



POLICY BRIEF

Youth engagement in governance, peace and security in East Africa

Nicodemus Minde

Enhancing youth engagement in East Africa's governance, peace and security is imperative for regional stability and sustainable development. With more than 70% of the population under 35, young people have the potential to shape a more inclusive and peaceful future. However, structural, social and institutional barriers still limit their meaningful participation, increasing the risk of marginalisation, disillusionment and instability across the region.

Key findings

- ▶ Despite their demographic strength, youth in East Africa are excluded from meaningful decision making. Older leaders dominate key institutions of governance at both national and regional levels, such as parliaments, cabinets and the East African Legislative Assembly. As a result, young people occupy auxiliary and fringe roles with little agency in shaping governance outcomes.
- ▶ Although strong national, regional, continental and international policy frameworks on youth exist, their implementation is weak and accountability mechanisms are ineffective. Many youth leaders and groups also lack awareness of these frameworks.
- ▶ Political patronage and cultural gerontocracy constrain youth participation in governance, peace and security.
- ▶ Youth participation in governance in East Africa, both at the national and regional levels, remains tokenistic and patronised by dominant ruling political parties.
- ▶ East African countries have robust youth policies, but there is a disparity in the framing of youth issues and policy interpretations, which makes harmonised monitoring and programmatic coordination at the regional level difficult.
- ▶ Youth programmes lack proper organisation and have poor cross-regional coordination, making it difficult to secure funding.

Recommendations

East African Community

- ▶ The East African Community (EAC) should urgently finalise its youth policy review to create a harmonised regional policy framework aligned with the African Youth Charter and UN Security Council Resolution 2250.
- ▶ The EAC Secretariat should revive and implement the EAC Youth Peace and Security Platform to strengthen youth involvement in regional peacebuilding, early warning and mediation initiatives.
- ▶ The EAC should enhance the dissemination and awareness of youth policies, frameworks, initiatives and activities.

Youth groups

- ▶ Civil society organisations working with youth should foster collaboration and dialogue through digital platforms, such as X Spaces, in line with the Bujumbura Declaration on Youth, Peace and Security, which calls for meaningful youth participation.

- ▶ Youth groups and organisations should find alternative funding models beyond donor funding. The proposed EAC Peace Fund can fund youth activities that promote peace and security in the region.

EAC partner states

- ▶ Partner states should develop accountability frameworks with clear indicators to monitor youth participation in governance, peace and security.
- ▶ Partner states should develop National Action Plans for Youth, Peace and Security in accordance with UN Security Council Resolution 2250 to enhance youth participation, prevent violence and promote peace.
- ▶ Partner states should enhance youth participation in governance by aligning legal and regulatory frameworks that promote youth inclusion, such as the adoption and implementation of youth quotas in parliament.

Introduction

In less than two years, East Africa has witnessed successive waves of youth-led protests, from the storming of Kenya's Parliament in June 2024 to anti-corruption marches in Uganda in the same year, and youth-led protests and youth-led protests during and after the disputed general elections in Tanzania on 29 October 2025. Demonstrations in Kenya in June 2025, sparked by blogger Albert Omondi Ojwang's death in police custody, underscore a generation unwilling to keep silent in the face of economic hardship, corruption and state violence. East African youth make up more than 70% of the region's population (35 years or below). This demographic reality is no longer just a statistic but a political force reshaping governance across the region.

