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Sustainable Development through Youth Innovation: A Case for Scientific Collaboration in Addressing Climate Challenges in West Africa

Thomas Sheku Marah
Nusa Putra University Sukabumi, Indonesia, thomas.sheku_hk23@nusaputra.ac.id
Corresponding author, e-mail: thomas.sheku_hk23@nusaputra.ac.id

Abstract—West Africa faces escalating climate challenges that threaten socio-economic stability and ecological balance. Traditional mitigation strategies have largely excluded the youth, despite their increasing engagement and innovative capacities. This study explores the potential of youth-led climate initiatives in Sierra Leone, Ghana, and Nigeria, emphasizing the role of scientific collaboration in enhancing their impact. Using a qualitative approach with secondary data from 2020–2024, the research applies thematic analysis framed by the Innovation Ecosystem Model and the co-creation concept within the SDG framework (SDG 13 and SDG 17). Findings show that youth innovations—such as renewable energy projects, climate-smart agriculture, and digital tools—gain greater legitimacy, scale, and policy relevance when connected with academic and institutional partners. However, barriers persist, including limited funding, weak infrastructure, and marginalization in formal governance. The study recommends institutionalizing youth-science partnerships, establishing climate innovation grants, integrating youth in national adaptation plans, enhancing digital infrastructure, and supporting gender-responsive innovation. Strengthening these frameworks is vital to harnessing West Africa's demographic potential and ensuring sustainable, climate-resilient development.

Keywords: Youth Innovation, Scientific Collaboration, Climate Resilience, Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), West Africa.

1. Introduction

Climate change continues to be a fundamental challenge, particularly to developing regions of the globe such as West Africa. It has made the region susceptible to deforestation, natural disasters, and socio-economic instability [1]. In addition, these elements have put agriculture, water resources, and health under severe strain, compromising development goals. Therefore, the climate phenomenon in West Africa is more a socio-economic concern than just an environmental problem, requiring prompt action through innovative and socio-economically inclusive approaches.

Youth populations in West Africa have emerged as a beacon of hope for the region, which has a large and growing number of young people preparing to enter the workforce. Recently, there has been increasing interest in development and a willingness among youth to play an active role in sustainable development. Among the youth of West Africa, a new demographic cohort is emerging that acts as an asset to boost innovative capacities [2]. There have been several youth-led initiatives that have succeeded throughout the region, ranging from the adoption of renewable energy and agriculture to climate change education and campaigning. These activities indicate a move away from conventional development practices

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towards more participatory development approaches. Where such opportunities exist, youth climate innovations seldom get to the level of systemic impact and scale because of resource limitations, incremental action, and inappropriate integration into mainstream scientific and policy frameworks [3]. Such inappropriateness of integration necessitates the need for creating effective scientific networking platforms that link young innovators to academia, governments, NGOs, and global actors. Such collaboration strengthens information sharing and capacity building, along with the political legitimacy of climate governance among the youth.

Research has been conducted on youth activism, innovation, and development advocacy, as well as on scientific collaboration for sustainable development [4], [5]. However, there is little documented evidence of the synergistic application of these two concepts in relation to West Africa. Very few studies have strategically examined how collaborative networks can equip young people to overcome challenges in achieving climate resilience.

This paper attempts to address the knowledge gap concerning youth-led innovation and scientific collaboration on climate issues in West Africa. It aims to analyze the enabling factors and constraints of such processes and also propose strategies for improving outcomes. The analysis is situated in the framework of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 13 (Climate Action) and SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals), in order to highlight the interlinkages between innovation, collaboration, and sustainability.

In prioritizing the youths as active change agents, the study challenges the prevailing narrative that the role of young people in climate governance remains passive. What is being advocated for here is to engage the West African youths in collective, proactive, innovative, and inclusive measures necessary in developing sustainable and resilient societies.

2. Method

The purpose of this study is to capture the relationship between youth innovation and scientific collaboration toward developing climate solutions in West Africa, using a qualitative research approach. The main focus is “A Case Study Analysis of Youth-led Climate Initiatives in Sierra Leone, Ghana, and Nigeria,” as these countries are highly participatory and representative of the region. This research is informed by the systematic study of a variety of secondary sources, which include academic journals, government and NGO literature, project assessments, and climate action databases from 2020 to 2024. Major databases, including Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, and institutional publications from UNDP, World Bank, and the African Union, were accessed.

