

Partner's Remarks — Youth Representative

2025 Annual National SDGs Multi-Stakeholders Conference, Mombasa

The Principal Secretary, Dr. Bonface Makokha, Your Excellencies, distinguished guests, partners, colleagues, and fellow young people...
Good morning.

My name is Okanda Stephen Eugene, and I stand here honored to speak on behalf of Kenya's youth — the innovators, organizers, builders, dreamers, and doers who continue to push this nation forward in the Race to 2030.

As Nelson Mandela once said, "It always seems impossible until it is done."

Today, we gather here in Mombasa under the theme: "Race to 2030: Partnerships and Collaboration, and Innovative Financing." For the youth, this is not just a theme — it is a call to action. Our future won't be built someday; it will be built by the decisions we make now.

APPRECIATION & CONTEXT

Allow me to appreciate all institutions present today — government, UN agencies, county leaders, development partners, private sector actors, civil society, and academia.

But above all, I appreciate the youth, because every milestone we celebrate today has a young person behind it — planning, creating, mobilizing, imagining, and believing.

YOUTH PARTICIPATION IN 2025 — OUR COLLECTIVE FOOTPRINT

This year, young people have shown up boldly in national, regional, and global spaces — taking their rightful place in decision-making rooms.

- Africa Regional Forum on Sustainable Development (ARFSD): Youth raised issues on climate justice financing, food systems, and grassroots innovations.
- High-Level Political Forum (HLPF): Youth contributed to global conversations on SDG acceleration and inclusion.

- United Nations General Assembly (UNGA 2025): Youth pushed for fair financing, improved participation, disability inclusion, and action on the Pact for the Future.

Back home:

- SDGs Flag Day & #RaceTo2030 Launch — 25 September 2025: Youth mobilized the nation toward SDG awareness and action.
- National Policy & Governance Dialogue — 29 October 2025: Youth engaged in conversations on the Youth Bill, AI Strategy, Disability Act, and Pact for the Future.
- Youth Pre-Conference 2025 — Nairobi: Over 150 youth shaped declarations on climate, care, innovation, and governance.

KEY YOUTH DECLARATIONS (With Clear Meaning)

Climate Action (SDG 13):

- Sustainable land use — using land wisely so it remains productive.
- Green mobility — transport that reduces pollution.
- Climate education — ensuring youth understand climate solutions.

Care & Gender (SDG 5):

- Recognizing unpaid care — valuing the work done at home.
- Care-tech — technology that makes caregiving easier.
- Gender equality — equal rights and opportunities for all.

Innovation (SDGs 4, 8, 9):

- Digital literacy — ability to use digital tools.
- AI skills — preparing youth for future jobs.
- Entrepreneurship support — helping youth start and grow businesses.

Governance (SDG 16):

- Youth inclusion — having youth at decision tables.
- Accountability — ensuring leaders keep promises.
- 'Nothing for us without us' — decisions must include youth.

LESSONS FROM THE YOUTH

1. Youth capacity is not the problem — access is.

Kenya is a *youth-majority nation*, with **over 75% of the population under 35**. This demographic dividend should be our greatest economic advantage — a source of innovation, productivity, and national competitiveness.

But the reality is this:

The agitation of the young people in the recent past has sent a clear and bold message: We are wasting our demographic dividend by locking young people out of opportunities.

Young people have ideas, energy, creativity, and solutions — but:

- **A huge percentage lack access** to financing, digital tools, mentorship, networks, and decision-making platforms.
- 70% youth are **in rural areas**, away from policy tables and innovation hubs.
- The majority of young people work in the **informal sector**, where opportunities are unstable and poorly supported.
- Digital inequalities continue to exclude youth who lack reliable internet or devices.

Kenya's youth potential is not in question.

What is in question is whether the systems, institutions, and leaders will open the doors.

If access is not expanded, the demographic dividend risks becoming a demographic *burden* — leading to unemployment, frustration, and social tension.

2. Youth solutions exist — but youth financing does not.

Kenyan youth are not short of ideas — they are short of **capital**.

