



NGYouthSDGs
Network of Youth For Sustainable Initiative



NIGERIA YOUTH SHADOW REPORT

On Nigeria's Voluntary National Review



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Executive Summary

This Youth Shadow Report provides a youth-led, evidence-informed perspective on Nigeria's progress toward the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as the country prepares its third Voluntary National Review (VNR) for the United Nations High-Level Political Forum (HLPF). Drawing on a national survey of over 1,000 young people and virtual consultations across the six geopolitical zones, this report reflects the lived realities of young people aged 15 to 35, including students, unemployed youth, self-employed individuals, and early career professionals. Approximately 34% live in rural communities and 66% in urban areas, highlighting the deep urban-rural divide in access to services and opportunities.

This report confirms that despite Nigeria's commitments to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, many young people remain excluded from decision-making and underserved by policies meant to benefit them. Major gaps persist in youth-friendly healthcare, especially mental health and reproductive services, affordable and relevant education, decent jobs, digital access, climate action, and meaningful civic engagement.

While Nigeria's 2025 VNR mentions "youth" 64 times, the integration of youth priorities into actionable strategies and budgets remains unclear. Our report calls for a shift from youth tokenism to true co-leadership, urging government and development partners to embed youth voices at the centre of policy design, budgeting, and accountability.

Headline findings

- Over 50 percent of the youth surveyed cannot consistently afford or access the internet.
- Only 22.9 percent have participated in any form of climate action.
- Nearly 60 percent feel excluded or unsafe participating in the local or national governance process.

To meet the SDGs, Nigeria must prioritise youth-led solutions, close the rural-urban and gender divides, and invest in systems that turn youth ideas into actions. With just five years to 2030, recognising that young people who make up 65 percent of Nigeria's population are not just beneficiaries but co-drivers of national development is essential.

Background

Youth constitute the majority of Nigeria's population, with approximately 65 percent under 30 and nearly one in five citizens is aged 15-24 yet continue to face systemic exclusion from development processes. Although the SDGs aim to leave no one behind, young people are often excluded from decision-making, data collection, and monitoring. This shadow report, led by Network of Youth for Sustainable Initiative (NGYouthSDGs) in collaboration with YouthHubAfrica (YHA), seeks to document youth realities and promote accountability, inclusion, and equity in the VNR process.

Despite Nigeria's commitments to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, young people continue to face persistent barriers to accessing health, quality education, decent work, digital access, and participation in civic life. While the government-led VNR process provides an overview of progress, it does not capture the grassroots realities of youth. Previous youth engagements have been superficial, lacking the depth and influence needed to shape decisions in a meaningful way. This report fills that gap by focusing on Good Health and Well-being (SDG 3), Quality Education (SDG 4), Decent Work and Economic Growth (SDG 8), Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure (SDG 9), Climate Action (SDG 13), Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions (SDG 16), and Partnerships for the Goals (SDG 17), spotlighting youth perspectives that are often overlooked.

Objectives

- Provide a youth-led, evidence-based narrative on Nigeria's SDG progress.
- Assess government and development efforts on youth priorities.
- Amplify youth voices to national and international audiences.
- Inform policies that advance youth inclusion and participation.



Methodology

To ensure this report reflected the realities and aspirations of Nigerian youth, a mixed-methods approach was adopted. First, a nationwide survey was conducted, engaging 974 young people from all six geopolitical zones. The survey captured diverse perspectives on key development issues, including health, education, employment, digital access, and civic participation.

Respondent Profile



Age of Respondents

- 15 - 19 years: 15.81% (n=154)
- 20 - 24 years: 26.18% (n= 255)
- 25 - 29 years: 32.44% (n=316)
- 30 - 35 years: 25.56% (n=249)

Settlement:	Urban (641) Rural (333)
Zones:	North Central (191) North East (115) North West (266) South East (111) South South (135) South West (156)

In addition to the quantitative data, virtual youth consultations were held across the six geopolitical zones. These sessions provided a platform for deeper conversations among 120 youth, allowing participants to share lived experiences and propose practical solutions to challenges in their communities.

Finally, a desk review was undertaken, analysing Nigeria's 2025 Voluntary National Review (VNR) draft and related policy documents. This helped to contextualise the youth data within national development priorities and provided a baseline for assessing alignment between official narratives and youth realities.

Desk Review of the VNR 2025 Nigeria Report

Nigeria's 2025 Voluntary National Review (VNR) offers a comprehensive reflection of progress and gaps in SDG implementation, emphasising a whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach. While the term "youth" appears 64 times, the report's integration of youth inputs into actionable policies remains vague. Despite efforts like the national youth consultation (UNICEF/UNFPA-led) and the online survey of 1,477 youth respondents, there's little evidence of how these insights directly shaped implementation strategies or sectoral programs. This gap raises questions about whether youth participation has moved beyond consultation into tangible influence.