In relation to innovation processes, collaborative frameworks, as well as obstacles and enabling factors that youth-led initiatives encounter, the analyzed data was thematically coded according to achievement sustenance, providing models for pattern recognition for sustainable outcomes relating to project impact and enabling outcome sustainment. The analysis was framed around the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 13 climate action initiatives and SDG 17 partnerships), supporting a goal-oriented exploration of youth innovation and scientific collaboration. Relevant visual components, such as figures and tables, were included in the report to highlight major findings. All information and data used were verified for accuracy. Only materials that were peer-reviewed or endorsed by relevant institutions were used. The aim of the study was not to collect primary data but rather to integrate already available literature and identify existing gaps within it.

Analytical Framework and Theoretical Basis

The guiding theory of this research adapts the innovation ecosystem model, which sees innovation as a product of multifaceted interactions involving people, institutions, and networks within a particular

milieu. This model works best for understanding the phenomena and processes around youth innovation in West Africa, where many actors—including grassroots organizations and international research institutions—are involved at different levels toward achieving sustainability.

This analytical scaffold is further informed by the concept of co-creation in sustainability science, which refers to the collaborative creation of knowledge and its applications by bringing together scientists, local people, and policymakers. This concept helps explain how scientific actors and youth innovators work collaboratively to make their innovations more relevant and useful.

The criteria for evaluation are informed by the framework of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 13 (Climate Action) and SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals). This focus captures the relevance of the study to well-known development questions and policy conversations.

The research process is illustrated in Figure 1, which outlines each step from problem identification to the conclusion and recommendation phases.

Summary of the Research Flowchart

The flowchart describes the orderly process of this study, which starts with the pinpointing of the main problem—West African climate problems and the marginalization of youths. It proceeds to a systematic literature review, formulation of research questions, and selection of countries as case studies (Sierra Leone, Ghana, and Nigeria). Data collection from secondary sources from 2020–2024 is followed by thematic analysis for obtaining major patterns. The research employs theoretical frameworks such as the Innovation Ecosystem Model and co-creation concepts, combined with SDGs 13 and 17. Dialogue and findings center around the importance of cooperation in increasing the effectiveness of youth action towards climate action, providing policy suggestions for empowering youth and improving scientific collaborations.

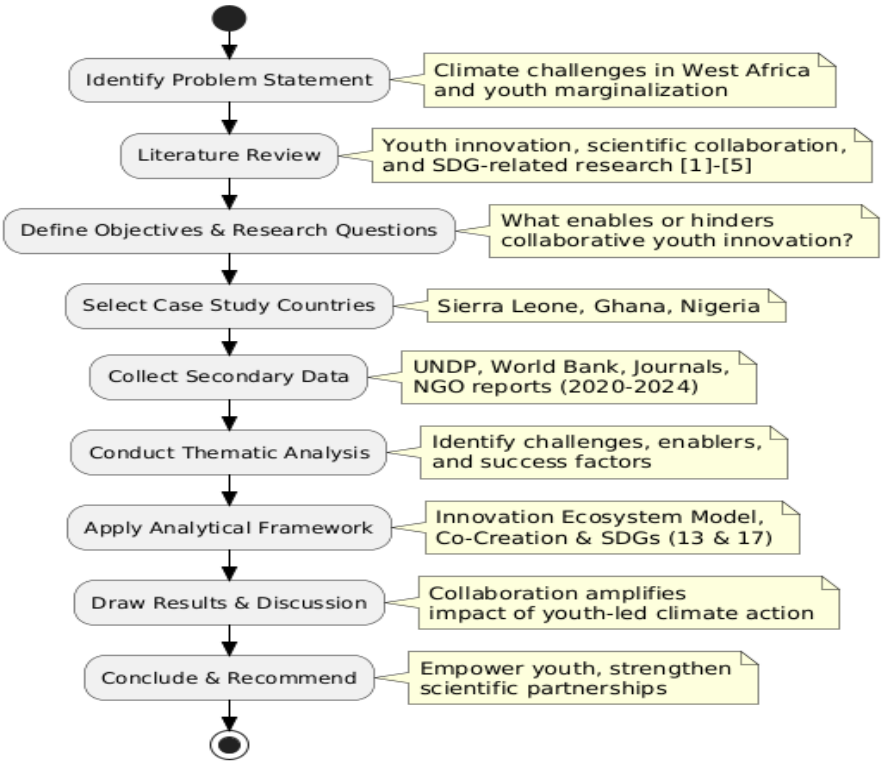

Figure 1. Research Flow of the Study

3. Results and Discussion

The effect of West African youth-led innovation on climate change has been mitigated significantly due to community-based and adaptable approaches. From Sierra Leone, Ghana, and Nigeria, dozens of initiatives have sprung up, including mobile applications to improve climate literacy in underserved communities, reforestation programs to reverse desertification, and solar-powered irrigation systems to alleviate drought-associated agricultural losses [6], [7], [8].

