

Title

ASSESSING THE ROLE OF YOUTH-LED ORGANISATIONS IN PROMOTING YOUTH PARTICIPATION IN COMMUNITY LEVEL GOVERNANCE: A STUDY AT YOUTH FORUM FOR NATIONAL TRANSFORMATION (YOFONAT).

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ABSTRACT

This study assessed the role of youth-led organizations in promoting youth participation in community-level governance, using the Youth Forum for National Transformation (YOFONAT) in Mtandile, Lilongwe, as a case study. Despite Malawi's National Youth Policy (2023) mandating at least 30% youth representation in governance structures, actual participation remains low, with the Youth Participation Index (2021) indicating that youths occupy only 4.7% of parliamentary seats and 11.7% of council wards. Guided by Arnstein's Ladder of Citizen Participation, the study adopted a qualitative case study design to explore strategies, challenges, perceptions, and impacts of youth-led initiatives. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with 12 purposively selected participants comprising YOFONAT leaders and youth members. Thematic analysis revealed that YOFONAT employs hybrid advocacy strategies, including digital activism, coalition building with civil society organizations, direct policy lobbying, and capacity-building workshops to enhance youth engagement in governance. However, the organization faces persistent structural barriers such as limited funding, institutional resistance, and internalized discouragement among youth, which constrain sustainability and influence. Findings further showed that community leaders often perceive youth as lacking technical capacity, although attitudes are gradually shifting through sustained engagement. Importantly, YOFONAT has facilitated youth access to formal governance spaces, including policy consultations and parliamentary platforms, indicating a transition from tokenistic participation toward partnership. The study concludes that youth-led organizations play a critical bridging role between national policy commitments and grassroots governance realities. It recommends institutionalizing youth participation through legally mandated youth committees, quota systems, sustained funding mechanisms, and intergenerational dialogue platforms to promote inclusive and meaningful youth

engagement in governance processes.

Keywords: Governance, Youth Participation, Youth-led Organizations, YOFONAT.

INTRODUCTION

Young people are active change-makers today, not just tomorrow's leaders. On the other hand, their opinions are frequently ignored in local decision-making processes all over the world. In order to address this gap, youth-led organizations have become the go-to agents in giving young people networks, capacities and self-assurance they need to have an impact on governance (Checkoway B., 2011). Such initiatives include organizing local advocacy campaigns to securing seats in community councils, hence reshaping how youth engage in public affairs. However, despite their growing influence, youth-led organizations constantly struggle with limited resources, political resistance and societal stereotypes that question their legitimacy (Braun, 2019). The research explored how youth-led organizations strengthen youth participation in community governance, the barriers they face, and their potential to create more inclusive societies.

Background

There is an increasing recognition that meaningful youth participation strengthens democracy. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, particularly Goal 16.7, 'stresses the need for inclusive decision-making at all levels (UN, *Transforming our World*, 2015). Similarly the African Union's (AU, 2006) 'African Youth Charter', dictates that young people be included in political and development processes. Despite these commitments, young people remain under-represented in local governance, where critical decisions about education, employment and public services are made. This goes to show that young people's voices do not carry enough weight, in places where one would normally expect a more inclusive setting. Youths are

primarily still seen as beneficiaries and not necessarily as active decision makers.

Youth-led organizations (YLO's) have emerged as important actors in fostering civic engagement and promoting the inclusion of young people in decision-making processes in local governance. Globally, young people make up a significant demographic yet their voices are often marginalized in political and administrative positions (*UN, Youth social entrepreneurship and the 2030 agenda, 2020*). This exclusion not only undermines democratic principles but also neglects the unique perspectives and innovative solutions that youths can bring to address local challenges. Recognizing this gap, YLOs have taken the initiative to mobilize young people, build their capacities and create a platform for their participation in local governance structures (*Campbell, 2018*). Their work ranges from raising awareness about civic rights and responsibilities of advocating for youth-friendly policies and actively engaging with local authorities. The rise of YLOs reflects a growing recognition of the importance of youth organizations in achieving sustainable development and inclusive governance. These organizations often operate at the grassroots level, a deep understanding of the specific needs and challenges faced by young people within their communities (*Cornwell, 2007*). By providing spaces for discussion, skill-building workshops and opportunities for collective action, YLOs empower young people to become active citizens and contribute positively to local government institutions, facilitating communication and fostering mutual understanding.

