



Youth Engagement in the Multilateral Energy Space in 2019–2021

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Abstract

The multilateral energy space is an essential forum for exchanging best practices, setting common targets, and developing financing frameworks. While recent years have seen an increased focus on socio-economic aspects of energy access and energy transition, the role of youth has not come to the fore until recently. This article reviews whether and how youth were involved in the multilateral energy space spanning 2019–2021 and provides suggestions regarding possible next steps that could be taken. There is a positive trend of an increasing number of youth-dedicated events held at the margins of intergovernmental forums on energy. Still, there remain several gaps for a more robust inclusion of youth.

Keywords United Nations · Sustainable energy · Young people · Meaningful youth engagement

The multilateral space refers to a system of organizations that enable ‘coordinated international action’ (Alonso 2000). The United Nations (UN) is a cornerstone of this system. It serves to negotiate common targets and responsibilities and develop collaborative platforms and solutions for financing, technical challenges, or other aspects of the issue at hand. The multilateral system is principally a space for interactions between member states. However, it is also a space for active stakeholder groups, including non-profit organizations, women, youth, indigenous people, labour unions, businesses, academia, and local governments (Alonso 2000). Agenda 21 adopted by the UN member states calls for strengthening the role of stakeholder groups in decision-making on issues that affect their communities (United Nations 1992). Direct participation of stakeholder groups in the intergovernmental space allows these groups to present their advocacy perspectives when the level of ambition of the governments appears to be insufficient to achieve the desired goals for the issue at stake. Engagement of stakeholder groups also warrants access to the expertise, testimonies, and resources that governments themselves are unable to provide. Given this context, this article reviews how young people, as a stakeholder group, have been involved in the multilateral energy space between 2019–2021. The term ‘youth’ in this article is used to refer to both children and youth, and so includes

individuals under the age of 30 or 35—eligibility depends on specific processes or events and the definition is not critical to this discussion. The article is structured as follows: first, a brief introduction to the multilateral energy space and the history of youth involvement is presented. Second, the trends of youth involvement are discussed and recommendations for future improvements are outlined.

Background

The idea of sustainable development in the multilateral space was inaugurated with the Rio Earth Summit in 1992 (Tollefson and Gilbert 2012). It was formalized as a common agenda of all the UN member states through the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), adopted in September 2000 (Sachs 2012). The MDGs were a promising, yet limited framework, especially when it came to environmental protection and equality (Fehling et al. 2013), and they expired in 2015. The MDGs were substituted by an expanded set of 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as a part of Agenda 2030 (Colglazier 2015). Within this framework, universal access to clean, affordable, and reliable energy was recognized as a standalone goal, SDG 7. While there is no specialized agency or convention dedicated to energy issues within the UN system (the International Atomic Energy Agency focuses on a subset of this thematic), several entities pursue related reporting, capacity building and financing efforts, most importantly the UN Department of Economic and

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Social Affairs, the World Bank, the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO) and Sustainable Energy for All (SEforALL), an initiative founded by former UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon that later became an independent organization with a special relationship to the UN and whose CEO traditionally is the UN Secretary-General Special Representative for Sustainable Energy for All.¹ Beyond the UN system, the International Renewable Energy Agency (IRENA) is the dedicated clean energy agency with near-universal membership (164 members as of July 2021).² Additionally, the International Energy Agency (IEA) and the Clean Energy Ministerial (CEM) are active in supporting their member states with pursuing the energy transition. In September 2021, at the margins of the UN General Assembly, the UN Secretary-General at the request of the member states convened the High-Level Dialogue on Energy (HLDE),³ which was a one-off conference that aimed to mobilize ambitions supporting achievement of SDG 7, preceded by review on the progress in achieving this goal and drawing recommendations for future actions by expert groups. Energy is the focus of many other regional and thematic organizations. However, the organizations and processes listed above have the widest membership and thus, are most relevant in the analysis on multilateral energy space.