These innovations do not take place in a vacuum. They often result from cooperation with other local stakeholders like universities, NGOs, and sometimes even international organizations. Take Sierra Leone as an example: a youth-led startup joined forces with Njala University and UNDP to implement a solar microgrid pilot project in a remote village. This significantly improved the village's energy autonomy and reduced the community's reliance on firewood and kerosene [9]. Comparable initiatives in Ghana and Nigeria have seamlessly integrated access to scientific data and technical information to guide youth-led agritech initiatives [10], [11].

The integration of scientific collaboration, especially when facilitated by memoranda of understanding or open research partnerships, results in enhanced resource sharing and knowledge co-production. Such collaboration improves technical capabilities and increases a stakeholder's influence in policymaking. Youth projects that are affiliated with academic institutions or are empirically researched are more likely to be incorporated into national adaptation frameworks or secure international funding [12], [13].

Despite these benefits, there is a considerable challenge in scaling up and sustaining youth-driven innovations. One of the main issues is that most youth innovators are located in under-resourced environments with little to no access to a research library, laboratory, or even basic digital technology [14]. In addition, West African countries suffer from fragmented policies and strategies that do not include any youth engagement campaigns focused on climate innovation, which makes it hard to convert the concepts into formal climate action plans [15]. Lastly, the lack of continuous structured guidance and scientific endorsement hinders the credibility of grassroots efforts and their presence in national or international conversations [16].

There are also socio-cultural factors that contribute. Most youths in rural communities do not have a socio-cultural context in which they are regarded as leaders or repositories of knowledge and, therefore, valid scientifically, which undermines the legitimacy of initiatives. Moreover, gender roles compound the problem by subjecting young women innovators to even greater climate and structural inequality burdens [17], [18].

Regardless of these limitations, some examples stand out where collaborative work in science has enhanced impact. The African Centre for Technology Studies (ACTS) revealed that regional research hubs supporting youth-led climate initiatives had a 60% greater rate of policy integration compared to youth-led climate initiatives independent from regional research hubs [19]. Moreover, the African Union's Climate Youth Envoy Program and the World Bank's Youth Innovation Labs demonstrate that these frameworks of structured support greatly enhance the impact and sustainability of grassroots initiatives [20], [21].

The adoption of digital tools within the frameworks of collaboration has, however, been transformative. Modern technologies, such as open-access climate data portals, mobile apps for community-based monitoring, and global virtual innovation hubs, allow youth innovators in Africa to link with researchers worldwide in real-time, greatly diminishing knowledge gaps and enabling more equitable participatory design [22], [23]. This reflects the socio-ecological co-creation principle of sustainability sciences, which stresses equity in generating knowledge, requiring all relevant partners [24].

Results from this research indicate that the participation of youth in climate governance activities at various levels not only improves their skills but also their socio-political agency. With the right local and scientific mentorship, the youths can perform their roles as sustainable development transformative agents through nurturing inclusive innovation ecosystems. Additionally, the containment of these innovations within international arrangements such as the Sustainable Development Goals, especially — SDG 13 (Climate Action) and SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals) — gives them contextual as well as scalable relevance [25].

3. Conclusion

The strength of scientific collaboration with innovative approaches from the youth is essential in addressing the complex climate problems of West Africa. The evidence from various case studies shows that the youth-led initiatives that are catalyzed through scientific collaborations offer sustainable, scalable, and contextually tailored approaches that significantly bolster community resilience as well as environmental sustainability.

The development of platforms facilitating interconnection between youth innovators and research institutions, governments, NGOs, and international agencies fosters the easy exchange of knowledge, capacity building, and grassroots innovation policy and development agenda mainstreaming. These partnerships not only boost the technical feasibility of youth projects but also raise their profile and impact at local and international levels.

Nonetheless, there are ongoing setbacks, including lack of funds, infrastructural voids, socio-political limitations, and marginalization of youth voices in official decision-making forums. These limitations can be overcome through overall strategic measures that institutionalize youth involvement, promote access to scientific data and funding opportunities, and design inclusive ecosystems that give agency to young innovators.

Aligning young people's climate action with the Sustainable Development Goals, in particular SDG 13 (Climate Action) and SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals), is essential to making such action meaningfully contribute to national and international sustainability objectives. Empowering West African youths as agents of change supports not just environmental protection but also broad-based socio-economic development and sound governance frameworks.

Lastly, the advancement of synergy between youth innovation and scientific collaboration presents a plausible and attractive path toward the creation of resilient and sustainable West African societies. Future development policies and programs must place the utmost emphasis on these collaborative approaches to actualize the region's demographic bulge potential in countering climate change and ensuring long-term sustainability.

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