

Post-Conference Perspectives: Youth Reflections on the Kenya Population and Development Conference 2025

Introduction

The inaugural Kenya Population and Development Conference 2025 on "Navigating the Future: Population Dynamics and Sustainable Development in Kenya," held from March 11-13 at the renowned University of Nairobi, marked a significant milestone in Kenya's commitment to addressing population challenges. The National Council for Population and Development (NCPD), in collaboration with partners such as RHNK, Zamara Foundation, UNFPA, Population Council, Faith to Action and MSI Reproductive Choices, demonstrated exceptional leadership in convening this landmark forum that brought together experts, policymakers, researchers, and diverse stakeholders from across the country and beyond.

The conference successfully created a dynamic platform for rich dialogue and knowledge exchange on critical issues at the intersection of population dynamics and sustainable development. Through thoughtfully organized sessions spanning human capital development, climate change adaptation, fertility trends, evolving family structures, gender dynamics, and evidence-based policymaking, the organizers established a comprehensive framework for addressing Kenya's most pressing demographic challenges.

Particularly commendable was the conference's emphasis on research-driven approaches, as evidenced by the inclusion of program-based studies and innovative methodologies presented by leading institutions. The multisectoral representation, ranging from government ministries and academic institutions to development partners, civil society organizations, and research bodies, further highlighted NCPD's commitment to nurturing and promoting collaborative solutions to complex population issues.

As young Kenyans who had the opportunity to participate in this groundbreaking event, we offer our perspectives on the conference proceedings, highlighting how the discussions connected to our lived experiences and suggesting pathways for even greater youth engagement in future iterations. Our reflections aim to contribute constructively to the ongoing national conversation about harnessing Kenya's demographic potential for sustainable development.

Susan's Reflections: Finding My Story in Kenya's Population Narrative.

As a young woman of reproductive age born and raised in Bungoma County and now residing in Nairobi, I found the conference exceptionally valuable in numerous ways that directly connect to my lived experiences.

The session on technology-facilitated abuse among youth aged 19-29 by Mercy Kamau particularly resonated with me, as I was recently a victim of hacking where my Facebook and Instagram accounts were compromised, forcing me to start over. This experience gave me firsthand insight into how digital violence manifests as a form of gender-based violence, which was thoroughly examined during the conference through research conducted in partnership with Kenyatta University's Women Economic Empowerment Hub (WEE-Hub), Johns Hopkins University, ICRH-K, and NCPD under the PMA Agile program.

Similarly, presentations by Dr. Sarah Okemwa and Professor Grace Ngare (my mentors at Kenyatta University where I'm pursuing a master's degree in Gender and Development Studies) on sexual

harassment among young people in Nairobi struck a chord. Mary Thiong'o's presentation on lessons from the PMA-Agile project highlighting GBV realities for women in Bungoma County—identified by KDHS 2022 as having some of the highest GBV rates—was particularly meaningful given my roots there.

My connection to these presentations extends beyond mere interest. I've actively participated in the PMA-Agile program as both a research respondent and contributor to their youth-targeted advocacy materials. The sessions examining the relationship between women's empowerment and fertility outcomes in Kenya felt especially relevant as a woman of reproductive age who has benefited from academic mentorship under Dr. Okemwa and Prof. Ngare, as well as career and advocacy guidance through my involvement with the PMA Agile project.

The conference also validated my work with NCPD's Population, Health, and Environment (PHE) program, which supported me in establishing the PHE Youth Alliance. Their backing gave me the opportunity to present my research on youth understanding of PHE integration both orally and through poster presentation during the conference.

Throughout the three days, I found myself connecting deeply with most presentations, studies, and shared best practices. They all spoke to elements of my lived reality as a young Kenyan woman and reflected experiences common among my peers. This personal connection underscores how significant this conference was—or could have been—for Kenyan youth. Yet paradoxically, young people were notably underrepresented as participants, panellists, discussants, and presenters.

This disconnect reveals a missed opportunity. If I could draw such clear relevance from the conference materials and feel so validated by them, then NCPD and other partners can be confident that involving more young people at all stages—from pre-planning through post-conference processes—would dramatically increase youth engagement. Young Kenyans would readily recognize the value of participating in such conferences in various capacities, whether as volunteers helping with planning and operations, supporting digital media functions, or providing technical services.

This approach represents true meaningful youth engagement and would demonstrate how Kenyan government institutions and organizations can genuinely prioritize young people.

Editor's note: The following sections feature contributions from other young attendees of the conference.

Lucy's Perspective: Role of CSOs in strengthening Youth Inclusion for a Sustainable Demographic Dividend

We commend the National Council for Population and Development (NCPD) for its dedication to harnessing the demographic dividend and for the meaningful strides made in addressing youth employment and entrepreneurship. Recognizing young people as key drivers of economic growth is an important step toward ensuring their potential is fully realized. Our initial engagements with NCPD have been promising, and we truly appreciate the openness to including youth perspectives in these crucial conversations. It is encouraging to see efforts that acknowledge the vital role young people play in shaping the nation's future. As we move forward, we are excited about the opportunity to further strengthen youth participation, with particular attention to young women and girls in all their diversities. Their voices, experiences, and leadership are essential in shaping policies that drive inclusive and sustainable development. We look forward to continued collaboration with NCPD in fostering meaningful

opportunities that build the agency of young women, ensuring they are not just beneficiaries but active contributors to national progress

Emmah's Insights: Climate Change and Reproductive Health.