However, the effectiveness and outcomes of YLOs in promoting youth decision-making in local governance are influenced by a number of factors. These include the organizational capacity, the political and socio-economic context in which they operate and the responsiveness of local government structures to youth engagement (*Banks, 2014*). Access to resources, the level of community support, and the presence of enabling legal and policy framework also plays significant

roles in shaping the ability of YLOs to advocate for youth inclusion and influence local policy processes. Therefore, a broad assessment of the roles played by YLOs in promoting youth decision-making in local governance requires a delicate understanding of their operational strategies, the challenges they face and the impact on both young people and local authorities. This was done by examining successful models and identifying key enabling factors. This research aim was to contribute to a more informed understanding of how YLOs can be supported and leveraged to enhance youth participation and strengthen local governance systems.

Problem Statement

Although youths aged 15-24 constitute over 16% of the global population (UNFPA, 2023), their influence in community governance remains extremely low, despite international commitments such as the *United Nations' (2015) Sustainable Development Goals* and regional frameworks like the *African Youth Charter Adopted by the African Union (AU, 2006)*, which explicitly advocate for youth inclusion in decision-making processes. Systemic barriers including age discrimination, limited funding, and institutional resistance prevent meaningful youth participation (*Tannock, 2015*), dismissing their perspectives as inexperienced or irrelevant. Despite Malawi's commitment to youth inclusion as articulated in the *National Youth Policy (2023)*, which mandates a 30% youth representation in governance structures, the actual participation of young people remains critically low. Empirical evidence from the Youth Participation Index of Malawi reveals a stark contrast: youths hold only 4.7% of parliamentary seats and 11.7% of council ward positions (*National Youth Council of Malawi, 2021*). This gap between policy intent and lived reality underscores a systemic failure to translate formal commitments into meaningful youth engagement in community-level governance. While youth-led organizations

such as the Youth Forum for National Transformation (YOFONAT) have emerged to advocate for inclusive governance, they operate within a context of persistent structural barriers including financial constraints, political gatekeeping, and entrenched societal skepticism, that limit their effectiveness and sustainability (Honwana, 2012; Checkoway, 2011). Consequently, there exists a critical need to examine how youth-led organizations navigate this policy-implementation gap and what strategies can be leveraged to align national youth participation goals with grassroots governance realities. This research is unique in such a way that it offers a grass-root perspective through YOFONAT, rather than analyzing youth participation from a top-down or purely governmental perspective, this research was centered on a youth-led organization (YOFONAT) as the primary unit of analysis. This provided insights into how grassroots actors interpret, challenge, and operationalize national policies in real-world settings.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

Main Objective

- To assess the role of youth-led organizations in promoting youth participation in community level governance: A study at Youth Forum for National Transformation (YOFONAT).

Specific Objectives

- To identify strategies used by Youth Forum for National Transformation (YOFONAT) in promoting youth participation in local governance processes.
- To highlight the structural challenges faced by YOFONAT in engaging youths in governance processes.
- To explore the perceptions of both community leaders and youths regarding youth participation in governance processes, within and around YOFONAT.

- To assess the impact of youth-led initiatives on youth participation in governance processes among the youth at YOFONAT.
- To recommend strategies that enhance partnership amongst youths, community members and other stakeholders to create a culture of inclusivity and shared responsibility in governance at YOFONAT.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Strategies used by youth-led organizations in promoting youth participation in local governance processes

According to (Zeldin.S, 2004) engaging youths in organizational governance promotes positive youth development, organizational effectiveness and adult leadership development that occur when youth and adults share governance responsibilities. The study found that engaging youth in decision making secured the commitment of young people to their organizational communities, and additionally, contributed positively to youth development. Further, the adult leaders reported that the experience of working with youth had a positive effect on their own development and contributed to the overall efficacy of their organizations. In addition, organizational governance may offer a viable context through which youth can be active producers of their own development and of the communities in which they interact. The effectiveness of strategies which youth-led organizations employ when engaging youths in governance processes, should complement the organizational operational strategies to render effective.

