CENTER FOR RESILIENCE AND SUSTAINABLE AFRICA

Center for Resilience and Sustainable Africa

CEFRESA

YOUTH AT THE COASTLINE OF CHANGE

Harmonizing County Youth Frameworks

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF YOUTH POLICY STATUS IN THE COAST REGION

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Center for Resilience and Sustainable Africa (CEFRESA)

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Youths at the Coastline of Change Towards Harmonized County Youth Frameworks

The youth of the Coast region stand at the heart of Kenya's development journey. With nearly 70% of the nation under the age of 35, the country's future depends on how effectively we invest in and empower young people today. Yet, despite the constitutional guarantees under Article 55, coastal youth continue to face systemic barriers: high unemployment, limited access to education and training, weak participation in decision-making, and limited structured opportunities to thrive.

It is against this backdrop that the Center for Resilience and Sustainable Africa (CEFRESA) developed this report, Youths at the Coastline of Change: Towards Harmonized County Youth Frameworks A Comparative Analysis of Youth Policy Status in the Coast Region. This report was produced with the active participation of young people, youth-led organizations, county-based platforms, civil society actors, and partners across the Coast region and beyond. It reflects CEFRESA's continued commitment to youth policy work, built over years of engagement with young people and county structures. Through these engagements, persistent gaps have been identified, including the absence of youth policies, weak enforcement of existing laws, and the lack of county-level regulations to operationalize the youth agenda. These realities inspired and informed the urgency of this analysis."

We also extend sincere gratitude to county youth assemblies and civil society platforms across the Coast region and beyond, whose contributions of data, insights, and validation greatly enriched this report. Their perspectives ensured that this analysis reflects not only policy texts but also the lived realities of young people.

This report offers a timely assessment of progress, gaps, and opportunities in county-level youth policy development, while drawing valuable lessons from benchmark counties. Most importantly, it underscores the urgency of establishing coherent and harmonized youth frameworks that genuinely respond to the aspirations of the Coast's young people.

At CEFRESA, we hold a simple conviction: youth empowerment is not an act of charity; it is justice, a constitutional right, and an investment in Kenya's socio-economic future. This report is not only a diagnostic tool but also a call to action, inviting county governments, civil society, development partners, and youth themselves to work collaboratively to turn commitments into lived realities. We hope this analysis will serve as a foundation for stronger advocacy, evidence-based policymaking, and sustainable youth empowerment across the Coast region ensuring that no young person is left behind.

Mary

Mary Maina
Executive Director
Center for Resilience and Sustainable Africa (CEFRESA)

PREFACE

This comparative analysis was developed to respond to a persistent concern in the Coast region the absence, weak implementation, or inadequate resourcing of county-level Youth Frameworks, including policies, Acts, strategies, and regulations, despite the constitutional obligations under Article 55 of the Constitution of Kenya.

The study seeks to provide clarity on the status of youth policy and practice across the six coastal counties, while offering lessons from counties that have made notable progress in institutionalizing youth empowerment. It is designed not only as an evidence-based but also as a practical tool for advocacy, planning, and accountability.

Specifically, the report aims to:

01 Document the Current Status

Provide an evidence-based account of where each Coast County stands on youth frameworks, including policies, Acts, and implementation mechanisms.

02 Highlight Gaps and Opportunities

Identify deficits in youth-focused responses while showcasing emerging opportunities such as the digital economy, innovation, climate action, and the blue economy.

03 Strengthen Advocacy

Equip youth, civil society, policymakers, and development partners with data and insights to push for coherent, inclusive, and harmonized Youth Frameworks across the Coast region, ensuring not only legislation but also budgeting, compliance, and implementation.

04 Provide a Benchmark Lens Beyond the Coast

Draw lessons from counties such as Makueni, Kakamega, and Nairobi City that have made significant progress in youth frameworks, offering adaptable models for coastal counties.

This report is intended for:

- County duty bearers (executives, assemblies, and policy drafters) to guide legislative, budgetary, and accountability action.
- Youth and youth-serving organizations as an advocacy and mobilization tool for meaningful engagement in policy and governance spaces.
- Civil society, development partners, and academia as a resource for programming, partnership, and oversight.

The findings and recommendations presented here are not an end in themselves but a call to action to move from rhetoric to reality, from fragmented interventions to coherent frameworks, and from commitments on paper to lived results for young people.

CEFRESA is proud to present this report as part of its mission to promote youth participation, influence policy, and strengthen governance systems in Kenya. We hope it contributes to a common coastal vision where young people enjoy their rights, fulfill their potential, and drive sustainable development across the region.

ABOUT CEFRESA

Who We Are

The Center for Resilience and Sustainable Africa (CEFRESA) is a non-profit organization committed to advancing inclusive development, strengthening participatory governance, and ensuring that youth voices shape policy across Kenya. We believe young people and communities are not merely beneficiaries but active drivers of change, bridging the gap between policy commitments and lived realities.

Our Role in this Analysis

CEFRESA spearheaded the design and execution of this comparative study through desk reviews, youth dialogues, and county consultations. The aim was to ensure the analysis authentically reflects the voices of young people in the Coast region while grounding findings in credible evidence and practical policy entry points.

Our Policy Advocacy Footprint

CEFRESA is recognized as a hub for policy advocacy and governance, anchoring its work on credible research, data, and the lived realities of communities. Its thematic focus spans four interlinked areas: (i) democratic governance; (ii) social well-being and peacebuilding; (iii) gender equality; and (iv) sustainable livelihoods and socio-economic transformation. Through this integrated approach, CEFRESA has consistently influenced county, national, and regional processes.