Coming from Kajiado County, I found the intersection of climate change discussions with sexual and reproductive health particularly relevant. Evans Muema Wambua's presentation on "Climate change threats to human well-being, Kajiado County, Kenya" described challenges I witness daily in my community.

As a community health volunteer and human rights defender, I see firsthand how environmental degradation affects women's health, access to healthcare and rights. The presentation by Grace Mugo on "The effects of climate change on women's reproductive health in LMICs" validated observations I've made but lacked the vocabulary or platform to articulate.

The conference provided valuable evidence-based insights, but I wonder how many of my peers from Kajiado could access this information. We need localized versions of these discussions in formats and languages accessible to youth in the communities most affected by these issues.

Judith's reflection: Family Structures

A memorable conversation was on marriages and changing family structure. Over time, family means different things to different people. Apart from the legal definition of family, with industrialization and social changes, we see family structures vary. From the conversation, I got to see the perspective of how culture and religion have played a role and how we use them interchangeably. More conversation needs to happen to bring in the lived realities of our communities because family is not just a union between two adults.

Recommendations for Future Conferences

- Intentional youth inclusion: Establish a dedicated Youth Advisory Committee with representation from diverse backgrounds (urban/rural, educational levels, socioeconomic circumstances) to inform conference planning from inception. This committee could help identify youth-relevant topics, suggest appropriate speakers, and ensure programming aligns with youth interests and concerns. Consider implementing a youth co-chair model for the main organizing committee to institutionalize youth perspectives at the highest planning level.
- Youth session/side event: Develop a comprehensive youth track within the main conference program that includes skill-building workshops, mentorship opportunities, and youth-led panels addressing population issues from young people's perspectives. This track could feature interactive formats such as world cafés, unconference sessions, or fishbowl discussions that encourage active participation rather than passive listening.
- Diversified representation: Implement a minimum 30% representation quota for youth speakers, panellists, and session chairs across all thematic areas. Provide presentation skills training and mentorship support for first-time youth presenters to ensure quality contributions. Create opportunities for intergenerational dialogue by pairing experienced researchers with emerging youth scholars in co-presentation formats.

- **Financial accessibility:** Given that the conference was not residential it required attendees to commute every day for three days. However, the session on Fertility and SRH was set too early in the morning that most who were coming from far did not attend. In this regard we recommend the establishment of a dedicated youth scholarship fund to cover registration fees, accommodation, and transportation for young participants, particularly those from marginalized communities and rural areas. Consider sliding-scale registration fees based on employment status and income level. Additionally, partner with universities to offer academic credit for student participation to incentivize attendance.
- **Digital engagement:** Leverage youth digital expertise by creating a Youth Digital Engagement Team responsible for social media coverage, live-tweeting sessions, creating shareable infographics, and managing online discussion forums before, during, and after the conference. Implement a conference mobile app with interactive features designed specifically for youth networking and engagement. Consider hybrid participation options to accommodate youth who cannot attend in person.
- **Youth-specific spaces:** Designate physical and virtual networking zones specifically for youth-mentor connections and peer collaboration. These spaces could feature structured networking activities like speed mentoring, research pitch sessions, or collaborative problem-solving exercises focused on population challenges. Establish a conference buddy system pairing first-time youth attendees with more experienced participants.
- **Simplified communication:** Develop youth-friendly knowledge products from conference presentations including infographics, policy briefs, explainer videos, and interactive data visualizations. Following Mary Thiong'o's excellent example from the PMA-Agile Project, create templates for presenters to develop accessible versions of their research. Establish a post-conference youth communication strategy to disseminate key findings through channels that reach young people effectively, including social media, youth networks, and educational institutions.
- **Capacity building opportunities:** Integrate pre-conference training workshops specifically designed for youth participants on topics such as policy analysis, research methods, advocacy strategies, and effective communication. These workshops would enhance youth's ability to meaningfully engage with technical content and contribute substantively to discussions.
- **Follow-up engagement mechanism:** Establish a structured post-conference youth engagement pathway that connects interested young participants with mentorship, internship, research, and career opportunities within participating organizations. This would transform the conference from a one-time event into a sustainable platform for youth professional development in population and development fields.

In conclusion, it is our strong belief that once these suggested recommendations are implemented and incorporated into the planning processes of future conferences by NCPD and other development partners, the result will be a transformation of such engagements into truly intergenerational platforms that not only discuss youth issues but actively engage young Kenyans in influencing population and development dynamics that will ultimately determine our collective future.

The conversations at KPDC 2025 were about us—next time, they should be with us.

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