Across climate action, digital innovation, agribusiness, entrepreneurship, creative industries, and community organising, youth-led solutions already exist. We see them everywhere:

- Solar-tech innovations
- AI-driven ideas
- Green mobility concepts
- Community climate resilience projects
- Social enterprises led by young women
- Digital skills training by youth for youth

But these solutions remain *small*, *invisible*, or *unscalable* because:

- Less than **10% of youth enterprises** get formal financing.
- Most funding mechanisms have **complicated, bureaucratic, or elitist requirements**.
- County-level funds rarely reach the youth who need them.
- Youth with disabilities face even greater barriers.

- Youth applying for grants face mistrust and stereotypes:
“Youth are not serious,”
“Youth misuse funds,”
“Youth lack experience.”

The result?

Youth talent turns into frustration — instead of transformation.

If Kenya truly believes in its demographic dividend, we must move from *motivational speeches* to *financial inclusion*.

Youth need catalytic financing — not applause.

3. Meaningful inclusion beats tokenism.

Kenyan youth are tired of being **seen but not heard** — invited to events but excluded from decisions.

Tokenistic youth engagement continues to show up as:

- Being given “youth slots” but no real power
- Being consulted at the end instead of the beginning
- Youth not being invited to the rooms where budgets are decided
- Spaces dominated by celebrities or influencers, not grassroots youth
- Disability inclusion treated as charity instead of a right

Yet Kenya’s youth are clear:

“We don’t want to be decorations. We want to be contributors.”

Meaningful inclusion means:

- Youth representation at national and county decision-making bodies
- Youth leading, not just participating
- Youth contributing to policy design, not just implementation
- Inclusion frameworks that consider gender, disability, and rural realities
- Accountability for youth-related commitments

Kenya’s demographic dividend requires **structural youth leadership –institutionalizing meaningful youth engagement**, not symbolic youth attendance. Re-engineering the NYC. It’s an institution that that is meant to work for the youth, not just for the state. Sustainable funding, election and leadership re-structuring, visionary youth-focus and youth-led Leadership.

As Wangari Maathai said, “The generation that destroys the environment is not the generation that pays the price.” The same applies to exclusion — the cost always lands on the young.

THE YOUTH MESSAGE TO STAKEHOLDERS

1. Establish permanent youth seats in national and county decision-making spaces.

Kenya has many youth funds — **YEDF, Uwezo Fund, Ajira, Studio Mashinani, KYEOP, NYOTA**, county youth funds, innovation grants, incubators, constituency-level opportunities...

But they are scattered, uncoordinated, and difficult to access.

Most youth do not even know these opportunities exist.

Those who know them **cannot access them** due to bureaucracy, gatekeeping, paperwork, corruption, or political bias.

This fragmentation leads to:

- **Duplication of programs**
- **Wastage of resources**
- **Funds reaching the wrong beneficiaries**
- **Urban youth benefiting while rural youth are left out**
- **No national database to track youth financing impact**
- **No long-term sustainability**

Kenya **cannot unlock its demographic dividend** with a scattered financing system.

Instead of chasing 20 different funds, a young person goes to: **ONE national youth financing platform, ONE application, ONE eligibility pathway.**

2. Create a national youth financing ecosystem — grants, innovation funds, and county-level youth budgets. All the various youth funding models to be consolidated into one umbrella under visionary leadership that serve real issues of the youth.

3. Ensure disability inclusion by design.

4. Partner with youth as co-creators, not beneficiaries.

5. Localize the SDGs and the Pact for the Future — take the Race to 2030 to villages, campuses, TVETs, youth groups, and creative spaces.

CALL TO ACTION — THE FINAL FIVE YEARS

We have five years left to make the SDGs real for the boda rider, the young mother, the innovator, the farmer, the student, and the child yet to be born.

The Race to 2030 demands:

- Collaboration over competition
- Partnerships over silos
- Innovation over routine

- Financing over promises
- Courage over comfort

What are we doing as the Youth?

AUNYD, we are developing a Youth Engagement Toolkit which will play a key role in disseminating information and collecting data to support evidence based policy integration. This will not only serve as a repository of data but also as a platform to train and engage youth in on going processes aligned with their participation at the national, regional and global level, while also supporting regional policy integration and youth collaboration across the six East African countries.

As Kofi Annan said, “You are never too young to lead, and never too old to learn.”

Let us lead together. Learn together.

And run — not walk — together in this Race to 2030.

Thank you. Asanteni sana. God bless you, and God bless Kenya.