To translate policies from paper to practice, CEFRESA applies five strategic lenses of influence:

- *Advocacy and Mobilization – amplifying community and youth voices in policy and budget spaces.*
- *Capacity Building – equipping young people and communities with governance, leadership, and civic engagement skills.*

- *Evidence Generation – producing research and disaggregated data to inform policy and strengthen accountability.*
- *Accountability and Oversight – tracking commitments, analyzing budgets, and ensuring compliance in governance processes.*
- *Partnerships and Innovation – building coalitions and leveraging technology for scalable, sustainable change*

By linking data with advocacy, CEFRESA demonstrates how policies can be holistic, inclusive, and future proof, addressing emerging challenges such as gender inequality, disability inclusion, climate change, and digital transformation. Its vision is clear: to champion empowered, informed, and engaged communities whose voices shape legislation, budgets, and development strategies across Kenya and the wider region.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Kenya's Coast is at a pivotal juncture. With more than 70% of its population under the age of 35, the region's future depends on how effectively it responds to the needs, aspirations, and opportunities of its young people. Youth are not simply beneficiaries of development; they are catalysts of economic transformation, social inclusion, and democratic governance.

At a Turning Point

The Coast region combines a youthful population with strategic assets the ocean and port, vast natural resources, and newfrontiers in the digital, blue, and green economies. This creates a unique opportunity to reimagine devolved youth development. But without decisive leadership, coherent policies, and meaningful youth participation, these opportunities risk slipping away.

Key Findings

- *Policy Gaps: Only a few coastal counties have formal youth policies or legislative anchors. Many rely on drafts or fragmented strategies that leave youth aspirations poorly addressed.*

- *Policy Gaps: Only a few coastal counties have formal youth policies or legislative anchors. Many rely on drafts or fragmented strategies that leave youth aspirations poorly addressed.*

- *Youth Participation: While youth assemblies and civic spaces exist, decision-making processes remain inconsistent and limited, often excluding meaningful youth input.*

- *Resource Allocation: County investments in youth are scattered, under-resourced, and rarely ring-fenced, undermining sustainability.*

- *Emerging Opportunities: Artificial intelligence, digital innovation, climate-smart agriculture, and the blue economy present unprecedented prospects for youth livelihoods but remain largely untapped.*

- *Governance and Coordination: Weak institutional frameworks and accountability mechanisms hinder collaboration across counties and with stakeholders.*

- *Collective Voice: Youth voices are vibrant but fragmented. Without harmonized platforms, advocacy power and regional influence are diluted.*

Implications

The absence of coherent county level youth policies risks perpetuating cycles of exclusion, unemployment, and disillusionment. Fragmented investments and weak accountability deepen the challenge. Yet, the opportunities are equally stark if counties strengthen governance, align resources, and integrate youth participation, the Coast could unlock its demographic dividend, harness digital and blue economy opportunities, and become a model of inclusive, devolved development.

Why This Matters Now

Kenya's coastal counties are not yet benchmarks for youth policy in the country. But the moment is ripe to change that narrative. With harmonized frameworks, adequate resources, and empowered youth leadership, the Coast can transform from overlooked to exemplary, leveraging its strategic assets to fuel innovation, enterprise, and sustainable growth while positioning young people as partners in shaping the region's future.

Key Recommendations

- Foster Regional Synergy
  Develop a unified coastal youth agenda through platforms such as Jumuiya ya Kaunti za Pwani, enabling counties to harmonize policies, share lessons, and amplify a collective voice.

- Strengthen Youth Participation and Leadership
  Institutionalize mechanisms for youth engagement in planning, budgeting, and implementation while elevating young people as leaders, not just participants, in governance processes.

- Invest in Emerging Opportunities
  Mainstream youth access to AI, digital innovation, creative industries, and the blue and green economies, embedding them in county strategies for jobs and enterprises.

- Enhance Resource Allocation and Accountability
  Increase and ring-fence youth development budgets while strengthening monitoring and accountability mechanisms to ensure transparency and measurable impact.

- Leverage Coastal Assets for Empowerment
  Harness the region's ocean resources, port infrastructure, tourism, and agricultural potential to create sustainable pathways for youth employment, innovation, and entrepreneurship.

YOUTH ECOSYSTEM IN FOCUS

In Kenya, the concept of youth is more than a demographic label, it is a legal, constitutional, and socio-economic category that defines the country's largest and most dynamic population segment.

Legal and Policy Definition

The recognition of youth as a distinct category is anchored in both national law and broader commitments. The Constitution of Kenya (2010), under Article 55, obligates the State to ensure access to education, training, employment, and participation in governance. The Kenya Youth Development Policy (2019) defines youth as persons aged 18–34 years, while Article 260 of the Constitution extends this to 35 years. The National Youth Council Act (2009, revised 2014) further institutionalizes youth participation through a statutory body for representation, coordination, and advocacy.

Kenya's commitments also extend outward. At the continental level, the African Youth Charter (2006) situates youth at the center of Agenda 2063, while the East African Community Youth Policy (2013) seeks to harmonize development priorities across member states. Globally, Kenya is guided by the UN World Programme of Action for Youth (1995) and the Sustainable Development Goals (2015–2030), which mainstream youth inclusion across education, health, gender equality, climate action, and decent work.

Together, these frameworks create a layered legal and policy ecosystem that underscores both the constitutional duty and the developmental imperative for counties to invest in coherent youth strategies.

Demographic Weight

Kenya is a youthful nation, with nearly 70% of its population under 35 years. The Coast mirrors this reality, making young people the majority in every county. This demographic dominance places youth not at the margins but at the center of governance anddevelopment planning.

Intersectionality of Youth Realities

Kenyan youth are not a homogeneous group; their experiences are shaped by gender, disability, geography, and socio-economic status. Young women face persistent barriers such as early pregnancies and unpaid care work. Youth with disabilities often encounter systemic obstacles to education and employment. Urban youth, such as in Mombasa, grapple with congested informal economies, while rural youth in counties like Tana River and Kilifi face isolation, limited markets, and scarce training opportunities. Some enjoy access to elite education and global platforms, while many remain excluded from even basic services.

