

POLICY BRIEF

Closing the Doors on Youth: Why Kenya's Institutions Must Open Up or Fall Behind

Civil Participation, SDG 16, and the Urgent Case for Youth-Responsive Governance in Kenya and East Africa

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KEY MESSAGES

1. Kenya has 75% of its population under the age of 35, yet young people remain largely absent from the governance structures that shape their future.
2. SDG 16 commitments on accountability, inclusion, and access to justice are being undermined by tokenistic youth engagement in VNRs, VLRs, and CIDPs.
3. Aligning Kenya's governance architecture to Vision 2030, AU Agenda 2063, and the post-2030 development agenda requires deliberate, structural integration of youth in decision-making.
4. Unless institutions change how they engage young people, Kenya risks repeating the same governance failures that have defined the last two decades.

1. Introduction

Kenya is a young country in every sense of the word. More than three quarters of the population is below the age of 35. This is not a statistic to file away in government reports. It is a daily reality that shapes the demand for jobs, the pressure on public services, the tempo of social change, and the expectations that citizens hold of their governments. Yet when you look at the rooms where decisions are made, where budgets are drawn up, where laws are debated, and where development plans are approved, young people are conspicuously absent.

This policy brief is written against that backdrop. It takes its cue from Sustainable Development Goal 16, which calls on countries to build peaceful, just, and inclusive societies and to create institutions that are effective, accountable, and open to all. SDG 16 is not a soft goal about aspiration. It is a concrete commitment about how governments must operate if development is to be real and lasting. Central to that commitment is the principle that no one should be left behind, and that those most affected by governance failures should have the loudest voice in fixing them.

This brief examines how civil participation, particularly youth participation, connects to the delivery of SDG 16 in Kenya. It traces how this connects to Vision 2030, the African Union Agenda 2063, County Integrated Development Plans, and Voluntary National Reviews. It argues that the failure to meaningfully include young people is not just a democratic deficit but a development risk, and it puts forward concrete steps that government, county authorities, civil society, and the international community can take to close that gap.

2. The Problem: Participation on Paper, Exclusion in Practice

Kenya has a remarkable record of ratifying good governance frameworks. The 2010 Constitution guarantees the right of citizens to participate in decision-making. The Public Finance Management Act requires public participation in budget processes. The County Governments Act mandates that CIDPs be developed through consultative processes that include all segments of society. On paper, the architecture for inclusive governance exists.

In practice, however, these provisions have delivered uneven results, particularly for young people. Public participation forums are often held with little prior notice and in locations and formats that are inaccessible to young people from rural areas, informal settlements, and marginalized communities. CIDPs are frequently drafted by consultants and presented at forums that function more as information-sharing events than genuine consultations. The result is that youth input, where it happens at all, tends to be ornamental rather than substantive.

What the Data Tells Us

Kenya's 2020 Voluntary National Review, submitted to the United Nations High Level Political Forum, acknowledged progress on multiple SDG fronts but fell short on detailing how youth were engaged in the review process itself. Civil society organizations monitoring the VNR process noted that outreach to youth-led organizations was minimal, that feedback from young people was aggregated without attribution, and that no dedicated youth annex was included in the final submission. This is not unique to Kenya. Across East Africa, VNRs have tended to be government-led processes with limited civil society, and even more limited youth, ownership.

Beyond VNRs, the same pattern plays out at the county level. VLRs, which are the localized equivalent of VNRs and offer a tremendous opportunity to capture place-specific experiences of development and justice, remain nascent in Kenya. Only a handful of counties have piloted VLR processes, and in those that have, youth engagement has not been a deliberate feature of the methodology.

This matters because SDG 16 is not just about peace and justice in the abstract. It is about who gets to define what justice looks like in their community, who gets to hold institutions accountable, and who gets to shape the rules by which their society operates. When young people are excluded from those conversations, SDG 16 is being violated at its most fundamental level.

3. How This Connects to Kenya's Development Frameworks

One of the strengths of Kenya's governance environment is that multiple frameworks exist which, if properly implemented, would create the conditions for meaningful youth participation. The challenge is that these frameworks have not been sufficiently integrated with each other, and implementation has been inconsistent. Below is an analysis of the four main frameworks relevant to this brief.

3.1 Vision 2030

Kenya's Vision 2030 positions the country as a middle-income nation offering a high quality of life to all citizens by 2030. The Vision's social pillar explicitly commits to a just and cohesive society, and the political pillar commits to a democratic political system that is issue-based, people-centered, results-oriented, and accountable. Youth are identified as a critical demographic in achieving this transformation.

