Examining the Impact of African Youth Activists on the Political Process at COP27: Unveiling Power Relations

Edgar, Marise

Examining the Impact of African Youth Activists on the Political Process at COP27:

Unveiling Power Relations

Master Thesis

Marise Edgar (3745538)

Master Thesis

MSc. Political Science: Nationalism, Ethnic Conflict and Development

Leiden University

Supervisor: Dr. D.E. Gómez Uribe

Second reader: Dr. J.P. Phillips

24/6/2023

9919 words

Table of Contents

Abstract

This study examines the impact of African Youth Activists (AYAs) at last year's Conference of the Parties (COP27). Despite being disproportionately affected by climate change, marginalized groups, such as AYAs, often face challenges in having their voices adequately heard due to underlying structures that favor countries and non-governmental organizations from the Global North. The Political Opportunity Structure can be used to examine whether AYAs have opportunities to make a difference in a system. This involves evaluating whether there are entry points for new actors to enter the political process and whether the existing mechanisms within the system effectively accommodate and integrate new perspectives. To explore this, the study conducted 12 semi-structured interviews with AYAs to investigate how the existing power relations at COP impact their participation. The perception of AYAs on power relations and their opportunities for intervention provide insights into their reality and how they navigate the structural aspects of the political process. The findings of this research can be used to find places to intervene in the UNFCCC- system and improve activists' work at COPs in the future.

Introduction

Each year, the UNFCCC organizes the Conference of the Parties (COP) in a different country, bringing together world leaders and civil society members to review climate policy implementation. Due to the way the conference is structured, it tends to favor Western countries and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) while marginalizing activists from the Global South and youth activists (Grosse et al., 2020). These power relations within climate negotiations tend to uphold efficient actions to combat climate change (O'Brien et al., 2015). During the Conference, national delegations engage in negotiations with each other, while civil society organizations play an observatory role and have the potential to influence these delegations (Falzon, 2021).

However, the resources available to different civil society members vary significantly, leading to unequal access to the negotiators (Gramsci, 1971). For example, lobbyists from the fossil fuel industry, a for-profit industry, often possess significant financial resources to advocate against measures aimed at reducing such emissions (Ciplet et al., 2015). Climate activists in the Global North, with fewer financial resources, rely on alternative methods like organizing school strikes to raise awareness and advocate for change (Sabherwal, 2021). Additionally, the opportunities available to young people[1] in more developed regions are not equally accessible to African Youth Activists (AYAs)[2]. This difference in resources underscores the unequal dynamics between different stakeholders at the conference. Moreover, there is a notable imbalance in the representation of Southern NGOs in climate change negotiations. Despite the majority of the world's population residing in the Global South,

---

[1] In this study, the term 'youth' is used to refer to individuals under the age of 35, as defined by YOUNGO. While the age range for defining 'youth' may be debatable, for the sake of consistency with YOUNGO's perspective, this research will adopt their age criterion.

[2] Unlike other studies that commonly use the term "Global South" to describe the group that emits the least but bears the greatest burden of climate change, this research uniquely focuses on African youth as a marginalized group that is not heard in climate negotiations. It should be noted, however, that this study also draws on literature using the Global South as defined above.

nearly three-quarters of all accredited NGOs originate from the Global North (Gereke et al., 2019, pp. 883). This lack of adequate representation diminishes the opportunities for AYAs to have a significant impact on the outcome of negotiations.

Previous studies have extensively explored the emergence and dynamics of social movements, but few have examined how power relations during international conferences like COP give shape to the ability of climate justice movements to influence the ultimate decision-making. This is particularly relevant regarding the AYAs participating in COP through Southern NGOs, as they represent those who suffer the consequences of climate change to a larger extent than NGOs representing the Global North. In order for AYAs to increase their influence during future COP editions and have their voices be heard, it is necessary to explore the existing system of COP and the power relations giving shape to this system. Based on this, the following research question was formulated: *How do power relations within the COP system influence the impact of young African climate activists on the political process at COP27?* This was done by examining the political access variable in the Political Opportunity Structure (POS) (Kitschelt, 1986) and measuring the impact generated by the AYAs during COP27. By first outlining the power relations during COP27, the existing framework through which AYAs pursued their objectives is established. Secondly, by investigating 'power' as experienced by the AYAs themselves, their impact during COP27 could be measured and their views on factors enhancing and limiting their impact could be identified. Lastly, by placing these findings in the framework of POS, points of access and restrictions could be determined. Based on this, the following sub-questions were formulated to support answering the main question:

1. *What do the power relations giving shape to the system of COP27 look like?*

2. *How did Young African Activists perceive the power relations during COP27?*

3. *How do the power relations in the current COP system enable/ restrict African Youth Activists in achieving their objectives?*

Firstly, the research conducts a literature analysis on the power relations at COP. For the second and third questions, this research conducts semi-structured interviews with AYAs who attended COP27 in order to understand their perception of power relations. This marginalized group does not conform to the social norm and can therefore provide a better picture of the power relations present, (Harding, 2004) when combined with information from the theoretical framework.

The expectation is that power relations within the UNFCCC significantly influence the distribution of political resources, which are every resource that could influence, shape or determine perceptions of possibilities within a political system (Gaventa, 1980). This, in turn, affects the opportunities available for the effective participation of AYAs in climate negotiations. This suggests that in order for AYAs to have a meaningful impact within the COP system, there should be a fair distribution of resources and opportunities, as well as openings for their participation in decision-making processes.

The following section presents relevant literature on power relations and their influence on the political process. The theoretical framework provides the conceptualization of POS and the available resources. The methodology explains the chosen research design, methods of data collection, operationalization of the data, and a description of the research ethics and the positionality. The analysis will use this information to answer the research question on power relations at COP27.

Literature Review

In order to grasp the impact that a social movement can have in a given system, this thesis built on the literature on power relations and the impact on a political process. First,

relevant scholars' ideas on power relations are outlined, then the impact of a social movement on the political process, and then POS is introduced into the theoretical framework.

Power Relations

Individuals are not inherently 'powerful' or 'powerless' in isolation, but their power is defined in relation to other social actors in a particular context (Pfeffer, 1981). Furthermore, power is not a fixed entity, but is dynamic and dependent on the social situation, making it difficult to quantify power as a static concept (Zartman et al., 2000). Simply examining the outcomes of power dynamics does not capture the extent to which individuals have resisted such power. It tells who wins, but not the score" (Zartman et al., 2000, p.7).

