

## Chapter 42

# Conferences as Learning Spaces on Climate Change and Sustainability: Insights from University Students' Experiences

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### ABSTRACT

*The international community is increasingly recognizing the importance of youth's meaningful engagement and empowerment for managing long-term climate change challenges, and of their consultation on policies and decisions that affect their well-being and sustainable development. Yet the extent to which new learning is generated in current spaces for youth participation in local, national and global negotiations and decision-making on environmental issues remains less understood. This Chapter discusses the importance and effectiveness of youth-targeted and youth-led environmental conferences, forums, workshops and similar events in advancing the learning experiences of youth participants in these events. Testimonials from young people, generated through in-depth interviews of youth participants at environmental conferences and forums in the Netherlands and South Africa provide key insights into their engagement. The findings highlight the need for more empowering and critically engaging platforms for youth participation and for adequate mentoring of young participants.*

### INTRODUCTION

Today's youth are living and learning in a vastly globalized world and green-oriented economy whilst facing rising challenges from climate change to their daily lives, well-being and career prospects. Questions are increasingly being raised regarding the extent to which current education and learning experiences are equipping young people, who constitute key stakeholders, decision-makers and leaders of future society, with the skills to efficiently manage such contemporary and long-term complexities.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-0803-8.ch042

Current literature is often focused on expert reviews and analysis of the potentials of formal learning spaces such as schools and universities for enhancing students' knowledge and skills in leading the transition towards a more sustainable future, or for integrating education for sustainability into academic curricula (Lozano, Lukman, Lozano, Huisinigh, & Lambrechts, 2011). A growing body of research is also exploring informal and non-formal learning spaces and the importance of sharing knowledge and action on environmental issues through social ventures, media projects and national and international conferences and forums (Grant, 2009). However, less insight is provided into the experiences, perspectives and priorities of youth themselves as collaborators, participants or attendees at such conferences and events. Scholars are increasingly emphasizing the importance of informal educational spaces and social learning and networking platforms for enhancing understanding of sustainable development and promoting collective and collaborative action on sustainability (Dlouha, Barton, Janouskova, & Dlouhy, 2013; Wals, 2010).

This chapter seeks to highlight the educational value for youth of informal learning and networking spaces on environmental issues, such as conferences, youth forums and regional and international networking and policy consultation events. The chapter reports on the insights of diverse young people who have participated in national and international environmental events and who have shared their perspectives and experiences for this study on the advantages and drawbacks of their participation at these events. The chapter therefore discusses the strengths and weaknesses of such platforms as learning spaces on climate change and sustainability issues through providing testimonials from youth participants in various conferences and forums that the author has attended in the Netherlands and South Africa.

## **Aims and Content of the Chapter**

The aim of the Chapter is to explore the benefits of, and ways to enhance youth-initiated and led and youth-targeted conferences, workshops and forums around themes of sustainability and climate change, from the perspectives and experiences of youth themselves. The Chapter discusses the strengths and weaknesses of such environmental events for empowering youth to contribute to sustainability. It delineates the findings generated through a qualitative study which aimed to investigate the diverse levels and forms of youth engagement with climate change and sustainability and to explore the influence of the environmental, socio-economic, political and cultural context on such youth engagement.

The study fieldwork was undertaken in the Netherlands and South Africa, chosen to meet the study's aims for a diverse data set across different cultural and contextual settings. The Netherlands is geographically vulnerable to climate change, with 70% of its land below sea level. Yet, as a rich country, it holds the human, financial, and technical resources to manage the risks posed by climate change (Stive, Fresco, Kabat, Parmet & Veerman, 2011). South Africa is facing multiple developmental challenges including social and economic inequities and livelihood dependencies in several regions on scarce natural resources. Climate change further burdens the economically developing country with a long-term challenge which requires extensive investment in technical and financial resources and political commitment. (Madzwamuse, 2010). Therefore, the two countries presented diverse settings for exploring in-depth the contextual engagement of young people with climate change and sustainability. The study participants constituted of higher education youth from various geographic regions and academic disciplines in each country.

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