Renewable energy for youth: For sustainable economic development, thriving life, decent work, and a greener future

Youth have the greatest interest in the transition to renewable energy, as the world faces an urgent race to avert climate devastation in the coming decades. Youth populations are growing rapidly, particularly across Asia, Africa and Latin America. Africa has the youngest population in the world, with 70% of sub-Saharan Africa under the age of 30.[1] Young people are expected to exceed 800 million in the continent by 2050.[2] The Asia-Pacific region contains 60% of the world's youth population,[3] and in Latin America the largest segment of the population is aged 19 to 30 years.[4] If done well, the transition to renewable energy offers new opportunities for young people to engage in a new green industrial economy, and energy security which ensures clean, affordable and accessible energy and decent work in green sectors and beyond.

The 2023 UN climate summit, COP28,[5] and the 2025 IRENA Youth Forum[6] sent a clear message: investments into renewable energy that deliver for youth needs are essential in achieving the ambitious global targets of tripling renewable energy capacity and doubling energy efficiency.

To fulfil their mandate of fostering economic and social progress in developing countries, multilateral development bank (MDB) investments in renewable energy should deliver the needs of the younger generation and offer a brighter future with opportunities for sustainable economic development, particularly in Asia, Africa and Latin America. This requires democratically owned renewable energy systems that are developed and supported by young people. Accessible, affordable and reliable energy must be delivered where it can benefit youth the most: A significant step forward from the centralised fossil fuel era of the past.

Energy for youth: Key issues

The lack of accessible, affordable and reliable clean and modern energy limits opportunities for young people in several ways. Some of these are education, health, access to decent employment, access to information, and generally energy as a right. Sustainable renewable energy access can be a factor in addressing the challenge of youth migration as it is critical in stimulating economic growth and therefore a key driver in creating livelihoods and opportunities for youth.[7]

School and college education services

There is a positive correlation between access to electricity, particularly lighting, and improved education.[8] Low levels of electricity access are correlated with poor educational performance, lower attendance in schools, and a decreased ability to attract and maintain teachers.[9] Schools and homes without lighting can limit opportunities for study in the evenings, and a lack of power prevents schools and colleges from accessing information technologies needed for education and the modern workplace. Additionally, without clean cooking methods or a pumped water supply, girls in particular spend long hours collecting wood fuel and water, often limiting their opportunity to attend school.[10] Also, youth in urban settings where electricity is limited and unreliable cannot reap the benefits of public spaces like libraries, internet cafés and study centres.

Clean cooking and clean indoor air

Lack of clean cooking methods affects youth, especially girls, causing them to suffer from illnesses caused by smoke inhalation, leading to frequent absences from school. About half of the global population lack the resources to cook efficiently, cleanly and safely, and 90% of the people affected are from lower and lower-middle income countries.[11] Lack of access to clean cooking methods causes 3.7 million premature deaths each year, with women and children being the most vulnerable to this.[12]

Decent work and employment, entrepreneurship and small business

Affordable and reliable renewable energy[13] can reduce the burden of domestic work. It provides refrigeration for food preservation at home and in restaurants; it can pump water for agricultural irrigation; it can power workshops and small businesses, and other productive uses of renewable energy. Youth can start businesses that rely on electricity, like welding, tailoring, food vending, or digital services.

Digital inclusion, communications and information technology

For many young people, decentralised energy solutions are essential for an inclusive digital economy.[14] There is evidence that access to mobile connectivity for rural users increases with access to electricity, with a stronger impact on women and youth,[15] and it reduces the migration of youth from rural areas to cities. For youth in urban areas, digital inclusion is good for online learning platforms, and provides flexibility and work-life balance.

Youth migration

When energy is unreliable, expensive, or entirely unavailable, it can impact economic opportunities, education, health, and overall quality of life. Youth often migrate from rural or energy-poor urban areas to cities or countries with better energy access and infrastructure, hoping for employment in industries that require reliable electricity. Therefore, it is important for MDBs to invest in renewable energy to address this issue; it is essential for economic development, and can shape migration patterns, particularly for youth.

How multilateral development bank investments can ensure renewable energy benefits youth

1. Investments targeted at youth employment in green sectors and a focus on renewable energy for skills education and training.

The energy transition can only be achieved with a skilled workforce commensurate with the challenge at hand.[16] A pathway to triple renewable energy capacity by 2030 increases the demand for skilled professionals in the renewable energy sector. Initiatives such as Mission 300 — in which the World Bank Group (WBG) and African Development Bank Group (AfDB) have pledged billions of dollars with the aim of connecting 300 million Africans to electricity by 2030[17] — will have to invest in training young people to design, build and maintain the renewable energy sectors of the future.

