

THREATENED FUTURES, COUNTLESS POLICIES, AND THE YOUTH CLIMATE POLICE

Another limp body with sunken eyes was brought into the pediatric hospital. It was the fifteenth case since I resumed. “Cholera, right?” The definite diagnosis rang in my head as I pored through my medical textbook, searching for the signs of severe dehydration. Three months later, it was shocking to realise that the floods caused the cholera outbreak. And that the floods were linked to climate change. The imminent danger was parading the hospital’s entrance. Unless my fellow youths and I took the law into our own hands, our siblings and friends would suffer for sins they did not commit.

The Children Climate Risk Index (CCRI) report by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) in 2021 found that almost 1 billion children globally are at incredibly high risk of the impacts of the climate crisis.¹ From water vulnerability and other environmental shocks to disruption of lives and climate anxiety, children and young people are bearing a heavy brunt, experiencing serious jeopardy of their rights to live. Unsurprisingly, low- to middle-income countries like Nigeria, which contribute less to net emissions than developed countries, are taking and will take the most significant hit on their children if measures are not implemented. Due to their vulnerability, children are more exposed to air pollution than adults and more susceptible to increased asthma attacks, respiratory damage, cancers, and developmental damage.¹ The spread of deadly diseases killing children has also skyrocketed in recent times. These lethal pathogens are transported in freshwaters because of higher temperatures, increasing waterborne diseases. Perhaps the most compelling effect of the climate crisis on young people’s health is anxiety and psychological distress.

In Nigeria, the direct health implications of extreme heat and changing precipitation patterns include cerebrospinal meningitis, malaria, and cholera, with vulnerable children under the age of 5 years mostly being affected.^{2,3} Nigeria, for the third year in a row, has the highest number of severely malnourished children.³ The Nigerian health system lacks the structure to cater to these children's climate-changed health needs adequately. In the face of overburdened healthcare workers and dilapidated or non-existent health facilities, Nigeria has to find another way of mitigating these health risks. It begs the critical question: "Are there policies or climate action documents geared to prevent the leaders of tomorrow from dying like animals”?

A turning point for Nigeria in its effective response to climate change and its challenges occurred in 2015 with the signing of the Paris Agreement. Upon ratification of the Agreement in 2017, the Federal Ministry of Environment, with the National Climate Change Council, developed, reviewed, and outlined various strategies and policy documents to be implemented. This includes the National Climate Change Policy for Nigeria 2021-2030 and Nigeria Long Term Low-Emission Development Strategy (LT-LEDS) 2060 documents. These documents show the tenacious spirit of the Nigerian government in tackling the climate crisis. In fact, one of these ambitious goals includes Nigeria revising its Nationally Determined Contributions in July 2021 and committing to reducing its emissions by 47% below Business As Usual by 2030, conditional on international support.⁴ This support will come mainly from

climate financing, paramount to implementing sustainable climate-resilient pathways in Nigeria. However, implementation will only be a daydream if the largest demography of the Giant of Africa remains on the sidelines. What is more paramount is the integration of youths and children into the climate picture. The roles of the youths, who constitute 70% of the entire population,⁵ have been defined vaguely. Securing climate financing yet leaving the populace illiterate is not only erroneous but also disastrous.

60% of Nigerians living in urban areas have never heard about climate change.⁶ Although stated in policy documents, this directly results from a lack of feasible Action for Climate Empowerment(ACE) strategies. ACE is a term adopted by the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change under the Paris Agreement. Its six pillars aim to empower everyone in every society to involve themselves in climate action actively. In Nigeria, the youths and children are best positioned to spearhead this movement. Therefore, I propose the Youth Climate Police.

The Youth Climate Police represent not just an association but a force. It comprises visionary, climate-knowledgeable, handpicked youths from all states and geopolitical zones in Nigeria. They are patriotic and well-versed in their local languages and cultural idiosyncrasies. Similar to the training received by the police force in our country, these youths will be rigorously trained in foundations like GreenHub Africa on the various facets of climate change as it relates to health. They will have rare opportunities to rub minds with climate action drivers like Adenike Oladosu, Salisu Dahiru, and many others. They will be responsible for developing unique strategies peculiar to the needs of their states, not individually but as a team. Once fully equipped, they will be deployed back to their respective states to begin a crucial phase. Their mission is simple: to create awareness of the effects and mitigation of climate change on health and to direct a youth-led community surveillance structure. They will mobilise youths and children, transfer the knowledge they have garnered, and enlighten their communities on sustainable and climate-resilient practices like water and sanitation hygiene, afforestation and deforestation, sustainable nutrition, etc. When there is a defaulter, they will ensure the individual is reoriented and set on his climate action journey.

“Nigeria has an astonishing opportunity to grow and prosper through its climate leadership”. These words by Simon Steill, the UN Climate Change Executive Secretary, are incredibly accurate. While we ensure climate financing to put sustainable models in place, we must not take climate empowerment of our communities lightly. Too much is at stake, particularly the health of the leaders of tomorrow. Rather than fold its hands at the sound of impending doom, Nigeria must harness its most valuable and readily available resource: the youths. Climate-resilient pathways and sustainable environmental models will only be ink on paper without enlisting the Youth Climate Police. Thus, surveilling our land will save our children's lives.

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