

MOMBASA YOUTH POLICY

POLICY

BRIEF



PURPOSE AND SCOPE OF THE POLICY BRIEF

This policy brief contributes to ongoing deliberations on the need for a localized, coherent, and actionable youth policy framework for Mombasa County.

It is informed by sustained youth engagement processes convened by CEFRESA, including the Vijanaaz Governance Garage (VGG), and builds on the broader efforts of youth-led organizations, civil society actors, and community platforms that have consistently advocated for the development of a Mombasa youth policy.

Fourteen years after the advent of devolution, and in the context of persistent and evolving challenges facing young people across Kenya, the absence of a structured county-level youth policy in Mombasa remains a significant governance gap. This brief advances a systems-based perspective, recognizing that the central challenge is not the absence of youth initiatives, but the lack of a coordinated framework that connects, aligns, and sustains them.

It presents a structured analysis across five core areas:

- Youth as Drivers of Transformation
- Youth Aspirations and System Expectations
- Structural Barriers to Youth Transformation
- Strategic Recommendations
- Accountability and Implementation for Youth Transformation

The brief consolidates lived experience, civic insight, and practical engagement into a coherent policy proposition, one that reflects both the realities and the collective agency of young people and those working alongside them in Mombasa.

Acknowledgment: This brief builds on contributions from youth-led and civil society actors in Mombasa. Authored and compiled by Mary Maina; design and layout by Mercy Chebet Kimetto; Cover image: Jacob Kinyamasyo.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Mombasa County stands at a critical demographic and development crossroads. With a significant proportion of its population under the age of 35, young people are central to the county's economy, social fabric, and future governance trajectory.

Despite constitutional guarantees and the existence of the National Youth Policy (2019), youth-related efforts in Mombasa remain fragmented, inconsistently communicated, and weakly institutionalized. As a result, access to opportunities is uneven, and the county is unable to fully harness the potential of its youth population.

This policy brief contributes to ongoing deliberations on the need for a localized, coherent, and actionable youth policy framework for Mombasa County. It is informed by sustained youth engagement processes convened by CEFRESA, including the Vijanaaz Governance Garage (VGG), and builds on the broader efforts of youth-led organizations, civil society actors, and community platforms that have consistently advocated for the development of a county youth policy.

Drawing from these engagements, the brief identifies four key systemic challenges:

- Fragmentation of youth programs across departments
- Limited and unequal access to information and opportunities
- Predominantly consultative rather than collaborative participation
- Weak institutional coordination and accountability mechanisms.

At the same time, it affirms the strategic role of young people as drivers of transformation, active contributors to economic development, civic life, and community resilience, whose agency remains under-recognized within existing systems.

In response, the brief proposes four high-leverage interventions:

1. Develop and institutionalize a Mombasa County Youth Policy Framework to align priorities, roles, and resources
2. Establish a County Youth Coordination and Innovation Unit to harmonize programs and ensure continuity
3. Create a transparent youth opportunity and information system to improve equitable access
4. Institutionalize participatory governance mechanisms to embed youth in decision-making processes

Beyond its recommendations, this brief reflects a distinct approach to policy development, grounded in sustained engagement, lived experience, and civic co-creation. It demonstrates how youth can move from participation to shaping systems, while offering a practical model for strengthening inclusive and accountable governance at the county level.

INTRODUCTION

Mombasa County occupies a strategic position as Kenya's principal coastal and port city, serving as a gateway for regional trade and a hub for key sectors including tourism, maritime activity, and the emerging blue economy. This positioning presents significant opportunities for economic growth, innovation, and youth employment, placing the county at the center of Kenya's development trajectory.

However, these opportunities exist alongside complex and persistent socio-economic challenges. A significant proportion of young people in Mombasa continue to navigate high levels of unemployment and informality, alongside social vulnerabilities such as exposure to drug abuse, crime, and limited access to structured and dignified opportunities. This contrast underscores a critical disconnect between the county's economic potential and the lived realities of its youth.

Kenya's legal and policy framework provides a strong foundation for youth inclusion. The Constitution of Kenya (2010), particularly Article 55, mandates the state to ensure youth access to education, employment, participation, and protection. The County Governments Act (2012) further requires counties to facilitate public participation, while the National Youth Policy (2019) outlines strategic areas for youth empowerment. Yet in Mombasa County, a persistent gap remains between policy intent and lived experience.

