

European youth at COP15: Unmuting global youth concerns for biodiversity?

Introduction

In 2019, the experts of the intergovernmental science-policy platform for biodiversity¹ estimated that 1 million species were threatened on Earth, meaning an unprecedented and dangerous decline of nature (IPBES 2019). In this important context, the second part² of the 15th Conference of the Parties (COP15) to the Convention on Biological diversity (CBD), the key international agreement dealing with nature protection, took place in Montreal from 7-19 December 2023. The conference was expected to be a crucial international moment for global biodiversity governance as COP15, initially planned for 2020 but postponed due to the pandemic, had to adopt a new global biodiversity framework, to “transform biodiversity governance” (Visseren-Hamakers and Kok 2022). This framework would replace the CBD's Strategic Plan for Biodiversity 2011-2020 and its Aichi Targets. And indeed, on December 19th 2022, the countries gathered in Montreal adopted the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (K-MGBF) containing 4 goals for 2050 and 23 targets for 2030, for the world to live in harmony with nature by 2050.

Along governmental efforts, the input of all the international actors concerned by biodiversity governance was important for the adoption of the K-MGBF to happen and the framework to be ambitious. While mostly known for being vocal on climate change politics (Thew et al. 2020, 2021, 2022), youth have been part of these international actors active at COP15. Yet, despite their presence in the CBD negotiations since 1992 and their official recognition as a formal constituency by the CBD in 2012, research has been neglecting the presence of youth in global biodiversity politics, giving the impression that their voice was not relevant.

This working paper has precisely for objective to study the voice of youth in global biodiversity politics during COP15. In particular, it focuses on the role of European youth actors. Indeed, as partly privileged youth who have the capacity and support to engage in international processes (Orsini and Kang 2023), European youth represent a most-likely case to analyze the extent to which youth voices can be heard at the international level of policy making. More precisely, the working paper aims at answering two research questions:

- Under which conditions have European youth actors been able to participate in the COP15 negotiations?
- To which extent have they been able to bring a new voice at the international level of policymaking on biodiversity issues?

Methodologically, the working paper relies on observations during the Youth Summit organized prior to COP15 on the 5th and 6th December 2022; and during COP15. Results also draw from 54 interviews conducted mostly with youth at COP15.

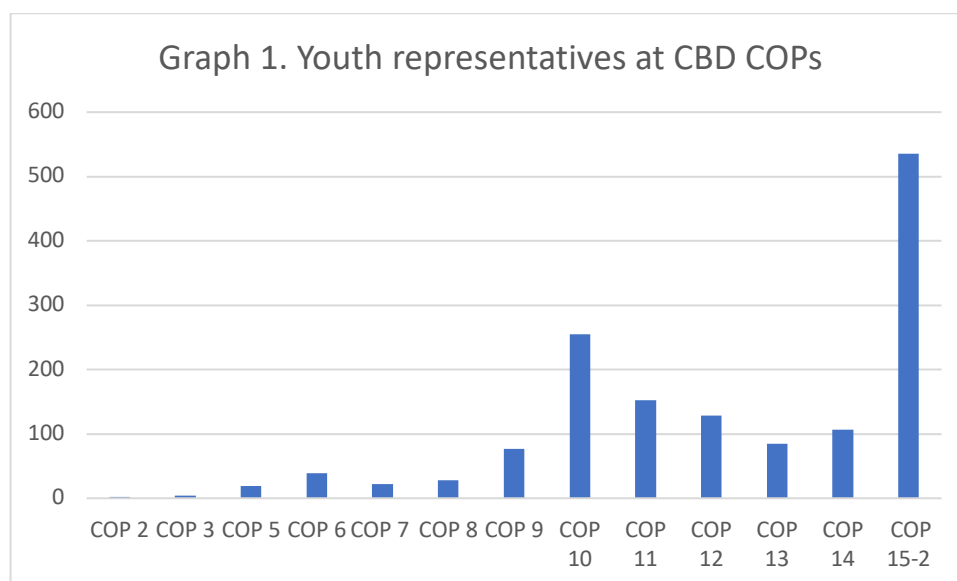
¹ The Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES), is equivalent to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), but for biodiversity.

² The first part took place in China, Kunming, 11-15 October 2021, in a restricted setting and complicated context marked by the COVID19 pandemic.

A first part analyses the circumstances of European youth participation at COP15 and a second part details the claims vehiculated by European youth actors during the COP.