The VNR identifies key youth-related challenges across healthcare, education, and livelihoods, among other areas, many of which also emerged as cross-cutting issues in our consultations:

- **Healthcare:** The VNR acknowledges high maternal mortality (1,047 per 100,000 live births), far above the global target. It attributes this to high out-of-pocket healthcare costs and significant regional disparities in access and quality. While youth are briefly mentioned concerning adolescent health, the report lacks focused attention on mental health, drug abuse, and youth-specific access to primary care issues that emerged repeatedly during this shadow report's consultations.

Although flagship programs such as MAMII (Maternal and Neonatal Mortality Reduction) and the Safe Motherhood Strategy (2024–2028) are highlighted in the VNR, they do not appear to be tailored to the unique health needs of young people. Respondents to our survey echoed the same disconnect, frequently citing inadequate health infrastructure, limited or absent mental health support, and the unaffordability of care as persistent barriers to their well-being.

- **Education:** The VNR highlights a modest rise in primary school attendance, reaching 68.4%, yet it acknowledges persistent disparities in secondary and tertiary education enrolment, particularly in rural and underserved communities. Infrastructure challenges, poor access to water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) facilities, and limited digital learning resources are also noted. However, the report lacks detail on vocational training, life skills education, or the effectiveness of school curricula in equipping students for real-world challenges.

These gaps align closely with findings from this shadow report. Many youth respondents from rural areas reported learning in overcrowded or dilapidated classrooms, inability

to afford school fees, and limited access to online educational tools or digital devices. Several also expressed frustration over outdated curricula and the absence of practical learning that could better prepare them for employment or civic life.

- **Livelihoods:** The VNR 2025 highlights a national unemployment rate of 8.6% as of Q3 2023, based on data from the Nigeria Labour Force Survey. While this figure presents a general labour market trend, it does not capture the full extent of youth-specific challenges. The report also notes that 26.2% of Nigerian youth are Not in Education, Employment, or Training (NEET), a figure that points to widespread exclusion from productive opportunities.

Despite referencing national programs to support Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) and entrepreneurship, the VNR offers limited insight into how these initiatives directly reach or benefit young people. In contrast, this shadow report reveals deeper structural barriers to youth economic inclusion.

According to our survey, only 178 youth respondents indicated that they were formally employed, while 222 reported being unemployed, and 319 were self-employed often informally and without access to capital or mentorship. An additional 227 youth were still in school, and only 28 respondents identified as NEET, suggesting that while formal NEET statistics are significant, many more youth experience unstable or vulnerable employment conditions not fully captured in national averages.

Respondents consistently cited the absence of decent jobs, lack of startup capital, and minimal mentorship or vocational pathways as key obstacles. Many also described self-employment not as a choice, but as a necessity born out of limited alternatives.

These findings underscore a significant gap between policy frameworks and the lived realities of young Nigerians seeking sustainable livelihoods.

Digital Inclusion and Innovation: The VNR outlines an ambitious \$3 billion broadband expansion aimed at achieving 70% internet penetration and reducing broadband costs by 60% by the end of 2025. It acknowledges stark digital disparities, especially along gender and geographic lines. According to the 2021 MICS, 37.8% of young men aged 15–24 use the internet compared to just 21.3% of young women.

However, findings from this shadow report reveal that national-level targets do not yet translate into equitable, on-the-ground access for many Nigerian youth. While 46% of respondents said they could always afford and use the internet, 37% said they could only afford it sometimes, and 17% reported no access at all. This means that more than half of the youth surveyed lack consistent, affordable access to the internet for learning, work, or innovation, an essential entry point for meaningful participation in the digital economy.

Furthermore, only 38% of respondents said there were opportunities to innovate or access digital training in their area, while 55% said no such opportunities exist, and 7% were unsure. These results highlight an urgent need to decentralise innovation ecosystems and invest in community-based digital literacy programs. Youth voices, particularly from the Southeast and rural communities, consistently pointed to the absence of digital training centers, poor internet connectivity, and a lack of awareness and resources to innovate.

To close these gaps, stakeholders must prioritise youth-specific digital inclusion strategies that go beyond infrastructure, ensuring that access to the internet and innovation opportunities is equitable, affordable, and empowering.

Climate Action: The VNR outlines Nigeria's key climate adaptation and mitigation priorities, including renewable energy transitions, reforestation efforts, and early warning systems for flood-prone areas. However, it lacks clear indicators or programs specifically targeting youth engagement in climate policy or local implementation. Youth are mentioned in broad terms, often under the umbrella of "vulnerable populations," without reference to specific climate education, green skills training, or participation in environmental governance structures.