It is evident that Youth-led organizations have emerged as critical actors in mobilizing young people through digital activism, participatory workshops, and advocacy campaigns (Sloam, *The outraged young: young Europeans, civic engagement and the new media in a time of crisis*, 2014), (Checkoway B. A., 2013). The

authors here are of similar view that the quickening of youth participation facilitated by digitally networked action, suggests that new media enables faster mobilization and engagement. Digital networking accelerates participation in the form of new media technologies, like social media and online platforms, are enabling young people to organize and participate in civic action more quickly and efficiently. This has offered young adults an opportunity for diverse forms of participation and civic engagement.

These strategies have proven effective in contexts like Nigeria's "Not Too Young to Run" movement, where sustained online and offline mobilization led to constitutional reforms. Furthermore, the findings of (*Checkoway B. A., 2013*), suggests that there are four key forms of youth civic engagement vital for diverse democracy: grassroots organizing, citizen participation, intergroup dialogue, and socio-political development. Grassroots organizing involves youth organizing and mobilizing within their communities to address local issues and advocate for change. Citizen participation focuses on youth actively participating in civic processes, including voting, participating in community events, and engaging in public forums.

Intergroup Dialogue involves fostering dialogue and understanding between different groups within the community, particularly focusing on bridging divides and promoting inclusivity. Socio-political Development encompasses youth learning about political systems, developing their own civic knowledge and skills, and participating in formal political processes. This goes to show that the effectiveness of these strategies is highly influenced by contextual factors. These factors will however vary depending on political systems, socio-economic conditions and cultural norms, emphasizing the importance of context-specific approaches to foster meaningful youth participation in local governance processes.

Structural challenges faced by youth-led organizations in engaging youths in

governance processes.

Youth participation in governance faces several structural challenges that impact its effectiveness. These include tokenistic representation, institutional resistance to change and disillusionment (*Marah, 2024*). Bad governance, poverty, unemployment and a lack of access to information also hinder meaningful youth involvement. (*Vambe, 2018*).

For instance, a study by *Mwaura (2020)* examining youth-led civic initiatives in East Africa found that inadequate funding and over-reliance on donor support constrained the capacity of youth-led organizations to sustain long-term governance engagement programs. Many of these organizations operate informally and lack the legal status required to access government or international grants, limiting their operational scope.

Similarly, *Ojong and Anwana (2019)* identified bureaucratic resistance and limited access to decision-making platforms as major obstacles for youth-led organizations in Nigeria. Their research showed that even where youth are formally included in local governance structures, their roles are often symbolic, with little influence on actual decisions. This tokenism discourages broader youth participation and undermines the legitimacy of youth voices in governance. The question still remains if governments actually understand the significance of incorporating youths in governance processes or is it just a political stance for a particular moment.

Mutamiri on the other hand, highlights electoral boundary manipulation negatively affects youth participation, while inadequate support and civic education limit engagement. In local government, youth structures like youth units have the potential to facilitate meaningful youth participation, but they often lack financial and human resources, rendering them ineffective.

Despite these challenges, youth participation is crucial for sustainable development, peace-building and

technological advancements (Marah, 2024). To enhance youth involvement, there is need for institutional reforms, sustainable investments, capacity building and increased access to information to promote active citizenship and democratizing governance systems.

In a study by (Juliet, 2004), the question is asked whether the official enthusiasm for youth participation has much to do with democratic practice. It is argued that the recent government enthusiasm for youth participation is problematic for three reasons. First, it fails to recognize the significant obstacles that young people currently experience when trying to participate socially, economically and politically. Second, there is a failure to think through what democratic practice requires. Third, both the conceptualization and operationalization of official youth participation policies reveal an agenda that is seriously at odds with the rhetoric of democratic participation. This raises questions about whose voice is actually being heard and to what effect.

Additionally, research by Tadele and Gella (2019) in Ethiopia highlighted the lack of technical capacity and organizational management skills among leaders of youth-led groups. Without adequate training and mentorship, many youth organizations struggle with strategic planning, policy advocacy, and building sustainable partnerships with local authorities.

These structural barriers suggest that for youth-led organizations to effectively engage youth in governance processes, there is a critical need for systemic reforms that provide institutional support, financial empowerment, and genuine youth inclusion in policy development and implementation.

The perceptions of both community leaders and youths regarding youth participation in governance processes.