While the county government has initiated several youth-focused programs, these efforts remain fragmented across departments, limiting coordination, coherence, and sustained impact. This points to a deeper structural gap, where existing efforts are not sufficiently aligned to deliver equitable and long-term outcomes for young people.

Through sustained engagement across Mombasa, including informal settlements, peri-urban areas, in higher learning institutions, and organized youth networks, young people have consistently articulated this gap, alongside a clear desire to move beyond participation toward co-creation.

"We are invited to meetings, but we rarely see how our ideas shape what comes after. We want to be part of building the system, not just speaking into it."

Youth participant, Mombasa convening

This shift is significant, it signals a generation that is not only aware of its rights but also capable of contributing to the design and delivery of governance systems. In this context, the development of a coherent and actionable Mombasa County Youth Policy Framework is a structural necessity. It provides an opportunity to align existing initiatives, reduce duplication, strengthen coordination, and ensure that youth-focused interventions are adequately resourced, inclusive, and responsive to evolving needs.

This policy brief builds on these insights, presenting a structured analysis of youth realities in Mombasa and advancing a set of strategic interventions aimed at transforming how youth engagement, opportunity, and governance are organized and sustained.

YOUTH AS DRIVERS OF TRANSFORMATION

Young people in Mombasa are not passive beneficiaries of development; they have an admirable track record of active contributors to the county's economic, social, and civic life. Across communities, youth are already building livelihoods, organizing collectively, and innovating in response to both opportunity and constraint.

From participation in the informal economy and creative industries to engagement in community initiatives, digital spaces, and civic platforms, youth are shaping local economies and contributing to social resilience. Their proximity to emerging sectors, including the blue economy, entrepreneurship, and technology, positions them as critical actors in the county's present and future development.

Beyond economic contribution, young people are increasingly engaged in governance processes. Through civic action, advocacy, and community organizing, they are articulating priorities, holding institutions accountable, and seeking to influence decision-making. This reflects a shift from viewing youth as participants in isolated engagements to recognizing them as co-creators of public systems.

This contribution, however, often remains under-recognized and insufficiently supported within existing institutional frameworks. Many youth-led efforts operate in fragmented and resource-constrained environments, limiting their scalability, sustainability, and overall impact. At the same time, young people bring distinct value to governance and development processes.

This includes:

- **Lived experience and contextual insight into the realities of their communities.**
- **Innovation and adaptability in navigating complex and rapidly changing environments.**
- **Collective agency and mobilization capacity, enabling peer engagement and community-driven solutions.**
- **A strong orientation toward accountability and transparency, particularly in public decision-making**

These attributes position as stakeholders and strategic partners in advancing inclusive and responsive governance. Recognizing youth as drivers of transformation requires a deliberate shift in how systems are designed and operated, from episodic engagement toward structured inclusion, from consultation toward co-creation, and from fragmented support toward coordinated investment.

A coherent County Youth Policy Framework provides an opportunity to institutionalize this shift by aligning systems, resources, and governance mechanisms in ways that enable young people to contribute meaningfully, consistently, and at scale.

YOUTH ASPIRATIONS AND SYSTEM EXPECTATIONS

Young people in Mombasa are actively organizing, innovating, and contributing to community development. Their aspirations are grounded in dignity, opportunity, and inclusion, reflecting a generation that is not only navigating existing systems, but also envisioning how those systems should function to support their growth and long-term contribution.

Key Aspirations

Young people consistently articulate a set of interconnected aspirations that speak to both economic inclusion and meaningful participation:

- **Meaningful Economic Inclusion**

Access to decent and sustainable work, strengthened entrepreneurship ecosystems, and fair participation in county economic opportunities, particularly within key sectors such as tourism, logistics, and the blue economy.

- **Structured Civic Participation**

Institutionalized platforms that move beyond one-off consultations to enable consistent and meaningful youth influence in decision-making, resource allocation, and policy implementation.

- **Skills and Capacity Development**

Access to market-relevant skills and continuous learning pathways aligned with emerging sectors, including the digital economy, climate resilience, and local value chains.

- **Equity and Inclusion**

Targeted and intentional support for marginalized youth groups, including young women, persons with disabilities, and youth in informal settlements, to ensure no one is excluded from opportunity and participation.

System Expectations

Beyond these aspirations, young people express clear expectations of how systems should function to enable their participation and success.

These include:

- Clear and accessible pathways to opportunities, supported by transparent and well-communicated processes
- Coordinated and coherent youth programming across departments to reduce fragmentation and duplication
- Sustained engagement mechanisms that extend beyond political and project cycles, ensuring continuity and trust
- Transparency and accountability in implementation, particularly in how decisions are made, and resources are allocated
- These expectations reflect a demand for systems that is functional, fair, predictable, and responsive to the realities of young people.

