



# **From Climate Policy to Practice: Strengthening Accountability and Governance Reform through Youth Participation in Local Government Elections**

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## **1. Introduction**

Climate change is no longer a distant environmental concern but a lived reality that increasingly affects communities across South Africa. From droughts and water insecurity to flooding, infrastructure collapse and heatwaves, the impacts of climate variability continue to shape livelihoods, service delivery and economic stability, as seen in Figure 1. Municipalities play an important role in responding to the impacts of climate change and in advancing sustainable development (Lethoko 2016). In recent years, climate disasters have exposed significant weaknesses in municipal infrastructure, preparedness and governance capacity. Although climate change is global in nature, many of its impacts are experienced and managed locally. South Africa has made progress in developing climate policy and frameworks intended to strengthen resilience and guide adaptation efforts. National strategies such as the National Climate Change Response Policy, alongside municipal planning strategies including the Integrated Development Plans (IDPs), increasingly recognise climate change as a developmental and governance priority. However, despite these policy advances, a significant gap remains between climate commitments and implementation. Many municipalities continue to face challenges relating to institutional capacity, financial constraints, fragmented planning systems, political instability and limited accountability (Department of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs 2025). Consequently, climate governance remains reactive rather than preventative, disproportionately affecting vulnerable communities.



Figure 1: Flooding and infrastructure damage in KwaZulu-Natal during the 2022 floods. Source: Gallo Images, Darren Steward (2022).

Within this context, youth participation in local government elections emerges as an important yet often overlooked dimension of climate governance and accountability. Young people are among those most affected by the long-term impacts of climate change, particularly in relation to employment, food security, health and urban livelihoods (Global Center on Adaptation 2021). However, youth political participation within local governance processes remains limited, raising important questions about representation, accountability and whose interests are prioritised within municipal decision-making processes. Strengthening youth participation in these electoral processes has implications beyond political representation alone. It also represents an opportunity to strengthen climate accountability, encourage governance reform, and promote more inclusive and responsive approaches to local climate action, according to Marah et al. (2024). This article argues that while climate governance frameworks are increasingly embedded within South African local government systems, weak implementation and limited accountability continue to undermine municipal climate resilience efforts. However, strengthening youth participation in local elections can contribute to improved accountability, more responsive governance, and greater pressure on municipalities to translate climate policy commitments into practical and community-centred action.

## 2. The gap between climate policy and implementation

Although South Africa has developed a relatively progressive climate policy framework, the translation of policy commitments into meaningful implementation at the municipal level remains uneven and inconsistent. Climate adaptation strategies, sustainability frameworks, disaster

management plans and resilience policies are increasingly incorporated into government planning documents, yet many communities continue to experience inadequate service delivery, infrastructure vulnerability and limited preparedness in the face of disasters (Lethoko 2016; Department of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs 2025). South Africa's climate governance framework increasingly recognises the importance of integrating climate change considerations into local government planning processes (Lethoko 2016). The National Climate Change Response White Paper of 2011 emphasises the need to mainstream climate change responses across national, provincial and local planning frameworks, including IDPs (Department of Environmental Affairs 2011). This positions the IDP as an important planning document through which municipalities can incorporate climate adaptation, resilience and sustainability priorities into local development and budgeting processes. However, despite this policy recognition, the inclusion and implementation of climate change strategies within municipal planning remains uneven across many municipalities (Lethoko 2016).

This disconnect reflects a broader governance challenge in which climate policy often exists more prominently 'on paper' than in practical implementation. One of the primary constraints facing municipal climate governance is limited financial capacity. Many municipalities across South Africa operate under significant budgetary pressures while simultaneously confronting rising service delivery demands, ageing infrastructure systems and socio-economic inequality, according to the review of the white paper on local government by the Department of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs (2025). Climate adaptation initiatives frequently compete with urgent developmental priorities such as housing provision and electricity access. As a result, long-term resilience planning is often deprioritised in favour of immediate crisis response measures (Global Center on Adaptation 2021). This contributes to reactive governance approaches in which municipalities respond to disasters after they occur rather than investing sufficiently in preventative adaptation and risk reduction strategies. The effects of these governance challenges become particularly visible during disasters and infrastructure failures. The 2022 floods in KwaZulu-Natal exposed significant weaknesses in infrastructure resilience, emergency preparedness and disaster response systems within affected municipalities. Roads, bridges, water infrastructure, electricity networks and informal settlements were severely damaged, resulting in widespread displacement and economic disruption. This illustrates that governance effectiveness cannot be measured solely through administrative performance but must also consider sustainability, resilience and preparedness in relation to emerging climate risks (Lethoko 2016).