Strengths and Emerging Opportunities

Despite these challenges, Kenyan youth bring immense assets. They are digitally savvy, innovative, and resilient. Youth-led startups, cultural industries, and climate-smart solutions are reshaping local economies. Coastal youth are uniquely positioned to lead in the blue and green economies, leveraging the ocean, port infrastructure, and rising global demand for sustainable solutions.

The Case for Comprehensive Youth Policies and Acts

This demographic reality, coupled with layered vulnerabilities and emerging opportunities, makes the case for binding youth frameworks at the county level. The Constitution and national laws already provide a clear mandate, but without county-level policies and Acts, youth priorities remain fragmented. Coherent frameworks would allow counties to respond systematically to gender and disability inclusion, rural urban disparities, and new economic frontiers in the digital, green, and blue economies.

In short, comprehensive Youth Policies and Acts are not just legal obligations; they are the bridge between Kenya's youthful promise and the Coast's aspiration to position itself as a benchmark for inclusive, devolved development. positioned to lead in the blue and green economies, leveraging the ocean, port infrastructure, and rising global demand for sustainable solutions.

KEY TERMS

- *Youth* – *Persons aged 18–35 years, as defined by the Constitution of Kenya (Article 260). This report aligns with this definition while also referencing broader regional and international frameworks where relevant.*

- *Youth Bulge* – *The large proportion of young people in Kenya (nearly 70% under 35), which can be a driver of growth or a source of instability depending on policy responses.*

- *Youth Ecosystem* – *The network of policies, institutions, communities, and markets both formal and informal that shape the opportunities, well-being, and participation of young people.*

- *Intersectionality* – *The overlapping and interconnected realities of youth experiences shaped by gender, disability, geography, and socio-economic status.*

- *Demographic Dividend* – *The potential economic growth that can be unlocked when a youthful population is well-educated, healthy, and productively employed.*

- *Benchmark* – *A point of reference county, national, or global whose practices provide lessons, standards, or cautionary insights for others.*

- *Inclusion* – *Ensuring that all youth, especially marginalized groups (young women, persons with disabilities, rural and minority youth), have equal opportunities, access, and representation.*

- *Devolution* – *The transfer of powers, resources, and decision making from the national government to county governments, as anchored in the Constitution of Kenya (2010).*

- *Blue Economy* – *The sustainable use of ocean and coastal resources for economic growth, improved livelihoods, and jobs, while safeguarding marine ecosystems.*

- *Digital Economy* – *Economic activities driven by digital technologies, platforms, and data including e-commerce, fintech, artificial intelligence, and online freelancing.*

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The Coast region of Kenya is home to a vibrant and diverse youth population whose creativity, resilience, and aspirations are central to the region's future. From the bustling port city of Mombasa to the fishing communities of Lamu and the agrarian landscapes of Tana River and Taita-Taveta, young people drive local economies and shape social systems. Yet, despite their demographic strength, youth continue to face structural barriers: high unemployment, early pregnancies, limited vocational training, digital exclusion, and weak representation ingovernance.

Since the advent of devolution in 2013, county governments have been tasked with developing localized policies and frameworks to address such challenges. More than a decade later, progress remains uneven. While some counties have passed Youth Acts, others still lack formal policies, and even where frameworks exist, weak implementation undermines their effectiveness. This fragmented approach has left many young people excluded from opportunities that could transform their lives and communities.

At the same time, young people are not only voicing concerns but also proposing solutions. They identify vast opportunities in the blue economy, renewable energy, sustainable agriculture, cultural industries, and digital innovation. Coastal youth recognize the region's unique assets such as the ocean, the Port of Mombasa, and its rich cultural heritage as gateways to economic transformation, provided they are supported by coherent and inclusive policy frameworks

This comparative analysis of the six Coast counties Mombasa, Kwale, Kilifi, Tana River, Lamu, and Taita-Taveta seeks to respond to these realities. It assesses the current state of county youth frameworks, highlights legal and institutional gaps, and identifies emerging lessons from within and beyond the region, including benchmark counties such as Makueni, Kakamega, and Nairobi City. Beyond diagnosis, the report captures the collective aspirations of young people and calls on counties to move from intent to implementation, placing youth empowerment at the core of devolved development.

Methodology

This comparative analysis was designed to be both participatory and evidence-driven, ensuring that it reflects not only official data but also the lived experiences of young people in the Coast region. A mixed-methods approach was applied, combining desk-based research with direct consultations and validation processes.

The key steps included:

- *Desk Review – Analysis of existing county policies, Acts, strategies, and planning documents (such as CIDPs, ADPs), alongside relevant national frameworks and legal instruments.*

- *County Consultations – Virtual engagements with youth groups, civil society actors, and county officials to capture on-the-ground perspectives and livedrealities.*

- *Regional Dialogue Inputs – Insights generated from the August 2025 International Youth Day forum, which brought together young people from across the Coast region to reflect on shared challenges and opportunities in youth Leadership.*

- *Comparative Analysis – Assessment of similarities, differences, and policy gaps across the six Coast counties to identify both common challenges and context-specific dynamics.*

- *Learning Models – Review of promising practices from selected counties such as Makueni, Kakamega, and Nairobi City, used as reference points to extract lessons relevant for the Coast region. This was not a ranking exercise but rather an opportunity to identify transferable insights for strengthening county-level youth frameworks.*

- *Validation – Peer review sessions with youth leaders, advocacy partners, and sectoral stakeholders (Youth-led organization with interventions on youth programs, CSOs, and private sector actors) to ensure accuracy, credibility, and legitimacy of findings.*

Scope and Timeline

The study focused on six counties in the Coast region, Mombasa, Kwale, Kilifi, Tana River, Lamu, and Taita-Taveta, covering the period from June to September 2025. It intentionally incorporated sectoral perspectives from stakeholders in governance, education, health, employment, the digital economy, and the blue economy, providing a holistic understanding of the youth ecosystem

LIMITATIONS

While this report provides a comparative analysis of the status of youth policy frameworks across the six coastal counties, several limitations should be noted:

- *Data Availability and Consistency – The analysis relies primarily on publicly available documents, county websites, and inputs from youth-led organizations, assemblies, and CSOs working with youths. In some cases, county data was incomplete, outdated, or not disaggregated, which affected the depth of comparison.*

- *Scope of Participation – Although efforts were made to include diverse voices, not all youth groups or county stakeholders could be reached within the review period. The perspectives presented here, though broad, may not fully capture the entire spectrum of youth realities across the region.*

- *Comparative Boundaries – The learning models from Makueni, Kakamega, and Nairobi City are illustrative rather than exhaustive. Their practices provide useful models but must be adapted carefully to the unique coastal context.*

  Dynamic Policy Environment – County legislation and programs are evolving, with some youth frameworks still in draft or under review. The report, therefore, provides a snapshot in time, and certain ongoing developments may not yet be fully reflected.