Power relations encompass the struggles between resource-rich and underrepresented members of society within a social space characterized by constant competition for influence (Bourdieu, 1991). In this dynamic, actors engage in struggles to secure resources, driven by their own interests. Ansari et al. (2013) argue that this all takes place within institutions, and actors that struggle are often perceived as flawed individuals, rather than being recognised as systematically disadvantaged by institutional structures. As a result, the flaws in the systems remain unacknowledged or hidden.

Relational theories of power can be used to explore the relative influence that one party has over another (Wolfe et al., 2005). This reduces any asymmetries in the relationship and takes power away from one actor. Scholars using this theory find that party A has power over party B to the extent that B is dependent on A to achieve goals or solve problems (Wolfe et al., 2005). Research on power relations can be divided into three categories: Structural, Institutional and Strategic perspectives (Ciplet et al., 2015; Klinksy et al., 2017; Gramsci, 1971).

The structural perspective highlights the reluctance of powerful states to make significant short-term sacrifices in favor of long-term global protection (Ciplet et al., 2015). The prevailing power dynamics among these states often rationalize inaction, perpetuating a status quo that hinders meaningful progress. The uneven integration of countries in the global economy influences worldviews that impede structural cooperation (Klinsky et al., 2017). However, this approach needs to be updated because it does not allow for change and sees the political space as a static place where social systems do not change (Levy et al., 2003).

According to the institutionalist approach to power relations, fragmented governance institutions hinder the establishment of concrete climate policies (Ciplet et al., 2015). According to this line of reasoning, powerful states would be more inclined to engage in international negotiations if the benefits outweigh the costs. Researchers following this approach argue for a reform of global institutional structures to increase the accountability of states for their actions (Ciplet et al., 2015). Similar to the previous approach, this perspective also represents a gap in the literature as it tends to underestimate the capacity of social movements to shape collective consciousness and influence the way we perceive and think about climate change.

In contrast, the strategic approach seeks to go beyond the above theories by looking at the influence of actors in driving transformative change, while recognising that they are constructed and constrained by these structures (Levy et al., 2003). In doing so, it places civil society at the center of the theory, challenging the notion that business groups hold power solely, because of their structural position. Instead, it recognised civil society as central to the systems, because it embodies the dominant historical systems of power (Gramsci, 1971). The historical systems of power contribute to the supremacy of a social group as domination and role through hegemony (Gramsci, 1971). Hegemony is based on consent achieved through coalitions, compromises and shared ideologies that accommodate the interests of different

social groups (Levy et al., 2003). Opinions in society are constantly changing, so the dominant group must by default engage with subordinate groups to secure consent. Both groups try to gain or maintain their position by using organizational and strategic means to change the situation, in what Gramsci called a 'war of position' (Gramsci, 1971).

Looking only at the political resources and positions of a group is not sufficient to fully analyze a social structure and the impact a group can have. The dynamics of the 'war of positions' are constantly changing (French, 1959). In order to understand the evolving nature of power relations, it is crucial to consider the broader context in which these dynamics unfold. During COP, a variety of actors with different power relations interact within a given institutional system, resulting in a complex outcome that can be difficult to fully grasp.

Impact on the Policy Process

A social group may seek to address and challenge existing power structures and inequalities. This may involve critically examining and deconstructing dominant narratives, norms and practices that perpetuate power imbalances. By actively questioning and challenging oppressive systems, the group can promote a more inclusive society and make their demands heard. This section explore show a social group can influence the political process.

Power is measured as influence over the policy process (Levy et al., 2003, Ciplet et l., 2015). In a transnational setting such as the COP system, civil society plays an important role in highlighting or constraining hegemony, but this group has a deeply unequal distribution of resources and access to political power against itself (Ciplet et al., 2015). Civil society does not have a formal role in negotiations at COP, as nation states are the only actors with formal power to set policy (Rietig, 2016). To study the impact of social movements, it is necessary to consider them in relation to politics, and that they vary in strategy, structure and success in different types of states (Skocpol, 1979). It depends on different variables: whether the impact

is in political spaces or in other spaces, including social and cultural; whether the impact is external or internal (the movement); and whether the impact affects the fundamental relationship between the established groups and the people, or only changes the policy and not the relationship between them (Estellés, 2010).

Several political scientists have argued that activists have a limited impact on the political process, mainly because they tend to focus on formal political institutions (Diani et al., 2003). Schroeder's study of indigenous participation in REDD+ negotiations found that while indigenous voices were included in discussions, they did not exercise control over the final outcomes (2010). Schroeder's use of 'control' implies that indigenous participants did not have absolute authority in shaping the final policy. This is likely due to the presence of other actors with entrenched positions in the negotiations. However, Rochon et al. (1993) argue that activists who are involved in the policy process have an impact on the process and, as a result, policy can be influenced indirectly and with a time lag (Rochon et al., 1993). Influence on the process can thus lead to influence on policy, and are therefore separate but interdependent.

According to Giugni (2007), activists are more likely to influence policy if they have the support of both political elites and public opinion. When different actors within a movement collaborate and work together, they tend to gain more significant support and are more likely to be heard and taken seriously. However, Giugni also warns that while collaboration can increase the chances of influencing policy, it is crucial to recognise that different actors may respond differently to opportunities due to different relationships with political elites and divergent strategies, which can affect the overall effectiveness of the movement (Giugni, 2007). The rules of the system largely determine how new actors, social movements, are incorporated into the system. The next section explains POS that can be used to study the emergence of a social movement.

Theoretical Framework

Understanding power relations alone do not provide an understanding of the impact of AYAs, so incorporating information on the political process can enhance the understanding. To bridge the gap between the power used in the negotiation process and the potential of AYA to effect change within the system, the theory of POS is used. This framework makes it possible to examine the specific conditions and opportunities within which AYAs can intervene.

Political resources

As noted above, any resource that can be transformed into influence can be used in the political process. However, resources must be 'present in a specific socio-historical context and accessible to potential collective actors' (Edwards et al., 2004, p.118). Resources need to be seen by actors in order to be able to use them. An actor's belief in the feasibility of holding power influences the perceived importance of that position, thereby establishing a link between power and resources. All identifiable resources serve as conduits through which power influences, shapes or determines perceptions of opportunities or challenges within the conflict situation (Gaventa, 1980).

When examining the exercise of power in COPs, several resources can be identified: (1) intellectual base, which is issue-specific knowledge and the ability to provide expert advice; (2) membership base, which is the number of members the group has; (3) political base, which is access to decision-makers and politicians; and (4) financial base, which is the financial resources the actor can channel into campaigns, lobbying, attending conferences, commissioning expert reports, etc. (Gullbrandsen et al., 2005, p.58). These lists include the type of leverage that an NGO can use, which in part shapes its potential for political influence (Gullbrandsen et al., 2005).