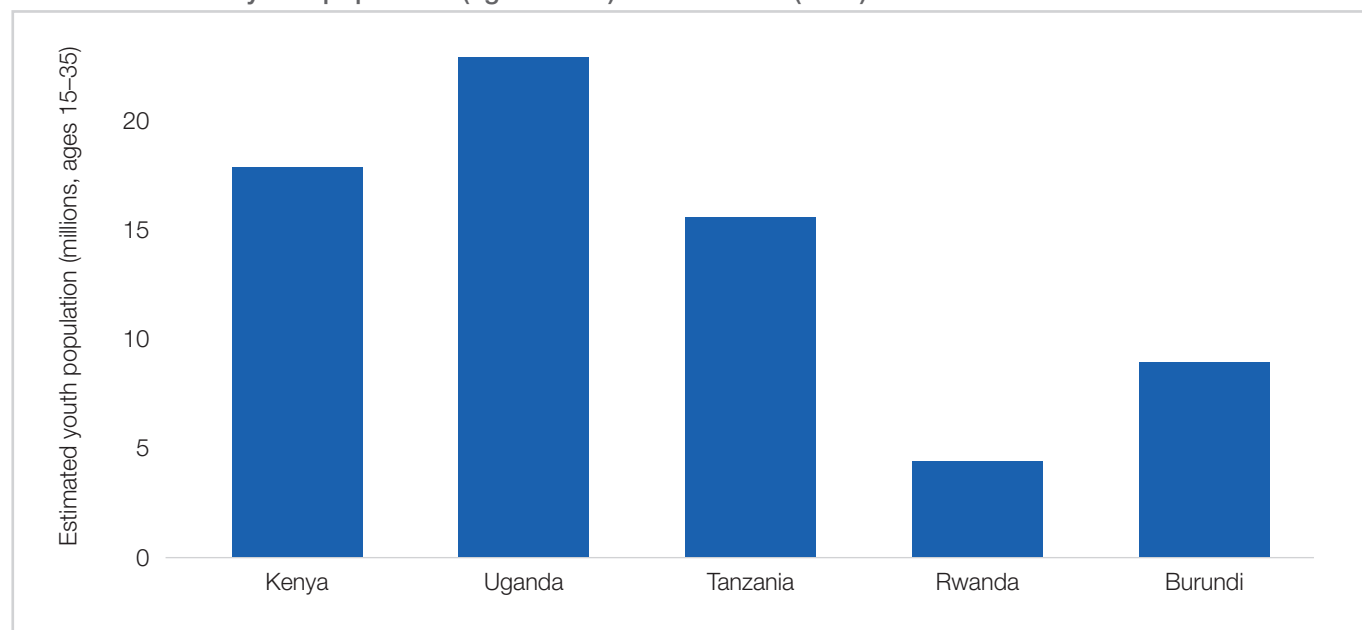
Defined by the African Union (AU) as people aged 15–35,¹ East African youth represent a demographic dividend with transformative potential for governance, peace and security.² Countries such as Uganda (70%), Kenya (75%) and Tanzania (77%) exemplify this youthful profile.³ However, systemic barriers including limited access to education, high unemployment, social and political exclusion and inefficient institutions consistently marginalise youth, restricting their participation in decision making and threatening regional stability.⁴

The region faces complex governance and security issues, such as interethnic conflicts, resource disputes, transnational crimes, political violence and terrorism. The United Nations (UN) Development Programme defines governance as comprising the mechanisms, processes and institutions through which citizens and groups articulate interests and exercise power.⁵ The absence of conflict, the defence of human rights and the establishment of favourable circumstances for sustained growth are all considered aspects of peace and security.⁶

East African youth make up more than 70% of the region's population – a political force reshaping governance across the region

Youth have traditionally been portrayed as both victims and offenders of violence, which feeds stereotypes that limit their capacity to promote peace and take part in political processes. However, regional frameworks such as the East African Community's (EAC) Youth Policy⁷ and the AU's Youth, Peace and Security (YPS) Agenda⁸ aim to recast youth as vital collaborators in creating stable and inclusive societies. These initiatives align with global commitments such as the UN Security

Chart 1: Estimated youth population (ages 15–35) in East Africa (2024)



Source: Compilation from National Council for Population and Development (Kenya); Kenya National Bureau of Statistics (2019 Census); Uganda Bureau of Statistics (2024 Census Report); National Bureau of Statistics (2022 Population and Housing Census Report); National Institute of Statistics of Rwanda (2022 Census Youth Thematic Report); UN DESA World Population Prospects (2024 Revision); and the UN Population Fund, Burundi Profile

Council Resolution (UNSCR) 2250, which underscores the role of youth in peacebuilding.⁹ Despite these progressive policies, gaps in implementation remain. Youth accords and frameworks often do not lead to real results.

This policy brief tackles this important issue by examining youth involvement in governance, peace and security in East Africa. It examines the relevance and effectiveness of youth frameworks in the region, reviews youth participation in governance and peace initiatives, offers recommendations and discusses opportunities for regional collaboration.

Context and background

Despite making up about 45%¹⁰ of the population in Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Rwanda and Burundi, youth in East Africa remain marginalised in governance, peace and security. Structural barriers – such as restricted access to education, unemployment rates exceeding 30% in some countries and exclusion from political decision making – hinder their participation. While AU and EAC frameworks promote youth inclusion, national frameworks often fail to implement them.¹¹ Each year, over 10 million young people enter the workforce in sub-Saharan Africa, but only about three million jobs are created.¹²

Restricted access to education and unemployment rates exceeding 30% in some countries, hinder youth participation in governance, peace and security

This policy brief uses a qualitative methodology that combines primary and secondary data. Data was drawn from expert interviews. It was complemented by various youth policy frameworks, including the African Youth Charter, the EAC Youth Policy (2013), the EAC Youth Peace and Security (YPS) Platform and the EAC Youth Ambassadors Platform. The analysis was done by assessing country youth policies, their alignment with the EAC policy framework, identifying gaps, challenges and proposing recommendations for enhancing youth engagement in governance, peace and security in East Africa.

