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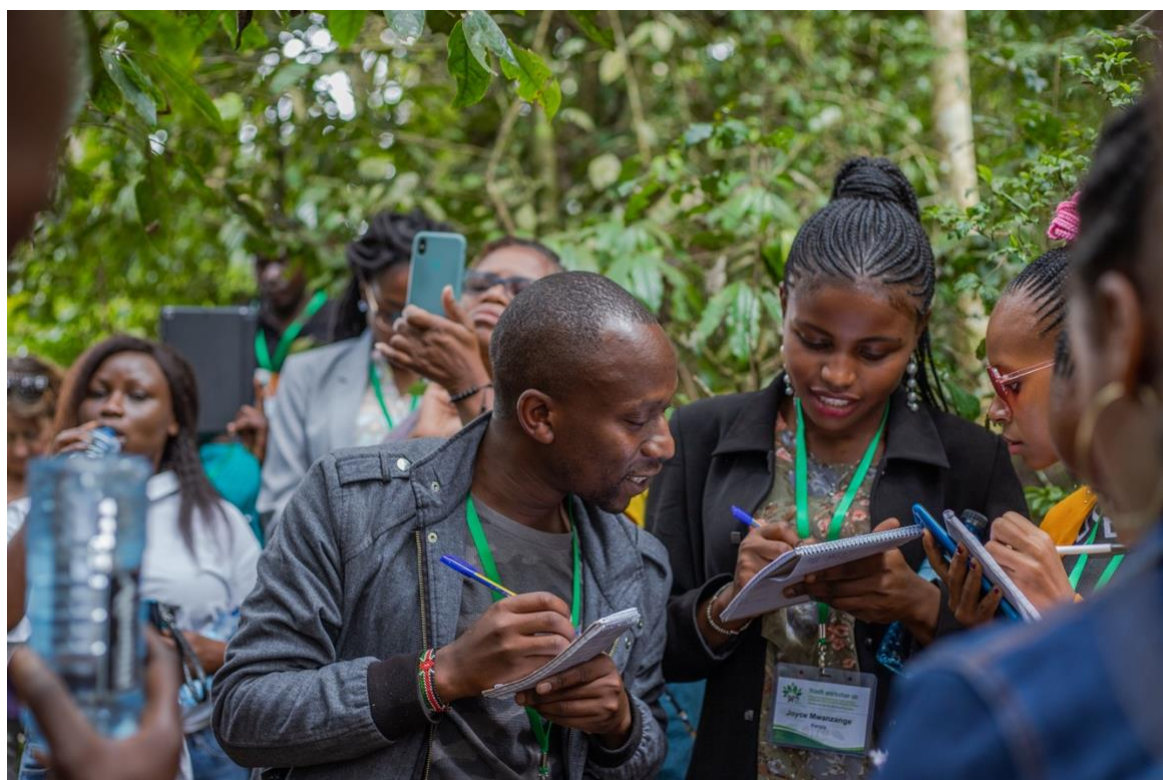


# Kenyan Youth Perspectives on Forests

Report from a youth-scientist dialogue on sustainable forestry

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D. Gitonga, C. Wekesa, E. Kiseu, G. Kowero, D. Mutta, R. Omondi, A. Roos



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Report from a youth-scientist dialogue on sustainable forestry

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## Abstract

This report presents proceedings of “AfricanYouth4Forests” project workshop held in Voi, Taita Taveta county, Kenya from 7 to 9 November 2022. The workshop was jointly organised by African Forest Forum (AFF), Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences (SLU), and Kenya Forestry Research Institute (KEFRI). It brought together 19 youths from Taita Taveta and Nairobi counties between 18-25 years of age to engage with researchers and policymakers in conversations about young people's views, visions, goals, and ideas in shaping the future governance of Kenya's and the continent's forests.

The participants identified niches for youths' engagement in forests to improve forest cover, curb climate change effects and improve livelihoods. The youth participants envisioned 'a world where young people are more involved in sustainable development by participating in the green economy.'

To achieve the youths' vision, several actions were recommended; training the youth on sustainable forest management and green entrepreneurship, developing markets for green products, establishing innovative knowledge-sharing platforms, and actively involving the youths in national and international policy processes on forests and climate change.

The outcome reflected a wide range of views and ideas among the youth, and that they have the capacity and readiness to tackle the forest-related challenges towards 2030 and beyond. It is recommended that the dialogue between African forestry researchers and the youth should continue.