The VNR does not provide much detail about how youth are involved in climate action. However, findings from this shadow report show that most young people have little or no access to environmental programs in their communities. Only 22.9% of youth surveyed had participated in any form of climate action. Another 35.2% said they were aware of climate issues but not involved, while a striking 41.9% said they were not aware of any

clear lack of access to localised environmental programs and highlight the urgent need to bridge the gap between national climate goals and youth inclusion on the ground.

Youth voices emphasised the need for climate awareness campaigns, school-based environmental clubs, and accessible platforms for youth to lead or participate in community resilience projects. Without intentional youth-centered investment, Nigeria risks sidelining a critical demographic from its climate goals.

Youth Engagement and Governance: Although the VNR celebrates “broad-based participation,” it offers only general references to youth inclusion and does not provide concrete evidence of youth-led governance mechanisms or outcomes from youth consultations. Youth are recognised as stakeholders but not as co-creators or decision-makers in institutional governance frameworks.

Survey responses from this shadow report tell a more revealing story. When asked whether they feel safe and included in decision-making in their communities or the country, 58% of youth responded 'No', 23% said 'Maybe', and only 19% said 'Yes.' Many shared personal stories of political exclusion, tokenism, and insecurity that shaped their perception.

"The government sees youth as tools, not partners." "Our opinions are heard but not acted upon."
"Speaking up feels dangerous, especially in rural areas."

These responses highlight both structural and cultural barriers to civic engagement. Many youth feel that even when given platforms, they are not empowered to influence outcomes. Others expressed concerns about physical safety, intimidation, or lack of trust in the political system.

Partnerships and Implementation: The VNR acknowledges the importance of multi-stakeholder collaboration through platforms like the Development Partners' Forum and Private Sector Advisory Group (PSAG). However, it lacks clear frameworks for how youth are engaged as partners in planning, implementation, or funding of SDG-related initiatives.

Our respondents emphasised the need for youth-focused and action-driven partnerships that go beyond visibility to include funding, technical support, and rural engagement.



■ Youth Perspectives by ■ SDG Theme



The VNR highlights government efforts to reduce maternal and child mortality through programmes like MAMII, construction of 195 health facilities, and the Safe Motherhood Strategy (2024–2028), aiming for a 20% maternal mortality reduction by 2027.

Beyond the VNR, the Basic Health Care Provision Fund (BHCPF) has operationalised funding for over 15,000 PHCs nationwide, expanding access to essential medicines and services for vulnerable populations.

The Nigeria Health Sector Renewal Investment Initiative (HSRII) further strengthens health security and immunisation coverage¹.

Despite these achievements, youth consultations reveal persistent gaps in mental health care, reproductive health services, and the affordability of primary care. Nearly half of the youth rated healthcare access as poor or very poor, with mental health support described as nearly non-existent in many communities.

Access to affordable and youth-friendly healthcare services remains a major concern, as reflected in both the youth consultation survey and discussions during the virtual consultative forum. Nearly half of the survey respondents rated healthcare access as poor or very poor, with only 55 respondents describing their access as excellent, compared to 367 who rated it negatively. This stark contrast underscores widespread dissatisfaction with the current state of healthcare delivery, particularly among young and vulnerable groups.

Across both data sources, mental health emerged as a critical issue, with participants identifying stress and substance use, especially smoking, as common challenges. Respondents described a lack of safe spaces, professional support, and public awareness around mental well-being, making it difficult for many young people to seek help or openly discuss their struggles.

In addition, participants raised concerns about the availability and accessibility of youth-friendly reproductive health services. They highlighted the need for more inclusive, stigma-free environments where young people can access information and services related to sexual and reproductive health. Cultural taboos, misinformation, and limited service delivery points continue to pose major barriers.

Click The Links Below

<https://statehouse.gov.ng/news/president-tinubu-approves-establishment-of-programme-management-unit-for-health-sector-renewal-investment-initiative/>

Together, these concerns suggest that while health is a core development priority under SDG 3, current systems are not sufficiently responsive to the unique realities of young Nigerians. Integrating mental health and reproductive services into mainstream health systems, alongside youth-led awareness campaigns, will be key to advancing progress under SDG 3.

Youth Voices:

- "Mental health support is missing."
- "Hospitals are far, expensive, and poorly equipped."
- "Getting better health care has become too expensive."

Gaps and Challenges:

- Inadequate mental health care
- High cost of treatment
- Drug abuse and lack of reproductive health education

Proposed Solutions:

- Establish youth-friendly clinics
- Invest in mental health services and campaigns
- Train health workers on youth-specific needs

Youth Priority Ask

Young people call for an integrated youth-friendly health services, including mental health, reproductive health, and substance use prevention, embedded within primary healthcare systems nationwide to ensure accessible, affordable, and stigma-free care.



“Young people are in school, but they’re not learning what matters.”