However, all power resources that an actor may have at its disposal for the purpose of influence can be used (Dahl, 1957). This list of power resources an actor can fall back on to gain power is not all-encompassing, as it includes all resources that can be used to make an impact (Dahl, 1957). The purpose of the list was to show 'the types of leverage an NGO can apply partly define its opportunity set with regard to exerting political power' (Gullbrandsen et al., 2005, pp.58). In addition, the mass media, with their framing power and the influence of those with access to the media, together with the use of social media as a growing resource, can be said to play a crucial role in determining the political opportunities of social movements (Gamson et al., 1993; McCombs, 2005).

Political Opportunity Structure

Measuring the impact of a social movement is difficult, because it is often indirect and mediated through conventional political processes (Andrews, 1997). Scholars have reached a consensus that POS serves as a tool for predicting variations in the strategy, organization, mobilization and impact of similar social movements in different time periods and institutional contexts (Tarrow, 1988). Social movements are thus influenced by the political environment, which in turn shapes the political processes in which the social movement operates.

Scholars argue that aspects of the political structure help social movements to emerge, mobilize, strategise and impact, while others hinder them (Meyer, 2004). POS can be used to explain how social movements relate to those they oppose and to the rest of society (Xie et al., 2010). This concept lies at the heart of the political process (Giugni, 2009). Scholars use four variable elements that can be identified that affect an actor's options. These variables are highly context-dependent and the only stable variable of POS is the opening up of political access (Tarrow, 1994). The options available to a social movement are influenced by the structure of the environment in which it operates. The environment responds differently to strong and weak contenders, and its response may vary across sectors and evolve over time (Kitschelt, 1986). It

is therefore more effective to examine only the stable factors of the institutional structure in relation to the social movement, rather than whether the system itself provides an opportunity for collective action by the social movement (Tarrow, 2004). To study the stable elements, I choose to use Kitschelt's (1986) operational variable.

Political System

According to Kitschelt (1986), the impact of a social movement depends on its access to the political system and the institutional rules should therefore be receptive to a social movement. Kitschelt further distinguishes between an open/closed input and a strong/weak output structure. The POS is usually characterized by varying degrees of openness, with an open structure making it easier for a social movement to enter the system and influence policy, particularly in terms of the 'input' side of the political process. Input structures include institutional rules about civil society access to politics, cleavage structures, elite allies, and whether the system represses or facilitates challengers (Kitschelt, 1986).

In addition, a POS can be assessed as strong in terms of a polity's capacity for policy implementation, which refers to the 'output' side of policymaking (Kitschelt, 1986). A strong output structure indicates an institutional environment in which space has been created for new policies to be implemented through the mobilization of a social movement (Pickvance, 2001). Strongly institutionalized systems are characterized by regular, routine meetings, institutional autonomy, a dedicated secretariat, legal support and clear rules and functions (Bolleyer, 2009, pp. 25-26). In addition, in weakly institutionalized systems, where relations are less formal, certain defined issues may be more easily ignored or not put on the agenda, so that negotiation outcomes are based on individual preferences and the constituency rather than the whole population benefits from policies.

Falzon (2021) delves deeper into formal institutional systems, focusing on the concept of institutional privilege within the structure of the COP. He shows how these structures are

aligned with normative ideals of national development, which in turn give developed countries an advantage in negotiations. According to Falzon's research, normative ideals of national development have not only been upheld but also embedded in the institutional framework of climate negotiations. Actors who did not meet these criteria - wealth, English, expertise and stability - received little institutional support and were disadvantaged in the institutions (Falzon, 2021).

This shows that context plays a crucial role in determining the importance of something as an asset for a particular actor. For example, even the ability to speak English can potentially be seen as a political resource in the context of the COP. Marginalized groups that do not have access to certain resources are stigmatized for not meeting the norm, rather than being recognised as systematically disadvantaged due to institutional structures (Ansari et al., 2013). The norms were treated as standards and became part of the established rules and procedures within the COP. As a result, global hierarchies were institutionalized within the negotiation process and influenced the positions of actors (Falzon, 2021).

The analysis is based on the POS variable on political access and information on available resources. Together with literature and interviews, the following question can be answered: *How do power relations within the COP system influence the impact of young African climate activists on the political process at COP27?* The next section explains the methods used in the research.

Methodology

Case Selection

The COP was chosen as a case study to examine power relations within global climate negotiations, because of the clear division between negotiators and observers, while the

outcomes of the negotiations transcend this division and have a major impact on a global scale. Previous research has highlighted the exclusion of marginalized groups within the COP, largely due to the unequal distribution of resources (Grosse et al., 2020). This suggests that global underlying structures that favor certain groups, i.e. power relations, also increase the chances of their demands being recognised and addressed during COP negotiations. However, there is a notable research gap in understanding power relations during international conferences like COP and how they shape the ability of social movements to influence the decision-making.

COP27, dubbed the 'African COP', provides a valuable opportunity to explore power relations, particularly as global attention is increasingly focused on Africa's position in climate negotiations (Ighobor, 2022). Given Africa's status as the most vulnerable continent to climate change (UN Environment Programme, 2013), it is imperative that its perspectives are included in climate negotiations. AYAs seek to strengthen the voice of African people, with a particular focus on youth, who are disproportionately affected by the climate crisis (Thiery et al., 2021). AYAs gives a new face to the youth climate justice movement by empowering the new generation, especially from Africa. This is significant as the movement has been predominantly dominated by the Global North, with notable figures such as Greta Thunberg leading the way (Sabherwal et al., 2021). In line with feminist standpoint theory, a conscious decision was made in this study to examine power relations from the perspective of AYAs, as it is recognised that women or other marginalized groups who fall outside the structural norms of society often have a clearer understanding of institutional inequalities and prejudices (Harding, 2004).

Methods of Data Collection

In order to examine the impact of power relations on the influence of African youth activists, the research utilize a variety of resources. The researchquestion is multi-dimensional and therefore cannot be answered by an analysis using only one theory. The analysis consists

of three parts: (1) an examination of how the COP system works, (2) an examination of how AYAs relate to the system, and (3) an examination of the impact of AYAs in the system.

The first part of the research reviews the literature on the actual power relations within the COP. This involves gathering information on the negotiation process and examining the power dynamics at play, particularly in the context of COP27. It also examines the resources available to AYAs.

For the second part, the researches draws on interviews with AYAs. The findings from these interviews provide valuable information about perceptions of power relations rather than the actual power dynamics. The difference between these perceptions and the actual power relations may indicate untapped opportunities for AYAs to intervene in the system. As the literature review emphasizes that power relations are relational, it is possible that if perceptions of power are higher, this may reduce the actual power position of AYAs.