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## Abbreviations

AFF	African Forest Forum
CECM	County Executive Committee Member
CBOs	Community-Based Organizations
CFAs	Community Forest Associations
ICT	Information and Communications Technology
KEFRI	Kenya Forestry Research Institute
KFS	Kenya Forest Service
NGOs	Non-Governmental Organizations
NTFPs	Non-Timber Forest Products
OVOC	One Voice Affinity Centre
SFM	Sustainable Forest Management
SLU	Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences

## Background

Africa is the world's youngest continent. Africans make up 26 percent of the world's young population under the age of 25 and their share will increase over the century. This “youth bulge” could either become a dividend or a liability for the continent – especially in the context of the current stress on natural resources.

On the positive side, however, youth in Africa are more educated, more connected, and tech-savvy than ever before. Hence, they should be an asset for a sustainable socio-economic development in the continent. While the quest to nurture the continent’s sustainability is vital, the creativity and innovation of Africa’s growing young workforce can help address the crises of forestry and climate change on the one hand, whilst creating jobs and wealth on the other.

Despite this latent potential, the youth are — and feel — under-represented. Besides the enormous challenges that they face, their needs and aspirations are not heard and adequately articulated whenever there are debates on global sustainability issues. Moreover, their perspectives and dependency on forests have rarely been explored.

The scientific community can help prepare young people in Africa, to sustainably govern and manage the continents’ forest resources. By sharing science-based knowledge about the forests with the youth, researchers can support the continent’s youth to overcome barriers to their meaningful contribution to the forest sector, including achieving the sustainable development goals on climate action and life on land.

Through the project “*#AfricanYouth4Forests*” the African Forest Forum (AFF), the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences (SLU), and the Kenya Forestry Research Institute (KEFRI) organised a three-day workshop in Voi, Taita Taveta county where young Kenyans engaged with researchers in a conversation about their views, vision, goals, and ideas in shaping the future governance of forests.





Participants of the AfricanYouth4Forests workshop held on 7-9 November 2022 in Voi, Taita Taveta County, Kenya. Photo: Felix Odhiambo

## Perspectives of youth on forest resources and communities

*“The melodies of birds remind me that forests are essential for life, and this has motivated me to establish and manage a tree seedlings nursery for planting. I am dedicated to contributing to the conservation of forests for future generations.”*

Moses Mwangemi, **20 years old.**

During the workshop, the youth shared their perspectives on the forest resources and their importance for the local communities. Based on their stories and video clips, the youth acknowledged that forests and trees outside forests offer several ecological, economic, and social benefits, hence the need for their conservation.

**The benefits of forests and trees for the youth and their communities** were:

- Support the hydrological cycle by regulating water catchment improving rainfall, and through water purification. Forests, therefore, increase the provision of quality drinking water.
- Providing nutritional benefits from fruit trees, honey, and other products on farmlands and in forests. Trees also yield animal feed, especially during dry periods.
- Improving soil fertility, thereby promoting agricultural productivity.
- Modifying climate and giving shade, thus safeguarding people from extreme temperatures.
- Cleaning the air as they regulate the atmosphere and provide oxygen.
- Absorbing and storing carbon, helping to mitigate the impacts of climate change and associated hazards.
- Acting as a source of firewood and construction materials.
- Creating habitats for a diverse flora and fauna (biodiversity), some of which are endemic to specific areas.
- Some plants/trees have medicinal value and are sources of medicinal products.
- Forests and trees offer protection services – they safeguard from erosion, floods, and destructive wind.
- Forests promote human mental health - the youth associated forests with calmness, peace, aesthetic value, recreation, and ecotourism services



Evidently, community benefits of forests and trees outside forests voiced by the youth, encompassed a range of ecosystem services: supporting, regulating, provisioning, and cultural services. The workshop participants further noted that they derive their motivation to manage and conserve trees and forests due to the above-mentioned benefits. **The activities that the young workshop participants already pursue** to conserve and sustainably use the forests are:

**Reforestation** which encompasses the planting of trees, for example during special occasions such as birthdays and weddings. It also includes the establishment of tree nurseries that apply circular practices whereby waste milk packets are recycled as potting tubes to nurture tree seedlings for sale. The stories shared by the youth indicated their interest to promote agroforestry through the planting of tree crops on farmlands, and creating awareness in the communities of the benefits of agroforestry.

**Biodiversity protection** is another priority activity, which consists of the identification and mapping of endemic species of plants, birds, butterflies, and other faunal species in the forest to, ultimately, compile a comprehensive, up-to-date biodiversity inventory.