Regional and country-level youth frameworks

Adopted in 2013, the EAC Youth Policy is the main regional framework for youth development, promoting social, economic and political inclusion. While still overarching, it has been overtaken by updated country-level frameworks, including Kenya Youth Development Policy 2019, Uganda's National Youth Policy revised in 2016, Rwanda's National Youth Policy 2015, Burundi's National Youth Policy 2016 and Tanzania's amended National Youth Development Policy 2024.¹³ The policy promotes youth leadership, skills training, digital inclusion and engagement in peace and security through initiatives such as the EAC Youth Ambassadors.¹⁴

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Chart 2: Country-level analysis

Country	Policy and year	Governance focus	Peace and security focus
Kenya	Kenya Youth Development Policy 2019	Promotes youth participation in governance by including them in decision making, providing leadership training and encouraging civic engagement; encourages recognition of youth voices in national development as part of the Big Four Agenda	Focuses on youth security awareness, patriotism and national unity; encourages participation in peace initiatives and countering violent extremism programmes
Uganda	National Youth Policy 2016 and Youth Action Plan	Prioritises youth involvement in governance structures, leadership skills and civic participation; youth councils institutionalised under law to engage with local/national government	Prioritises youth involvement in conflict prevention, peacebuilding and post-conflict mediation
Tanzania	National Youth Development Policy 2007; amended National Youth Development Policy 2024	Strengthens youth agency in governance by connecting with the country's Vision 2050; youth inclusion in leadership and digital governance is prioritised	Because of the country's relative peace, the focus is on enhancing youth inclusion in national stability and strengthening cohesion
Rwanda	National Youth Policy 2015 Revision	Focuses on youth inclusion in decision making and building youth inclusion through civic education	Anchored in post-genocide context; youth policy focuses on peace education, reconciliation, unity and prevention of relapse into genocide
Burundi	National Youth Policy 2016–2026 and Youth, Peace and Security Strategy/National Action Plans (NAPs) 2025	Calls for including youth in governance, leadership training and participatory development	Distinctively promoted by the National YPS Strategy (2025), which specifically complies with the AU Continental Framework on YPS and UNSCR 2250; places young people in national security discourse as leaders, peacemakers and conflict mediators

Source: Author's compilation

Youth engagement in governance

Youth participation in East African governance remains limited and uneven, reflecting systemic exclusion. According to global data on national parliaments, the percentage of members of parliament aged 40 or younger in East Africa is within the range of the global average of 17.5%.¹⁵ Comparatively, Tanzania (27.6%) and Uganda (24.3%) have the highest youth representation in parliament.

Only Uganda and Rwanda have a youth quota system, but Tanzania and Kenya have an allocation for special interests, which may sometimes go to youth. Tanzania ranks high in youth representation in parliament, even without the quota system. Its demographics are broader compared to other East African countries. While Uganda shows a high level of youth representation, the local level still faces low youth representation. Uganda's Local Government Act restricts youth to four representatives

per district, undermining their influence in a country where they constitute 78% of the population.¹⁶

Tanzania’s amended National Youth Development Policy 2024 creates youth councils. However, these councils do not have decision-making power and only serve as advisory bodies.¹⁷ Rwanda shows higher engagement, with youth comprising 30% of local councils, though centralised governance limits autonomy.¹⁸ Burundi’s political instability restricts youth to informal roles, with minimal institutional support.

This tokenistic engagement risks alienating youth and undermining democratic inclusivity.¹⁹ Comparative analysis reveals Rwanda’s relative success, driven by structured representation, while other East African countries rely on informal and improvised approaches, highlighting the need for reforms.