I. The formats and conditions of European youth participation at COP15: is European youth participation European?

Overall, searching the list of participants to CBD COPs with keywords such as “youth; young; boy; etc.”, enables to have an idea of the number of youth representatives present at each CBD COP (see Graph 1).



Graphs 1 shows that 535 youth participants have attended COP15, the largest youth group so far at a CBD COP. This could be explained by the importance of the COP and the increasing youth presence on the international scene on environmental issues following the Fridays for Future movement. Among these 535 youth participants, the participation formats vary. Some youth representatives are included in the delegations of specific countries. In that case, they are known as youth delegates and possess a Party badge. When they are not included in national delegations, they can attend the negotiations as observers. In that case they register under different constituencies including youth, but also Academia, Non-Governmental-Organizations (NGOs) or Indigenous Peoples among others. The following studies these different formats one by one, with a specific focus on European youth.

1.1. European youth representation within national delegations

Table 1 below lists the countries which included youth representatives in their delegation at COP15. 14 different countries had youth delegates, among which 6 are European countries, exclusively from Northern Europe.

Table 1. Youth representatives within national delegations at COP15

Country	Nb of youth representatives
Belgium	1

Canada	21
Denmark	5
Finland	2
France	1
Mexico	1
Micronesia	1
Netherlands	2
Nigeria	1
Norway	1
South Africa	7
Sudan	2
Sweden	1
Thailand	1
Total	47
Total European	12

If we disregard the overrepresentation of Canadian youth delegates, related to the location of the COP in Canada, European youth delegates represent about 1/4 of the national youth delegates. The European youth representatives included in the different European delegations are usually a few: 1 for Sweden, France and Belgium; a couple for Finland and the Netherlands; and 5 for Denmark.

Despite similar numbers, the conditions of the involvement of youth representatives within these delegations vary. Finland, Denmark, the Netherlands, and Belgium have had youth delegates for many years already, often related to the United Nations national youth delegate programme (Lo Curlo 2023), which is not the case of France. Having longer experience in the programme gives more legitimacy and visibility to the youth delegates and comes with clearer conditions of involvement in the delegation. The Dutch delegates are partly paid for their position, while all the others are engaged on a voluntary basis, while receiving indemnities for their travel, accommodation and sometimes food expenses. Nearly all of these European national youth delegates are included in all the activities of their delegation (“we can whisper in their ears”³), while only one explained having very limited contact with his/her delegation. Overall, this confirms that national youth delegates can face very different working conditions within and outside of their national delegation; but it also confirms that European youth delegates tend to have stronger relations with their national delegations, compared to youth delegates from other countries (Lo Curlo 2023).

Moreover, several European youth representatives are also included in the Nordic Youth Council delegation and therefore appear as youth registered under International Organizations, not as youth in Party delegations. Looking at youth potential registration through IOs, the European Union does not appear in the list⁴: there are no EU youth delegates for biodiversity at CBD COPs, but youth delegates from different European countries. Youth included in the Nordic Council that were interviewed confirmed that their working conditions were very good (except lack of salary), with constant interactions with the Council and with

³ Interview quotation.

⁴ Other IOs include the International Union for the Conservation of Nature; UNESCO or ASEAN, among others.

individual member states. Denmark, Finland, and Sweden are European member states who have therefore sent additional national youth delegates to the COP, through the Nordic Council.

Table 2. Youth representatives within the Nordic Council at COP15

Country	Nb of youth representatives
Denmark	1
Finland	1
Sweden	2
Nordic Council as a whole	6
Total	10
Total European	4

1.2. European youth as observers

Youth participants can also register as observers to the meeting. In that case, they can choose different constituencies to register under: they can register under the Youth constituency; but they can also register with the NGOs, Academia, or Indigenous Peoples' constituencies (see Table 3). No youth representatives were found under the Business and Industry, or under the Subnational and Local Authorities' constituency.

Much more youth have registered as observers (474) for COP15, compared to national youth delegates. The majority of youth representatives as observers has registered as Youth. When they do so, they can join the Global Youth Biodiversity Network (GYBN), one important youth group within the CBD, created in 2011 (90.4% have done so; and all European youth have done so).