**Ecotourism** activities reported include tour guiding in biodiversity rich areas, such as the Ngangao mountain forest (in Taita Taveta county). These activities require a thorough knowledge of the faunal and floral species in the forests and their environmental and/or socio-economic roles.

**Non Timber Forest Products (NTFPs):** The youth were also engaged in NTFPs production. Small-scale beekeeping and honey production is widely practiced for income, albeit with intentions to upscale the business. Butterfly farming is also pursued in the area for the sale and conservation of specific plants that host the butterflies.

**Knowledge management:** Other youth participants were engaged in forest-related careers to strengthen their capacities in forest governance. They also undertake own education initiatives in schools to create awareness among children and students on sustainable conservation of forests and trees outside forests.

Although the youth acknowledged the wide range of benefits of forests and trees, they indicated factors that could – favourably or adversely – influence their involvement in forestry. The youth thus shared some of the **critical factors that (positively or negatively) affect their participation in the management of forest resources**, and recommended several creative innovations, technologies, or approaches to respond to these issues. The issues identified are:

**Government policies:** The Kenyan government is committed to increasing forest cover to 30% by 2032 by planting 15 billion trees in the next 10 years (2022-2032). This offers an opportunity for the youth to form and register groups and produce high-quality seedlings that the government could purchase to support the initiative. Producing high-quality seedlings would mean that the youth must consider the right



Gloria Chebet, a youth from Nairobi sharing her story, on how she influences friends and relatives to plant trees during special occasions like birthdays and weddings. Photo: Felix Odhiambo

*“I am passionate about forest conservation and sustainable development, and I strive to inspire my family and friends to join me in planting trees during special occasions such as birthdays and weddings. Forests are a vital part of my life, and I prioritise their preservation.”*

**Gloria Chebet, 25 years old.**

seedlings for the right place and the right purpose, and in sufficient quantities, thus the need for innovative management of tree nurseries. A high success rate of planted trees is important through good reforestation expertise and community engagement. Hence, youth and experts in forestry have the capacity to co-create the conditions for successful reforestation and afforestation programmes.

**Market access:** Inaccessible or lack of markets for nature-based products could hinder youth participation in the green economy. Market limitations demotivate youth from exploiting green entrepreneurship opportunities due to the perceived potential of incurring losses. The solution recommended by the youth was to come up with innovative marketing strategies that prioritise the social media and web-based platforms, investment in value addition, and identifying and collaborating with key value chain players locally, nationally and internationally can be other coping strategies.

**Start-up costs:** High cost of starting green entrepreneurship ventures constitute another entry barrier. For example, inadequate capital hinders the youth from investing in modern beehives. Besides, youth without the skills to develop a realistic business plan may want to hire an expert, which is costly. Supporting the youth to diversify income sources was proposed as a solution to the issue of financial inadequacies.

**Reforestation:** The gradual increase in forest/tree cover in the country, which has already surpassed the 10% target as outlined in the 2010 constitution, provides more opportunities for youth involvement in the sector. Increased forest/tree cover implies more opportunities in terms of employment and green ventures such as butterfly farming, beekeeping and honey production, sustainable wood products and ecotourism, all of which are attractive to young people.

**Ignorance and employment needs among the youth:** Lack of knowledge can cause forest degradation as some young people may participate in illegal logging, charcoal production, and other similar practices to earn income. The proposed solution was to create awareness of the need for, and benefits of, forest conservation, the existing/potential green enterprises, and the best ways of exploiting biobased business opportunities. Moreover, it is key to develop policies and regulations that divert youth activities away from unsustainable forest uses and promote sustainable practices that still generate income.

**Community organisations for conservation:** The formation of community forest associations (CFAs) in gazetted forest areas under the custodianship of the Kenya Forest Service (KFS) provides an opportunity for the youth to be members of a legally recognized group, with the voice to advocate for participatory conservation, user rights, and benefit sharing mechanisms.

**Logging and agriculture practices:** Some local communities use slash and burn method to prepare the land before planting crops, which hinders on-farm tree growth. Wildfires caused by local communities destroy forests/trees and interfere with the green enterprises associated with the forests. Unregulated logging for timber, poles, and charcoal production can also destroy forests and

trees. As a result, youth involved in nature-based enterprises may lose their income and interest in deforestation free forestry. Essentially, the youth proposed the need to encourage and enable local communities to apply sustainable forest management and timber harvesting practices.