This sentiment, shared during the virtual consultation forum, reflects a broader frustration with Nigeria’s education system, particularly its inability to prepare students for real-world demands. The VNR reports progress through the construction of 8,008 classroom blocks, rehabilitation of 305 classrooms, and the World Bank-funded Adolescent Girls Initiative for Learning and Empowerment (AGILE)

programme supporting adolescent girls’ education, contributing to a rise in primary school attendance from 60.9 percent in 2016 to 68.4 percent in 2021.

Outside the VNR, the Nigeria Learning Passport (NLP) has registered over 100,000 learners, enabling online access to basic and skills-based education³. The operationalisation of the National Skills Qualification Framework (NSQF) standardises vocational training, while the Nigeria Education Loan Fund (ELFund), which started in 2024, offers tertiary students interest-free loans to reduce financial barriers.

Despite these initiatives, youth consultations reveal that many schools remain overcrowded with outdated curricula and minimal digital tools, particularly in rural areas. 30% of respondents felt unprepared for employment or civic life, and poverty remains a key barrier to completing education. Respondents also voiced even deeper concerns, pointing to infrastructural decay, lack of learning materials, and economic hardship that prevent many from completing school. As one participant put it:

“The issue here is not going to school, it’s that the teachers lack teaching instruments. For example, computer students have not even seen a computer, yet they are being taught computers.”

These accounts highlight a widening gap between curriculum and delivery, especially in rural and low-income settings. Many participants also emphasised the financial burden of continuing education, with one sharing:

“Most students drop out not because they don’t want to learn, but because of poverty. They just can’t afford to go further.”

Click The Links Below

²<https://projects.worldbank.org/en/projects-operations/project-detail/P170664>

³<https://www.unicef.org/nigeria/press-releases/nigeria-learning-passport-reaches-one-million-subscribers-milestone-educational>

Despite these challenges, youth are stepping up to support one another. A forum participant shared a personal intervention:

"I facilitated getting scholarships so that some young people in my community could write WAEC for free. That was the only way they could finish school."

Beyond personal experiences, participants critiqued the education system's lack of leadership development, outdated curricula, and failure to promote practical or vocational skills.

To address these issues, participants called for the expansion of education funding initiatives like NELFund to include primary, secondary, and vocational levels, ensuring a more inclusive and equitable reach.

Collectively, these insights demonstrate that improving access is not enough; relevance, affordability, and quality must be central to education reform if Nigeria is to meet the aspirations of SDG 4 and empower its youth to thrive.

Youth Voices:

- "Our curriculum is outdated."
- "Even graduates are unemployed."
- "Schooling is expensive and doesn't lead to jobs."
- "Lack of motivation and exposure to practical experiences."

Challenges:

- School fees and poverty
- Lack of access to digital tools
- Inadequate infrastructure

Proposed Solutions:

- Strengthen vocational education
- Expand digital learning programs
- Improve infrastructure, especially in rural schools

Youth Priority Ask

Youth demand a modernised educational system that equips them with practical, digital, and vocational skills, alongside relevant curricula, infrastructure upgrades, and financial support to ensure inclusive, quality learning for all.

Many young Nigerians feel locked out of meaningful economic participation. From the youth consultation survey, the majority of respondents reported being either unemployed or self-employed without formal support systems, a trend that reflects both high joblessness and limited access to structured opportunities.

The VNR notes an unemployment rate of 8.6 percent (Q3 2023) and 66 vocational and skills centres constructed, with economic reforms leading to 4.6 percent GDP growth in Q4 2024.

Beyond the VNR, the government restructured N-Power into the Renewed Hope Skills Acquisition Programme, targeting 1 million youth annually with apprenticeship and digital economy training. The Presidential Enabling Business Environment Council (PEBEC) also streamlined MSME registration, improving Nigeria's business climate.

Despite these efforts, youth consultations show only 178 respondents were formally employed, with 319 self-employed often informally, citing lack of startup capital, mentorship, and practical skills as major barriers. Many described self-employment as a necessity rather than choice.

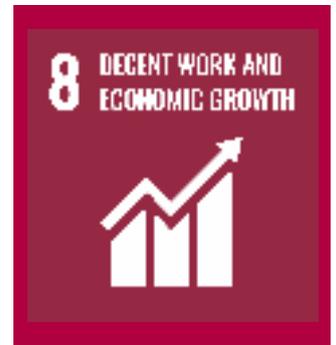
Unemployment and underemployment consistently emerged as top concerns across both the survey and the virtual consultation forum. Youth expressed deep frustration with unrealistic job requirements, particularly the demand for "two years of experience" for entry-level positions aimed at fresh graduates. This contradiction leaves many feeling disqualified before they even begin.