Given the rising prominence of the youth climate movement, there is a positive trend in enabling youth to participate in the climate discourse (Fisher and Nasrin 2021), including participation in the multilateral space. In similar fashion, energy-focused agencies and intergovernmental organizations have been seeking to involve young people in their activities, starting in 2019. The first high-level energy forum open to youth participation was the Youth Leaders Forum at the 10th Clean Energy Ministerial in May 2019 in Vancouver, Canada, organized in partnership with Student Energy, a Canadian charity and global non-for-profit focused on developing a new generation of young energy leaders.⁴ The Youth Leaders Forum featured skill-building sessions, discussions, and innovation brainstorming with participation of 60 young people from 25 different countries and representatives of governments, the private sector, and non-profits. The next organization to invite participation of

young people was IRENA, which held its inaugural Youth Forum in January 2020 in Abu Dhabi, UAE.⁵ During the Youth Forum, 60 young people from around the world exchanged their views on the potential of deployment of renewable energy sources. The outcomes were discussed with representatives of governments and intergovernmental organizations and later presented by one of the participants at the 10th IRENA Assembly Plenary. A few weeks after the IRENA Youth Forum, the COVID-19 pandemic unfolded across the globe and put on hold virtually all the intergovernmental events. Many of these events were eventually either postponed or moved online. One of the first UN events to be held virtually was the High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) on sustainable development in July 2020. The HLPF reviews progress in achievement of Agenda 2030 and the SDGs and in 2020, one of the agenda items was ‘Sustaining efforts to ensure access to sustainable energy’ (United Nations 2020). While the HLPF did not have a dedicated youth space, youth organizations had the opportunity to submit contributions and intervene in the plenary sessions as per the mandate of stakeholder engagement in HLPF based on UN General Assembly resolution A/Res/67/290.⁶ The next event following the HLPF was the 11th Clean Energy Ministerial, hosted virtually by Saudi Arabia in September. The youth programme was down scaled in comparison to the youth forum held in the previous year and limited to a side event on young energy innovators.⁷ Throughout 2020, both youth-led and intergovernmental organizations learnt their lessons about the potential of online events and in 2021, there has been a return to the regular calendar of events hosted online. In January 2021, IRENA hosted the second IRENA Youth Forum, which took place virtually under the theme ‘Promoting an Inclusive and Just Energy Transition’.⁸ 400 young people from 100 countries participated in proceedings of the working groups and the Youth Forum plenary, which featured discussions with senior officials. Like the previous year, a youth speaker presented the outcomes at the 11th IRENA Assembly Plenary. IRENA’s event was followed by

¹ Who we are, Sustainable Energy for All, <https://www.seforall.org/who-we-are>. Accessed 13 July 2021.

² IRENA Membership, International Renewable Energy Agency, 2021, <https://www.irena.org/irenamembership>. Accessed 13 July 2021.

³ United Nations, Resolution A/Res/74/225 (paper presented at the United Nations General Assembly, 2020).

⁴ Student Energy’s Inaugural Youth Leaders Forum at CEM10/MI-4, Student Energy, 2019, <https://studentenergy.org/student-energy-youth-leaders-forum-at-cem10-mi-4/>. Accessed 13 July 2021.

⁵ Youth Gather to Tackle Development and Climate Challenges with Renewables, International Renewable Energy Agency, 2020, <https://www.irena.org/newsroom/articles/2020/Jan/Youth-Gather-to-Tackle-Development-and-Climate-Challenges-with-Renewables>. Accessed 13 July 2021.

⁶ United Nations, Resolution A/Res/67/290 (paper presented at the United Nations General Assembly, 2019).

⁷ The CEM11 Outcomes Report, Clean Energy Ministerial, 2020, <https://www.cleanenergyministerial.org/events-cem/11th-clean-energy-ministerial-meeting>. Accessed 13 July 2021.

⁸ Global Youth Call for a Just Energy Transition at IRENA Eleventh Assembly, International Renewable Energy Agency, 2021, <https://www.irena.org/newsroom/articles/2021/Jan/Global-Youth-Call-for-a-Just-Energy-Transition-at-IRENA-Eleventh-Assembly>. Accessed 13 July 2021.