Table 3. European youth representation within different observer categories at COP15

	Total Nb of youth observers as...	Nb of countries of origin of youth observers as...	European countries and Nb of delegates of youth as observers as...
GYBN	273	56	Austria (2); Finland (1); France (6); Germany (85); Greece (1); Italy (1); Netherlands (1); Romania (1) Total: 102
NGOs and observers	87	19	France (2); Germany (1); The Netherlands (2); Italy (1) Total: 6
Academia	73	15	Austria (2); Germany (5); Netherlands (5) Total: 12
Youth not GYBN	29	5	/
Indigenous	12	5	/

Within GYBN, 35.9% of youth representatives were European, with 8 different European Union countries represented. What is noticeable is that Germany has counted a little more than 31% of all youth representatives within GYBN for COP15. This is so, because German organisations are used as an entry point for youth delegates from all over the world to register within GYBN.

The second most used format of accreditation as observers is through the NGOs group but it has mostly been used by Canadian (28) and American (25) youth, as European youth mostly registered within GYBN. A few European youths also registered as Academia. Finally, no European youth representatives registered under the Indigenous category, or as Youth but not GYBN.

European youth are not the majority among observers, but European youth is still very active, especially within GYBN. The platform gathers many non-European youth, among which many are hosted by German organizations. The next section looks at the claims formulated by European youth representatives during the COP.

II. Beyond privilege: claims and impact of European youth at COP15

2.1. The organizing of European youth at COP15

Just as there have been different formats of youth participation at COP15, there have also been different sites for youth participation at the COP (see Table 4). Before the COP, a two-day Youth Summit introduced the topic of biodiversity politics and enabled young people to get to know each other. During the COP, participation spaces were visible within the formal negotiations; and in parallel to the formal negotiations.

Within the formal negotiations, youth delegates with Party badges could have access to nearly all the negotiation meetings; and youth observers could observe the debates and eventually take the floor for statements during plenary sessions, working groups' sessions, and sometimes contact groups, which are more restricted negotiation venues (at the discretion of the negotiation chairs). COP15 also allowed for online participation, and several youth observers were following the negotiations online. To prepare the negotiations, each day, in the morning, before the official negotiations, a coordination meeting was organized by youth and for youth, with again the possibility for several of them to participate online to such a coordination meeting.

In parallel to the formal negotiations, youth representatives have been very active in organizing official side events. Side events are usually roundtable presentations where speakers present their work and views. For the first time at a CBD COP, a Youth Pavilion was established, serving as a meeting point for anyone interested in youth activities, and regularly hosting short presentations and debates. During the COP, two days were also labeled Youth Days, with again a special programme to present and discuss youth views. Finally, many youth representatives joined the march for biodiversity organized by civil society on December 10th with slogans and colorful banners. On the activist side, actions were also organized in the

corridors during the COP, such as a die-in for biodiversity and promotion of the hashtag #StoptheSame campaign.

All youth representatives, whatever their format of participation, and whatever their geographical origin, could join these activities. In practice, most of these sites were used by all youth representatives, and no specific site was dedicated to or activated by European youth actors exclusively. There exist many circulation paths between the different youth representatives (national youth delegates, GYBN members, etc.). One specificity of European youth was their constant participation to any sites, being probably more active than others for such direct actions or during the march, as several youth representatives from the Global South were fearing retaliation for participation in more activist formats. European youth representatives were aware of the privilege they had to be able to freely and loudly express their views.

Table 4. Modes of political participation of youth at COP15

Format	Details
Youth summit	5 & 6 December
Youth days	8 & 18 December
Side events	Among others, 8 side events organized by GYBN
Youth pavilion	All days during the COP
Actions	Die-in for biodiversity; #StoptheSame campaign
Youth march	10 December
Statements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Opening plenary statement COP15, 7 December 2022 • Closing plenary statement COP15, 19 December 2022
Position papers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • GYBN, Youth4Nature & YOUNGO. 2022. <i>Global Youth Statement on Nature-Based solutions</i>. • GYBN. 2021. <i>Youth Perspectives for a transformative Post-2020 Global Biodiversity Framework</i>. OEWG-3 • GYBN. <i>No Nature without Justice. Youth Recommendations for the Post-2020 Global Biodiversity Framework</i>. OEWG-5 & CBD COP15 - December 2022

2.2. The European youth voice at COP15

During the COP, most youth perspectives were expressed in the name of all youth. There has only been one specific public positioning by European youth actors, at the middle of the COP, with a short newspaper article published by 11 European youth representatives, including 2 GYBN European members, 4 delegates from the Nordic Council and 5 European national youth delegates (European youth representatives, 2022). The paper was mostly aiming at reminding the European Union about the importance of the meeting, and about the main points to push for in the new global biodiversity framework.