Research on youth participation in rural governance reveals complex challenges

and opportunities. Community leaders in South Africa recognize the interplay of social, economic and environmental factors influencing youth disengagement. Young adult's perceptions of community resources and their perceived value correlate strongly with their engagement levels (Majee, 2019). This results in young leaders facing challenges in implementing youth programs, low self-esteem, criticism and geographical barriers which limits their exposure to adequate and reliable information hence the need for capacity building for community leaders overseeing participatory structures and young adults on the importance of inclusive community participation that will address traditional perceptions of youth participation.

Understanding the perceptions of both community leaders and youths is essential to evaluating the effectiveness and inclusiveness of youth participation in governance. Empirical studies reveal that while youths often view themselves as capable contributors to governance, community leaders sometimes regard their involvement with skepticism or perceive it as symbolic rather than substantive.

A study by Alidu and Ame (2018) in Ghana found that while youth expressed a strong desire to be involved in local decision-making, many community leaders perceived them as inexperienced or lacking the maturity required for governance roles. This perception often leads to limited delegation of responsibilities to youth, thereby reinforcing their marginalization in political processes. In Nigeria, research by Ede and Nnamani (2021) revealed a disparity in perceptions: while youths believed they were systematically excluded from governance, traditional leaders and local officials often claimed that youths lacked the interest or capacity to participate meaningfully. These conflicting views contribute to a trust gap that hampers collaborative governance initiatives.

It is a deceptively simple formula: "youth contributing to communities-communities supporting youth"(Irby and others,

2001). The mutual and intergenerational interdependence is appealing, so why in most communities is this vision a dream largely deferred, if not outright denied? What are the pressures that keep them separate? Why have the realizations that youth and community development are inextricably linked—that youth are essential partners in community building, and that community building can provide developmental opportunities for youth—not been enough to make linking the two common practices? We contend that for support practitioners to do this type of work, they will need concrete models of practice in which youth play leadership roles in addressing community issues and communities learn to align themselves to better support their youth.

Furthermore, a qualitative study conducted by *Osei and Boateng (2020)* emphasized that cultural norms and generational hierarchies significantly shape community leaders' attitudes toward youth involvement. In many communities, respect for elders remains a central value, and youth activism is sometimes interpreted as disrespectful or confrontational rather than constructive. However, the same study also noted that where youth-led initiatives have successfully engaged local leaders—particularly through consultative forums or intergenerational dialogue—there has been a positive shift in community perceptions, leading to greater inclusion and shared decision-making. These findings suggest that changing perceptions on both sides is crucial to fostering a more participatory and collaborative governance environment.

The impact of youth-led initiatives on youth participation in governance processes among the youth.

Youth-led initiatives in urban communities face challenges in impacting local government decision-making processes. Studies show that despite efforts to engage young people, their participation often remains limited and constrained. (*Pauli-Mylar, 2019*) Found that simply bringing youth and local government together did

not automatically alter decision-making processes and sometimes reinforced perceptions of young people as incapable. Similarly, (*Freeman, 2003*) reported that well-intentioned participation initiatives had limited success in facilitating meaningful engagement.

A study by *Chitere and Ileri (2019)* in Kenya found that youth-led organizations that engaged in civic education, voter mobilization, and community accountability forums contributed to more transparent and inclusive governance processes in county governments. These initiatives not only increased youth participation in public consultations but also influenced budget allocations to youth-related projects.

Similarly, *Olorunfemi and Adebayo (2020)* examined the impact of youth-led advocacy groups in selected Nigerian local governments and found that sustained engagement—especially through social media campaigns and town hall meetings—resulted in policy shifts and greater responsiveness from local authorities. In one case, youth pressure led to the inclusion of youth representatives in a local council's planning committee, marking a shift from symbolic to substantive inclusion. Furthermore, empirical findings from *Banda and Mvula (2021)* in Malawi show that youth-led monitoring initiatives, such as community scorecards and participatory audits, have pressured local officials to improve service delivery and reduce corruption. Their study noted that the effectiveness of such initiatives depends largely on partnerships with civil society organizations and support from development partners.

Advocacy initiatives whether youth led or supported by organizations, stand as potent tools for amplifying youth voices, advocacy for their needs and driving transformative change. Global case studies underscore the potential of advocacy to influence policy shift and promote meaningful societal change. Within Lilongwe, youth led advocacy groups, as highlighted by (*Chirwa and Mkandawire 2020*), actively championing increased

youth participation in community development initiatives. Such efforts not only empower youth but also fosters an environment conducive to their engagement. The power of advocacy goes beyond policy change, as it nurtures essential skills that empower youth for active civic engagement and personal growth.