  Timeframe of the Study – The exercise was conducted over a relatively short period (June - September 2025). While sufficient for identifying trends and patterns, the compressed timeline limited deeper longitudinal engagement with communities.

  Sectoral Breadth – The study engaged stakeholders across multiple sectors, including governance, education, health, employment, the digital economy, and the blue economy. However, not all sectors could be examined in equal depth, and some thematic areas may therefore require more detailed follow-up research

Comparative Framework

This report adopts a comparative lens to assess progress and gaps in youth policy development across the six Coast counties Mombasa, Kwale, Kilifi, Tana River, Lamu, and Taita-Taveta. Instead of reviewing each county in isolation, the analysis applies common parameters that allow for side-by-side evaluation, cross-county contrasts, and the identification of regional patterns and lessons. This approach ensures consistency while highlighting both the unique contexts of each county and the shared priorities that can form the basis of a collective regional agenda.

The framework is organized around six parameters:

1. Legal and policy anchors

- *The analysis examines whether counties have enacted binding Youth Acts or policies, or continue to rely on sectoral strategies and draft documents, and the extent to which these instruments align with the Kenya Youth.*

- *Development Policy (2019), Article 55 of the Constitution, and relevant continental and global frameworks.*

2. Budgetary Commitments

- *The analysis considers the presence (or absence) of dedicated youth budget allocations and the extent to which they are institutionalized in CIDPs and ADPs, as well as the transparency, accessibility, and consistency of youth-related budget information.*

3. Institutional Structures and Implementation

- *Existence and functionality of county youth advisory councils, directorates, funds, and implementation units, as well as the strength of monitoring, evaluation, and accountability mechanisms.*

4. Inclusivity and Intersectionality

- *Recognition of diversity among youth populations, with explicit attention to gender, disability, rural-urban disparities, and socio-economic status.*

- *Integration of emerging sectors and opportunities, including the digital economy, blue and green economies, climate resilience, and creative industries, into youth policy and programming.*

5. Youth Participation and Voice

- *The extent to which youth are meaningfully engaged in policymaking, budget processes, and oversight moving beyond formal structures to assess whether youth voices are consistently respected, amplified, and translated into concrete decisions.*

6. Political Will and Leadership Commitment

- *The extent to which county leaders, governors, assemblies, and executives prioritize youth empowerment is reflected in their actions: appointing young people to leadership roles, integrating them into flagship programs, and backing commitments with clear timelines.*

Lack of political will often explains why laws remain dormant, budgets lapse unspent, and youth structures fail to take root.

THE STATUS OF YOUTH POLICIES IN COASTAL COUNTIES

Introduction to the County Analysis

This section provides a county-by-county review of the status of youth policies in the Coast region. It examines youth demographics, the legal and institutional frameworks in place, and the persistent gaps that constrain meaningful empowerment. The analysis establishes where each county stands relative to its peers and highlights opportunities for advancing a harmonized Youth Policy Agenda in each county.

County Youth Policy Profile

The six coastal counties, Mombasa, Kwale, Kilifi, Tana River, Lamu, and Taita-Taveta, host one of Kenya's youngest populations, with nearly 70% of the population under 35. This youthful demographic presents both opportunities and challenges. Opportunities exist in emerging sectors such as the blue and green economies, digital innovation, and creative industries. Yet young people also face persistent barriers, including high unemployment, early pregnancies, drug and substance abuse, and limited access to digital infrastructure.

Under devolution, county governments have made uneven progress in embedding youth priorities. Some counties have passed Youth Acts and piloted innovative programs, while others still lack clear legal frameworks, budgetary commitments, or institutional mechanisms. The county profiles below summarize the context, status, gaps, and implications for each county.

a. Mombasa County

Context:

Mombasa, the economic hub of the Coast region, is home to a predominantly young and highly urbanized population. Yet, youth unemployment remains alarmingly high, estimated at over 40%, with many young people depending on informal and often precarious livelihoods. These economic pressures are compounded by persistent vulnerabilities, including drug and substance abuse, early pregnancies, and barriers to digital inclusion, all of which undermine the full participation of youth in the county's development.

Status:

The county has launched several youth-focused initiatives, including the *Adolescent & Young People Strategy (2024–2029)*, the proposed *Mombasa County Resilience and Preventing Violent Extremism Bill*, and the *Mombasa Ni Yangu* program, which engages youth in local service delivery. While these initiatives demonstrate intent, they remain fragmented and sector-specific. The absence of a binding Youth Act or dedicated budget means youth issues are not systematically embedded into law or mainstreamed across sectors.

Gaps & Implications:

Without a comprehensive Youth Act, Mombasa's youth agenda risks fragmentation and short termism. A county-wide Youth Policy/Act could consolidate existing initiatives, integrate youth across high potential sectors such as ICT, the blue economy, and creative industries, and ensure sustainability through secure funding and institutional anchoring.

b. Kwale County

Context:

Kwale is predominantly rural, with a youthful population facing barriers such as limited access to vocational training, early marriages, and high underemployment.