**Perception on the forest sector:** The controversial view that forests and their management is a preserve for the elderly and that there is a minimal representation of the youth e.g., Kaya forests (i.e. sacred forests) was another factor the youth identified. Based on this perception, some youth may disconnect from forestry. While it is important to preserve cultural values, youth representation in the Kaya elders council is a good way to pass traditional knowledge on forest conservation to the next generation. Besides, interactive virtual platforms and the integration of modern technologies would motivate the youth to become active champions in the forestry sector.



County Executive Committee Member for Water, Environment, Sanitation, Climate Change, and Natural Resources Mr. Granton Samboja during the opening session. Photo: Felix Odhiambo

## Roles of youth in forests conservation and governance

*“As a member of the WildNow Foundation, I am committed to tree planting initiatives because I understand that forests are an essential part of our planet. There can be no planet without forests, and I am dedicated to making a positive impact through my involvement.”*

**Marion Otema, 22 years old.**

The youth are currently involved in forestry through several activities. Some examples:

The youth participate in agroforestry. The stories and video clips shared by the youth indicated their interest and commitment to promoting agroforestry through the planting of tree-crops on farms and creating awareness among members of the communities on the benefits of agroforestry. The youth indicated that their involvement in agroforestry plays a critical role in increasing tree cover on farms, enhancing soil fertility, and hence increasing food productivity, thereby contributing to sustainable management of forests and trees outside forests and ensuring the community is food secure.

The participants also demonstrated their involvement in tree-planting activities to increase forest cover. Based on their success stories, the youth have influenced friends and relatives to plant trees during special events such as weddings and birthdays. The youth also lead organizations involved in tree planting. For example, the *Panda Miti Initiative* by WildNow Foundation has led to the planting of one million trees. Another youth-led organization, One Voice Affinity Center (OVOC) is involved in tree planting, innovative greening of the planet through smart waste management, activism through the action army against environmental destruction, and promoting women and youth-focused environmental conservation activities.

The youth also belong to Community Based Organizations (CBOs) involved in tree planting. For example, some are members of the Go Green Dembwa Youth Group in Taita Taveta county, which focuses on enhancing the culture of tree growing outside forests in the County by raising seedlings for pine, grevillea, eucalyptus, and other native species from wildlings for planting. The group collects

the wildings and takes them to an onsite nursery where they manage them until they attain plantable size before selling them for planting in degraded forest areas. The active engagement of youth in tree planting is an indication of their readiness and willingness to work towards advancing the forestry sector to a sustainable future.



Collins Martin, a youth from Nairobi shares the work OVOC does in planting trees and greening the planet Photo: Felix Odhiambo

Several participants participate in creating awareness of the importance of forest conservation in schools and supporting schools to plant trees. As they emphasized during the workshop, the future of forests depends on how many pupils and students can be inspired to embrace positive attitudes and good practices concerning the management and sustainable utilization of forests and trees outside forests. During the workshop, one of the youths indicated in his story of having created awareness on environmental conservation in fourteen schools based in Nairobi. By inculcating positive conservation culture in school-going children and youth, there is a likelihood to sustain healthy forests for future posterity.

The workshop attendees underscored their role in planting fruit trees (e.g., mangoes) and trees of medicinal value (e.g., moringa) on farms to increase forest cover and earn income through the sale of fruits and herbal medicinal products. Fruit trees rank high among the tree species the youths encourage communities to plant, given their economic and nutritional benefits.

Young people are also engaged in butterfly farming for income. In the process, they conserve tree species that host butterflies; the result is increased forest cover and income from the selling of butterflies. A typical example of youth involvement in butterfly farming is in Chawia forest, where there are two endemic butterfly

species namely *Cymothoe teita* and *Papilio desmondi teita* that are being conserved. Through this initiative, the youth conserve tree species that butterflies feed on while earning income by selling butterfly pupae to Kipepeo project in Gede for export mainly to Europe. Upscaling butterfly farming and expanding the market is therefore one way to engage youth in forest conservation through a green enterprise.

*“My father inspired me to pursue a career in agribusiness. He planted a variety of fruit trees on our farm, which provided me with constant nutritional benefits without any monetary cost. I am motivated to continue his legacy and contribute to sustainable agriculture and nutrition through my career.”*

Josephine Masanju, **25 years old.**

Further activities involve the establishment and management of tree nurseries for quality seedlings production, which are sold for income and/or planted in local forested areas and farmlands. Some of the youth apply innovative ways by using waste milk packets as potting tubes to raise seedlings in their tree nurseries, thereby managing plastic waste.