In the third part, the analyse is based on interviews with AYs and the theory of POS to answer the question of whether power relations provide opportunities or constraints for activists. The impact of a group cannot be measured in isolation because of the presence of other influential actors. This is a problem in research, so the focus is only on the access to resources, the achievement of goals and the self-perception of the AYAs. The answers to the three sub-questions provide information on the extent to which power relations in the COP influence the impact of AYAs.

Interview Process

To answer subquestions (2) and (3), this study used semi-structured interviews with a sample of 12 AYAs attending COP27 to gain insights into perceptions of power relations at the COP. Interviews were chosen because they aim to uncover interpretations and subjective perspectives (Atkinson, 2011). The interviews were conducted online via Google Meet and

saved as an audio file, after which the file was manually transcribed. Interviews lasted between 45 minutes and 1.5 hours. In some cases, follow-up questions were asked via Whatsapp or email. The interviews were all recorded in English, which was not the participants' first language. The manual transcription helped to identify some grammatical errors for a better understanding of the text as a whole, but did not alter the meaning of the quotes.

My previous experience of working with three of the twelve participants on a climate justice education project may have contributed to a more comfortable environment for discussing the study's themes within this subgroup. The other participants were selected using a 'snowball' method (Johnson, 2014) by asking them if they knew other young AYAs who would be interested in talking to me about their experiences. All interviewees belonged to an organization that is part of YOUNGO, so the findings only provide information about the constituency. They came from Congo, Ghana, Kenya, Liberia, Malawi, Namibia, Niger, Uganda and Zimbabwe. The age of the group ranged from 23 to 34 years. Of the 12 respondents, five identified themselves as women. This demographic aspect may have an impact on their perceptions and experiences of power structures, as being both young Africans and women may compound their marginalization. Other minor variables may also influence perceptions, but due to the limitations of this study these were not further explored.

Operationalization

The transcripts were coded using the online computer program ATLAS.ti. This programme helps to locate codes within bodies of unstructured data (ATLAS.ti, n.d.). The codes were derived from the literature mentioned above as well as from the interview process itself. After the first round of codes, the codes were reviewed and adjusted to find sub-codes. The codes were divided into two categories based on the two sub-questions: (1) perceptions of power relations and (2) opportunities for intervention.
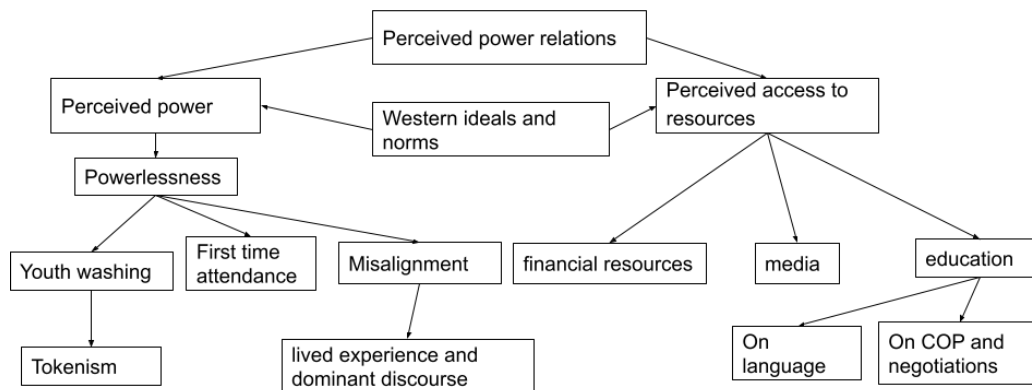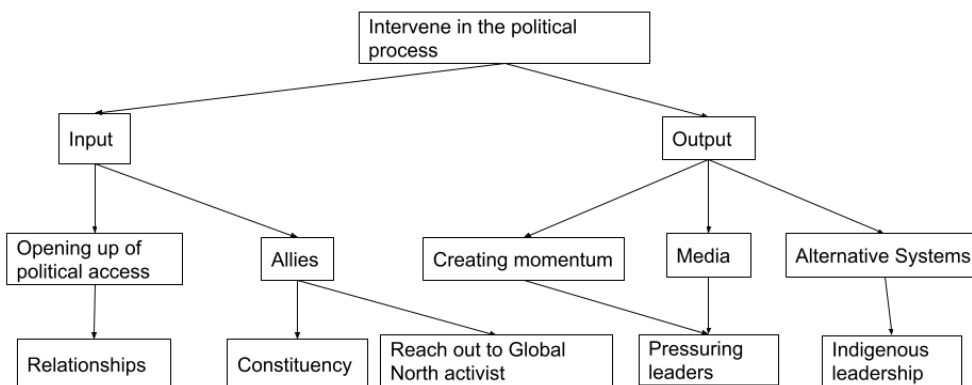
Figure 1. Code frame on perceived power relations

Figure 2. Code frame to intervene in the political process

Ethics and Consent

Power relations are a sensitive issue, especially for people from marginalized groups, so the interviewer took extra care throughout the interview process. Interviewers should be aware of their position and be able to judge what is appropriate to ask respondents (Flick et al., 2004). It should also be noted that the interviewer was already familiar with three of the participants before the study began. To control for any bias, the interviewer regulate the interview process and ask questions exactly as they are written down to maintain neutrality and consistency (Fontana et al., 2005).

Before the interview, informed consent was obtained by asking them to sign a document with additional information about the study. At the beginning of the interview the purpose of the study was repeated. In accordance with the recommendations of Richards et al., to ensure the privacy of the interviewees, the dataset is anonymised by associating it with a number rather than the names of the interviewees. The names associated with the numbers are kept in a separate file.

Analysis

This chapter consists of three sections to answer the three sub-questions posed in the introduction. The first section discusses the regulations within the COP system to distribute power relations between actors. The second section analyzes AYAs' perceptions of the COP system and how they relate to it, and finally, an analysis of these findings are placed in the framework of POS, so points of access and restrictions could be determined.

Power relations within the COP system

Participation and access

To participate at COP and gain access to negotiations, actors are required to undergo advance registration through an organization that has observer status granted by the Secretariat (UNFCCC, 2022). Individuals are not able to apply for a badge on their own behalf, but they must apply through an organization, which can result in some dilution of individual demands or perspectives within the group. Additionally, based on the UNFCCC's 'higher-order principle', only representatives of international organizations are eligible to apply for a badge (UNFCCC, 2022). This criterion limits the direct participation of individuals who are not affiliated with international organizations and places them outside of the system. Additionally,

due to the fact that credentials are issued by the Head of State or Government or by the Minister of Foreign Affairs (UNFCCC, 2022), it is expected that activists who oppose government policies, particularly in corrupt countries, may encounter greater difficulties in obtaining a badge and participating in the COP.