### **3. Electoral accountability and governance reform through youth participation**

Young people will inherit the long-term consequences of current governance and development decisions. However, despite this reality, youth participation within local government decision-making and electoral processes is limited. Low levels of youth voter turnout and political participation have increasingly become a concern within South Africa's democratic landscape (Chauke 2020). Factors contributing to youth disengagement include distrust in political institutions, dissatisfaction with governance performance, unemployment, social inequality, and

perceptions that political participation does not meaningfully influence lived realities, as explained by Barrett and Pachi (2019). If young people remain absent from local governance processes, municipalities will continue to face reduced public pressure to prioritise long-term sustainability, climate adaptation and environmental justice within policy agendas (Thew et al. 2021). Youth participation in local elections should therefore not only be understood as political participation, but also as a form of climate governance participation (Barrett and Pachi 2019; Thew et al. 2019). Electoral engagement provides opportunities for young people to influence municipal priorities, demand transparency, shape developmental planning, and hold local governments accountable for policy commitments (Global Center on Adaptation 2021). Increased youth participation can strengthen accountability mechanisms by placing greater pressure on municipalities to move beyond symbolic commitments towards practical implementation and measurable outcomes. Globally, youth-led climate movements have further demonstrated the growing role of young people in shaping climate discourse and demanding institutional accountability (Thew et al. 2021). Addressing climate governance challenges within South Africa's municipalities will require governance approaches that move beyond policy formulation towards more participatory, accountable and community-responsive systems of implementation. While technical climate strategies and institutional planning frameworks remain important, effective climate governance ultimately depends on whether communities are meaningfully included in decision-making processes and whether municipalities can be held accountable for delivering on climate commitments in practice.

Meaningful youth participation requires more than symbolic representation, according to Chauke (2020). It requires institutional mechanisms that actively integrate young people into municipal planning, policy consultation and accountability processes. Participatory governance frameworks that incorporate local perspectives may contribute to more equitable and effective climate responses, particularly as vulnerable communities often possess important lived experiences and local knowledge regarding climate risks and adaptation priorities (Thew et al. 2021; Marah et al. 2024). As the Department of Environmental Affairs (2011) stated in the National Climate Change Response, transformative adaptation requires governance systems capable of engaging directly with social vulnerability, inequality and community resilience. As climate risks continue to intensify, strengthening youth participation within local governance systems is important for advancing more inclusive, responsive and future-oriented forms of climate governance (Global Center on Adaptation 2021; Thew et al. 2021) In this regard, youth electoral participation represents not only a democratic responsibility but also an important mechanism through which climate resilience, accountability and governance reform can be strengthened at the municipal level.

#### **4. Conclusion**

In conclusion, climate change has increasingly become a local governance challenge that directly affects municipalities through pressures on infrastructure, disaster management and service delivery. Although South Africa has developed climate policy frameworks aimed at strengthening

resilience and sustainability, significant gaps remain between policy commitments and practical implementation. Financial constraints, institutional weaknesses, political instability and socio-economic inequality continue to undermine effective municipal climate governance, often resulting in reactive rather than preventative responses to climate change. Within this context, youth participation in local government elections represents an important mechanism for strengthening accountability and advancing governance reform. However, despite this need, youth participation in the local government elections remains limited. The arguments for strengthening youth engagement are that it can contribute to greater public oversight, increased accountability and stronger pressure on municipalities to prioritise climate resilience, sustainability and equitable development within governance agendas. Importantly, youth participation should not only be viewed as a democratic responsibility but also as a form of climate governance participation. The youth can influence municipal priorities and demand more transparent, inclusive and responsive governance systems.

## References

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