Ecotourism activities also engage young persons, mostly as tour guides for income and promotion of conservation activities within the forests. The income generated from ecotourism motivates the youth to actively participate in the conservation of indigenous forests. A good example of an ecotourism enterprise in promoting forest conservation is manifested in Ngangao forest, a moist indigenous forest in Taita Hills, with several nature trails. The youth engage in guiding tourists to appreciate trees as old as over 250 years, medicinal plants, endemic butterfly species museum, and endemic plants, among other tourism products. Accordingly, the forest becomes valuable to the youth and the locals, hence increased community participation in its management and sustainable use.





Youths during the field visit to Ngangao forest, Taita Taveta County. Photo: Felix Odhiambo



## Role of youth in shaping the future governance of the continent's forests

*“Recognizing that our forests are the key to our future, I am inspired to provide environmental education in schools. I am passionate about ensuring that young people are aware of the importance of nature conservation and actively participate in it.”*

**Abdulrazaq Mohamed, 23 years old.**

To advance the forestry sector to a sustainable future, youth must be responsible and accountable actors at community level. The behaviour, practices, attitudes, and knowledge of the youth must not cause harm to the environment, society, and the economy. They must operate within the safeguards of doing economic, social, and environmental good at all times to ensure sustainable governance of forests and trees outside forests for posterity. Therefore, the youth suggested the following ways to engage and empower them to be responsible and accountable actors in the forestry sector:

- Offer competitive rewards to the youth who actively participate in forest-related activities, organize youth fun days, and where possible employ more youth in the sector. These actions would incentivize youth to embrace positive behavior/practices and attitudes and hence promote best practices in the management of forests and trees outside forests.
- Build the capacity of the youth in networking for strengthened collaborations in the forestry sector. Currently, public-private-people partnerships are vital in the sustainable management of forests and trees outside forests. Therefore, the youth expressed the need to enhance their ability to build networks and coalitions and promote multi-stakeholder collaborations in steering the forestry sector to a sustainable future.
- Train the youth on best practices in forestry, tree nursery management, and how to establish and sustain viable green enterprises through robust, practical, and easily implementable business plans. Key areas to consider

include training on governance, project design and implementation, resource mobilisation, and knowledge management among others. Most importantly, youth with the potential to invest in and/or upscale green enterprises need skills to develop realistic business plans to guide their business ventures to prosperity.

- Youth inclusion in community forest associations (CFAs) to enhance their participation in forest management. The youth expressed the desire to participate in conservation through CFAs, particularly in protected forest areas under the custodianship of the Kenya Forest Service (KFS). They recommended that protected forest areas should have active CFAs so that they can benefit from the user rights enshrined in the forest management agreements signed between the KFS and CFAs and actively engage in participatory management of state forests.
- Link the youth directly to the international, as well as to expanding African urban markets for forest products for increased income generation from green enterprises as there is no point starting green entrepreneurship only to run losses due to lack of or inadequate markets. Establishing links with the international or urban markets can be complex, thus the youth's appeal for assistance from national and international players in the forestry sector, and KEFRI, AFF, and SLU could help in the identification of potential international markets.
- Guide the youth to establish innovative knowledge-sharing platforms to inspire others to participate in forest management and green enterprises. The platforms should be comprehensive and designed in a way to engage people, thereby motivating youth to consider investing in green enterprises and/or management of forests and trees outside forests.
- Create awareness of the best trees youth can integrate with crops (tree-crop combinations) to have highly productive and sustainable agroforestry systems. Highly productive agroforestry systems will motivate the youth to grow and manage more trees on farms, thereby improving agricultural productivity, agrobiodiversity, soil fertility, and forest cover on farmlands.

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## Links to media coverage and video messages

### Media coverage

- [Kenyan youth pledge support for nature-based solution to climate emergencies.](#)
- [Africa youth engage in conservation.](#)
- [Vijana wa mataifa mbali mbali wakongamana nchini Kenya kujadili masuala ibuka ya tabianchi.](#)
- [Experts urge African youth to seek jobs in the forestry sector.](#)
- [Mjadala wa Mazingira: Washika dau wa mazingira watoa kauli zao.](#)
- [Youth turn to planting trees as income venture.](#)

### Video messages

- [Mr. Collins Towet , Founder OVAC plans on conservation in Africa as a mitigation to climate change.](#)
- [Marion Otema, Student at Strathmore University shares her views over conservation in Africa.](#)
- [Prof Godwin Kowero, CEO African Forest Forum on the need for African youths in conservation.](#)
- [Hon Granton Samboja , CECM Water & Environment Taita address to African youths on conservation.](#)
- [Dr Doris Muta, Senior Programme Officer AFF, sharing her perspective over forests in Africa.](#)



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