Status:

The county does not have a Youth Act or a formal policy framework. However, the Kwale Youth Assembly has emerged as a strong civic platform, amplifying youth voices in governance and accountability. Through this assembly, youth have been able to push for inclusion in county planning processes and influence aspects of local development.

Gaps & Implications:

While civic organizing is a notable strength, it cannot substitute for institutionalized frameworks. Without a Youth Act ordedicated budget, youth priorities risk being sidelined. Institutionalizing the Youth Assembly's gains through law and funding would safeguard its influence and ensure continuity of youth participation.

c. Kilifi County

Context:

Kilifi has one of the largest youth populations in the Coast, with pronounced rural-urban disparities. Key challenges include youth unemployment, limited access to higher education, and high rates of early pregnancies.

Status:

Kilifi has developed a draft Youth Policy, complemented by the establishment of the Kilifi Youth Assembly, a youth-led platform that demonstrates the initiative and agency of young people in shaping their own governance space. The draft policy itself was informed by extensive consultations with youth and civil society, reflecting inclusivity and a growing culture of policy literacy among young people. However, the policy remains unadopted, which limits its authority and implementation

Gaps & Implications:

Unless formally adopted and backed by resources, the draft policy remains aspirational. Passing the policy into law, institutionalizing budget allocations, and establishing clear implementation mechanisms would transform youth participation into tangible empowerment and accountability.

d. Tana River County

Context:

Tana River is one of the least urbanized counties in the region. Youth are primarily engaged in pastoralism and small-scale agriculture, but face high poverty levels, low access to education, and weak digital connectivity.

Status:

The county has established the Tana River Innovation & Youth Empowerment Centre (TRY-IEC), which equips young people with skills in agriculture, hydroponics, and digital technology. While promising, these efforts are not embedded within a comprehensive youth framework. The county lacks a Youth Act or a binding strategy to institutionalize such initiatives.

Gaps & Implications:

Without legal anchoring, initiatives like TRY-IEC risk remaining isolated projects rather than scalable solutions. A Youth Policy/Act would provide the framework for continuity, resource allocation, and integration of youth innovation into county development plans.

e. Lamu County

Context:

Lamu has a relatively small population, yet a significant proportion of its residents are young. Many youths face exclusion due to weak infrastructure, limited access to education, and economic marginalization.

Status:

Lamu passed the County Youth Development Act (2018), providing a legal foundation for youth empowerment. The county also hosts the Lamu Youth Assembly, which mobilizes young voices in governance. However, implementation of the Act has been weak, with persistent gaps in budgetary allocations and institutional structures.

Gaps & Implications:

Lamu illustrates that passing legislation is only the first step. Without supporting regulations, strong institutions, and adequate financing, the Act risks being symbolic rather than transformative. Strengthening operationalization is critical to turning legal commitments into real impact.

f. Taita-Taveta County

Context:

Taita-Taveta has a growing youth population, many of whom are engaged in agriculture, mining, and small-scale enterprises. Unemployment and underemployment remain pressing challenges, with limited pathways to formal sector opportunities.

Status:

In 2024, the county enacted the Youth Welfare & Empowerment Act, making it the most recent coastal county to anchor youth rights in law. This milestone demonstrates political will. However, the Act is still at an early stage, with regulations, budget provisions, and implementation structures yet to be rolled out.

Gaps & Implications:

Timely operationalization of the Act will be essential to avoid delays in impact. Dedicated budgets, institutional frameworks, and participatory monitoring mechanisms are needed to ensure the law translates into meaningful empowerment for young people.

From County Profiles to Regional Insights

The county-by-county review reveals both the diversity and the shared realities of youth across the Coast region. While each county has unique socio-economic contexts, from the port economy of Mombasa to the agrarian livelihoods of Tana River and the island setting of Lamu, their youth face many common challenges and aspirations.

This convergence underscores the need to move beyond isolated county responses toward a more collective perspective. By identifying where experiences align, counties can learn from one another, pool resources, and craft joint strategies that amplify impact. It is in this spirit that the following section turns to cross-county trends, highlighting the opportunities and challenges that cut across the region.

CROSS-COUNTY TRENDS

The six coastal counties share strikingly similar youth dynamics, shaped by overlapping socio-economic realities, cultural contexts, and policy environments. Looking across the region reveals a set of trends that both reinforce the urgency for action and point to opportunities for collective solutions.

Demographic Convergence

Across all six counties, nearly 70% of residents are under 35. This youthful population is not just a statistic but a defining feature of the region's present and future. It represents both a demographic dividend waiting to be unlocked and a pressing call for inclusive policy responses.

Shared Opportunities

The counties collectively hold vast untapped potential in the blue economy, agriculture and green jobs, tourism, creative industries, and cross-border trade. These sectors, ifstrategically harnessed, could provide sustainable pathways for youth employment and enterprise development.

Persistent Challenges

Despite the opportunities, youth across the region grapple with recurring barriers: high unemployment, school dropouts, early pregnancies, drug and substance abuse, and uneven access to digital infrastructure. These challenges cut across county boundaries, demanding coordinated rather than piecemeal responses.

Policy and Institutional Gaps

Progress in youth policy remains uneven. While Lamu and Taita-Taveta have enacted Youth Acts, others continue to rely on draft policies or fragmented initiatives. Promising innovations such as youth assemblies, innovation hubs, and resilience programs often lack legal anchoring, sustainable financing, or institutional support, limiting their scalability and long-term impact.

Regional Implications

Without harmonized frameworks and consistent financing, county level interventions risk remaining fragmented and short-lived. Strengthened cross-county collaboration could consolidate shared strengths, reduce duplication, and create a unified platform for advancing youth priorities. With coordinated leadership, the Coast has the potential to transform its demographic weight into a regional benchmark for youth-led development in Kenya.