Chart 3: Percentage of MPs 40 or younger in East Africa (per the last election)

Country	Legislature	Overall	Male	Female	Last election
Tanzania	National Assembly	27.6%	15%	12.9%	2020*
Uganda	Parliament (unicameral)	24.3%	15%	9.8%	2021
Burundi	National Assembly	19.8%	5%	14.4%	2025
Kenya	National Assembly	19.5%	14%	5.5%	2022
Rwanda	Chamber of Deputies	13.8%	6%	7.5%	2024

Source: Author’s compilation

* These figures were aggregated before Tanzania’s 2025 general elections on 29 October 2025



TOKENISTIC ENGAGEMENT
RISKS ALIENATING YOUTH
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At the EAC institutional level, youth involvement in governance is negligible and almost non-existent. According to the EAC’s Coordinator for Children and Youth, ‘You rarely find anyone close to youth age among presidents, ministers or in organs such as the East African Legislative Assembly, the East African Court of Justice; only a handful fall even near 35–40 years.’²⁰ Young people are often confined to mobilisation roles within partner states’ political party youth wings rather than core leadership positions. Even institutions that should offer representation – such as youth councils or regional assemblies – tend to feature very few youths in influential roles. The EAC’s Coordinator for Children and Youth, further noted that ‘youth are present in political party structures, but mostly to make noise and mobilise; leadership is still held by older elites.’²¹

Barriers to youth participation in governance

Youth face institutional, cultural and economic barriers to governance. Age restrictions on candidacy (e.g., Burundi, 25 years, Tanzania, 21 years) and a lack of youth quotas limit participation. Most electoral systems in East Africa use the first-past-the-post system, which favours established politicians who are well-resourced and well-connected. In this system, smaller parties struggle to compete with youth-mobilising dominant parties such as the National Resistance Movement in Uganda or the Chama Cha Mapinduzi in Tanzania. As a result, positions are given out based on loyalty rather than merit, leading to patronage.²²

Economic factors restrict youth participation in national politics. For instance, Kenya's election campaigns for parliamentary seats typically cost more than \$50 000, which discourages young people from running.²³ Culturally, age-based hierarchies prioritise elder leadership, often marginalising youth voices across the region.²⁴ Economically, unemployment rates exceeding 30% in Kenya and Uganda, coupled with poverty, limit resources for advocacy and youth active participation in governance.²⁵ These barriers sustain a cycle of exclusion, reducing youth agency.²⁶ Tackling them involves lowering candidacy costs, implementing quotas and encouraging cultural shifts.

Youth, peace and security in East Africa

Youth play contradictory roles in peace and security in East Africa. They are simultaneously seen as agents of peace and at-risk actors for recruitment into armed groups. The EAC's Coordinator of Children and Youth notes, 'If you go to the security sector – official or otherwise – you find many youth involved, but not through formal participatory mechanisms.'²⁷

While frameworks exist based on the UNSCR 2250 and the AU YPS, actual youth participation in peace processes in East Africa remains limited. Youth are mostly excluded from formal peace negotiations and conflict-resolution spaces. The EAC's Coordinator of Children and Youth, observed that 'when peace talks happen, young people are rarely in the room – decisions are made by older political and military leaders.'²⁸ In 2022, the Bujumbura Declaration on Youth, Peace and

Security in Africa was adopted to complement the AU YPS and the UNSCR 2250, calling for the creation of NAPs on the YPS Agenda.²⁹ The EAC's Coordinator noted, 'Only Nigeria, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Burundi have adopted and published the NAPs in Africa.'³⁰

Youth are central to the realities of conflict dynamics, yet they remain on the sidelines of official peace processes

In Kenya, youth groups are involved in peacebuilding but face many challenges. For example, the Kenya Coalition on Youth, Peace and Security (KCYPS) mediates conflicts in al-Shabaab-affected Garissa and has trained over 500 youth mediators.³¹ Uganda's Bridges to Peace initiative counters extremism by engaging youth in economic programmes, reaching 1 000 young people in Wakiso.³² Tanzania Peace and Youth Development Centre (TPYDC) trains youth in conflict resolution and has resolved over 200 community disputes.³³ Never Again Rwanda promotes dialogue and engages 10 000 youth in peace education, while UN Children's Emergency Fund-supported projects in Burundi foster reconciliation among 5 000 community members.³⁴

These roles show youth's potential in peace and security, but lack of resources limits their full involvement.³⁵ There is a paradox where youth are central to the realities of conflict dynamics, yet they remain on the sidelines of official peace processes. Without targeted efforts to include youth in security governance, the region risks missing an important chance to use youth agency as a force for lasting peace.³⁶

Youth, peace and security at the regional level are anchored on continental, regional and national frameworks.³⁷ Despite these expansive policy frameworks, policymakers and youth often lack awareness of the YPS Agenda and youth's potential contributions.³⁸ Another barrier to youth in peace and security is their exclusion from peace talks and their limited participation in election observation missions and post-conflict reconstruction initiatives.³⁹