However, the translation of these commitments into practice has been complicated by the fact that Vision 2030 was designed as a top-down planning framework. The Medium-Term Plans that operationalize Vision 2030 have tended to treat youth as a target population rather than as active architects of the vision. Youth development has been framed in terms of what government will do for young people, not what young people will be empowered to do for Kenya. This framing needs to shift, particularly as Kenya prepares for the post-2030 development agenda.

3.2 AU Agenda 2063

The African Union Agenda 2063 provides the continental long-term development blueprint under which Kenya's national plans must be situated. Agenda 2063's Aspiration 3 calls for an Africa of good governance, democracy, respect for human rights, justice, and the rule of law. Aspiration 6 calls for an Africa whose development is people-driven, relying on the potential of African people, especially its women and youth.

Kenya has formally aligned Vision 2030 and its Medium-Term Plans to Agenda 2063. However, the alignment has been largely rhetorical. Continental reporting mechanisms for Agenda 2063 have the same weaknesses as VNRs: they are state-led, infrequent, and not designed for bottom-up input from young citizens. The opportunity exists for Kenya to demonstrate continental leadership by developing a youth participation model that could serve as a template for other East African Community member states.

3.3 County Integrated Development Plans

CIDPs are arguably the most important planning instruments in Kenya's devolved governance system. They are the five-year blueprints through which county governments translate national and international commitments into local action. They determine how county budgets are allocated, what development projects are prioritized, and how services are delivered.

For young people, the CIDP process represents the most accessible entry point into formal governance participation. Unlike national-level processes, CIDPs are geographically proximate and are supposed to involve ward-level consultations. However, research by governance organizations working across Kenya's 47 counties consistently shows that youth participation in CIDP processes is weak. Ward development forums rarely have dedicated youth sessions. Youth council inputs, where they exist, are seldom systematically captured in the final CIDP documents. The third generation of CIDPs, which are currently being prepared in many counties, presents a fresh opportunity to fix this.

3.4 Voluntary National Reviews and Voluntary Local Reviews

Kenya has participated in the VNR process at the UN High Level Political Forum. VNRs are intended to be comprehensive stocktaking exercises that capture the perspectives of government, civil society, the private sector, and citizens in assessing progress toward the SDGs. They feed into global accountability mechanisms and are meant to drive domestic course correction.

The weakness of VNRs, as currently practiced in Kenya, is that they are predominantly government-authored documents. Civil society and youth organizations are consulted, but the degree to which their inputs actually shape the final report is variable and often unclear. There is no published methodology for how VNR inputs are gathered, weighted, and incorporated. Kenya's next VNR should be designed as a genuinely multi-stakeholder process, with youth as co-authors rather than as a demographic category to be referenced.

VLRs offer even more potential because they bring the SDG accountability framework down to the subnational level, where most citizens actually experience governance. Several Kenyan counties, including Kisumu and Makueni, have taken early steps toward VLRs. These pilots should be documented, evaluated, and scaled, with youth engagement built into the VLR methodology from the outset.

4. The State of SDG 16 in Kenya: Where We Are and Why It Matters

SDG 16 has 12 specific targets covering everything from reducing violence and ending abuse of children, to building effective institutions, ensuring access to justice, and guaranteeing inclusive and participatory decision-making. For the purposes of this brief, three targets are particularly relevant to the discussion of civil participation and youth.

Target 16.6: Effective, Accountable and Transparent Institutions

- Kenya scores inconsistently on institutional transparency. The Access to Information Act (2016) has improved the legal framework but enforcement is weak and uptake among citizens, particularly young people, is low.
- County assemblies, which are the closest legislative bodies to citizens, have struggled to build genuine oversight capacity.
- Public accounts committees exist but rarely generate public interest or youth engagement.

Target 16.7: Inclusive, Participatory and Representative Decision-Making

- Kenya has a constitutional two-thirds gender rule that has not been fully implemented even after more than a decade.
- Youth representation in county assemblies has improved marginally but remains well below proportional levels.
- The National Youth Council, which is supposed to channel youth voices to government, is underfunded and has limited political influence.

Target 16.10: Public Access to Information and Protection of Fundamental Freedoms

The digital divide means that young people in rural Kenya face structural barriers to accessing government information, even where that information is technically public. Mobile penetration is high, but data costs remain prohibitive for many young people, and government platforms are frequently not mobile-optimized.

Civic space in Kenya has also come under pressure. Civil society organizations working on governance and accountability have reported increased bureaucratic obstacles, particularly around registration and public assembly. Young activists and youth-led organizations have been among the most affected.

5. The Barriers Young People Face

Understanding why youth participation in governance processes remains weak requires an honest look at the structural, institutional, and social barriers that young people encounter. These are not simply matters of attitude or capacity on the part of young people. They are systemic failures that need systemic responses.