“Every year feels like we are starting again. There is no clear system we can plug into and grow from.”

- *Youth participant, Kisauni.*

Ultimately, youth in Mombasa are calling for coherent systems that enable those opportunities to be accessed, sustained, and scaled over time. Meeting these expectations requires a deliberate shift from fragmented interventions toward integrated and accountable approaches to youth governance.

STRUCTURAL BARRIERS TO YOUTH TRANSFORMATION

Despite the demonstrated agency, innovation, and aspirations of young people in Mombasa, a range of structural barriers continues to limit their ability to fully participate in and benefit from the county's development processes. These barriers are not isolated challenges, but interconnected system-level constraints that undermine coherence, access, and long-term impact.

1. Fragmented and Uncoordinated Youth Programming

Youth-focused initiatives are dispersed across multiple county departments and actors, often operating without a shared framework or coordination mechanism. This fragmentation leads to duplication of efforts, inefficiencies in resource use, and limited visibility of available opportunities. As a result, young people encounter disjointed systems that are difficult to navigate and sustain engagement with.

2. Limited Access to Information and Opportunities

Access to opportunities remains uneven, with many young people lacking timely, accurate, and centralized information on available programs, funding, and participation spaces. This disproportionately affects marginalized groups, reinforcing existing inequalities and limiting inclusive participation in economic and civic life.

3. Episodic and Consultative Participation

While platforms for youth engagement exist, they are often ad hoc and consultative in nature, with limited influence on decision-making or implementation processes. This undermines trust and reduces participation to symbolic inclusion rather than meaningful involvement in shaping policies and programs.

4. Weak Institutional Coordination and Accountability

The absence of clear institutional mandates and accountability mechanisms for youth programming limits oversight, continuity, and impact. Without defined roles, performance tracking, and feedback loops, it becomes difficult to assess progress, ensure responsible resource use, or sustain initiatives over time.

5. Under-Resourced and Informal Youth-Led Initiatives

Many youth-led efforts operate in resource-constrained environments, with limited access to funding, technical support, and formal recognition. Despite their potential to drive localized solutions, these initiatives often remain small-scale and disconnected from broader development frameworks.

6. Inequities in Access and Inclusion

Structural inequalities continue to shape who benefits from existing opportunities. Young women, persons with disabilities, and youth in informal settlements face additional barriers, including social norms, limited mobility, and exclusion from decision-making spaces, further constraining their participation and advancement.

STRATEGIC RECOMMENDATIONS

To address the structural barriers identified and unlock the full potential of young people as drivers of transformation, this brief proposes four key interventions aimed at strengthening coordination, expanding access, and institutionalizing inclusive and accountable youth governance in Mombasa County.

1. Develop and Institutionalize a Mombasa County Youth Policy Framework

The Mombasa County Government, through the Department of Youth, Gender, Sports, and Social Services, should lead the development and formal adoption of a comprehensive Youth Policy Framework to provide a unified strategic direction for all youth-related interventions. The framework should clearly define priorities, roles, coordination mechanisms, and resource allocation pathways, while embedding principles of inclusion, participation, and accountability.

Lead Actor: *Mombasa County Government*

Supporting Actors: *County Assembly, civil society organizations, youth-led organizations*

2. Establish a County Youth Coordination and Innovation Unit

The Office of the Governor, in collaboration with relevant county departments, should establish a dedicated Youth Coordination and Innovation Unit to harmonize youth programs across sectors. The unit should serve as a central platform for planning, implementation tracking, and innovation, ensuring alignment of initiatives, reducing duplication, and strengthening collaboration among stakeholders.

Lead Actor: *Office of the Governor / County Executive Committee Member*

Supporting Actors: *County departments, development partners, civil society organizations*

3. Develop a Transparent Youth Opportunities and Information System

The Mombasa County Government, through the ICT and Youth departments, should develop a centralized and accessible system, both digital and community-based, to provide real-time information on opportunities, programs, funding, and participation platforms. This system should enhance transparency, improve equitable access, and enable young people to engage more effectively with available resources.

Lead Actor: *Mombasa County Government (ICT and Youth Departments)*

Supporting Actors: *Private sector, youth platforms, civil society organizations*

4. Institutionalize Participatory Governance and Accountability Mechanisms

The County Executive and County Assembly should formalize structured mechanisms for youth participation in governance, including representation in planning and budgeting processes, regular feedback and accountability forums, and monitoring of youth-focused interventions. These mechanisms should move beyond consultation to enable meaningful co-creation and ensure that youth perspectives shape decisions and outcomes.