Table 1 List of reviewed events and processes, in chronological order

10th CEM Youth Leaders Forum
IRENA Youth Forum, 2020
High-Level Political Forum, 2020
11th CEM
IRENA Youth Forum, 2021
SEforALL Youth Summit
12th CEM
Youth for VEF
High-Level Dialogue on Energy
Global Commission on People-Centred Clean Energy Transitions (preparatory process until October 2021)

the first SEforALL Youth Summit, held in February. The three-day event organized by SEforALL and supported by the SDG7 Youth Constituency and Student Energy had almost 1,000 participants from 134 countries.⁹ The attendees had the opportunity to listen to remarks from top UN officials, follow fireside chats between youth and senior energy sector leaders, network in careers and academic fairs, submit their solutions to ‘Troubleshooting for SDG7’ competition and contribute to the roundtable on youth participation in the HLDE and COP26. After the SEforALL Youth Summit, the next event in the calendar was the 12th Clean Energy Ministerial, hosted virtually by Chile in May. For the first time in the history of CEM, young advocates addressed the ministerial plenary based on the outcomes of the youth survey designed and disseminated by the CEM Secretariat, the SDG7 Youth Constituency and Student Energy. The 12th CEM also provided an opportunity for external stakeholders to propose official side events, and at least four side events were organized by youth-led organizations. The most recent intergovernmental energy event was the Vienna Energy Forum hosted by UNIDO, the Austrian government and partner organizations in July 2021. The first day of VEF was dedicated to youth and titled Youth for VEF, hosted in partnership with the SDG7 Youth Constituency.¹⁰ On that day, young people interested in energy issues had the opportunity to participate in workshops, panels, quizzes, plenary session with policymakers and virtual tours of renewable energy facilities. In addition to the events listed above, young people have been involved in two high-level processes on energy taking place this year. First, young experts and representatives of youth organizations were invited to join the Technical Working Groups¹¹ and address

the Ministerial Thematic Forums¹² of the HLDE. Additionally, youth-led organizations had the opportunity to submit voluntary commitments to support the achievement of SDG 7 in the form of Energy Compacts in the framework of the HLDE¹³ and several young speakers intervened at the HLDE Energy Action Days and the Summit. Secondly, representatives of the SDG7 Youth Constituency, a global network of youth-led energy organizations, groups, and enterprises, are members of the IEA’s Global Commission on People-Centred Clean Energy Transitions which comprises ministers, industry representatives and civil society leaders.¹⁴ In total, ten events and processes (hereinafter ‘events’) are reviewed in this article and the list is shown in Table 1. Youth dedicated events are highlighted in bold.

Methodology

As shown in the previous section, there has been a significant uptake of youth-dedicated events at the margins of intergovernmental energy forums. So far in 2021, virtually every major event in this space had a dedicated avenue for youth participation or engagement. Given the learning and advocacy potential of youth engagement in these spaces, there is a need to evaluate how the currently employed means for youth participation fare against youth engagement frameworks developed in the literature. Based on the review, the activities involving or dedicated to youth usually have one or both of the following purposes: policy advocacy or capacity building. Policy advocacy is bringing the voices of civil society to the decision-making table and meaningfully incorporating their recommendations in the outputs of the process, such as policies and international agreements (Gen

⁹ Seven Highlights and Outcomes from the SEforALL Virtual Youth Summit, Sustainable Energy for All, 2021, <https://www.seforall.org/publications/highlights-outcomes-youth-summit>. Accessed 13 July 2021.

¹⁰ Youth for VEF, Vienna Energy Forum, 2021, <https://www.viennenergyforum.org/events/youth-for-vef/>. Accessed 13 July 2021.

¹¹ Technical Working Groups, United Nations High-Level Dialogue on Energy, 2021, https://www.un.org/en/conferences/energy2021/Preparatory_Process/TECHNICAL_CONSULTATIONS. Accessed 13 July 2021,

¹² Ministerial-level Thematic Forums, United Nations High-Level Dialogue on Energy, 2021, https://www.un.org/en/conferences/energy2021/Preparatory_Process. Accessed 13 July 2021.

¹³ Energy Compacts Registry, United Nations, 2021, <https://www.un.org/en/energycompacts/page/registry>. Accessed 9 October 2021.

