

Draft Speech for Dr Sunshine Myende

Executive Chairperson, National Youth Development Agency (NYDA), South Africa

CSW70 Side Event: ***Renewing Multilateral Action for Gender Equality: The Role of Youth-Led Institutional Platforms***

11 March 2026

Programme Director

Representatives of UNOPS and UN Women,

Distinguished panellist

Excellencies, colleagues, and young leaders joining us across the world

Good morning,

It is an honour to participate in this important conversation during the 70th Session of the Commission on the State of Women, a platform that continues to shape the global agenda for gender equality and women's empowerment.

I would like to thank UNOPS and UN Women for convening this dialogue at a time when the international community is increasingly reflecting on how multilateral institutions can remain legitimate, inclusive, and responsive to the needs of people, particularly young women.

The theme of this session, “renewing multilateral action for gender equality through youth-led institutional platforms”, is both timely and necessary. Around the world, young people are not only calling for a seat at the table, they are demonstrating their ability to shape policy, influence institutions, and drive meaningful reform.

Today, I would like to reflect briefly from four perspectives, global continental, regional, and national, on why youth participation, particularly young women's leadership, must be institutionalised if we are to advance gender equality and strengthen democratic governance.

Global Perspective

Globally, we find ourselves at a critical moment. Progress towards gender equality remains uneven, and in some context, we are witnessing worrying reversal. At the same time, the world is experiencing significant demographic shifts, with young people representing the largest generation in history.

Yet, despite this reality, youth participation in governance and decision-making structures often remain consultative rather than structural.

Multilateral frameworks as the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, CEDAW, and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development have long recognised participation, justice and equality as central pillars of development and peace. However, translating these commitment into practice requires institutions to rethink how participation is structured.

Youth-led and youth-advisory platforms emerging across the UN system represent an important shift. When properly designed, resourced, and linked to institutional decision-making, these mechanisms can help reshape organisational cultures, challenge informal gatekeeping, and ensure that young women's voices are embedded within governance processes.

Continental and Regional Progress: Africa and SADC

From a continental perspective, the case for strengthening youth participation is both urgent and promising.

Africa remains the youngest continent in the world, with majority of its population under the age of thirty five. This demographic reality presents an extraordinary opportunity to harness what we often refer to as the demographic dividend, but this dividend can only be realised if deliberate investments are made in youth development, empowerment and leadership.

Encouragingly, over the past two decades we have witnessed significant progress in establishing policy frameworks and institutional mechanisms that place young people at the centre of Africa's development agenda.

At the continental level, the African Youth Charter, adopted in 2006, has been instrumental in advancing youth participation as both a right and a development imperative. The Charter explicitly calls on Member States to establish platforms that enable young people to participate meaningfully in grievance and decision-making processes.

As a result majority African Union Member States now have national youth policies and national youth councils, which is an important milestone in institutionalising youth participation across the continent.

At the same time, the African Union has strengthened youth leadership structures through initiatives such as the African Union Youth Envoy, which plays a coordinating role in amplifying youth voices at the continental level. We have also seen the emergence of African Youth Peace Ambassadors, who contribute to peacebuilding, conflict prevention, and youth engagement in governance.

These developments demonstrate that Africa is moving in the right direction in recognising young people not merely as beneficiaries of development, but as active partners in shaping the continent's future.

However, while this progress is significant, it has not been without challenges.

Across many African countries and regional institutions, a common constraint remains limited resources to effectively service and support young people across the breadth and diversity of our respective countries. This challenge affects national youth institutions, youth councils, and regional initiatives such as the work of the African Youth Envoy and SADC youth structures.

Southern Africa: Youth and the Demographic Dividend

Within the Southern African Development Community (SADC), the demographic profile similarly reflects a predominately youthful population. This presents a wonderful opportunity to accelerate inclusive growth, strength social cohesion, and promote long-term stability.

To support this, several regional frameworks provide a strong policy foundation. These include SADC Vision 2050, the Regional Indicative Strategic Development Plan (RISDP 2020 -2030), and SADC Declaration on Youth Development and Empowerment, alongside broader continental frameworks such as Agenda 2063 and the AU roadmap on Harnessing the Demographic Dividend through Investments in Youth.

These frameworks emphasise the importance of investing in areas such as youth leadership, governance participation, employment and entrepreneurship, education and skills development as well as youth health and wellbeing, including sexual reproductive health.

Across the region, SADC Member States have also undertaken practical initiatives to strengthen youth engagement. Young people are increasingly participating in regional dialogues on peacebuilding, democratic governance, and social cohesion, while youth entrepreneurship and innovation initiatives are being supported through programmes such as regional institutionalisation, SME development, and financial inclusion.

For example, initiatives such as the SADC Innovation and Investment Challenges are beginning to showcase the significant potential of youth-led innovation and entrepreneurship in driving regional economic transformation

Ongoing challenges and the need for institutionalised participation

Despite these positive developments, youth participation across the region remains uneven and often insufficiently institutionalised.

In many context, youth engagements still takes place through ad hoc consultation or project-based initiatives, rather than through permanent governance structure that allow young people to influences planning, policy and resource allocation.

Youth voices also remain underrepresented in critical sectors such as trade, institutionalise agriculture, peace and security an broader economic policy processes.

These challenges are often compounded by fragmentation among youth structures, limited coordination across organisations, and insufficient financial and institutional support.

Recognising these challenges, SADC has taken important steps to strengthen youth engagement in a more structured manner. One notable milestone was the SADC Youth Consultative Forum on Sexual and Reproductive Health and Demographic Dividend held in Johannesburg in 2025, which brought together youth leaders, policymakers and regional stakeholders.

This forum provided young people with a platform to articulate their priorities and concerns, including limited participation in decision-making processes and the need for stronger institutional mechanism to channel youth perspectives into regional policy development.

Importantly, these consultations have contributed to ongoing work towards the development of a SADC Youth Engagement Framework, which aims to provide a more coherent and structured architecture for youth participation at the regional level.

National Perspective: South Africa

In South Africa, youth participation forms part of the broader democratic architecture.

Institutions such as the National Youth Development Agency (NYDA) were established to ensure that youth perspective informational development priorities, policy frameworks, and programme implementation.

Our experience has shown that youth development and gender equality are deeply interconnected. Young women often face multiple layers of exclusion, including economic inequality discrimination, and barriers to leadership.

For youth-led institutional platforms to have meaningful impact at the national level, three enabling conditional are critical: political commitment, sustainable financing, and institutional integration.

In closing

Ultimately, the question before us is not whether youth should participate, the question has been answered.

The real question is how institutions are willing to transform themselves to enable meaningful participation.

When young people, and particularly young women, are empowered to participate meaningfully on governance, institutions become more inclusive, more responsive, an better equipped to deliver on their commitments to justice and equality.

As we reflect on the priorities of CSW70, youth-led institutional platforms must be recognised not simply as participation mechanisms, but as drives of institutional reform and gender - transformative changes

