

POLICY BRIEF

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Africa's seat at the table

and who is sitting in it

Youth in multilateral diplomacy at the African Union and the United Nations

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YOUTH LEADERSHIP · DIPLOMACY · GOVERNANCE

ABSTRACT

Africa is the world's youngest continent, yet young Africans remain thinly represented in the rooms where its future is negotiated. Recent commitments, including the African Union's 2024 decision to institutionalize the Office of the Youth Envoy and the UN's 2024 Pact for the Future, open real doors. This brief argues that the next step is to move from consultation to a defined role: seats with a mandate, an institution that outlasts any one office-holder, and a simple way to check whether it works. It makes three recommendations for AU and UN stakeholders, each with its rationale, concrete steps, responsible actors and measures of success.

1. A young continent, a quiet room

Walk into almost any multilateral meeting about Africa and the first thing you notice is the age gap. Africa has a median age of about 19, and roughly 70 percent of Africans are under 30.¹ The rooms that decide the continent's positions on trade, peace and security, and climate do not look like that.

~19 median age in Africa¹	70% of Africans are under 30¹	2.8% of MPs worldwide are aged 30 or under²
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The global figure shows the pattern. The Inter-Parliamentary Union finds that half of the world's people are under 30, yet only 2.8 percent of parliamentarians are.² Diplomats tend to be drawn from the same political and civil-service pipelines, so it is reasonable to expect the gap to carry into delegations. I have not found a continent-wide count of young people in African delegations to the AU and the UN. Building one is part of what this brief proposes.

This is not only a question of fairness. The IPU makes the practical point: younger generations will live longest with the consequences of today's laws, and where their voices are missing, policy is less likely to reflect issues such as education, unemployment and climate change.² The same logic applies to treaties, trade positions and peace processes negotiated in multilateral settings.

There is also a question of voice. Speaking at the AU's 6th Mid-Year Coordination Meeting in July 2024, Chairperson Moussa Faki Mahamat stressed the importance of Africa speaking with a unified voice to transform its global narrative, and said that no one, especially Africa's largest demographic group, its youth, should be left behind.⁴ A unified voice is stronger when it includes the people who will carry the outcome. Multilateral forums are where common African positions are agreed and then defended in front of the world, so who is in those rooms shapes what Africa says and how credibly it says it.

The aim here is practical. The brief does not argue that young people should replace experienced diplomats. It argues that experience and youth should sit together, and that the structures to make that happen now exist on paper and need to be made real.

2. The doors that are now open

At the African Union

The African Youth Charter, adopted by the AU Assembly in Banjul on 2 July 2006, is the continent's foremost legally binding instrument on the rights, responsibilities and development of young people aged 15 to 35. It gives Member States a framework to strengthen youth participation and expand access to education, employment, health, and peace and security. In 2026 the AU marks its 20th anniversary through the AYC@20 campaign.³

In July 2024, at its 45th Ordinary Session in Accra, the AU Executive Council adopted a decision to institutionalize the Office of the Chairperson's Special Envoy on Youth. The AU describes this as a deliberate shift that ensures continuity beyond individual mandates and addresses earlier problems of capacity and sustainability. The Commission was to assess the financial, legal and structural implications and take the matter to the relevant policy organs. The Council also took note of recommendations to review the Charter, and the Commission was to publish a report on how far it has been implemented.⁴

The Envoy's office has built working platforms. These include the AU Youth Reference Committee, partnerships with Afreximbank and the Africa Leadership Academy, the LeadHer Fellowship, and the Make Africa Digital campaign. It has also carried African youth views into outside policy processes, among them the Netherlands' Africa Strategy, the Austria-Africa Strategy and the German Africa Policy Guidelines.⁴

At the United Nations

In September 2024 world leaders adopted the Pact for the Future. In its chapter on youth and future generations, states committed to strengthen meaningful youth participation at the national level (Action 36) and at the international level (Action 37).⁵ Under Action 37(d), the Secretary-General is asked to keep developing core principles, with Member States and young people, for meaningful, representative, inclusive and safe youth engagement across the UN. The UN Youth Office leads that work, which has moved through a desk review, stakeholder consultations and draft principles, with a pilot planned. The UN's own explanation is direct: youth participation must be meaningful, not just symbolic.⁶

The Pact also says something about attitude. It recognizes that the current generation of children and young people is the largest in history, most of them living in developing countries, and that they will live with the consequences of both action and inaction. States pledged to invest in and promote engagement by young people at national and international levels.⁵ The text separates children and youth from future generations, which are covered by a Declaration on Future Generations annexed to the Pact. For Africa, the first group is the one whose seats are at issue today.

Seen together

2006	African Youth Charter adopted in Banjul. ³
July 2024	AU Executive Council, Accra, decides to institutionalize the Office of the Youth Envoy and notes the need to review the Charter. ⁴
Sept 2024	UN Pact for the Future adopted, with Actions 36 and 37 on youth participation. ⁵
2025	UN Youth Office reports milestones completed on the Action 37(d) core principles: desk review, consultations, and draft principles for stakeholder feedback, with a pilot planned. ⁶
2026	AU marks the 20th anniversary of the Youth Charter (AYC@20). ³

The timeline shows that the African and global tracks are moving in the same years. That is an opening. The two processes can reinforce each other if the people working on them are connected, and if African youth are present in both.

The language is right. The test is whether a young African can now point to a seat, a mandate and a vote, and not only a photo opportunity.

3. What is still missing

The following is my reading of the gaps, based on the sources above. It is analysis, not the result of a survey.

