



“We are just cheerleaders”: Youth's views on their participation in international forest-related decision-making fora



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ABSTRACT

The failure of the multilateral processes to deliver comprehensive treaties has illuminated the importance of participatory and deliberative processes in global forest policy. There has been scholarly work on the role of different actors in global forest policy fora, including the roles of: environmental non-government organizations, private sector, public administrations, and scientific communities. However, literature search suggests studies on the participation of the youth groups are almost non-existent. Our research aimed to assess how youth delegates perceive their participation in the international forest-related conferences, and to identify areas that they think can improve their engagement in the international forest-related fora. We surveyed the youth participants of three international forest-related decision-making processes and fora: United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), United Nations Forum on Forests (UNFF), and Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD). Although they felt their participation was valued, a large majority of them suggested that the opportunities to express their opinions and ideas remain limited. More importantly, they were afraid that their views and ideas on how to deal with the current forest challenges were not taken into consideration. They further argued that the forest-related international conferences should provide more opportunities for youth to facilitate engagement with other groups, to share ideas, wisdom and solutions.

1. Introduction

Ever since the 1987 *Our Common Future* report, and subsequently the 1992 Rio Summit, complex problems of forest loss and environmental deterioration have become core political agendas of decision making processes at the global level (Singer and Giessen, 2017). Previously, forest and environment issues were being dealt by principally state actors in both multilateral and domestic processes. However, the failure of the multilateral processes in producing comprehensive treaties (see Humphreys, 2005; Dimitrov, 2005) has illuminated legitimacy deficits (Haas, 2004) and the importance of participatory and deliberative procedures in global forest policy making (Stevenson and Dryzek, 2012). Capistrano et al. (2007) argue that the pressing forest-related problems and the emerging policy challenges require multi-stakeholder coordination, partnerships and collaboration.

A broad range of actors, both public and private, have cooperated and/or competed in defining global forest agenda over the past two decades (McDermott et al., 2010). They include nation-states, international non-government organizations (NGOs), the corporate sector, and expert groups (O'Neill, 2009). A body of scholarly work has examined

the role of the different actors: environmental NGOs, in both multilateral processes (e.g. Humphreys, 2004; Giessen, 2008; O'Neill, 2009) and non-state processes, notably forest certification (e.g. Cashore et al., 2004; Orsini, 2013), firms and corporates (Bled, 2009), and nation-states and public administrations (Dimitrov, 2005; Giessen et al., 2014), and scientific communities (Bäckstrand, 2003; Giessen, 2008; Larigauderie and Mooney, 2010). However, a literature search reveals almost no studies of youth participation in global forest policy processes; we are keen on filling this research gap. This paper aims to assess how youth delegates perceive their participation in the international forest-related processes, and to identify areas that they think can improve their engagement in the international forest-related fora.

‘Youth’ is broadly defined by the United Nations as those persons between the ages of 15 and 24 years (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2017). The population of the age cohort in 2015 was 1.2 billion, accounting for one out of every six people worldwide (UN-DESA, 2015). Incorporating youth's voice in decision-making processes has become a norm in global development (Bersaglio et al., 2015). Ensuring that the voices of youth are heard is also embedded in the concept of sustainable development, which

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emphasises the ability of “future generations” to meet their needs (World Commission on Environment and Development/WCED, 1987). It is increasingly thought that youth could act as meaningful contributor to global deliberations and agent of change (Ward and Parker, 2013; Richards-Schuster and Pritzker, 2015). They possess intrinsic strengths of creativity and energy to mobilize support (Wong et al., 2010).

The importance of involving youth in the global deliberation was first brought to the table during the Rio Summit. Agenda 21 (Chapters 11 and 25) specifically mentions that their inclusion in environment and development decision-making and in the program implementation is regarded as one of the important keys to ensure a rational and holistic approach to the sustainable and environmentally sound development of forests and the environment (United Nations, 1992). Since the Rio Summit, the UN has formalized youth as one of the Major Groups channeling participation in activities within its system (United Nations, 1992). Youth delegates have been invited to participate in three global forest- and environment-related policy processes, namely: the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), and the United Nations Forum on Forests (UNFF).

With regard to climate change negotiations, youth have been participating in the process of UNFCCC since 1999 in the Conference of the Parties (COP) 5 held in Bonn. In 2009, the UNFCCC secretariat granted a provisional constituency status to the youth non-governmental organization/YOUNGO (Youth Climate, 2014). Similarly, UNFF recognized youth as one of its major groups in Major Group (MG) Children and Youth, which is represented by the International Forestry Students' Association (IFSA). In CBD, the youth network called the Global Youth Biodiversity Network (GYBN) has been participating the conference since 2012. Nonetheless, there might be underlying and practical barriers for youth to participate in decision making processes at the international level; it is indicated that the participatory mechanisms for youth frequently may not fully allow them to contribute meaningfully in the processes (United Nations, 2010).

