



The COP27 Children and Youth Pavillon (Alamy Stock Photo).

The COP27 Children and Youth Pavilion: How Youths United to Inspire the World

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The 27th United Nations Conference on Climate Change, known as COP27 and held in November 2022 in Egypt, witnessed an unusual event: children and young people had a leading role thanks to the space given to them, a pavilion organised and led by them, where, over 10 days, a series of events took place around the issues of their concern: water, energy, adaptation, health and indigenous communities, among others. It was a unique and inspiring moment in which children and young people enjoyed their own platform where they could speak out and interact with each other and with the political leaders present at COP27. The pavilion achieved a series of milestones ranging from the union between young people and the strengthening of links with their peers and adults to the creation of a space to develop their capacities, reflect, and exchange and defend their points of view in an inspiring environment.

Conferences of Parties or COPs are the highest-level events where government representatives, civil society, and other stakeholders gather to negotiate global agreements and policies that can mandate different actors to play a more active role to protect the environment. Young people and children usually manage to attend these conferences through NGO accreditation, and a few of them through government accreditation. Youths and children, although a minority in those spaces, act as a reminder to the world that there is a future generation waiting to inherit the world from us.

Young people have the power to unite and inspire the world. This was the message that hundreds of youths showcased at the first ever COP27 children and youth pavilion. Youths entirely led the planning, hosting and facilitation of a whole pavilion dedicated

to children and youths during COP. It was marked as the most vibrant, colourful and busiest pavilion at COP. Youths and children take part in COPs and global climate events every year, but last year was special. They had a place to come together, feel safe and speak out.

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It all started in July 2022 when the climate high-level champions team convened representatives of 15 global and regional youth climate organisations. The idea was for young people to create a space for ourselves at COP27. After receiving the funds from the Children Investment Fund Foundation

CIFF, the youths organised themselves in a unified steering committee and raced against time to make the pavilion happen. With no precedent or previous experience, the youths started getting inspired by other pavilions and shaped the design, logistics and communication strategy, as well as the programme of the pavilion. The pavilion was so popular that, in the short application period for contributions, the team received over 500 applications from youths wanting to organise sessions and share their stories and experiences with the world.

The pavilion ran from 7 to 17 November, 10 days where 100 sessions and side events were organised addressing 15 big themes, such as water, energy, adaptation, health and indigenous communities, among others. All sessions were youth-led and had the participation of over 300 stakeholders, including ministers and high-level actors. The pavilion was one of the busiest at COP and always had a high attendance from youths, as well as adults who were there learning and interacting with youths.

Young people all over the world are doing inspiring things from community actions to advocacy and innovations to solve the climate crisis. To celebrate and spread those stories, each day, the pavilion hosted Tedx-style sessions where the youths had 10 minutes to inspire the audience with their best practices and stories.

Another unique type of session hosted at the pavilion was the high-level dialogues. Every day at noon, youths and children had the chance to interact with decision-makers and global leaders related to the daily themes. These included HE Mia Mottley, Barbados Prime Minister; HE Mary Robinson, Chairman of the Elders and former

President of Ireland; Noura bint Mohammed Al Kaabi, UAE Youth Minister; Alok Sharma, COP26 President, and many others. This was a space for youths to question, learn and exchange with these leaders to get inspired and share their vision and voices as youths. Many youths were able to meet and interact with their ministers for the first time thanks to the pavilion.

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Aside from capacity-building and sharing, the pavilion aimed to link youths with each other and create a sense of community and exchange. To this end, networking sessions and regional sessions were organised. Youths from each region had a day to unite and lead by conducting their session, which was their space to express themselves. Youths conducted cultural dances and performances, dialogues with regional leaders, and discussions about their regional issues and priorities. They were able to connect with each other and create new friendships and potential collaborations for the future.

Besides the conference room, the pavilion had an open networking space with tables, chairs and free coffee. The space was a safe zone for all children and youths during COP to come and take a break, meet new friends, and feel at home. It also allowed youths to unite and discuss different negotiation updates and unify their voices and advocacy strategy. You could randomly find young people from different countries sitting at tables or even on the floor talking with each

other, feeling relaxed, discussing their plans or drawing and doing artwork.