Furthermore, while the quantity of badges for observers increases annually, it does not proportionally accommodate the growing number of observer organizations, resulting in a reduction in the number of badges available per organization per year (Nazareth et al., 2022). Unlike other groups, the fossil fuel industry was highly visible at COP27, surpassing the number of delegates from other delegations (UNFCCC, 2022) The significant presence of the fossil fuel industry's delegation at COP27 likely granted them greater influence and power due to the increased number of representatives participating in meetings and negotiations, within a consensus-based decision-making framework (Falzon, 2021). This increased representation potentially conferred a stronger position of power to other delegations.

Political resources

If power relations within the conference influence the extent to which actors can participate, then the available resources are also influenced by power relations. Without sufficient resources, the ability to directly influence the negotiations may be constrained, regardless of formal access. Another resource, where visible power relations affect it, is resources based on finances. The costs associated with sending representatives to COP, including travel expenses, accommodation, and participation fees, can be substantial and create barriers for organizations with limited financial resources.

In the context of the COP, observer NGOs are divided into nine constituencies that represent specific interests and perspectives related to climate change (UNFCCC, 2022). Having constituency status within the UNFCCC grants representatives certain privileges, such as speaking opportunities at plenary meetings, access to designated office spaces during

UNFCCC meetings, and the ability to engage with decision-makers (UNFCCC, 2010). While this status offers advantages to individual actors, pigeonholing groups are seen by some scholars as a way of weakening the connected struggle against the underlying dominant structures (Flavell, 2023). To overcome the compartmentalization of constituencies, actors advocating for various dimensions of social inequality can seek support from allies in other constituencies. This cross-pollination of collaboration between diverse constituencies can disrupt the dominant discourse and foster policies that consider multiple dimensions of inequality.

Perceived power relations within the COP system

The interviews with AYAs reveal that perceived power relations make them feel powerless. Interviewees indicated that power relations at the COP affect access to resources, because of the preferential treatment for privileged institutions and individuals. This affects the education actors have received, the financial resources available and access to media.

Powerlessness

All interviewees share the sentiment of having less power compared to corporate NGOs and national governments, which can lead to feelings of frustration and a sense that their contributions are not fully recognized or respected. This perception is often intensified by a belief that their presence at COP is more symbolic than substantive in terms of influencing decision-making processes. Multiple activists talked about 'youth washing' to describe how youth participation can be superficial and that they are not taking part in the decision-making process (Barry, 2021). In order to give legitimacy to the conference, AYAs felt they had to put on a show. An interviewee expressed this perception by stating '*They are recognizing us in their speeches, talking about us in the media. But actually, they are never talking to us about what we want. They know what we want, but they are excluding us in the negotiation rooms*'

(Interview 5, May 2023). Another activist expressed this too '*On paper, you know you have power and can use that power, when it comes to actual empowerment, young people, don't have any power' (Interview #2, May 2023).* This frustration stems from AYA's role as an observer at the conference; negotiators are not obliged to hear the suggestions or demands of AYAs or other non-governmental participants. This voluntary nature of engagement can lead to a perception that they are shouting from the sidelines: '*So what we can do is scream, loud. So they can't do like they don't hear us'* (Interview #10, May 2023).

Activists attending COP for the first time felt that they could achieve even less as individuals, because they did not fully understand the complex COP system. This lack of familiarity can make it more difficult for them to navigate the conference and achieve their goals effectively. In contrast, experienced participants, often more established and older actors at COP, benefit from their accumulated knowledge and familiarity with the conference (Nasirtousi et al., 2006). They are better equipped to make strategic decisions about where to allocate their time and resources, enabling them to engage more effectively and efficiently.

In addition to an experienced sense of 'powerlessness', by the youth washing and first time attendance, AYAs also highlight the misalignment between the way the climate crisis is discussed at COP and their lived experiences. The discourse surrounding the climate crisis at COP employs specialized climate jargon. Activists must invest significant effort to internalize the language used in climate crisis negotiations and this poses challenges in adopting and understanding the discourse. However, the interviewees believe that individuals from the Global North, having experienced climate change on a smaller scale, face fewer difficulties in adapting to this language due to their relatively lesser emotional connection to the issue.

This difference in ease in adapting to norms during COP, shows that activists struggled to meet the norms visible at COP. These norms and preferences are largely determined by the Global North, often favoring NGOs, countries and actors who align with these norms and

possess greater resources and influence (Falzon, 2021). One activist elaborates, 'There *is no representation in these COPs, because the 'main' people who discuss and carry out these discussions in the meeting rooms and boardrooms are not youths or close to youths. They are white, older men. Whereas we are the ones that have to suffer from their decissions' (Interview #8, May 2023).* These men represent large business, national governments, or any other powerful body channeling a large degree of power. The influence of these characteristics in the negotiation space can be attributed to the historical establishment of global political institutions by and for Global North national governments, resulting in systemic biases and the perpetuation of existing power imbalances (Grosse et al., 2020).

Access to political resources

First, the interviews revealed that dominant power structures influenced the education received by activists, leaving them feeling underprepared for their participation at COP and only becoming aware of gaps in their knowledge once they were at the conference. W*e need to understand the policies. We need to understand the accreditation system. We need to understand how climate change is governed, but I think most of all we need to understand the opportunities young people have' (Interview #3, May 2023).* The availability of information about COP and climate policies aligns with the notion put forth by Edwards et al. (2004) that resources must be visible to the actors in order for them to effectively utilize them. In this case, activists encounter challenges in recognizing their need for information and identifying the appropriate sources to access it.

Access to education also affects the ability to communicate in one of the mandatory languages of COP. Interviewees expressed their concerns about the fairness of conducting negotiations in only one of the six official languages, while all other discussions were held exclusively in English. The requirement of using only official languages poses challenges for individuals whose mother tongue is different, resulting in language barriers and potential

inequalities in participation. To enhance their political opportunities, it is crucial to establish mechanisms that facilitate the aggregation of demands and ensure meaningful participation (Kitschelt, 1986, p. 63). When activists are limited in their communication methods, it becomes difficult to effectively convey and be heard in expressing their demands.

