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Environment and youth engagement***Note by the Secretariat****I. Introduction**

1. In September 2015, world leaders reached a historic agreement and set a global agenda which presented new visions for the future - a future in which there is more equitable, more inclusive and sustainable development for the people and the planet, with peace, justice and shared growth for all, with nobody being left behind. This is embodied in the Agenda 2030 and the sustainable development goals.

2. Agenda 2030 accorded prominence to sustainable development in which environmental sustainability is viewed as a key component. This justifies the emphasis put on environment and climate change by the African Union in the first ten year implementation plan of the regional vision, Agenda 2063. The plan clearly states that for Africa to achieve a development which is people-driven and relying on the potential of African people, there is need to create opportunities for Africa's youth for self-realization, access to health, education and jobs and provide all the needed support for early childhood development. In line with this plan, different initiatives are taking place across the continent with youth being involved in the implementation of projects and programmes that promote sustainable development. However, a lot remains to be done to achieve their full participation in policy development processes in the region.

3. Indeed, if one of the key objectives of the region's vision is to radically transform Africa's agriculture to enable it feed itself and be a major player as a net food exporter a number of transformative actions need to be undertaken. These include exploiting the vast potential of Africa's blue/green economy, and putting in place measures to sustainably manage the continent's rich biodiversity. In addition, youth involvement in policy development needs to be substantively enhanced since their engagement in decisions that affect their lives have important implications for the region's economic transformation.

4. The purpose of this note is therefore to raise awareness of African Ministers of the Environment on the central role youth play in sustainable development, and to follow up on the recommendations made during the Africa Day celebration this year. The focus of the recommendations was on harnessing the demographic dividend through investments in Youth. It is expected that appropriate decisions will be made to ensure adequate policies are put in place to guarantee involvement, representation and participation of youth in governance matters. Ministers will deliberate on youth employment in Africa and recommend appropriate mechanisms to address it.

II. Background

5. Africa holds the youngest population in the world. In 2010, 70 per cent of the region's population was under the age of 30, and slightly more than 20 per cent were young people between the ages of 15 to 24. There are 46 countries in the world where at least 70 per cent of the population is under 30 years old, and only seven are not in sub-Saharan Africa (Leahy et al., 2007, cited in

* The present document is being issued without formal editing.

Sommers, 2010:320). Experts say that this presents a combination of both opportunities and challenges. In fact, youth population is not only a dynamic source of innovation and creativity, but has contributed to and even catalyzed important changes in political systems, power-sharing dynamics, and economic opportunities in many Africa countries.

6. However, rapid urbanization that is attracting youth to large towns and cities is a big challenge as depicted by the formal unemployment figures in urban areas. Most urban youth, particularly youth migrants, live in unplanned settlements, often in squalid conditions and are vulnerable to high levels of unemployment. UN statistics forecast that by 2030, 60 per cent of the world population will live in cities and as many as 60 per cent of them will be under 18 (Ambala, 2011). Studies also suggest that one of the key challenges youth are facing relate to unemployment. African youth (15-24 years) constitute about 37% of the working age population, but account for more than 60% of all unemployed people in Africa.

7. Youth are also facing challenges from climate change that constantly hits their various initiatives and projects through severe droughts, floods, and soil erosion, resulting in many losses. A big part of the unemployment challenges that youth are facing could be addressed by the various opportunities that green economy and sustainable consumption and production patterns can offer (including waste management, sustainable agriculture, renewable energy initiatives, weather forecasts, etc.). However, youth in most countries are not equipped with appropriate knowledge, technical capacities and skills that are required to address those challenges through these environmental solutions.

8. Young people also face health problems due to, among others, air, water and soil pollution, deforestation, poor management of waste, and chemical pollution. Although there is limited current data on causes of mortality among young people, WHO reported in 2002 that deaths of young African men were attributable first to AIDS, followed by tuberculosis whose manifestation on patients could be triggered by climate change effects and environmental degradations. A 2010 report by UNECA confirms that the causes of mortality in youth still prevail.

9. Overall, youth in Africa are facing various challenges whose root cause is the poor translation of their priorities and needs in country development policies. This is largely due to the weak participation of youth in the elaboration and implementation of these policy provisions. Agenda 21 of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) states that “it is imperative that youth from all parts of the world participate actively in all relevant levels of decision-making processes because it affects their lives today and has implications for their future”. Indeed, young people have an important role to play given their large proportion in global and regional population structures coupled with the tremendous energy, talent and skills that they hold in Africa. Africa needs to take advantage of this huge potential in creating an enabling environment that enhances youth participation in policy-making that relates to environmental issues. With the use of the digital technologies of their era, such as internet, mobile and social media youth can bring revolution in the environmental protection agenda.