Art was a main component of the pavilion. The pavilion walls were decorated with paintings and art creations made by youths to express different environmental issues. During the second week, a big artistic hand-made painting was done by Fearless Collective to celebrate three young female climate activists. Music was also prominent at the pavilion. Many young artists performed their songs related to the environment, which offered entertainment and diversity and showed the unique creativity and art perspective that youths have to offer.

Thanks to the pavilion, for the first time children had a safe place welcoming them. They were even speakers in panels and high-level sessions. Children's inclusion required the organising team to take safeguarding training and preparatory measures, and ensure that children are well cared for. The media and people with cameras had to acquire a consent agreement to be able to take pictures of a child.

Indigenous youths were also strongly present at the pavilion. Indigenous populations were one of the pavilion themes recognising their role as stewards of nature. Indigenous youths were present at panels as speakers and moderated mental health, well-being and nature-related sessions showing people how to link with nature and their roots.

The pavilion had a communication team of youth volunteers from the steering committee and Greenhouse Communications agency. The Office of the Secretary-General's Envoy on Youth team supported the communication campaign. The pavilion had a dedicated room to conduct interviews

and podcasts with both young activists and adult leaders. This allowed the pavilion to share those voices with youths worldwide, especially those who did not have the chance to attend the conference.

To ensure that the pavilion content is accessible, all sessions were live-streamed on the pavilion's YouTube channel and are still accessible for anyone to watch. With the different high-level speakers and attention gained by the pavilion, the media was everywhere to cover this unique achievement. The pavilion was covered by over 1,400 media articles and outlets, including BBC news, *The Independent*, *Financial Times*, Reuters, Euronews, and others.

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In just four months, youths were able to organise the most vibrant pavilion at COP27 for the first time ever. The pavilion gained strong momentum, which resulted in the COP27 final "Cover Decision" document mandating future COP hosts to ensure the existence of children and youth pavilions. This was a great win for youths, meaning that for all future conferences they will have a space to feel safe and to get together with their peers. Youth engagement at COP will never be the same again.

The pavilion achieved excellent outcomes, from uniting youths and linking them with peers and adult stakeholders to offering a space for them to develop their capacity, reflect, exchange, and advocate more effectively. COP27 had 1,500 mentions

of children and youths in its coverage, an increase of 1495% compared to COP26.

The pavilion team had multiple challenges and learnt many lessons. A major challenge was accommodating the cultural diversity of different youths. Multiple young people and children, especially indigenous, had difficulty speaking or communicating in English and needed support for interpretation. Logistics also proved to be a challenge. Many sessions happened in parallel, and many young people were present at the pavilion, which was full most of the time.

Multiple lessons can be learned from the pavilion. When young people unite and work together, their voice becomes louder and the impact bigger. This is a message for different stakeholders to collaborate and work collectively to amplify their results. Another lesson is the diverse expertise and skill set youths have to offer, from events organisation to policy and advocacy, art, innovation, research, and leading field campaigns.

Youths proved to be meaningful actors able to lead a whole global momentum and influence policy change. This calls for the urgency to provide more spaces for them to use their resources and act locally and globally. One meaningful way to engage youths is to develop their capacity and include them in countries' official delegations as young negotiators. Some countries initiated such practices and other countries are urged to get inspired. Young negotiators can solve the divide between high- and low-income countries. The latter tend to have fewer delegates, and this can cause their voice to be less present in global negotiations.

Youths are leaders when it comes to climate action. Aside from providing a whole

pavilion for them, it is essential for different stakeholders to also involve them in different spaces as speakers in panels and discussions to share their reflections, as advisors and partners to share their recommendations and experiences, and to provide capacity development and involvement opportunities for them through grants, mentorship and internship opportunities and junior positions for work and involvement.

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This is also an inspiration for youths in other sectors, such as health, gender and human rights, to mobilise and unite in global events and create similar structures for them to expand their presence and voice. Adult stakeholders are also needed to champion the youth agenda and push for its inclusion. This collaboration between youths and adults can result in a collective intergenerational exchange and momentum leading to greater influence.

COP28 will certainly have its children and youth pavilion. This time, youths and the COP presidency are challenged to raise the bar and deliver a better pavilion with more youth engagement dynamics. Youths are looking forward to making it happen again and inspiring the world with their innovation and unity, and reminding stakeholders that young people care about having a better and cleaner world.

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