COMPARATIVE SCORECARD OF COAST COUNTIES

✓ strength or established	▶ Partial progress or Emerging initiative framework	✗ Absent or very weak

This scorecard provides a quick visual snapshot of where each county stands in translating youth priorities into laws, budgets, institutions, inclusivity, participation, and political will. It is not a ranking exercise but a diagnostic tool, designed to highlight relative strengths, persistent gaps, and opportunities for counties to learn from one another and work toward a harmonized regional approach.

COUNTY	LEGAL & POLICY ANCHORS	BUDGETARY COMMITMENTS	INSTITUTIONAL STRUCTURES & IMPLEMENTATIONS	INCLUSIVITY & INTERSECTIANALITY	YOUTH PARTICIPATION & VOICE	POLITICAL WILL & LEADERSHIP COMMITMENTS
Mombasa	▲ Adolescent & Young People Strategy Resilience Bill (Mombasa Ni Yangu initiative)	✗	▲ (Youth Engagement via Mombasa ni Yangu)	▲	▲	▲
Kwale	✗	✗	▲ (civic platforms)	▲	✓ (Kwale Youth Assembly)	▲
Kilifi	▲ (Draft Youth Policy)	✗	▲	▲	✓ (Kilifi Youth Assembly)	▲
Tana-River	✗	✗	▲ (Tana River Innovation & Youth Empowerment Centre – TRY-IEC)	▲	▲	▲
Lamu	✓ (Youth Development Act, 2018)	▲	▲	▲	✓ (Lamu Youth Assembly)	▲
Taita-Tataveta	✓ (Youth Welfare & Empowerment Act, 2024)	▲	▲	▲	▲	▲

Synthesis Narrative

The comparative scorecard underscores an uneven yet evolving landscape of youth policy across the Coast region. While every county has made efforts, very few have achieved a comprehensive framework that aligns laws, budgetary commitments, institutional structures, and political will into a coherent whole.

Mombasa has multiple initiatives such as the Adolescent & Young People Strategy, the proposed Resilience Bill, and the Mombasa Ni Yangu program offering promising entry points for youth engagement. However, these remain fragmented, lacking the cohesion and enforceability of a binding Youth Act.

Kwale demonstrates the power of civic mobilization through the Kwale Youth Assembly, which has grown into a credible accountability platform. Yet, without legal and financial anchors, its influence risks being limited.

Kilifi shows momentum through its Draft Youth Policy and the Kilifi Youth Assembly. But delayed adoption of the policy weakens its ability to guide action and secure long-term commitments.

Tana River distinguishes itself with innovation through the TRY-IEC hub, which equips young people with entrepreneurship and skills development opportunities. Still, the absence of legal and budgetary support makes sustainability uncertain.

Lamu benefits from the Youth Development Act (2018) and the vibrancy of the Lamu Youth Assembly. Together, these form one of the strongest policy infrastructures in the region. Yet, implementation gaps and weak financing reduce overall impact.

Taita-Taveta passed the Youth Welfare & Empowerment Act (2024), signaling strong intent. However, follow-through with regulations, institutional structures, and budget lines remains pending, leaving the framework incomplete.

Across all six counties, a clear pattern emerges: laws without implementation, platforms without resources, and programs without legal backing are insufficient to transform youth lives. The region's comparative strength lies in its youth assemblies and innovation hubs, which provide vibrant entry points for participation, accountability, and innovation.

For these gains to take root, counties must transition toward coherent, harmonized Youth frame that:

- *Embed youth voices in decision making spaces.*
- *Guarantee dedicated resources for youth priorities.*
- *Strengthen implementation and accountability mechanisms.*

Such alignment would not only empower young people across the Coast but also position the region as a national model for youth-led development.

This scorecard and synthesis reveal that while progress is uneven, the Coast holds immense potential if counties move from fragmented efforts to a cohesive regional agenda. The next step is to unpack the emerging themes and patterns that cut across counties and point toward what a harmonized Coastal Youth Policy Framework could look like.

EMERGING THEMES

The comparative picture of youth policies in the Coast region points to dynamics that cut across counties and transcend local contexts. These emerging themes reveal not just what exists, but how systemic strengths and weaknesses are shaping the trajectory of youth empowerment. They show that while opportunities abound in digital innovation, civic participation, and regional collaboration, structural gaps in implementation, financing, and politics will continue to constrain progress.

The Gap Between Policy Intent and Practice

Youth Acts, draft policies, and strategies exist in varying forms, but weak implementation is the common thread. Frameworks without regulations, budgets, and accountability mechanisms remain largely aspirational. Counties must move from drafting laws to embedding them into daily governance, with clear milestones and resourced action plans.

Youth Leadership and Assemblies as Engines of Voice

Kwale, Kilifi, and Lamu highlight the role of youth assemblies and civic platforms in strengthening accountability, policy literacy, and leadership pathways. These bodies are nurturing a new generation of civic leaders who are shaping debates and pushing county governments to act. However, without legal recognition and financing, their influence risks being short-lived. Anchoring such platforms in law could secure youth participation as a permanent feature of governance.

Digital Futures and the AI Opportunity

Across the Coast, young people are eager to engage with the digital economy from e-commerce and creative industries to AI-driven solutions for agriculture, health, and climate resilience. Yet access to digital infrastructure, training, and financing remains limited. Unlocking this space requires counties to integrate digital inclusion into youth policies, positioning young people not just as consumers but as innovators shaping Kenya's digital transformation.

Digital Futures and the AI Opportunity

Experiments like Tana River's TRY-IEC showcase how innovation hubs can provide practical skills in agriculture, renewable energy, and technology. These hubs are gateways to sustainable livelihoods and pathways into new economies. Scaling them across the region and linking them to county budgets and private sector investment could create a robust ecosystem of youth-led innovation.

Innovation Hubs as Entry Points for Economic Empowerment

Experiments like Tana River's TRY-IEC showcase how innovation hubs can provide practical skills in agriculture, renewable energy, and technology. These hubs are gateways to sustainable livelihoods and pathways into new economies. Scaling them across the region and linking them to county budgets and private sector investment could create a robust ecosystem of youth-led innovation.