Alignment of youth policies with regional frameworks

Youth policies among East African countries show partial alignment with continental and international frameworks, such as the African Youth Charter and the UNSCR 2250, which emphasise participation, protection and prevention in peace processes.⁴⁰

Rwanda's policies closely integrate peace education and include youth representation in higher education, sports, art and cultural platforms and community and youth programmes.⁴¹ Kenya's policies focus on youth empowerment but have implementation challenges, with only a handful of planned youth programmes receiving funding.⁴² Uganda's policies support participation goals but do not have enough resources. Tanzania's recent policy updates prioritise youth participation, but lack enforcement, as indicated by the International Labour Organization.⁴³ Burundi is on track with the adoption of the NAPs in 2024.

The credibility of youth policies risks being eroded as long as implementation mechanisms remain weak and accountability structures are ineffective

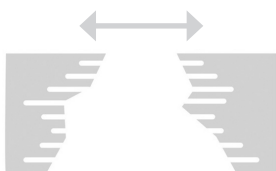
The EAC YPS Platform aims to harmonise policies but faces divergent national priorities and coordination challenges.⁴⁴ Strengthening alignment requires standardised definitions, shared monitoring systems and regional advocacy.⁴⁵ The credibility of youth policies risks being eroded as long as implementation mechanisms remain weak and accountability structures are ineffective.

Partnerships and stakeholder engagement

Effective youth participation in governance, peace and security requires strong collaboration among multiple stakeholders; however, East Africa's current partnerships are fragmented, with significant gaps undermining their effectiveness. National governments, youth networks, international organisations and civil society organisations (CSOs) are important stakeholders who all play different but related roles in promoting youth inclusion.

National governments vary in their commitment to youth. For example, Kenya supports economic empowerment through the Youth Enterprise Development Fund but overlooks political inclusion.⁴⁶ Uganda implements youth plans with only 15% of the budget.⁴⁷ Tanzania's 2024 policy is largely unimplemented, especially in rural areas.⁴⁸ Rwanda achieves 30% youth representation, while Burundi's political instability limits policy execution despite President Évariste Ndayishimiye's AU Youth Champion role.⁴⁹

The AU, UN and EAC provide frameworks and funding. The AU's Y4P Africa Programme trains 500 youth ambassadors. The UNSCR 2250 supports the NAPs. The EAC's YPS Platform coordinates regional efforts but has funding



EAST AFRICA'S CURRENT
YOUTH PARTNERSHIPS
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shortages.⁵⁰ These organisations facilitate dialogue but face challenges in meeting national priorities.⁵¹

Youth networks, including Tanzania's Youth Coalition and Kenya's KCYPS, amplify advocacy, mobilising thousands, but a lack of formal integration into policy processes limits their influence.⁵²

Enhancing youth engagement in East Africa's governance, peace and security is essential for regional stability

Collaboration happens on platforms such as the EAC's youth forums and AU's Y4P events. However, fragmentation continues because of overlapping mandates and competition for resources. For example, Kenya's government and CSOs often work separately, which reduces their impact. Gaps include insufficient CSO funding, weak government–CSO linkages and limited youth representation in policy forums. There is an opportunity in the YPS Fund. This fund supported 50 youth projects in 2023. There is also a need to create a multi-stakeholder platform that engages youth.

Strengthening partnerships requires clear roles, shared responsibility and increased investment. In Kenya, for example, KCYPS helps to ensure that all relevant stakeholders who are involved in preventing and combating violent extremism are brought together so as to coordinate responses.⁵³ Rwanda's approach

includes collaboration among the government, CSOs and the youth, making it a model for others. East African countries can adopt this as a best practice.

Conclusion

Enhancing youth engagement in East Africa's governance, peace and security is essential for regional stability and sustainable development. The region's young population has the potential to bring about change. However, structural, social and institutional barriers continue to limit their participation, which could lead to instability.

Youth are often excluded from governance due to high candidacy requirements and cultural traditions. Promising policies, such as Tanzania's amended National Youth Development Policy 2024, face challenges of underfunding and weak implementation, while Rwanda's 30% youth representation serves as a model, though centralised government reduces its effectiveness. In peace and security, youth play important roles, ranging from Kenya's KCYPS mediators to Rwanda's Never Again dialogue. However, underfunding limits their impact.

These challenges must be tackled to boost youth participation in governance, peace and security. This includes improving frameworks, enhancing governance, strengthening peacebuilding, integrating security actions, encouraging collaboration, using digital tools and promoting regional cooperation.

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