This requires investments in education facilities for the younger generation, to support national energy transition plans and strategies. Different skills will be needed at country levels. Examples include installation of solar photovoltaics and wind turbines; operation and maintenance; social and environmental sustainability of renewable projects; analytical and data interpretation; and project management skills. Jobs created will include short-terms jobs like construction, as well as long-term jobs such as maintenance and management. In particular, decentralised energy technologies[18] can unlock new career paths in rural areas and open opportunities for young entrepreneurs to run small and medium enterprises (SMEs) that service the green energy sector, supporting energy systems and investing locally in the energy sector to reduce outsourcing of jobs to other countries.

It will be important for the MDBs to ensure that their youth education initiatives — such as the World Bank investment in jobs and skills training programmes in 58 countries[19] through the Solutions for Youth Employment[20] programme — include a focused training for readiness for the renewable energy economy. The programmes should offer opportunities for upskilling, reskilling, and skilling to match the job market demands and be implemented in partnership with the private sector.

Transition minerals

As the world shifts to green industrialisation, certain minerals such as nickel, copper and lithium are becoming more important as they play a crucial role in renewable energy technologies. Youth should play a role in decision-making about the future of mineral exploitation, including its impacts on communities and natural resources, and they should be considered an important constituency in the free, prior, and informed consent (FPIC)[21] and as stakeholders that can provide the needed data and research on transition minerals. They should also play a role in the circular economy to ensure the mineral cycle is efficient, minimising mineral demand and maximising safe recycling. To enable them, MDBs should consider investing in science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM) programmes.

2. Youth involvement in decision-making on energy strategies and delivery at local, national and international levels

With the right support, young people can obtain the skills, knowledge and confidence to get involved with decision making and even step up to become decision makers themselves[22]. Youth have the potential to become agents of change in the energy sector, as renewable energy provides a platform for young people to engage in environmental activism and advocate for sustainable practices or promote renewable energy initiatives in their communities, schools, and universities.[23]

3. Ending austerity, avoiding debt, and fostering local, youth-led private sector engagement

For many countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America, the constraints of high levels of indebtedness and low fiscal space risk limiting the future economic development of the younger generation for many decades to come. The MDBs' current approach of 'leveraging' private sector investment prioritises heavy loans for damaging centralised energy systems, often for export and not local needs, bypassing young people and pushing countries further into debt to be paid for by future generations.[24] MDBs should instead support policies that enable countries to pursue their own energy transition, fostering local private sector and SME engagement, with meaningful participation from young people. Youth can engage with the private sector as a force for innovation and prosperity, avoiding the burden of economic injustice for their future. MDBs should aim to build a brighter future for young people and an optimistic outlook for future generations.

Recommendations:

MDBs should be positioned to promote gender equality into all aspects of the renewable energy transition they support, funding projects that advance clean energy infrastructure while ensuring women are recognized, benefit equally, and are represented in decision-making. Through targeted investments and a clear commitment to gender equality, MDBs can help build a sustainable, fair and just renewable energy future for all.

1. MDBs should provide quality finance that includes improving **education infrastructure, enhancing digital access, and powering youth employment** as part of investing in a greener future and creating sustainable and thriving livelihoods, and overcome barriers to education, economic stability, and social mobility.

2. MDBs should provide grants and capacity **strengthening for youth-led businesses focused on clean energy solutions or energy efficiency products**, and they should invest in community-led programmes to ensure long-lasting economic benefits

3. MDB investment in **youth training, workshops, and upskilling/reskilling** should focus on creating a strong well-skilled workforce that will not depend on outsourcing for renewable energy technologies. This includes training youth to work with emerging smart grid technologies that make energy use more efficient and interconnected.

4. **To ensure sustainability in youth and women-led renewable energy projects, MDBs should implement mentorship and incubation programmes** that focus on building long-term capacity beyond just securing grants, including:

    - Establishing a platform for **youth to monitor renewable investments and benefits for local communities**, which will also enhance transparency from the MDBs,

    - Creating a process for youth to engage MDBs continuously through **intergenerational dialogues at local and national levels**, not only at annual events like youth summits.

5. MDBs should view **youth as key stakeholders/rights holders** with an interest in a sustainable and thriving renewable energy future, and ensure the full and meaningful participation of youth in decision-making processes, at local, national and international levels.

6. **Prioritise affordable and clean cooking solutions** that will reduce fuel use, improve health and save time for households, especially for women and girls.

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BANKING ON Renewables

About the Banking on Renewables Campaign

Banking on Renewables is a global civil society initiative advocating for public finance institutions to align energy investments with climate goals and just transition principles. Join us in demanding a just energy future that puts people first.

Visit the website to find out more:

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