Secondly, several interviewees indicated that their NGO went to COP with few people due to lack of funding and therefore did not have the capacity to attend all events. The financial resources are coming from the organization itself and they can apply for funding. '*Most of the African countries don't even have enough negotiators, which makes the negotiation very difficult to follow because you will see one person jumping from meetings to meetings, and that person is not able to focus on everything, so we end up losing track. The organizations from richer countries do not have this problem*' (Interview #10, May 2023). Richer countries have more financial resources to send larger delegations. This can provide them with an advantage in terms of having more representatives who can attend various meetings. This can enhance their overall effectiveness in the negotiation process. The decentralized nature of the conference provides social movements with opportunities to engage through multiple access points, but this requires a sufficient number of activists to seize those opportunities (Kriesi, 2004). Furthermore, activists need to have an understanding of power structures and their visibility in order to identify areas where they can potentially gain influence (Xie et al., 2010).

Thirdly, activists see a power differential between activists from the Global North and the Global South, with respondents feeling that the media are more willing to listen to activists from the Global North. There is a prevailing frustration regarding the disproportionate media attention received by prominent figures like Greta Thunberg, often for expressing the same messages that activists from the Global South have been advocating for years (Grosse et al., 2020). '*I think activists from the North benefit so much more than us, because they have access to the media. They have easy access to the BBC, they have easy access to CNN, they have easy*

access to the New York Times. They have easy access to the Guardian. They get a lot of coverage from a lot of media, but for us it is really difficult' (Interview #8, May 2023). They perceive that media outlets from the Global North have more influence than African media, allowing the story of Global North activists to spread more around the world. The attention given by the media to young activists from the Global North reinforces the underlying dominant structures, leading to the marginalization and invisibility of AYAs. This could hinder AYAs ability to influence public discourse and policy discussion on a global scale. While both groups are fighting for climate justice, the urgency and nature of their activism are shaped by their distinct contexts. The attention directed towards Global North activists does not necessarily translate into increased power for AYAs, as the urgency and nature of their activism differ based on their distinct contexts and circumstances (Grosse et al., 2020). Thus, the disparities in power and influence persist despite media attention for the allies of AYAs.

Intervene in the political process

Drawing upon POS and the available data, it becomes evident that the COP system provides limited avenues for AYAs to intervene within the system effectively. On the input structure, activists are not given the right resources to effectively voice their opinions. On the output side, the consensus-based approach can result in the easy blocking of sensitive policies by certain countries.

Political input structure

As previously highlighted, the COP system operates within the broader global system, and the power relations within the global system shape the dynamics within the COP system. Within the COP system, the availability of resources is significantly influenced by the dominant structures that favor countries and NGOs from the Global North. Despite the intention and efforts of the UNFCCC to promote the inclusion of young people, such

recognition may be largely symbolic. The actual decision-making process is often perceived to occur behind closed doors, with only established actors who possess familiarity with the process and existing relationships being able to participate and influence these decisions. One interviewee recalled a moment where the lack of transparency and unequal access was visible: '*In Block D [the block in which the negotiations are] there are many fabrication reasons so that you are not let in, even though you have the right badge. You have to be invited to access it, although I have the right badge. When you reach that room, they tell you no. So for me, it feels very discriminatory and exclusive*' (Interview #7, May 2023). While under formal rules only negotiators are allowed in such spaces, some NGOs with 'insider' status can also directly influence negotiations through their personal relationships with national delegations and informal communications (Andonova et al., 2009; Lövbrand et al., 2017). As a result, the social power of an NGO, which determines access to the network, is important for the impact an NGO can have (Nasirtousi et al., 2006).

In addition to these points, the accreditation process presents challenges for new groups, including activists, to participate in the COP and gain access to decision-making spaces, as it relies on the willingness of negotiators to listen to their perspective. The entrenched power dynamics within COP create barriers for new ideas originating from NGOs that have not been traditionally represented, or ideas that challenge the dominant norms, limiting their opportunities for presence and influence. This leads to the belief that 'real' political access does not exist in the system that is shaped by norms from the Global North.

Tarrow (1994) highlights the significance of the availability of allies as an opportunity for a social movement to gain entry into a system and effect change from within. Seven interviewees indicated that being part of a specific constituency gave them a sense of being heard and acknowledged due to the formal rights granted within that constituency. However, this formation of constituencies has resulted in a division among different issues, leading to a

lack of attention and consideration for the intersectional problems faced by marginalized groups, such as African youth. '*We must bring together all youth, all Africans, and also try to push the agenda together.' We are not necessarily amplifying 1 voice, but we need to act together as a secto*r [Climate justice activists]' (Interview #7, May 2023). One interviewee introduced the concept of the 'power of quantity', suggesting that the more individuals demand climate justice within the COP system or from world leaders, the stronger the position of activists becomes. As the number of people advocating for change increases, it becomes increasingly challenging for negotiators to ignore their voices, making it more likely for activists' concerns to be heard and addressed. *'Increase, increase, increase participation. If they are with 10, we need to be with 1000 people to show who we are and they can't pass us anymore. We should be seen' (Interview #12, May 2023).*

According to Kriesi (2004), when there are a large number of parties involved in a system, social movements are more likely to find allies within that system. However, the interviews suggest that the allies within the system hold different positions of power, leading to a lack of reinforcement among the various forces and potentially hindering the collective impact of social movements. AYAs expressed a perception that activists from the Global North were more likely to be listened to than themselves, based on the color of their skin. This perception contributes to the idea that the entire global system this movement operates in is shaped by the historical dynamics of colonialism, resulting in an inherent power imbalance between Global North and AYA. As an example, Greta Thunberg has enjoyed significant security and visibility at COP, partly due to media attention, in contrast to the interviewees' experience of having to fight for their presence at the conference and avoid eviction by the police. However, AYAs express the belief that this separation is imposed upon them by external forces, but they acknowledge that there can be benefits in collaborating with activists from the Global North. *'They are actually supporting us so one community is possible. The Global North*

and Global South division is a disadvantage to us as climate activists, because it creates conflict in itself and it is a blame game on each other. This does not help, not at all' (Interview #11, May 2023). Collaborating with Global North activists can provide an opportunity to challenge and reshape this colonial system and by doing so creating opportunities for others through collective action (Tarrow, 1994). As a result, parties that benefit from the existing colonial global system are incentivized to respond to these actions and address the demands of the movement.

Political output structure

Looking at the 'output' of policy-making, it is notable that COP has a consensus-based approach, which can make it challenging to address specific concerns quickly. According to activists, ambitious and urgent policies with substantial financial implications for the Global North are unlikely to be approved under the current consensus system. Even if the policies were to be considered, their implementation would likely be contingent on market mechanisms, which are seen as inherently inadequate for equitable climate action and perpetuate structural advantages for colonizing nations (Grosse et al., 2020).