These examples demonstrate that although challenges remain, youth-led initiatives have the potential to significantly influence governance practices at the grassroots level, particularly when they are strategic, organized, and well-networked. In-order to improve youth engagement, there is need to address power dynamics, provide meaningful spaces for participation and adapt approaches that will enable reflection of diverse communities for effective engagement.

Strategic recommendations that enhance partnership amongst youths, community members and other stakeholders to create a culture of inclusivity and shared responsibility in governance.

Engaging youth in decision-making processes and public service delivery through digital technologies can foster participatory governance and address complex challenges (*Park, 2023*). Youth-led communication initiatives have shown promise in empowering young people, changing their self-perception and influencing community development (*Tufie, 2018*). Participatory governance models that involve shared responsibility and multi-sectoral partnerships, including local communities and private sector, can contribute to effective management of cultural and natural heritage as illustrated by *Kocovic & Dukic (2015)*.

A study by *Nkomo and Marongwe (2020)* in Zimbabwe found that multi-stakeholder forums bringing together youth groups, traditional leaders, local government officials, and civil society organizations fostered constructive dialogue and joint decision-making. These forums enabled stakeholders to jointly prioritize local

development needs and empowered youth to contribute ideas within culturally respectful structures, thus enhancing legitimacy and trust. In Uganda, *Namazzi and Kato (2019)* documented how community-driven development (CDD) models that incorporated youth-led groups alongside older community members and local officials improved service delivery outcomes in rural districts. The study emphasized that clearly defined roles, capacity-building programs, and inclusive planning sessions were key strategies that promoted equal partnership and discouraged generational power imbalances.

Moreover, an evaluation by *Ayodele and Okonkwo (2021)* in Nigeria demonstrated that the institutionalization of youth liaison offices within local government authorities helped to bridge the gap between youth organizations and policymakers. This initiative created a formal channel for youth input in governance, and it encouraged collaboration on initiatives such as community sanitation drives, voter education, and anti-corruption campaigns.

These findings suggest that strategies such as intergenerational dialogue platforms, institutional youth representation, inclusive community planning, and capacity-building partnerships are crucial in cultivating a participatory governance culture. They demonstrate that inclusivity is best achieved not through isolated efforts but through structured and continuous collaboration among all stakeholders.

Strategies must be centered on social justice, civic society building and youth development both must however be supported by policies prioritize public awareness, securing stable funding and building local capacity through community coalitions and intermediary organizations.

Theoretical Framework.

Arnsteins Ladder of Citizen Participation (*Kusi, 2023*). A "ladder of citizen participation" is a concept developed by

Sherry Arnstein in 1969 to illustrate different levels of citizen involvement in decision-making processes, particularly in planning and governance. The ladder serves as a powerful metaphor, with each step representing an increasing degree of citizen power and influence. The core idea is that not all forms of "participation" are equal; some are merely tokenistic or even manipulative, while others represent genuine power-sharing and citizen control. Arnstein's original ladder has eight steps, typically grouped into three broad categories:

Non-participation (No Citizen Power)

Manipulation: Citizens are educated or "cured" to support a pre-determined plan, with no real input. Their participation is used to legitimize decisions already made.

Therapy: Similar to manipulation, but citizens are put through a process that suggests their problems are personal rather than systemic, diverting attention from power holders' responsibility.

Tokenism (Some Citizen Power, but Limited):

Informing: Citizens are simply told about decisions. It's a one-way flow of information with no opportunity for feedback or influence.

Consultation: Citizens are invited to give opinions, for example, through surveys or public meetings. However, there's no guarantee their input will be considered or acted upon. It can be "window-dressing" without real impact.

Placation: Citizens are allowed to advise or plan, but power holders retain the right to judge the legitimacy or feasibility of their advice. A few "worthy" citizens might be co-opted onto committees, but their influence is limited.

Citizen Power (Genuine Citizen Influence):

Partnership: Power is redistributed through negotiation between citizens and power holders. They agree to share planning and decision-making responsibilities, often through joint committees.

Delegated Power: Citizens hold a clear majority of seats on committees with delegated powers to make decisions. They

have the power to ensure accountability of programs.

Citizen Control: Citizens have the majority or full managerial power, handling the entire job of planning, policy-making, and managing a program with no intermediaries between them and the source of funds.