Beyond employment status, youth called for gender equity in hiring, improved support for digital creators and informal entrepreneurs, and urgent investment in infrastructure, including stable electricity, internet, and security to unlock productive potential. Many participants highlighted that the current economic environment stifles initiative and innovation.

A forum participant underscored the disconnect between government programs and youth realities, stating:

"The youths should be asked what they need before programs are created. The government just brings up initiatives without asking if the youths are even interested in them."

This comment reflects a broader call for youth-informed economic planning. Participants advocated for consultative approaches that prioritise what young need, whether that's skills training, startup capital, flexible learning models, or digital work pathways.



Youth Voices:

- “No jobs, and no capital to start anything.”
- “Lack of access to job opportunities or capital to start a life.”

Challenges Indicated:

- Lack of capital and mentorship
- Limited job creation programs

Solutions Proposed:

- Youth micro-grants and incubators
- Expand job and skills training programs
- Incentivise local hiring and youth entrepreneurship
- Public-private youth employment partnerships.

Youth Priority Ask

Young Nigerians seek bold, youth-responsive economic strategies, including micro-grants, mentorship, youth-inclusive MSME initiatives, and public-private partnerships to create decent jobs and pathways for dignified livelihoods.

Despite Nigeria’s growing digital economy, many young people, particularly in rural areas and the South East region, remain excluded from meaningful access to technology and innovation infrastructure. Survey responses revealed that a significant number of youth have limited or no access to digital training programs or innovation hubs, limiting their ability to develop tech skills, explore entrepreneurship, or engage in creative industries.

The VNR outlines a \$3 billion broadband expansion plan to achieve 70% internet penetration and a 60% cost reduction by 2025, alongside installing 19,266 solar streetlights and expanding solar capacity from 4 MW (2014) to 112 MW (2023).

Outside the VNR, the National Blockchain Policy (2023–2025) is being implemented, with the National Information Technology Development Agency (NITDA) training over 30,000 youth in blockchain and emerging tech, while 5G network deployment has commenced commercially through MTN and Airtel.



Despite these advancements, youth consultations reveal persistent digital exclusion, with over half lacking consistent, affordable internet access and only 38% reporting access to digital training or innovation hubs, particularly in rural areas.

During the virtual consultative forum, participants emphasised the need to close this digital divide. They pointed out that youth in many communities still lack basic internet access, reliable electricity, and local tech infrastructure, which hinders not only learning but also creative and entrepreneurial potential. One participant noted: “We have the ideas and the passion, but without internet, tools, or spaces to work, how can we innovate?”

Youth advocated for greater government investment in local innovation centers, particularly in underserved regions. These centers, they argued, should provide access to co-working spaces, equipment, mentorship, and training tailored to young entrepreneurs, tech enthusiasts, and content creators.

Young people also stressed that internet access should be treated like a basic necessity, something everyone needs to fully participate in the economy, society, and civic life. Without reliable internet, especially in rural areas, many are left behind, and this deepens inequality. Aligning with SDG 9, these insights highlight the urgent need for inclusive, youth-centered investments in infrastructure that bridge the innovation divide and unlock the creative potential of young Nigerians.

Youth Voices:

- “We don’t have internet to attend free online courses.”
- “No digital training centers in my community.”
- “We lack awareness and resources to innovate.”

Gaps and Challenges:

- Poor internet access
- Innovation hubs remain scarce, especially in rural communities, where youth often have little to no access to local digital training or innovation spaces.

Youth Priority Ask

Youth urge investments in local innovation hubs, digital training centres, and reliable internet infrastructure, particularly in rural areas, to bridge the digital divide and unlock their potential as innovators and entrepreneurs.



While awareness of climate change is growing among young Nigerians, active participation in climate action remains limited, particularly in rural areas. Many youth respondents acknowledged the visible effects of climate change on their communities, including flooding, air pollution, and land degradation due to mining activities.

The VNR highlights Nigeria's Long-Term Low Emissions Development Strategy (LT-LEDS) targeting net-zero by 2060, with reforestation and flood early warning systems as key adaptation priorities.

Beyond the VNR, the Energy Transition Plan (ETP) has mobilised over \$2 billion in blended finance commitments, scaling solar mini-grids in rural areas, while the Great Green Wall expansion in northern states combats desertification. Currently, Nigeria's third Nationally Determined Contribution is at the consultation phase under the leadership of the National Council on Climate Change.

Despite these initiatives, youth consultations reveal that only 22.9 percent have participated in climate action, with many unaware of local opportunities or lacking access to environmental programmes. Young people desire practical, community-based climate initiatives and school-based environmental education.

During the virtual consultation, participants criticised the government's weak response and inadequate public awareness efforts, stressing that climate policies often lack local reach and youth involvement. They called for stronger integration of youth voices in climate education, community resilience programs, and policy development.