III. Current status

10. The current situation reveals that youth continue to be involved in environmental initiatives, such as networking¹, project based activities or purely activism-oriented initiatives. However, there is a clear insufficient youth engagement in platforms that support and influence decision making processes. The African Youth Charter calls on state Parties to “facilitate the creation or strengthening of platforms for youth participation in decision-making at local, national, regional, and continental level of governance”. Currently, the participation of youth appears to be formalized more extensively with international organizations than at the national level².

11. Paragraph 153 of the Plan of Implementation adopted at the World Summit on Sustainable Development, held in Johannesburg in 2002, indicates the need to promote and support youth participation in programmes and activities relating to sustainable development through, for example, supporting local youth councils or their equivalent, and by encouraging their establishment where they do not exist. Goal 16 of the sustainable development goals further reinforce the need for peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, as well as the building of effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels.

¹ Among them, TUNZA¹, Africa Youth Environment Network (AYEN), and the Africa Youth Initiative on Climate Change (AYICC) merit mention.

² For example, UNEP has a Youth Advisory Council that plays a supportive role. UNDP as another example sponsors training for young environmental leaders in a few countries.

12. Many national governments currently have ministries or departments with “youth affairs” as part of their portfolio. However, the environmental sustainability dimension is lacking or poorly integrated in their goals and objectives as national authorities tend to view youth as a social group to be assisted (as they can) rather than a resource to be tapped for participation in policy-making in various areas of environmental sustainability and resilience.

13. Countries also do not fully consider, through the decisions that they make, that the involvement of youth in policy making processes is key for their own success as young people have a special interest in maintaining a healthy environment because they will be the ones to inherit it. Most of the long term vision documents of countries do not capture and translate into action the fact that youth can also influence development process by making their weight felt as a constituency for the long term since they are able to call political leaders to account for the long-range environmental consequences of their decisions.

14. In addition, as the current and future generations, young people are the ones who will be the most affected by the decisions being made by those who are managing the environmental affairs of countries that still experience depletion of natural resources, loss of biodiversity, and other forms of environmental degradation. The education and championing role that youth can play in creating direct impact through changing the behaviour of their peers and the attitudes of the people who surround them (their parents, schoolmates, relatives, and families) is poorly taken into account by national authorities when elaborating policies.

15. The eighteenth session of the Regional Coordination Mechanism for Africa that took place on 25 and 26 March 2017 in Dakar, Senegal, recognized that policy development is a predominantly government-oriented and highly technical process that up to now has minimal and undefined youth input. Consequently, young people who are typically at a relative disadvantage in terms of power and influence may find it impossible to secure a formal place at the decision-making table. A clear message from Africa was that giving more concerted attention to the issue of youth will be an important and long overdue stimulus to boost inclusive human development and economic growth for the entire continent. It is the continent’s responsibility to assess the extent to which efforts being undertaken are reflecting this.

IV. Efforts being undertaken

16. Beyond initiatives dealing with networking, advocacy and activism on environmental issues, a few youth initiatives underway include the following:

(a) The first that merits mention is the African Union’s initiative that promotes the harnessing of the region’s demographic dividend in support of youth agenda in Africa. The logic is that the Africa region as the fastest-growing continent in the world with the highest fertility rate is experiencing an unprecedented population growth. But at the same time, it is blessed with a youth population that can be an important asset for economic development and a huge potential for achieving the sustainable development goals if appropriate economic and social policies are in place. The success of the programme will depend on the extent to which environmental sustainability and resilience will be considered as a main success factor. It will also depend on ways youth education on environmental degradations and climate change externalities will be recognized and enhanced.

(b) Sustainable agriculture considered by the African Union as one of the most relevant initiatives is underway in sub-Saharan Africa. This is to translate into action the Maputo Declaration on the Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme (CAADP). In Ghana, CAADP gave farmers’ associations and private sector federations a seat at the policy table where they contribute formally to policy making. This experience of youth participation in policy making needs to be documented, enhanced and expanded.

(c) Concrete experiences of youth engagement in green economy initiatives are evident in a number of countries and are offering concrete livelihood opportunities in Uganda³, Burkina Faso, Ghana, Rwanda and South Africa to cite a few. These experiences across the region target, among others, green forestry, sustainable fisheries, renewable energy, sustainable agriculture, and water management. These efforts can only sustain if governments create national development contexts that position youth at the center of environmental policy making, policy implementation and policy monitoring and evaluation.

³ In Uganda, the fishery industry employs over 700,000 people involved in various activities ranging from: fishermen, fishmongers, fish transporters and boat builder. On its part, South Africa expects to create 462, 567 green jobs within a span of eight years, mostly in renewable energy generation, resource efficiency, emissions and pollution mitigation and natural resource management.