2. Theoretical considerations: Democratic deliberation for youth

Participation -often synonymised with representation, involvement and recently deliberation (Innes and Booher, 2004)- has become a norm in decision making over the approaches and instruments for conservation and management of forests and environment. The main motivation for promoting participation in the decision making processes is connected to the perceived ineffectiveness of past methods (Abelson et al., 2003). The general idea is that the greater public involvement, the better decisions and solutions. The new social movement representing diverse values, needs and perceptions challenge the legitimacy of hierarchical and centralized decisions (Giessen, 2008). More generally, the concept of participation has been increasingly connected to democratic governance (Gaventa, 2003). It relates to legitimacy and sustainability of the decisions made for societal problems and challenges that need solutions. Dryzek (2001: 651) points out that “outcomes are legitimate to the extent they receive reflective assent through participation in authentic deliberation by all those subject to the decision in question”. This is particularly crucial for decisions over forests and environment, which increasingly characterised by a plurality of perspectives and values (Krott, 2005; Prabowo et al., 2017; Setiawan et al., 2016; Maryudi and Krott, 2012; Maryudi and Sahide, 2017).

Participation is embedded in governance, which cannot be associated with governments solely; instead the political decisions were made by involving networks of actors including wider civil societies. Parkins and Mitchell (2005) point out that deliberative democratic theory often emphasises the process itself. Participation relates not only to representation, but also empowerment of the actors involved. This emancipatory participation stresses that decision making processes ensure the voices of the less privileged groups being heard. In this way,

all participants in decision making processes are engaged in “mutual communication and exchange of ideas, assessments and evaluations [to] improve the final decisions” (Renn and Schweizer, 2009: 175). They are provided with fair opportunities to express their opinions; no particular interests dominate the deliberation processes (Renn and Schweizer, 2009).

Thus, this emancipatory participation should be seen at the broader context of existing socio-political power structure. Decision making procedures for particular societal problems are often adult-biased (Wong et al., 2010). As such, there is a youth participation movement (Checkoway and Gutierrez, 2006) demanding a voice in today's decisions (Ginwright and James, 2002; Checkoway, 2011; Nikolayenko, 2012). Lentin and Ohana (2008) argue that youth participation is focused on “young people being represented in political process and decision making”. There is a range of requirements needed to support a genuine participation: legal frameworks; information provision; cultural and attitudinal change among adults and decision-makers; clear and supportive mechanisms, service or organizational processes; and opportunity for complaints (Percy-Smith and Thomas, 2010).

3. Research methods

3.1. Research approach

We surveyed the views of the participants of three international forest-related decision-making processes and fora: UNFCCC, CBD, and UNFF. We conducted a survey using internet-based questionnaire between 10 September and 25 October 2016. This technique was employed because the target of research participants spread from all around the world (Africa, America, Asia-Pacific, and Europe). In addition, it was much cheaper and faster than either face-to-face or telephone interviews. Furthermore, the internet-based approach was used to facilitate honest answers. The research participants were young people who have attended UNFCCC, CBD, and UNFF conferences/meetings. To implement this approach, we first needed their contact. To date, no data are available on the number of young people attended the three fora. The first author has some contacts from her participation in some of the aforementioned international fora. Besides contacting each delegate personally, we also circulated questionnaires through the mailing list of YOUNGO, GYBN and IFSA. We also contacted the focal points of the respective youth groups (YOUNGO, GYBN, and IFSA) to encourage the former delegates of the related conferences to respond. To boost the response rate, we sought constructive inputs by making questions that elaborated their thoughts and assured the anonymity. We also sent three reminders for the youth participants who had not filled the survey: three days before deadline, on the deadline, and three days after deadline.

3.2. Analytical frameworks and operationalisation

We assessed the views of youth on their participation in international decision-making fora. We specifically explored their views on four aspects: inclusivity, transparency, interactivity, and continuity (Bickerstaff et al., 2002). Based on the requirements for a genuine youth participation proposed by Percy-Smith and Thomas (2010), we defined the aspects and further detailed them into more operationalized indicators and statements about their participation in the conferences (Table 1). Each of the operationalized indicators was elaborated into five Likert response scale questions. It is the type of question that asks for opinion using 1-to-5 scale, in which: 1 denotes *Strongly Disagree*, 2 denotes *Disagree*, 3 denotes *Neutral*, 4 denotes *Agree*, and 5 denotes *Strongly Agree*.

We classified the forum participants into two groups: experts and non-experts. The experts were those who have been or are now serving as the coordinators of YOUNGO (UNFCCC Focal Point for Youth), GYBN (CBD Focal Point for Major Group Children and Youth), and IFSA

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