However, AYAs voices can influence the discourse and inspire policymakers, even if their demands aren't immediately fulfilled. To achieve this influence, activists need to ensure their visibility at COP and actively seek allies to garner support for their cause. The relative weakness of the system, characterized by less formal relationships, can indeed contribute to the spread of discourse that AYAs seek to spread, because the spaces allow for more diverse and varied perspectives to be expressed and interpreted (Chilton, 2004). Although their demands may not be immediately met, the persistent efforts of activists have the potential to catalyze a systemic shift over time in the COP system and in the global world.

As activists work to persuade more individuals of their demands, they contribute to the momentum for change and pave the way for transformative shifts in societal structures. In this

way, the 'elites', the actors with personal relations to the negotiators and actors who are out of power, are encouraged to stand behind the activists (Tarrow, 2004). The diffusion of demands raised by AYAs through the population can contribute to their legitimization and potentially enhance their impact on COP. As the global world and the COP system are interconnected with norms from the Global North, broader public support and recognition of these demands can create pressure and momentum for meaningful change within the COP process.

Activists express skepticism about whether COP is the appropriate platform to address the urgency of the climate problem, as they believe that more radical policies are required that may not be achievable within the current system dominated by norms from the Global North. They emphasize the need for action at the local and national levels, as they perceive the climate crisis as too urgent to wait for the gradual diminishment of the norms of the Global North and the slow pace of progress within the COP process. An interviewee highlighted the potential of indigenous leadership, emphasizing its focus on meeting the needs of people and nature without *'winners and losers'* (Interview #6, May 2023). This contrasts with the prevailing dynamics of global politics, where power relations often steer decision-making towards the path of least resistance, as discussed by Klinsky et al. (2017). The suggestion points to the recognition of alternative perspectives and approaches that challenge existing power structures and prioritize sustainability and equity.

In conclusion, activists strongly believe that the prevailing underlying structure at COP and the political process often exclude them, limiting their ability to let their demands be heard. Consequently, activists are increasingly seeking avenues beyond the confines of COP to influence global climate politics and exert pressure on leaders. '*If our political leaders are not addressing the problems, we won't vote for them'* (Interview #7, May 2023). By broadening their strategies and engaging in activities outside the conference, activists aim to expand their reach, raise awareness, and mobilize support for their causes on a global scale. This approach

reflects their determination to overcome the limitations they face within the COP system and drive change in a broader global system.

Conclusion

The research examined how power relations within the COP system determined the ability of AYAs to enact an impact on the political process at COP27. The institutional structures on which the UNFCCC is built benefit national governments and NGOs from the North, as their standards are included in the political process. This makes it harder for AYAs to obtain the right resources to participate in COP. In addition, the opportunities the system offers to make an impact outside the position of power obtained by accumulating resources and converting them to power, such as the observer role, are not advantageous to AYAs, because they are a new social movement. Despite the UNFCCC's steps towards inclusivity, these efforts have primarily held symbolic value and have not significantly expanded opportunities for AYAs. This finding is significant as it highlights that, currently, COP lacks the necessary conditions for social movements like AYAs to influence decision-making.

The prevailing power dynamics at COP contribute to a sense of powerlessness among AYAs, as their presence in an observer position often serves to legitimize the continued global hegemony of the Global North. AYAs believe that increasing their financial resources is crucial for enhancing their power and amplifying their voices within the COP process. However, according to Gaventa (1980), the mere increase of one resource is not sufficient to guarantee the inclusion of new, more radical ideas that challenge the status quo within COP. Therefore, addressing the limitations goes beyond resource augmentation and requires broader transformative changes in the COP system to create an inclusive space for diverse voices and perspectives. This perception of finances may influence the strategic choices of AYAs, potentially leading them to adopt strategies that may not effectively achieve the desired impact.

Seeking allies outside the system can be beneficial for activists, as it allows them to expand their network and increase their resources. The growing support base increases its leverage and places heightened pressure on political leaders. This solidifies the power position of AYAs and they increase the possibilities of political leaders making decisions during COP that are in line with the demands of activists.

Bibliography

Admitted NGOs | UNFCCC. (n.d.). Retrieved June 24, 2023, from https://unfccc.int/process/parties-non-party-stakeholders/non-party-stakeholders/admitted-ngos/list-of-admitted-ngos

Andonova, L. B., Betsill, M. M., & Bulkeley, H. (2009). Transnational climate governance. *Global environmental politics*, *9*(2), 52-73.

Andrews, K. T. (1997). The impacts of social movements on the political process: The civil rights movement and black electoral politics in Mississippi. *American sociological review*, 800-819.

Ansari, S., Wijen, F., & Gray, B. (2013). Constructing a climate change logic: An institutional perspective on the "tragedy of the commons". *Organization Science*, *24*(4), 1014-1040.

Atkinson, P., & Coffey, A. (2003). Revisiting the Relationship. *Postmodern interviewing*, 109.

ATLAS.ti | The #1 Software for Qualitative Data Analysis. (n.d.). ATLAS.Ti. Retrieved June 24, 2023, from https://atlasti.com

Barry, C. (30 September 2021). Young climate activists denounce 'youth-washing' in Milan. Associated Press. https://apnews.com/article/climate-change-environment-andnature-united-nations-europe-milan-d372f243a15a71fa45128003493c5643

Bolleyer, N. (2009). Inside the cartel party: party organisation in government and opposition. *Political Studies*, *57*(3), 559-579.

Bourdieu, P. (1991). *Language and symbolic power*. Harvard University Press.

Chilton, P. A. (2004). *Analysing political discourse: Theory and practice*. Psychology Press.

Ciplet, D., Roberts, J. T., & Khan, M. R. (2015). *Power in a warming world: The new global politics of climate change and the remaking of environmental inequality*. Mit Press.

Dahl, R. A. (1957). The concept of power. Behavioral science, 2(3), 201-215.

Diani, M., & McAdam, D. (2003). *Social Movements and Networks* (pp. xix–xix). Oxford: Oxford University Press

Edwards, B., & McCarthy, J. D. (2004). Resources and social movement mobilization. *The Blackwell companion to social movements*, *11*, 152-156.

Estellés, I. S. (2010). The political-opportunity structure of the Spanish anti-war movement (2002–2004) and its impact. The Sociological Review, 58, 246-269.

Falzon, D. (2023). The ideal delegation: How institutional privilege silences "developing" nations in the UN climate negotiations. *Social Problems*, *70*(1), 185-202.

Flavell, J. (2023). Lessons from the women and gender constituency: Interrogating civil society strategies for organising in the UNFCCC. *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society*, 1-19.