More precisely, European youth insisted on the need to finance the adopted measures “the issue is not the ambition, it’s the means that we implement to reach it that can fail us”. The proposal included deviating money from subsidies that are harmful to nature and investing in the adopted biodiversity protection measures. European youth also reminded European

leaders about important targets to include in the final agreement such as to protect 30% of the planet by 2030; or to pay attention to pesticides' use. Finally, they urged the EU to try as much as possible to rebalance North/South inequalities: "indeed, we can't achieve 'live in harmony with nature' (2050's vision) by perpetuating inequitable relations between the Global South and 'us', the Global North that we represent as the EU. That's why it's crucial to have those negotiations and to be able to listen to what the grassroots movements and civil society from other countries want from their governments (women, youth, Indigenous People and Local Communities, or IPLC as stated in the texts); it's not for us to decide for them". A way to do so is for the EU to push for a human rights-based approach during the negotiations.

Some of these points resonated with the elements contained in the global youth statements pronounced at the COP or in the policy documents circulated by youth prior to the COP. In its opening statement GYBN has mostly been highlighting the limits of the current system, inviting governments to "stop the same", the same being "the same greenwashing, the same broken promises, the same too-little-too-late solutions, the same old excuses, the same injustices". According to them, the biodiversity crisis is rooted in broader injustice and inequality. In its closing statement, GYBN has underlined the positive achievements of the COP that are in line with a human-rights approach: "we celebrate the much-needed recognition of the rights of Indigenous peoples and local communities, women and youth to inclusive participation and access to justice and information – a huge milestone for international biodiversity policy". They also praised the recognition of the need to protect environment defenders, the recognition of intergenerational equity, and efforts to bridge the financial gap.

In its general youth policy documents, GYBN has been promoting three elements: intergenerational equity, transformative education, and a rights-based approach for people and nature. One additional key policy document produced for the COP deserves particular attention as it was co-authored by three youth organizations and platforms, including one for climate change (GYBN et al 2022). Such document explains the risks of a "nature-positive" narrative, a narrative that seems to underestimate the fact that current practices are not positive for nature. Rather, youth advocated for "nature-based" solutions, not for nature-positive solutions. With "nature-based" they defend a diversified view of nature as rich and multiple ecosystems. This last document shows the circulation of youth across environmental topics (biodiversity and climate change). Actually, several European youth circulate across venues: the Danish and Swedish youth delegates attend both biodiversity and climate change negotiations, many of them are both members of YOUNGO (youth platform in the climate change negotiations) and GYBN.

Conclusion

This working paper has been written in the context of an increasing involvement of youth representatives in CBD COPs. Trying to understand if European youth participation at COP15 has been active, this short analysis of the European youth voice at COP15 has confirmed that European youth are quite well represented, even if not at the European level of policymaking per se (no European youth delegate) and even if not all the member states have youth representatives taking part to the process as Party delegates or as observers (it is mostly Northern European countries and Nordic countries). Such representation distribution could be improved. Interestingly, some European organisations host a number of youth

representatives from the Global South, to improve participation from under-represented countries, meaning that European organisations somehow give their voice to actors from the Global South to be heard. Moreover, while not necessarily majority in numbers, European youth delegates have usually fruitful contacts with national delegations and other stakeholders, so the quality of their participation is satisfactory. They recognize the need to be financially supported, independent and involved in the process ahead and after the COP, elements that some already benefit from but that they would like to be improved from them and for all other youth representatives. What comes out of this study of European youth representation is their awareness of the fact that they are privilege youth (with more resources, support and freedom than many others) and that they need to give a voice to underrepresented youth (being Eastern European youth, youth from the Global South, youth from the Dutch Caribbean, etc.). This tendency is visible in climate change negotiations as well, whereby some European youth representatives have decided not to attend COP28, to give more space to youth from other origins. European youth themselves still need to be unmuted, but are also taking efforts to unmute others.

Regarding their claims, European youth representatives have mostly followed the objectives of global youth platforms, still putting a little more pressure on the European Union, as a key actor in the process. Youth at COP15 have also been able to draft concrete policy proposals, that have been, to some extent, taken into account in the final agreement, the K-MGBF: intergenerational equity appears in the text, youth is mentioned three times as well; while for instance nature-positive does not appear in the text (nature-based and ecosystem-based are favored). It will now be important to see if these key achievements are maintained during the implementation of the agreement, at the global but also at the European level.

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