¹⁴ Our Inclusive Energy Future. The Global Commission on People-Centred Clean Energy Transitions, International Energy Agency, 2021, <https://www.iea.org/programmes/our-inclusive-energy-future>. Accessed 13 July 2021.



and Wright 2013). Capacity building is a broad category of efforts aimed at improving skills, creating opportunities, and providing resources to the target groups (Eade 2007). The success of events introduced in the previous section will be examined regarding achieving the two goals outlined above through the lens of youth engagement framework developed by Maynard (2008). Maynard distinguishes three factors of youth engagement: (i) youth voice, which refers to giving the youth the opportunity to present their views, (ii) youth empowerment, which refers to transferring some power (decision-making, agenda-setting, etc.) from adults to youth, and (iii) youth participation, which refers to some form of participation of young people (attending events, volunteering for activities, etc.). A different combination of these factors may be present in each analyzed situation and preferably, all of them would be present to enable meaningful youth engagement. The advantage of Maynard's framework rather than the frequently used Ladder of Participation (Arnstein 1969) is that it allows us to scrutinize which aspects of engagement are present and which are absent, instead of merely assigning a pre-determined category to the scrutinized case. In addition to meaningful engagement of young people in the events, commentary is provided regarding follow-up activities. The review has been conducted based on publicly available information on the events and the author's personal experience as a participant.

Discussion

Youth Voice

All the analyzed events either focus solely on policy advocacy or have a joint focus on policy advocacy and capacity building. Hence, each event should give youth the platform to communicate and be listened to. It has been observed that there are indeed opportunities for young people to express their views. However, the modalities of engagement differ. Firstly, there is a clear distinction between youth-dedicated and general events with youth participation. In the latter, the youth representatives usually deliver interventions at the plenary sessions or, less frequently, participate in proceedings of working groups. One of the limitations is that these events rely on a single or a limited number of representatives to bring the 'youth perspective' and risk tokenization (Lal et al. 2019). In such settings, organizers often expect a single or a few individuals to represent views of an incredibly diverse and complex constituency. To mitigate it, the organizers should set the expectations clear regarding the representativeness of the speakers and expand the speaking opportunities to bring in more young voices. Another metric to measure if youth voices are meaningfully included is to compare how many young experts are considered for

speaking opportunities compared to other demographic groups. Among the youth-dedicated events, the modalities range from open participation in a discussion to mere following of the interventions by other youth advocates. In this regard, some youth-dedicated events do not offer any more inclusive advocacy framework than do general energy forums. The shift from in-person to virtual events enabled wider access to the youth discussion forums at the margins of key intergovernmental events, but it also has limitations. Extensive use of interactive tools for online events may limit youth voices to participation in closed polls, instead of sharing their opinions in open discussions. For youth-dedicated events, a critical question is how the outcomes of the discussions are channelled to decision-makers. Most of the reviewed events have on their agenda at least one segment dedicated to presentation of advocacy positions by youth representatives and discussion of the proposals with officials from governments, private sector, or intergovernmental organizations. In some cases, representatives from the youth event are invited to deliver remarks at plenaries of the related general events. This is a promising development, but there is a need for more clarity on how the outputs of youth advocacy are included in the outcomes of the proceedings. Regarding events that are not youth-dedicated and young people are one of the many participating stakeholder groups, interventions of youth are often not reflected in the formal or non-formal reports.

Youth Empowerment

The concept of youth empowerment can be applied to different stages of event preparation, execution, and follow-up. The classic example of a lack of youth empowerment presented by Maynard is when an organization collects inputs from youth but designs an activity without their active involvement and only expects the young people to participate in the event. This risk seems to be mitigated in most youth-dedicated events, as almost all of them identify youth partner organizations or young individuals on the organizing team. It is a welcome step that in most of the events, the facilitators and moderators are young people. However, there is still a significant gap in empowering youth to support and co-create general events. At the execution stage, the most common reason for disempowerment is the inability of young people to secure access to the space. In all cases, except for the High-Level Political Forum, youth engagement in the space is at the discretion of the secretariat or the chair and not ensured by the terms of reference. The lack of long-term commitment or obligation to involve young people may hinder the other two factors of engagement: the potential to fully utilize the opportunity to participate or voice opinions. It was shown in the context of youth engagement in the multilateral climate space that if



the self-perception of agency of the youth is high, they contribute with constructive policy amendments, useful to the process (Thew 2018). If there is no certainty regarding their access to the space, young people may refrain from fully utilizing the advocacy opportunities in the fear of limiting their access in future iterations of the events.