5.1 Structural and Institutional Barriers

- Governance processes are often scheduled, designed, and communicated in ways that assume participants have flexible work schedules, reliable transport, and prior familiarity with government procedures. Most young Kenyans, particularly those in the informal economy, have none of these.
- There are no statutory requirements in Kenya that mandate youth-specific consultation sessions in CIDP or VNR processes. Youth participation is therefore dependent on the goodwill of individual county officials, which produces wildly inconsistent outcomes across counties.
- Feedback loops are almost entirely absent. Young people who participate in public forums have no way of knowing whether their input was considered, recorded, or acted upon. This erodes trust and discourages repeat participation.
- Youth-led organizations are frequently not registered, lack bank accounts, or do not meet the administrative requirements to be included in formal multi-stakeholder processes. The registration requirements for civil society organizations are burdensome and poorly understood by young community organizers.

5.2 Political and Social Barriers

- In many parts of Kenya, governance participation is still understood through the lens of ethnicity and patronage politics. Young people who try to engage on issues-based terms often find themselves marginalized by established political networks that view independent youth voices as threats rather than assets.
- Young women face compounded barriers that combine age-related exclusion with gender-based discrimination. In mixed forums, young women are frequently talked over, assigned supporting roles, and expected to represent gender issues rather than to participate as full governance actors.
- Young people from pastoralist communities, from island communities around Lake Victoria and Lake Turkana, and from hard-to-reach border areas face geographic and economic barriers that effectively exclude them from any governance participation, regardless of their will to engage.

5.3 Capacity and Information Barriers

- Many young people do not know that processes like VNRs and CIDPs exist, let alone how to engage with them. Civic education in Kenyan schools does not cover SDGs, and the communications budgets of county governments rarely reach young people through the channels they actually use.
- When young people do engage, they often lack the technical vocabulary to engage effectively in planning and budgeting discussions. This is a solvable problem, but it requires investment in civic literacy programs that go beyond general awareness campaigns.

6. What Needs to Change: Recommendations

The recommendations in this section are organized around four actors: the national government, county governments, civil society and youth organizations, and development partners. They are designed to be practical, affordable, and achievable within the current governance architecture. They are also designed to be mutually reinforcing, recognizing that the problem of youth exclusion cannot be solved by any single actor.

6.1 National Government

Immediate Actions (Within 12 Months)

- Amend the VNR process guidelines to require a dedicated youth consultation strand, with a minimum of 30% youth participation in national-level SDG review forums.
- Establish a Youth SDG Advisory Panel that contributes directly to Kenya's next VNR submission, with youth members having co-authorship recognition.
- Fund the National Youth Council adequately to allow it to coordinate youth inputs into SDG processes at both national and county levels.
- Publish a plain-language youth guide to VNRs and CIDPs and distribute it through university student unions, secondary school leadership clubs, and youth social media channels.

Medium-Term Actions (12 to 36 Months)

Enact a Youth Participation in Governance Act or an equivalent statutory instrument that mandates minimum youth representation standards in all county-level planning processes, including CIDPs and county budget forums. Link Vision 2030's political pillar indicators to youth participation metrics, and publish annual progress reports that track not just the number of youth consulted but the degree to which their inputs shaped final planning documents. Review the registration and compliance requirements for civil society organizations with a view to creating a simplified, affordable registration pathway for youth-led community groups.

6.2 County Governments

- Dedicate at least two days of each CIDP public participation cycle specifically to youth-focused consultations, using formats that young people prefer, including community dialogues, online submissions, and ward-level youth forums.
- Create youth liaison positions within county planning departments, funded through the County Development Fund, to ensure that youth inputs are properly captured, documented, and traceable in final CIDP documents.

- Lead the way on VLRs. Counties like Kisumu and Makueni that have piloted VLR processes should publish their methodologies and share them with peer counties, with explicit guidance on how youth engagement was designed and what worked.
- Partner with universities, technical and vocational training institutions, and student unions within each county to create structured pipelines for youth participation in county governance.
- Make CIDP progress reports publicly available in accessible formats on county websites, and hold at least one annual public forum specifically for young people to review progress and provide feedback.