One participant emphasised the importance of community-based awareness:

"The community needs to be educated on the issue of climate change and how our actions affect it. Organisations can work in conjunction with waste management agencies in their various places to make sure that the dustbins are well-disbursed."

This reflects a broader call for practical, youth-led solutions such as proper waste management, environmental education, and collaboration with local authorities to address environmental hazards.

To truly advance SDG 13, climate initiatives must empower youth as local climate actors, equipping them with the tools, platforms, and support to take action within their communities.

Youth Voices:

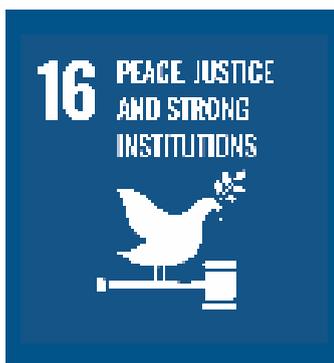
- “We want to help, but don’t know how.”
- “Climate clubs in schools can help.”

Gaps and Challenges:

- Lack of access to climate programs
- Low awareness of local opportunities
- Climate action is concentrated in urban areas

Youth Priority Ask

Young people want to be active partners in climate action, calling for school-based climate clubs, community resilience programmes, green skills training, and inclusion in national and local climate decision-making platforms.



The VNR documents reforms such as strengthening the Independent Corrupt Practices and Other Related Offences Commission (ICPC), Constituency Project Tracking, and SDG Standing Committees in the National Assembly. Outside the VNR, the Community Policing Initiative recruited 20,000 constables to strengthen local security, while the National Identity Management Commission (NIMC) expanded National Identification Numbers (NINs) to over 100 million, improving citizen data for social protection and governance.

However, a significant number of young Nigerians feel excluded from the systems meant to represent them. According to the youth consultation survey, 58 percent of respondents stated that they are not included in governance processes or feel unsafe participating in civic activities. This points to a broader climate of political marginalization, distrust in institutions, and fear of violence. During the virtual consultation forum, participants unanimously agreed that young people are often sidelined in political spaces and civic processes. There was a strong call for:

- Greater youth representation in governance, including at the local government and community levels.
- Reform of civic education to ensure young people understand their rights and responsibilities in democratic spaces.
- Creation of safe spaces for youth dialogue and advocacy, where their voices are respected and translated into action.

These findings highlight the need for institutional reforms that not only create room for youth participation, but also prioritise safety, accountability, and meaningful engagement.

Advancing SDG 16 requires building systems where young people are not just seen but heard, valued, and empowered to lead.

Youth Voices:

- “We are used for politics, not included.”
- “We don’t trust local leaders.”
- “We are not taken seriously in political spaces.”

Challenges:

- Political exclusion
- Insecurity and harassment

Proposed Solutions:

- Invest in sustained civic education campaigns in schools and communities to increase youth awareness of their rights and responsibilities, and to encourage meaningful participation in political and governance processes.

Youth Priority Ask

Youth demand meaningful representation in governance, safety in civic spaces, and institutional reforms that treat them as co-creators in decision-making, not merely as consultation participants.



Young Nigerians have consistently expressed a strong willingness to contribute to national development, but many feel excluded from planning, implementation, and funding processes. While youth-led organizations and informal groups are driving impactful change in their communities, they often lack the institutional support and resources to scale their efforts.

Nigeria’s 2025 VNR acknowledges platforms like the Private Sector Advisory Group (PSAG), Civil Society Organizations Strategy Group on the SDGs (CSOSG-SDGs), and the Integrated National Financing Framework (INFF) for SDGs resource mobilization. Beyond the VNR, the Nigeria Integrated Planning and Reporting Toolkit (IPRT) aligns sub-national plans with SDGs, while diaspora investment initiatives are piloting structured remittance channels for MSME and job creation funding.

Yet, youth consultations indicate limited inclusion of youth-led organizations in these partnerships, with many lacking accesses to funding, capacity-building, or decision-making platforms.

Participants advocated for:

- Inclusive development planning, where youth are engaged from the outset, not as an afterthought.
- Access to funding and capacity-building opportunities, particularly for youth-led initiatives in rural and underserved areas.
- Cross-sector collaboration to support education, innovation, climate action, and rural development.

To realise SDG 17, partnerships must evolve into platforms for shared leadership and mutual accountability where youth are not only recipients of development interventions but co-creators and implementers of lasting solutions.

Youth Voices:

- "Allow youth to participate fully in governance and decision-making."
- "There should be a quota system for youths and women in politics."
- "By equipping young people with practical skills, mentorship, and start-up support, this policy would not only reduce unemployment but also give youth a stronger voice and role in driving community development and national progress."
- "A grassroots-based alliance network is the only and preferred path towards improving life for youths."

Top Priorities Shared by Youth:

- Fund and scale youth-led solutions
- Involve youth in planning, budgeting, and reviews
- Improve access to funding and partnerships.