Youth empowerment is a critical factor for events that focus on capacity building, as young people are encouraged to gain new skills and employ them to address challenges facing their communities and the wider world. To this end, the events focused on capacity building frequently invite successful young energy entrepreneurs, advocates, researchers, policymakers, analysts, and leaders to share their stories and best practices. At the same time, there appears to be little follow-up action to streamline policy recommendations on enabling environments, and hence, develop youth-dedicated programmes or substantive reports on issues of youth in the energy sector. An example of recommendations that include youth-focused metrics are theme reports of the Technical Working Groups of the HLDE.¹⁵

Youth Participation

Some key questions in the context of youth participation are how open and accessible participation is and what are the modalities of engagement. To a large extent, these questions were answered in the previous subsections. Regarding sheer numbers, most of the in-person events report attendance of less than one hundred and virtual events in hundreds. These numbers are miniscule in comparison to the potential number of young people involved in or interested in the energy sector. While participation in the multilateral space will not be of interest to many due to the political nature of the engagement, by looking at the total number of professionals and the example of rapid opening of the climate space, there seems to be a potential to increase participation severally. One of the potential gaps for youth participation is that virtually none of the discussed events has dedicated regional or national tracks, and the selected thematic are often broader than any person's individual expertise. Lack of geographic focus may discourage participation for professionals interested in dealing with issues unique to their locality or unable to participate in an event held only in English. Having that said, while expanding participation in capacity building activities is clearly beneficial, the proposition of increasing the number of youths in policy advocacy spaces is more nuanced. Just like other constituencies, young people should not have to show up *en masse* to defend their interests and

present their points of view. While the lived experiences of young people always matter and there should be a space for them to be listened to, young people may not always have the capacity and training to effectively engage in the multilateral space. Hence, networks for young people to coordinate and streamline their voices, such as the SDG7 Youth Constituency of the Major Group for Children and Youth, play an important role in reflecting the views of young people. The legitimacy of these groups, and hence the interest of young people to contribute to these processes, can be improved by the presence of transparent decision-making processes but also through recognition by the intergovernmental partners. Having considered these limitations to participation, two suggested pathways forward are to dedicate efforts to improve outreach and participation number in the events or ensure that those attending are effectively gathering inputs from their respective communities and disseminating output information to those groups.

Conclusion

The multilateral energy events have the potential to serve as a space for youth advocacy for a more rapid and ambitious clean energy transition, especially given that international cooperation will play an important role in mobilizing finance and raising awareness about the socioeconomic benefits of the energy transition (Quitow et al. 2019). Active engagement in these spaces will also empower and build the capacity of young professionals. In a positive development to enable such engagement, an increasing number of UN agencies and other intergovernmental organizations held youth-dedicated events on energy or invited youth to participate in the ongoing processes, such as expert working groups and high-level discussions. Most of the discussed events employ the three dimensions of youth engagement identified by Maynard—youth voice, youth empowerment, youth participation—at least to some extent. The suggested areas for future improvement include securing long-term or mandated participation of young people, enabling more universal or more representative attendance, facilitating more participative modes of engagement, and ensuring follow-up actions based on outputs of the events. To achieve universal energy access by 2030 and rapid transition to a clean and efficient energy system, governments, private sector, academia, and civil society must become active agents of change. Participation in policy advocacy and capacity building in the multilateral space is one of the avenues how young people can pursue their role in the energy transition, so it is necessary to make this space ever more inclusive and effective.

¹⁵ Theme Reports, United Nations High-Level Dialogue on Energy, 2021, <https://www.un.org/en/hlde-2021/page/theme-reports>. Accessed 14 July 2021.



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