Political Will and Institutional Continuity

Leadership commitment emerges as the decisive factor in whether youth priorities move from paper to practice. Counties that treat youth as political and development priorities stand further ahead, but gains are often vulnerable to electoral cycles. Institutionalizing youth priorities in laws, budgets, and permanent structures can insulate progress from leadership changes.

Collective Voice for Regional Convergence

Youth on the Coast are increasingly recognizing that their power lies in joint advocacy. Shared challenges high unemployment, limited digital access, and substance abuse, cannot be solved by one county alone. A coordinated regional platform, driven by youth leaders themselves, could amplify their voices, harmonize demands, and build the Coast as a national model for youth-led policy reform.

LESSONS LEARNT

The comparative analysis of youth policy frameworks across the six coastal counties highlights not just gaps, but clear lessons for shaping stronger, actionable strategies. These insights move beyond diagnosis to guide counties on what must be done differently if youth empowerment is to move from rhetoric to reality.

1. Implementation is the real measure of progress

Passing Youth Acts or drafting policies is only the beginning. Unless laws are operationalized with regulations, budgets, and strong institutions, they remain symbolic. Counties that stop legislation risk disillusioning the very young people they aim to serve.

Pilot projects must be institutionalized.

Innovation hubs and empowerment programs (such as TRY-IEC in Tana River) show the potential of local solutions. But without a legal and financial anchor, such initiatives remain short-lived. Institutionalizing them within county frameworks is what ensures continuity, scale, and resilience beyond political cycles.

Youth participation is a force multiplier.

Where youth assemblies and civic platforms exist, accountability improves, and governments respond more actively. Investing in structured, resourced youth participation mechanisms is not optional it is a proven accelerator of better governance and stronger outcomes.

Evidence-based advocacy changes the conversation.

Kilifi's draft policy process showed that when youth and civil society bring credible data and research, decision-makers engage more seriously. Evidence transforms advocacy from appeals to persuasion, making policy adoption and financing harder to ignore.

Fragmentation weakens impact.

Youth challenges in the Coast are shared across counties, yet responses remain fragmented. Collective approaches whether through regional frameworks, shared standards, or joint advocacy are more effective than isolated county actions and can elevate the Coast as a leader in youth empowerment.

The findings presented above, drawn from cross-county trends, scorecards, and emerging themes, provide a comprehensive picture of the state of youth policy in the Coast region. Building on these insights, the next section outlines actor-specific recommendations to translate analysis into action.

BENCHMARK COUNTIES BEYOND THE COAST

The experiences of Makueni, Kakamega, and Nairobi City County demonstrate how devolved governments can move beyond symbolic commitments to build youth frameworks that are structured, financed, and accountable. Their models offer inspiration and caution for the Coast as it seeks to strengthen its own youth agenda.

Table 1: Strengths and Practices Worth Emulating

COUNTY	Strengths in Laws/ Frameworks	Budgeting Approach	Implementation & Monitoring	Addressing Intersectionality	What Coast Counties Can Emulate
Makueni	Comprehensive County Youth Policy (2022), legally anchored in governance.	Cost action plans are directly linked to CIDPs.	Clear coordination structures and robust M&E	Addresses employment, entrepreneurship, and governance, with a moderate gender lens.	Draft clear, costed frameworks; integrate youth policy into CIDPs; establish youth directorates/
Kakamega	Inclusive policy covering employment, education, health, environment, and climate change	Fully integrated into the county planning cycle.	Participatory drafting with youth assemblies and CSO involvement.	Explicit inclusion of women, PWDs, and rural youth.	Adopt participatory policy-making models; embed cross-cutting issues such as gender and disability.
Nairobi	Youth Development Policy (2022) with strong accountability clauses and annual reporting.	Budgetary ring-fencing: 2% of county allocation dedicated to youth programs	Annual performance reviews and mandated	Strong inclusion of women, PWDs, and marginalized urban youth.	Institutionalize budget floors; enforce annual accountability reporting; strengthen inclusive representation.

Table 2: Gaps, Risks, and Implications

County	Gaps / Weaknesses	Risks & Implications
Makueni	Inconsistent budget disbursement; limited focus on rural marginalized youth and the digital economy.	Policies risk staying "on paper"; frustration among rural youth.
Kakamega	Too many priorities with uneven implementation.	Dilution of impact; risk of youth disillusionment and reduced credibility of leadership.
Nairobi	Bureaucratic delays in releasing funds; urban-centric bias neglects peri-urban/informal settlements	Marginalization of youth outside the urban core; erosion of trust if promises are unmet.

Blueprints for Action: What the Coast Can Learn

From these counties, six actionable lessons stand out as blueprints for the Coast:

- Anchor Youth Policy in Law and Structure
  Move beyond ad-hoc strategies to binding Youth Policies/Acts with clear mandates, measurable indicators, and functional youth directorates.

- Budget Realistically and Transparently
  Institutionalize youth budget lines (e.g., Nairobi's 2% model), embed them in CIDPs/ADPs, and ensure public reporting.

- Ensure Participation and Ownership
  Institutionalize consultations with youth assemblies, CSOs, women, PWDs, and rural youth following Kakamega's participatory model.

- Prioritize Inclusion and Intersectionality
  Go beyond "generic youth" to explicitly address young women, youth with disabilities, rural and blue-economy livelihoods.

- Focus on Implementation, Not Just Paperwork
  Ensure laws and policies are accompanied by regulations, financing, and compliance mechanisms to avoid cosmetic legislation.

- Leverage Emerging Opportunities
  Harness growth sectors digital economy, climate resilience, innovation, and the blue economy as new engines of youth employment.