6.3 Civil Society and Youth Organizations

- Build a coordinated East Africa youth civil society coalition specifically focused on SDG 16 and governance accountability, modeled on successful coalitions in the climate and health sectors. This coalition should have a joint advocacy position that feeds into EAC governance forums and the AU Agenda 2063 review processes.
- Develop and deliver a Youth Civic Literacy curriculum that covers SDGs, VNRs, CIDPs, and rights-based civic engagement. This should be piloted in at least five counties by the end of 2026, with funding sought from development partners and corporate social responsibility programs.
- Document and publish youth experiences of exclusion from governance processes in Kenya, using accessible formats such as short films, podcasts, and social media content. Evidence-based advocacy is more powerful than position papers alone.
- Mentor and build the capacity of youth-led organizations to meet the administrative requirements for inclusion in formal multi-stakeholder processes, including registration, financial management, and report writing.

6.4 Development Partners and the International Community

- Require youth participation plans as a condition of funding for governance programs in Kenya and East Africa. Programs that cannot demonstrate meaningful youth engagement should face funding consequences.
- Fund longitudinal research on the impact of youth participation in governance processes on development outcomes. The evidence base for the development returns of youth inclusion remains thin and needs to be built.
- Support the design and rollout of a regional East African VLR framework under the East African Community governance architecture, with a common methodology that includes youth participation standards.
- Champion Kenya's leadership on youth-responsive governance within the UN High Level Political Forum and encourage other African countries to learn from Kenya's experience, both the good and the bad.

7. The East Africa Dimension

Kenya does not stand alone. The governance challenges described in this brief are shared, in varying degrees, by all East African Community member states: Uganda, Tanzania, Rwanda, Burundi, South Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Somalia. Youth exclusion from governance is a regional phenomenon, not a national aberration.

This creates an opportunity for regional learning and coordination that has not been sufficiently exploited. The East African Community has a governance framework and conducts periodic peer reviews of member states. However, youth participation in these processes is even weaker than at the national level. A dedicated East Africa Youth Governance Platform, convened under the EAC's auspices and linked to AU Agenda 2063 monitoring mechanisms, could serve as a powerful amplifier for youth voices across the region.

The model advocated in this brief, where youth are co-authors of VNRs, co-designers of CIDPs, and active participants in accountability processes, is a model that works in diverse contexts. It is not specific to Kenya's geography or political system. It is grounded in the universal principles of SDG 16 and the shared continental commitments of Agenda 2063. Kenya, with its comparatively strong civil society, its devolved governance architecture, and its history of youth-led social movements, is well-placed to lead this agenda in the region.

8. The Post-2030 Development Agenda

The SDGs expire in 2030. With four years remaining, discussions about the architecture of the post-2030 development agenda are already underway. Kenya's position in those discussions will be shaped, in part, by its track record on the current SDGs, including SDG 16.

There is a genuine risk that the governance and institutional commitments of SDG 16 will be diluted in the post-2030 framework if the countries that are supposed to be implementing them cannot demonstrate that they have tried. Kenya needs to enter the post-2030 negotiations as a country that has genuinely invested in civil participation, youth inclusion, and institutional accountability. That requires action now, not in 2029.

For young people specifically, the post-2030 agenda must be designed with them, not for them. The generation that will live with the consequences of whatever framework is agreed in 2030 is currently between 10 and 25 years old. They should have a structural voice in the negotiations, and Kenya should advocate for that at the UN level while also creating the domestic conditions for meaningful youth engagement in the national consultations that will feed into those negotiations.

9. Conclusion

SDG 16 is a promise. It is a promise that by 2030, the world's institutions will be more peaceful, more just, and more open than they were in 2015. For that promise to mean anything in Kenya, it has to mean something to the 35-year-old watching a county budget passed without her input, to the 22-year-old who showed up to a CIDP forum and was told to wait outside, to the 19-year-old who tried to register a youth organization and was buried in paperwork.

Kenya has the frameworks. It has the constitutional architecture, the devolved governance structures, and the civil society energy to deliver on SDG 16. What it lacks is the consistent political will to translate frameworks into practice, and the institutional discipline to track progress and course-correct when things go wrong.

This brief argues that youth participation is not a side issue in this conversation. It is the test case. If Kenya can build governance institutions that are genuinely open to young people, it will have built institutions that are open to everyone. And that is what SDG 16 has always been about.

References and Key Resources

The following documents informed the analysis in this brief and are recommended for further reading:

- Kenya Voluntary National Review 2020, Government of Kenya, State Department for Planning.
- Kenya Vision 2030 Medium Term Plan III (2018-2022) and associated sector plans.
- African Union Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want, First Ten-Year Implementation Plan.
- SDG 16 Progress Report 2023, United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs.
- Constitution of Kenya 2010, Articles 10, 35, 69, 118, 174, and 196 on citizen participation and devolution.
- County Governments Act, 2012, Part VII on public participation.
- Access to Information Act, 2016.
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- The Youth Charter for Kenya, Kenya National Youth Council, 2022.
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About the Author

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