A role, not a welcome

Consultation is valuable, but it can end with nobody obliged to respond. The AU Youth Envoy has said that young people have always been mobilized for advocacy, but they want more technical engagement, to bring their capabilities and innovation forward and contribute meaningfully.⁴ Advocacy gets a young person heard. A technical role, with a portfolio and access to the text, gets that person counted.

This matters because the usual alternatives are weaker. A youth forum held beside a summit can be warm and well attended and still leave the official agenda untouched. A single young representative can be asked to speak for a whole continent. Both are better than silence, and neither is the same as shared responsibility.

Continuity

Institutionalizing the Envoy's office is the right decision. As of the AU's October 2024 release, though, the office's structure still had to be assessed and approved by the policy organs.⁴ Until that is complete and funded, progress depends on individuals rather than institutions. Readers should check the current status before relying on this point.

Connection between the two tracks

The AU and the UN processes described above run in parallel. The Youth Envoy has already taken African youth views into external policy processes, and the UN Youth Office is drafting principles for youth engagement across the UN.^{4,6} I have not seen a stated mechanism that links the two, so that a young African who gains experience in one forum is supported in the other. Without a link, effort is duplicated and experience is lost when a person moves on.

Measurement

The Pact commits states to youth participation, but a commitment with no baseline cannot be checked. Without simple numbers, such as how many young people sit in a delegation or on a negotiating team, every actor can claim progress and no one can be held to it. The IPU shows what good measurement looks like. Because it has reviewed youth in parliaments five times, it can say where progress has been made and where there have been setbacks.² Diplomacy has no equivalent.

4. Three recommendations

The recommendations below are the author's proposals. Each states why it matters, what to do, who acts and how success would be measured. Dates are suggestions for discussion.

1 Put young Africans inside delegations, with a brief

RATIONALE

A young person in the audience is not a young person in the negotiation. The gap in section 3 is between being consulted and holding a defined role. A named adviser with a portfolio and access to documents turns participation into influence, and builds a pipeline of experienced diplomats for the next generation.

CONCRETE STEPS

- AU Member States include at least one young adviser (aged 15 to 35, following the Charter definition) in their delegations to AU Summits, Executive Council sessions and the UN General Assembly.
- Each adviser gets a defined portfolio, such as trade, climate or peace and security, plus access to negotiating texts and briefings.
- The AU Youth Reference Committee and the Envoy's office keep a roster of vetted candidates that states can draw from, with a short pre-session briefing on procedure.
- Advisers are paired with a senior diplomat as mentor and write a short debrief after each session.

WHO ACTS

Foreign ministries of Member States; the Office of the Youth Envoy; the AU Youth Reference Committee.

HOW TO MEASURE

Number and share of delegations with a young adviser, per session; number of advisers who return for a second session; share of advisers who report access to negotiating texts.

2 Finish the job on the Youth Envoy's office

RATIONALE

The July 2024 decision was a strong signal, and the AU itself says its purpose is continuity beyond individual mandates.⁴ A decision becomes an institution only when it has a structure, a budget and a reporting line. Until then, it can still be lost at the next change of leadership.

CONCRETE STEPS

- The AU Commission completes its assessment of the financial, legal and structural implications and submits the proposed structure to the policy organs, with a published timeline for approval.
- The approved office has dedicated, multi-year core funding, so that it does not depend on project support.
- The office links its work to the review of the African Youth Charter and the implementation report already requested, so the two processes inform each other.⁴
- The office publishes a short annual account of what youth input changed in AU decisions, and which recommendations were not taken up and why.

WHO ACTS

AU Commission; Executive Council and other policy organs; the Office of the Youth Envoy.

HOW TO MEASURE

Structure and budget approved by a stated date; share of the office's budget that is core rather than project funding; annual account published on time.

3 Count it, and publish the numbers

RATIONALE

The IPU has tracked youth in parliaments for years, and that tracking is what lets anyone say the figure is 2.8 percent.² Pact Actions 36 and 37 need the same discipline for diplomacy. Core principles on paper are only as strong as the evidence of their use.⁶

CONCRETE STEPS

- The AU Commission and the UN Youth Office agree a small set of indicators for the African context, for example: young people in delegations, youth-led agenda items, and follow-up responses to youth recommendations.
- Member States report these indicators voluntarily at first, using a simple shared template.
- A baseline is published in the first year, then updated annually and presented at the AU Mid-Year Coordination Meeting.
- Young people are involved in designing the indicators, in line with the co-development approach of Action 37(d).⁶

WHO ACTS

AU Commission; UN Youth Office; Member States; youth-led organizations as co-designers and independent reviewers.

HOW TO MEASURE

Baseline published within twelve months; number of Member States reporting each year; year-on-year change in each indicator.

5. The bigger point

Diplomacy is often pictured as formal and cold. In practice it runs on trust, curiosity and the ability to make a room feel that agreement is possible. Young Africans bring those strengths in abundance, along with fresh ideas and hard-earned insight into the problems being negotiated. A seat at the table is not a favour to a generation. It is how Africa gets a better-informed and more credible voice in the places where its future is written.

The three recommendations are meant to be taken together. Delegation seats give young people a role. A funded, permanent Envoy's office gives them a home and a memory. Published indicators give everyone a way to see whether the first two are working. If any one is missing, the others weaken.

The year 2026, which marks twenty years since the African Youth Charter, is a natural moment to move. A charter that says every young person has the right to take part in decision-making is easier to honour when the person taking part has a name tag, a briefing pack and a place in the delegation. The invitation to the table has been sent. The next step is to make sure the chairs are there, and that someone young is sitting in them.

Draft for author review. Statistics and institutional facts are cited to the sources below, all accessed on 20 October 2026. Sources report slightly different median ages for Africa (about 18.7 to 19.7), so "about 19" is used. The gap analysis and recommendations are the author's own.

References

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