerial roundtables, plenary discussions, and closing declarations.



5. **Leverage Technology and Networks:** Use platforms like LinkedIn to connect youth delegates across the continent, document outcomes, and ensure continuous engagement beyond the summit.



6. **Link Youth Participation to Livelihoods:** Expand initiatives like the Green Jobs Pavilion, ensuring that climate action is tied to employability, entrepreneurship, and tangible opportunities for Africa's youth demographic.

Conclusion

ACS2 demonstrated meaningful progress toward integrating youth voices into Africa's climate governance framework. Through AYCA, youth articulated a unified, sophisticated vision for their role in continental climate action, while the Green Jobs Pavilion provided practical pathways linking climate engagement to economic opportunity.

Compared to the inaugural summit, ACS2 represented significant advancement, but substantial work remains to transition from enhanced visibility to structural influence in climate decision-making. The path forward requires institutional commitments, dedicated financing, and policy reforms that position youth as co-creators rather than beneficiaries of Africa's climate future.

For Clean Technology Hub and similar institutions, ACS2 highlighted opportunities for more substantive collaboration with youth networks whose capacity and strategic thinking have evolved

significantly. By deepening these partnerships and advocating for the structural reforms outlined above, the continental climate movement can harness Africa's demographic dividend to build a sustainable, just, and prosperous future for all Africans.

The recently concluded ACS2 proved that when provided with appropriate platforms, resources, and institutional support, Africa's youth can contribute substantively to the continent's most pressing challenges. The question now is whether continental institutions will commit to the structural changes necessary to make this contribution systematic rather than exceptional.