Why is Arnstein's Ladder important?

Critique of superficial participation: It highlights the difference between genuine citizen engagement and empty rituals that give the illusion of participation without real power.

Framework for analysis: It provides a tool for analyzing existing participation processes and identifying where they fall on the spectrum of power.

Advocacy for empowerment: It implicitly advocates for moving up the ladder, encouraging greater citizen power and control in decision-making.

Influence on practice: It has significantly influenced how governments, organizations, and communities approach citizen engagement and public participation.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The research utilized a qualitative case study design. The qualitative approach was suitable for this research because it allows for an in-depth exploration of the research topic, for a better and deeper understanding of the phenomenon under investigation.

Research Methodology

The research used interview-guides to support the research topic. Interview-guides are a qualitative research tool used to gather in-depth insights from participants, allowing for a more flexible and open-ended approach, that will target, leaders and youths within YOFONAT involved in governance initiatives. This method provided a comprehensive understanding of the research topic which

enabled triangulation of findings, increasing the validity and reliability.

Research Setting

Research setting is the environment within which studies are run (*Joel, 2005*). Hence the research was conducted at YOFONAT in Mtandile, Lilongwe.

Target Population

The research population was comprised of YOFONAT leaders and youth participants aged between 18- 35 within YOFONAT who have participated in governance related activities.

Sampling Technique

Purposive sampling is a non-probability sampling technique that involves choosing individuals who are believed to be the most knowledgeable, experienced and representative of the phenomenon being studied. Through the use of this sampling technique, it enabled the research to target relevant participants in relation to the topic, allowing for more accurate and enhanced quality of information.

Sample Size.

The research sampled out 10 youth participants and 2 leaders within YOFONAT bringing the total population to 12 participants.

Results and Discussions.

The participants consisted of 12 individuals, with a higher proportion of females, who accounted for 8 participants (66.7%), while males comprised 4 participants (33.3%).

In terms of age range, the majority of participants were aged 21–25 years, representing 8 individuals (66.7%). Smaller proportions were aged 14–20 years

and above 30 years, with 2 participants each (16.7%).

The demographic data reveals a participant group that is predominantly young adult and female. The majority (66.7%) of participants were between 21 and 25 years old, representing the core age bracket for youth engagement in governance as defined by many national and international frameworks. The presence of two participants over the age of 30, are in leadership and mentorship roles within YOFONAT, provides valuable intergenerational perspective. The significant female majority (66.7%) suggests that YOFONAT's activities may be particularly successful in engaging young women in governance processes, and it reflects a broader trend of female participation in civil society organizations in the region. This gender and age composition is critical for understanding the perspectives shared, as the experiences and challenges related to participation in governance can differ meaningfully across gender and generational lines. The profile indicates that the findings are largely shaped by the views of young adults, with supplementary insights from both younger adolescents and older mentors, offering a multi-layered understanding of youth participation.

Presentation of Research Findings.

Strategies used by Youth Forum for National Transformation (YOFONAT) in promoting youth participation in local governance processes.

YOFONAT employs a multi-branched, hybrid advocacy strategy. This combines collective action with National and International NGOs, direct policy lobbying, capacity building workshops and strategic social media campaigns. For instance in June 2025 YOFONAT in partnership with Youth Wave Malawi and Global Platform Malawi launched an online solidarity march against political violence and tokenism under the “*Tiwadyele Koma Tikavote*

Mwanzeru” movement. In the words of the executive director of YOFONAT “*Representation should not just be for the sake of numbers, but putting youths in positions where they can utilize their potential*”. According to the Youth Participation Index of Malawi, there is a significant gap in youth participation in key positions; Political Representation is extremely low, with youths holding only 9 out of 193 parliamentary seats (4.7%) and 52 out of 462 council wards (11.7%) which is the complete opposite of what is written in the Malawi National Youth Policy which mandates there be 30% of youth representation (*Policy, 2023*).