Youth Priority Ask

Young people call for authentic partnerships that include youth in planning, budgeting, implementation, and monitoring, backed by equitable funding and capacity building to scale youth-led solutions nationwide.

Cross Cutting Issues

Gender

A notable cross-cutting issue observed in the data collection process was the low participation of female respondents. This gender imbalance may be attributed to a combination of socio-cultural norms, limited access to digital tools, and competing domestic responsibilities that disproportionately affect young women. Additionally, the timing and mode of survey dissemination, along with potential concerns around safety, privacy, or perceived relevance of the topic, may have further discouraged female participation.

Addressing this gap is crucial for ensuring that the insights and recommendations emerging from the report are inclusive and reflective of the diverse experiences and needs of all youth, particularly young women who often face structural barriers to civic engagement and policy participation.

"Young people, especially young women, should be given more opportunities to vote, speak, and occupy public offices."

What is needed

- Design inclusive survey and consultation methods that account for time poverty and access challenges.
- Invest in safe, community-based digital spaces and devices for young women.
- Ensure gender parity in youth committees, local decision-making structures, and SDG.

Rural-Urban Divide

The rural-urban divide emerged as another significant cross-cutting issue, with rural youth consistently reporting higher barriers to accessing quality education, healthcare, and digital tools. These disparities not only limit their opportunities for personal and professional development but also hinder their ability to participate meaningfully in civic and policy processes. The gap underscores the need for more inclusive policies and targeted interventions that bridge infrastructural and service delivery inequalities between rural and urban areas.

"We were consulted ahead of the 2023 General Elections. But nothing changed. It's just PR."

"All the grants, trainings, and policies happen in Abuja or Lagos. But we are also Nigerians."

What is needed

- Localise youth development programmes by investing in rural innovation hubs, mobile skill labs, and offline civic education tools.
- Partner with traditional institutions, local governments, and radio stations to share information in real time.
- Set sub-national SDG targets specifically focused on rural youth access and disaggregated outcomes.

Political Exclusion and Tokenism

Youth consistently raised concerns about exclusion from political decision-making and SDG-related governance. While they are often invited to events or focus groups, most said they do not feel taken seriously or included in the outcomes. Many cited a pattern of tokenism, being asked to speak at events without follow-up, or being invited only for social media optics.

Some also described fear or fatigue. Several youth from conflict-affected zones said they no longer participate in advocacy or activism because they feel unsafe or surveilled. Others were frustrated by bureaucracy, patronage, and the perception that “policy is for the elite.”

Youth Voices:

"Old politicians should give the youth a chance."

"To be more inclusive, carry the youths along more and engage them practically rather than mere propaganda that we see on all media platforms."

"The old eggs should provide open opportunities to youth, instead of using them in fuelling crime in the community. Why not the INGOs, NGOs, governments, and elites in our communities find a means of putting the youth on the right track by building their capacity, especially on skills acquisition and change in attitude?"

What is needed

- Institutionalise youth participation through youth advisory boards in MDAs, state governments, and LGAs.
- Ensure that feedback loops are built into youth consultations, including written reports, action points, and follow-up sessions.
- Protect youth activists and civic leaders through robust legal frameworks and effective accountability mechanisms, particularly in conflict zones.

Key Findings

While many of these challenges are not new, this shadow report reinforces them with evidence from over 1000 young Nigerians across diverse backgrounds and locations. It highlights how these persistent barriers are currently experienced by youth, drawing attention to nuances often missed in national reports such as affordability gaps in digital access, the stigmatisation of mental health, and political disengagement rooted in exclusion rather than apathy.

1. Youth feel excluded from health, governance, and employment systems. Across all SDGs assessed, young Nigerians expressed a lack of access, representation, or support from existing institutional frameworks.
2. Access to healthcare is limited, especially for mental health and reproductive services. Many youth reported poor or fair access to youth-friendly health services, with cost, stigma, and weak infrastructure as major barriers.
3. Education is often theoretical and disconnected from real-world applications. Youth highlighted outdated curricula, unaffordable fees, and poor infrastructure as key challenges, especially in rural areas.
4. Employment opportunities are scarce, and self-employment is often a necessity, not a choice. Respondents identified limited vocational training, a lack of mentorship, and exclusionary hiring practices as significant barriers.
5. Digital access remains unequal. More than half of the youth surveyed cannot consistently afford or access the internet, and few have access to innovation hubs or digital training programs.
6. Youth are largely excluded from climate action efforts. While many are aware of climate issues, only a minority have participated in any initiatives, reflecting a disconnect between national climate strategies and youth-level engagement.
7. Civic engagement is hindered by structural exclusion and insecurity. A majority of youth feel unsafe or unheard in political processes and call for stronger protections and institutionalised youth representation.
8. Youth want practical, inclusive reforms. Their top priorities include employment support, improved education and healthcare, digital access, civic inclusion, and climate education, backed by meaningful partnerships and funding mechanisms.