V. Challenges

17. As earlier mentioned, the main gap or challenge remains the weak involvement of youth in policy making that limits their contribution to sustainable development. Governments and national legislative bodies should enact policies and laws that address this void, making it possible to Africa place due attention on the protection of people most at risk. The Agenda 2030 principle of ‘leave no one behind recognizes the need for protecting ecosystems and biodiversity as the “GDPs of the poor,” since they provide the bases for livelihoods and employment for many of the poorest people including youth in Africa. The involvement of youth in sustainability policies will increase their participation in country and regional efforts in the conservation of African ecosystems and biodiversity.

18. If youth are involved in policy making processes, they will need capacity to play their role and fulfil the tasks with which they will be charged. Youth capacity development is thus the second gap or challenge that needs to be addressed. The 7th Commitment⁴ of the Paris Declaration recommends that federated states, regions and cities mobilize all stakeholders (national, local, private) around projects that build the capacities of young people, as well as prioritise specific training courses that promote green jobs to achieve a fast transition to green economy in different areas of sustainable development. Youth capacity development in sustainable environmental issues will help countries to speed progress towards the implementation of many sustainable development goals in a collective manner, mainly SDGs 6,7,8, 10,12,13,14,15, while spurring implementation of SDGs 1,2,and 3.

19. Youth involvement in policy making together with youth capacity development will call for youth participation in monitoring and evaluation of activities they are contributing to, including the establishment of baselines to track progress in Africa where availability of disaggregated data is a real challenge.

20. Another gap is how to mainstream the youth Agenda in the work of the United Nations at country and regional level, particularly in its aspect of environmental sustainability. Few initiatives are being undertaken but strong success stories remain marginal with UN country teams engagement levels varying from a country to country. The United Nations Development Assistance Framework (UNDAF) development process is a country-led mechanism with UN technical support. National authorities, mainly the Ministries in charge of environment during those mechanisms have the responsibility to ensure that youth involvement in matters related to environment sustainability is effective and has received the needed attention both technically and in terms of budget allocations.

21. At local level, it is a big challenge to involve decentralized authorities in a business model that involves young people in policy making processes as authorities at that level are lacking human and funding capacity that is required.

22. Private sector engagement in youth development on the basis of environmental sustainability is weak due to the high risks that characterize such involvement. Most of the time, the way economic policies and practices are framed around environmental sustainability and the youth agenda at national level lacks incentives and motivation for private sector engagement.

VI. Key Messages

23. **Message 1:** A substantive involvement of youth in policy making will be a key corner stone for the success of the first ten year implementation plan of Agenda 2063 in Africa.

Recommendation 1: African Governments should formulate enabling policies and enact sound legislations that promote the involvement of youth in decision making processes that support the environmental sustainability and resilience agenda in Africa.

24. **Message 2:** The weak technical capacity of youth to handle green economy and environmental sustainability issues holds a big part in the factors that justify their weak contribution to a low carbon economy.

Recommendation 2: National authorities including members of parliaments and decentralized constituencies should set arrangements and allocate appropriate resources that enhance youth technical capacity to contribute more to environmental programmes

⁴ The Paris Declaration, opportunity for Bottom-up action in favour of the low carbon economy; commitment for action, towards COP21, Paris climate, 2015.

25. **Message 3** The lack of data in Africa makes it hard to track progress and make decisions that enhance youth involvement in matters that concern sustainability and resilience.

Recommendation 3. *A workable monitoring and evaluation system needs to be put in place in countries to establish the baselines of ongoing youth initiatives. These should define indicators that capture youth living conditions and the extent to which their involvement in policy making processes is effective.*

26. **Message 4:** Success of the demographic dividend initiative will depend on the extent to which green economy and resilience component will be integrated to ensure that the expected dividends will be in line with the Paris Agreement and will not set back countries in their progress towards the sustainable development agenda.

Recommendation 4: *The African Union initiative on harnessing the demographic dividend should identify actions and budget required to make green economy and sustainable consumption and production a key component of the initiative.*

27. **Message 5:** The sound application of the sustainability and resilience principle within the UN work at country level cannot be successful if UN country teams do not position youth involvement as a key pillar of their support to countries.

Recommendation 5: *Ministers of environment should take appropriate measures to ensure that during the United Nations Development Assistance Framework (UNDAF) design and implementation, different result groups (made of government and UN staff) integrate youth in the sustainability and resilience agenda.*

28. **Message 6:** The regional integration could provide a good opportunity to support young people for them to be marketable on the labor market

Recommendation 6: *Ministers should deliberate on how regional integration could foster a regional wide economy relevant education system to promote youth employment.*

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