This approach reflects a sophisticated understanding of the modern advocacy landscape, where influence is built both through formal coalitions and digital public engagement. The effectiveness of this hybrid model is supported by scholarship on social movements. According to *Checkoway (2011)*, coalition-building is a fundamental strategy for amplifying marginalized voices. YOFONAT’s collaborative campaigns with established NGOs exemplify this principle, lending legitimacy and pooling critical resources. Concurrently, the organization’s use of social media aligns with contemporary research on digital activism. Scholars such as *Boulianne (2020)* note that digital tools are particularly effective for youth mobilization and agenda-setting. However, as *Tufekci (2017)* argues in her analysis of networked protest, online movements often struggle to translate momentum into tangible policy change without grounded, offline action. YOFONAT’s strategy appears designed to overcome this limitation by pairing digital campaigns with direct lobbying. This integrated approach is consistent with the concept of “collective action framing” (*Benford & Snow, 2000*), whereby successful movements strategically blend activities to build public support while directly engaging power structures.

The structural challenges faced by YOFONAT in engaging youths in

governance processes.

Severe and persistent financial constraints is the primary structural challenge, significantly limiting the scope, sustainability, and impact of YOFONAT’s programs.

This finding illustrates a critical systemic barrier for youth-led organizations. The financial lacking described reflects a broader pattern identified in the literature. As argued by *Alvarez (2009)*, heavy reliance on short-term donor funding can lead to the “NGO-ization” of grassroots movements, potentially diverting agendas to meet external priorities rather than member-driven goals. This creates a debilitating cycle where demonstrating impact—a requirement for funding—requires resources that are themselves unavailable. Furthermore, this economic constraint must be understood within its wider context. Scholars of African youth, such as *Honwana (2012)*, situate this challenge within a political economy where young people face systemic economic marginalization.

Consequently, the financial limitations reported by YOFONAT are not merely operational but are constitutive of the constrained agency that youth-led organizations must navigate, fundamentally shaping their capacity for sustained action.

The perceptions of both community leaders and youths regarding youth participation in governance processes, within and around YOFONAT.

Community leaders initially exhibit skepticism, primarily questioning youths “*technical know-how*” as expressed by a participant, though some attitudes are beginning to shift.

The skepticism of community leaders is indicative of generational power structures. According to *Honwana (2012)*, in many traditional societies, legitimate authority is often culturally linked to age and seniority, which can inherently disqualify youth. The emerging shift in leader’s attitudes

suggests that sustained advocacy campaigns and demonstrated competence can begin to challenge these deep-seated norms.

“Among youth themselves an eagerness to drive change is ironically undermined by internalized discouragement and peer-to-peer skepticism” as mentioned by most participants. The internal contradiction among youth is a more profound finding. This resonates with *Bourdieu’s (1991)* theory of symbolic violence, whereby subordinated groups may internalize and reproduce the logic of their own marginalization. As noted by scholars of youth participation, this can manifest as self-doubt or peer discouragement, creating a significant barrier to collective political action (*O’Donoghue & Strobel, 2007*). For instance, according to the National Youth Participation Index of Malawi (*National Youth Council of Malawi, 2021*), the nation scores low on indicators of formal youth inclusion in governance. This statistical evidence collaborates the interview data, showing that the mindset barriers identified within and around YOFONAT are part of a broader, systemic pattern of exclusion.

The impact of youth-led initiatives on youth participation in governance processes among youths at YOFONAT.

YOFONAT’s impact is most evident in the tangible access to formal governance spaces it has secured for its members. This ranges from advocacy for representation to actual participation in high-level forums like the Youth Parliamentary Committee and technical design sessions on public debt.

“We recently sent a letter to the President requesting for Policy commitment, where we saw the appointment of a young minister of sports” as elaborated by a participants.

This progression signifies a shift in the typology of participation. According to *Gaventa’s (2006)* power analysis framework, YOFONAT has facilitated a

move for youth from contested or claimed spaces of protest into more invited spaces of formal consultation and dialogue. Gaining entry to these previously closed forums is a recognized first step towards influence. Participation in technically complex sessions is particularly significant, as it directly challenges the perception of a youth competency deficit, a key finding from Objective 3.

However, the literature urges a critical distinction between different levels of participation. As *Hart’s (1992)* seminal ladder of participation illustrates, the presence of youth in a space does not automatically equate to meaningful influence; involvement can remain tokenistic if voices are not heeded. Therefore, while access is a crucial and measurable impact, scholars suggest that a deeper, longer-term impact of initiatives like YOFONAT may be political socialization- the process by which young people acquire the skills, knowledge, and networks necessary for effective civic life. This form of capacity-building represents a substantial, if less immediately visible, contribution to future governance.