Recommendations

Short-Term (0 – 12 Months)

- Develop and roll out grassroots civic education programs that teach young people about their rights, responsibilities, and the importance of democratic engagement. These should be adapted for both formal (school-based) and informal (community centers, online platforms) learning spaces.

Responsible actors: Federal Ministry of Education, National Orientation Agency (NOA), State Universal Basic Education Boards (SUBEBs), Civil Society Organisations (CSOs), and Youth Networks.

- Establish youth desks within Ministries, Departments, and Agencies (MDAs) by appointing dedicated youth focal persons or units to coordinate youth engagement. These structures will ensure youth inclusion in planning and feedback processes, while providing formal entry points for young people to contribute to national and local governance.

Responsible actors: Ministry of Youth and Sports Development, Office of the Secretary to the Government of the Federation (OSGF), Individual MDAs at Federal and State level, State Ministries of Youth Development, Youth-led Organisations.

- Conduct workshops and refresher courses for frontline health workers to better understand the unique health needs of youth, including reproductive health, mental health support, and non-judgmental service delivery.

Responsible actors: National Primary Health Care Development Agency, State Ministries of Health, Health Professional Associations.

Medium-Term (1 – 2 Years)

- Partner with education stakeholders to embed climate literacy and digital skills into school programs, establishing clubs that empower students to lead environmental and tech-based initiatives.

Responsible actors: Ministry of Education, Ministry of Environment, Universal Basic Education Commission (UBEC), NGOs focused on Climate and Education.

- Integrate mental health care into local primary health services, train counselors, and launch youth-friendly helplines or mobile clinics to expand access to emotional and psychological support.

Responsible actors: Ministry of Health, State Health Boards, Mental Health NGOs, World Health Organization (WHO), UNICEF.

Long-Term (2 - 5 Years)

- Institutionalize youth-inclusive budgeting and policy frameworks by passing and implementing policies that guarantee youth participation in decision-making and budgeting processes at all levels of government. This includes legal reforms, quota systems, and regular audits of youth representation.

Responsible actors: National Assembly, Ministry of Finance, Budget Office, Youth Parliament, Development Partners.

- Expand tertiary health care and innovation infrastructure by investing in building and upgrading hospitals, digital labs, and innovation spaces to support complex health and technology needs. Ensure these facilities are accessible and equipped to serve youth populations nationwide.

Responsible actors: Ministry of Health, Ministry of Innovation, Science and Technology, State Governments, Public-Private Partnership (PPP) Investors.

- Develop green economy pathways for youth employment by creating national and sub-national strategies that link climate goals with job creation, such as renewable energy programs, eco-enterprises, and green infrastructure, targeted at equipping youth with sustainable livelihood opportunities.

Responsible actors: Ministry of Environment, Ministry of Power, National Environmental Standards and Regulations Enforcement Agency (NESREA), Climate Finance Agencies, Green Startups.

- Mainstream youth priorities and data into national SDG implementation plans, ensuring long-term coordination, accountability, and funding toward youth-led progress.

Responsible actors: Office of the Senior Special Assistant to the President on SDGs (OSSAP-SDGs), National Planning Commission, and Donor Agencies.

Conclusion

As Nigeria enters the final stretch toward the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), this Youth Shadow Report offers both a reality check and a roadmap. It affirms that the country has made measurable progress, with new infrastructure, digital initiatives, climate policies, and reforms in health, education, and governance. Yet for many young Nigerians, these gains remain distant, unevenly distributed, or inaccessible.

Youth who make up over 65 percent of the population continue to face structural barriers to meaningful inclusion. While national policies and the VNR 2025 reference youth repeatedly, young people are rarely embedded in the processes that shape their futures. From health and education to climate action and governance, their lived experiences reveal persistent gaps: mental health services are missing, internet access is unreliable, decent jobs are scarce, and civic participation feels unsafe or tokenistic.

Despite these challenges, young Nigerians are not waiting. They are organizing, innovating, volunteering, building businesses, and leading community action. What they need is not more pilot projects or consultations, but a shift in power, access, and trust. They need to be seen not just as beneficiaries or participants, but as co-creators of Nigeria's development.

This report calls on all levels of government, civil society, and international partners to act on the data and demands presented here. The future of the SDGs and Nigeria's broader development agenda depends on unlocking the full potential of its youth. That means investing in youth-led solutions, embedding youth into planning and budgeting systems, and holding space for them at every decision-making table.

The window to act is closing. The opportunity is still open. Young Nigerians are ready and the time for youth-driven transformation is now. We must ensure we leave no one behind.





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