Flick, U., Kardoff, E. von, & Steinke, I. (2004). *A Companion to Qualitative Research*. SAGE.

Fontana, A., & Frey, J. H. (2005). The interview: From neutral stance to political involvement. In N. K.

French, J. R., Raven, B., & Cartwright, D. (1959). The bases of social power. *Classics of organization theory*, *7*(311-320), 1.

Gamson, W. A., & Wolfsfeld, G. (1993). Movements and media as interacting systems. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, *528*(1), 114-125.

Gaventa, J., 2009, 'Environmental mega-conferences and climate governance beyond the nation-state: a Bali case study', St Antony's International Review 5(2), 29–45.

Gereke, M., & Brühl, T. (2019). Unpacking the unequal representation of Northern and Southern NGOs in international climate change politics. *Third World Quarterly*, *40*(5), 870-889.

Giugni, M. (2007). Useless protest? A time-series analysis of the policy outcomes of ecology, antinuclear, and peace movements in the United States, 1977-1995. *Mobilization: An International Quarterly*, *12*(1), 53-77.

Gramsci, A. (1971). *Hegemony* (pp. 95-123). na.

Grosse, C., & Mark, B. (2020). A colonized COP: Indigenous exclusion and youth climate justice activism at the United Nations climate change negotiations. In *From Student Strikes to the Extinction Rebellion* (pp. 146-170). Edward Elgar Publishing

Gulbrandsen, L. H., & Andresen, S. (2004). NGO Influence in the Implementation of the Kyoto Protocol: Compliance, Flexibility Mechanisms, and Sinks. Global Environmental Politics, 4(4), 54-75

Harding, S. G. (Ed.). (2004). *The feminist standpoint theory reader: Intellectual and political controversies*. Psychology Press.

Ighobor, K. (2022). *COP27 is Africa's COP. It must address Africa's climate challenges*. https://www.un.org/africarenewal/magazine/october-2022/cop27-africa%E2%80%99s-cop-it-must-address-africa%E2%80%99s-climate-challenges

Johnson, T. P. (2014). Snowball sampling: introduction. *Wiley StatsRef: Statistics Reference Online*.

Kitschelt, H. P. (1986). Political opportunity structures and political protest: Anti-nuclear movements in four democracies. *British journal of political science*, *16*(1), 57-85.

Klinsky, S., Roberts, T., Huq, S., Okereke, C., Newell, P., Dauvergne, P., ... & Bauer, S. (2017). Why equity is fundamental in climate change policy research. *Global Environmental Change*, *44*, 170-173.

Kriesi, H. (2004). Political context and opportunity. *The Blackwell companion to social movements*, 67-90.

Levy, D. L., & Egan, D. (2003). A neo-Gramscian approach to corporate political strategy: conflict and accommodation in the climate change negotiations. *Journal of management studies*, *40*(4), 803-829.

Lövbrand, E., Hjerpe, M., & Linnér, B. O. (2017). Making climate governance global: how UN climate summitry comes to matter in a complex climate regime. *Environmental Politics*, *26*(4), 580-599.

McCombs, M. 2005. A look at agenda-setting: Past, present and future. Journalism Studies 6(4): 543–557.

Meyer, D. S. (2004). Protest and Political Opportunities. Annual Review of Sociology, 30(1), 125–145. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.soc.30.012703.110545

Nasiritousi, N., Hjerpe, M. & Linnér, BO. (2016). The roles of non-state actors in climate change governance: understanding agency through governance profiles. Int Environ Agreements, 16, 109–126. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10784-014-9243-8

Nazareth, A., Shawoo, Z., & Kim, D. (2022). *Enhancing Resilience to Global Crises in the UNFCCC Climate Arena*. Stockholm Environment Institute. https://doi.org/10.51414/sei2022.048

O'Brien, K., & Selboe, E. (Eds.). (2015). *The adaptive challenge of climate change*. Cambridge University Press.

Pfeffer, J. (1981). Understanding the role of power in decision making. *Power in organizations*, 404-423.

Pickvance, C. (2001). Inaction, individual action and collective action as responses to housing dissatisfaction: a comparative study of Budapest and Moscow. In *Political Opportunities Social Movements, and Democratization* (Vol. 23, pp. 179-206). Emerald Group Publishing Limited.

Richards, H. M., & Schwartz, L. J. (2002). Ethics of qualitative research: are there special issues for health services research?. *Family practice*, *19*(2), 135-139.

Rietig, K. (2016). The power of strategy: environmental NGO influence in international climate negotiations. *Global Governance*, 269-288.

Rochon, T. R., & Mazmanian, D. A. (1993). Social movements and the policy process. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, *528*(1), 75-87.

Sabherwal, A., Ballew, M. T., van Der Linden, S., Gustafson, A., Goldberg, M. H., Maibach, E. W., ... & Leiserowitz, A. (2021). The Greta Thunberg Effect: Familiarity with Greta Thunberg predicts intentions to engage in climate activism in the United States. *Journal of applied social psychology*, *51*(4), 321-333.

Schroeder, Heike, Maxwell T. Boykoff, and Laura Spiers. (2012). "Equity and State Representations in Climate Negotiations." Nature Climate Change 2(12):834–6.

Skocpol, T. (1979). *States and social revolutions: A comparative analysis of France, Russia and China*. Cambridge University Press.

Standard_admission_process_ngos_en.pdf. (n.d.). Retrieved June 24, 2023, from

https://unfccc.int/sites/default/files/resource/standard_admission_process_ngos_en.pd

f

Tarrow, S. (1988). National politics and collective action: Recent theory and research

in Western Europe and the United States. *Annual review of sociology*, *14*(1), 421-440.

Thiery, W., Lange, S., Rogelj, J., Schleussner, C. F., Gudmundsson, L., Seneviratne,

S. I., ... & Wada, Y. (2021). Intergenerational inequities in exposure to climate

extremes. *Science*, *374*(6564), 158-160.

UNFCCC. (2010). Youth participation in the UNFCCC negotiation process: the

United Nations, young people, and climate change.

http://unfccc.int/files/conference_programme/application/pdf/unfccc_youthparticipati

on .pdf

United Nations Environment Programme. (2013). Gaborone Declaration on Climate

Change and Africa's Development.

Wolfe, R. J., & McGinn, K. L. (2005). Perceived relative power and its influence on

negotiations. *Group Decision and Negotiation*, *14*, 3-20.

Xie, L., & Van Der Heijden, H. A. (2010). Environmental movements and political

opportunities: The case of China. *Social movement studies*, *9*(1), 51-68.

Zartman, I.W. and J.Z. Rubin (2000), 'Symmetry and Asymmetry in Negotiation' in

I.W.