Strategies that enhance partnership amongst youths, community members and other stakeholders to create a culture of inclusive and shared responsibility towards in governance.

The proposed strategy centers on moving from make-do involvement to structural inclusion, specifically through institutionalizing youth-focused committees and advocating for systematic quotas in representative bodies like parliament.

The strategy of institutionalizing youth-focused committees and advocating for systematic quotas in parliaments represents a structural and transformative approach to youth inclusion in governance. Rather than relying on make-do, discretionary invitations for youth participation, these approaches seeks to embed youth representation directly into the architecture of decision-making bodies. By

establishing mandated committees, youth gain a permanent, formal platform to contribute to policy debates and oversight. Concurrently, parliamentary quotas-reserved seats or candidate requirements-ensure that youth perspectives are not only heard but are also represented in legislative outcomes. This dual mechanism aims to overcome the chronic underrepresentation of youth by shifting from symbolic consultation to guaranteed representation. However, for such institutionalization to move beyond tokenism, it must be supported by capacity-building for youth representatives and a cultural shift within institutions to value and integrate intergenerational partnership in governance.

This strategy aligns with what *Cornwall (2008)* terms a transformative approach to participation, which seeks to alter the institutional rules and power dynamics themselves, rather than merely inserting marginalized groups into unchanged systems. Advocacy for quotas is a recognized, if debated, mechanism for fast-tracking such inclusion. Evidence from related fields, such as gender and politics, suggests that statutory quotas can effectively increase the numerical representation of excluded groups (*Bauer & Burnet, 2013*).

The literature, however, provides an important stipulation. According to reviews by institutions like the *UNDP (2020)*, structural mechanisms like quotas are most effective when embedded within a supportive ecosystem. This includes complementary measures such as capacity development for both youth representatives and adult institutional leaders, as well as efforts to shift organizational culture towards genuine collaboration. Therefore, while YOFONAT's identification of institutionalization as a key strategy is theoretically sound and addresses the root causes of exclusion identified in earlier objectives, its ultimate success will depend on its integration with these broader, systemic enablers of meaningful participation.

CONCLUSION

Summary of Research Findings

The study revealed the following key findings:

- **Strategies Used by YOFONAT:** YOFONAT uses a hybrid approach combining digital activism, coalition-building with NGOs, direct policy lobbying, and capacity-building workshops to promote youth participation in governance.
- **Structural Challenges:** YOFONAT faces significant financial constraints, reliance on short-term donor funding, and internalized discouragement among youth, which limit its effectiveness and sustainability.
- **Perceptions of Youth and Leaders:** Community leaders initially doubt youth competency, though attitudes are slowly shifting. Youth themselves express eagerness but also face peer skepticism and low self-confidence.
- **Impact of Youth-Led Initiatives:** YOFONAT has successfully gained youth access to formal governance spaces such as parliamentary committees and policy forums, though the depth of influence remains variable.
- **Partnership Strategies:** There is a strong need for institutionalized youth inclusion through mandated committees and parliamentary quotas, supported by capacity-building and cultural change within institutions.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are made:

For YOFONAT and Similar Organizations:

- Diversify funding sources and develop sustainable income-generating activities to reduce dependency on short-term grants for sustained organizational impact.

- Strengthen internal capacity-building programs focused on leadership, advocacy, and organizational management for youth members and adult institutional leaders

For Government and Policymakers:

- Institutionalize youth participation by establishing legally mandated youth committees at local and national levels.

For Community Leaders and Traditional Authorities:

- Engage in intergenerational dialogue platforms to foster mutual understanding and shift perceptions about youth capability.

Areas for Further Study

Future research could explore:

- The long-term impact of youth quotas and reserved seats on policy outcomes and youth political engagement in Malawi.
- Comparative studies between urban and rural youth-led organizations to understand contextual differences in strategies and challenges

CONCLUSION

The research concludes that youth-led organizations like YOFONAT play a critical role in bridging the gap between Malawi's National Youth Policy and the reality of low youth participation reflected in the Youth Participation Index. While YOFONAT has made notable progress in creating access to governance spaces, structural and attitudinal barriers continue to hinder meaningful and sustained youth inclusion. The disconnect between policy intent and implementation highlights the need for more systemic, funded, and culturally sensitive approaches to youth participation. Without addressing these

challenges, youth representation risks remaining tokenistic rather than transformative.

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