Advocacy Entry Points for the Coastal Counties

Push for Youth Acts/Policies in counties that lack them, modeled on Makueni's binding framework. Demand budget ring-fencing, using Nairobi's 2% allocation as a benchmark.:

- *Mobilize youth assemblies and CSOs to co-create and monitor policies, following Kakamega's participatory lead.*
- *Call for annual reporting on youth budgets, programs, and outcomes to institutionalize accountability.*
- *Frame a collective regional agenda One Coast, One Youth Agenda to strengthen bargaining power and ensure no county is left behind.*

RECOMMENDATIONS

Progress for young people in the Coast region will only be realized if all stakeholders act in a coordinated and accountable manner. The following recommendations are actor-specific, actionable, and measurable, offering a roadmap from analysis to impact.

1. County Assemblies: Legislating for Youth Empowerment
2. County Executives: Driving Implementation and Service Delivery
3. Civil Society and Youth Platforms: Sustaining Advocacy and Accountability
4. Development Partners: Strengthening Capacity and Innovation

If each actor fulfills its mandate, youth empowerment in the Coast region will shift from aspiration to reality anchored in law, backed by resources, mainstreamed across development sectors, and sustained by youth participation and accountability.

CONCLUSION

This analysis has revealed both the gaps and the opportunities shaping youth policy across the Coast region. It shows that laws without implementation remain hollow, and fragmented or draft policies leave young people underserved. Yet it also points to vast possibilities from digital innovation and creative industries to the blue and green economies that could transform the region if youth are meaningfully integrated into governance and development.

The way forward is clear: youth empowerment must be firmly anchored in law, supported by dedicated budgets, and safeguarded through inclusive and accountable institutions. Looking beyond individual counties, a harmonized Coast Regional Youth Policy Agenda offers an opportunity to unify efforts, establish shared standards, and guarantee that no young person is left behind.

What is needed now is courage and commitment. Counties, civil society, and partners must move from rhetoric to result, translating frameworks into action and aspirations into lived realities. If seized, this moment can redefine the Coast not as a region of missed potential, but as a national model of devolved youth empowerment where young people drive resilience, prosperity, and sustainable development.

“The Coast can rise as Kenya’s model of youth-led transformation if action replaces promises.”

ANNEXES

Annex 1: Key References and Sources

- Constitution of Kenya, 2010 (Article 55, Fourth Schedule).
- County Governments Act, 2012.
- Kenya Youth Development Policy, 2019.
- National Youth Council Act, 2009 (Revised 2014).
- County Integrated Development Plans (CIDPs):
    - *Makueni County (2023–2027)*
    - *Nairobi City County (2023–2027)*
    - *Kakamega County (2023–2027)*
    - *Coastal Counties: Mombasa, Kwale, Kilifi, Tana River, Lamu, and Taita-Taveta (2023–2027)*

- Kenya News Agency and *The Star Kenya* report (2024–2025).
- BMC Public Health – *Adolescents & Youth Population Distribution in Kenya.*

Annex 2: Comparative Scorecard of Coast Counties

✓	*Strength or established framework*
▶	*Partial progress or emerging initiative*
✗	*Absent or very weak*

Each county was scored qualitatively (✓ ▸ ✖) to provide a comparative snapshot rather than a rigid ranking. The aim is to highlight relative strengths, gaps, and opportunities for harmonization.

COUNTY	LEGAL & POLICY ANCHORS	BUDGETARY COMMITMENTS	INSTITUTIONAL STRUCTURES & IMPLEMENTATIONS	INCLUSIVITY & INTERSECTIANALITY	YOUTH PARTICIPATION & VOICE	POLITICAL WILL & LEADERSHIP COMMITMENTS
Mombasa	▲ Adolescent & Young People Strategy Resilience Bill (Mombasa Ni Yangu initiative)	✖	▲ (Youth Engagement via Mombasa ni Yangu)	▲	▲	▲
Kwale	✖	✖	▲ (civic platforms)	▲	✓ (Kwale Youth Assembly)	▲
Kilifi	▲ (Draft Youth Policy)	✖	▲	▲	✓ (Kilifi Youth Assembly)	▲
Tana-River	✖	✖	▲ (Tana River Innovation & Youth Empowerment Centre – TRY-IEC)	▲	▲	▲
Lamu	✓ (Youth Development Act, 2018)	▲	▲	▲	✓ (Lamu Youth Assembly)	▲
Taita-Tataveta	✓ (Youth Welfare & Empowerment Act, 2024)	▲	▲	▲	▲	▲

Annex 3: Youth Demographic Data – Coast Region

- **Youth Proportion:** Nearly 70% of the population in all six coastal counties is under 35.

Urban-Rural Variations:

- *Mombasa – most urbanized; high youth unemployment (40%+).*
- *Kwale & Kilifi – largely rural, with high rates of early marriage and underemployment.*
- *Tana River – predominantly pastoral/agricultural, with poor connectivity.*
- *Lamu – smaller youth population but marginalized by weak infrastructure.*
- *Taita-Taveta – youth concentrated in mining, small businesses, and agriculture.*

Emerging Livelihood Pathways: Blue economy, creative industries, ICT, and climate-smart agriculture remain underdeveloped but high-potential.

Annex 4: Methodological Note

This report's comparative analysis and scorecard were developed through a mixed-methods approach:

- **Document Review** – Key national and county-level documents were analyzed, including Youth Acts, draft policies, CIDPs, and strategic plans.
- **Secondary Data** – Youth demographic and socio-economic statistics were drawn from KNBS, BMC Public Health, and county websites.
- **Stakeholder Inputs** – Insights were gathered from youth-led organizations, youth assemblies, and civil society representatives through rapid consultations.
- **Learning Models** – Makueni, Kakamega, and Nairobi were selected as benchmarks based on their recognized progress in youth policy frameworks.
- **Scorecard Development** – Six dimensions were used:
    - *Legal & Policy Anchors.*
    - *Budgetary Commitments.*
    - *Institutional Structures & Implementation.*
    - *Inclusivity & Intersectionality.*
    - *Youth Participation & Voice.*
    - *Political Will & Leadership Commitment.*

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