Lead Actor: *Mombasa County Government (County Executive and County Assembly)*

Supporting Actors: *Youth councils, civil society organizations, oversight bodies*

ACCOUNTABILITY AND IMPLEMENTATION FOR YOUTH TRANSFORMATION

The effectiveness of the proposed interventions will depend not only on their adoption, but on the strength of the systems established to implement, coordinate, and sustain them over time. Advancing youth transformation in Mombasa requires a deliberate shift from fragmented and short-term initiatives toward institutionalized, accountable, and continuously learning systems.

a) Institutional Ownership and Coordination

Clear institutional responsibility must be established to ensure that youth programming is not dispersed across departments without alignment. The County Government should anchor overall coordination within a designated structure, with defined mandates, roles, and reporting lines across departments. This will enable consistency in implementation and strengthen interdepartmental collaboration.

b) Resourcing and Sustainability

Effective implementation requires sustained and predictable resourcing. Youth-focused interventions should be integrated into county planning and budgeting processes, with dedicated allocations that reflect their strategic importance. Moving beyond project-based funding toward programmatic investment will be critical to ensuring continuity and long-term impact.

c) Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning

A robust monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL) framework should be established to track progress, assess outcomes, and inform continuous improvement. This includes defining clear indicators, strengthening data systems, and ensuring regular public reporting on the status of youth-focused interventions. Embedding feedback loops, particularly from young people, will be essential to ensure that implementation remains responsive to evolving needs and realities.

d) Transparency and Public Accountability

Transparency mechanisms should be strengthened to ensure that information on youth programs, resource allocation, and outcomes is publicly accessible. This includes open communication channels, regular accountability forums, and accessible reporting formats that enable young people and the broader public to track progress and engage constructively.

e) Inclusive and Continuous Participation

Institutionalizing youth participation requires moving beyond ad hoc engagement toward structured, continuous involvement in planning, budgeting, and oversight processes. Participation mechanisms should be inclusive, ensuring representation of diverse youth groups and enabling meaningful contributions at all stages of the policy cycle.

CONCLUSION

Mombasa County stands at a defining moment, with a youthful population at the center of its economic, social, and governance landscape, the choices made today will shape not only immediate outcomes, but the long-term trajectory of the county's development.

This brief has highlighted a central reality: young people in Mombasa are already contributing, organizing, and innovating within their communities. However, their efforts continue to unfold within systems that are fragmented, inconsistently coordinated, and insufficiently aligned to support sustained impact.

The opportunity before the County Government is therefore not to initiate youth engagement, but to structure it. A coherent and actionable County Youth Policy Framework offers a pathway to align existing efforts, strengthen institutional coordination, expand equitable access to opportunities, and embed accountability in how youth-focused interventions are designed and delivered.

More fundamentally, it presents an opportunity to reposition young people, not as beneficiaries of programs, but as partners in shaping the systems that affect their lives. Realizing this shift will require commitment, coordination, and sustained investment. It will also require a deliberate move from consultation to co-creation, from fragmented initiatives to integrated systems, and from short-term interventions to long-term transformation.

Mombasa's youth are not waiting to be included, they are already building, organizing, and contributing. The task ahead is to ensure that the systems around them are structured to match their energy, respond to their aspirations, and enable their full participation in the county's development.

REFERENCES AND SOURCE MATERIAL

This policy brief draws from a body of youth-centered research, engagement processes, and knowledge products, including:

- **Comparative Analysis of Youth Policy Status in the Coast Region**
- **Vijanaaz Governance Garage (VGG) Launch Report**
- **Reflective Dialogue on Ethical and Value-Centered Leadership**

The brief was compiled by synthesizing insights from these processes alongside sustained youth engagement across Mombasa County.

ABOUT CEFRESA

CEFRESA is a people-centered governance and resilience institution working to advance more equitable systems, amplify community voices, and strengthen accountable public decision-making processes across Kenya. Through its strategic focus on democratic governance and accountability, CEFRESA supports young people through civic innovation platforms. One of them is the Vijanaaz Governance Garage (VGG), a flagship initiative that enables youth to move from civic awareness to the co-creation of public systems.

Through convenings, advocacy, mentorship, and capacity strengthening, alongside civic innovation platforms like Garage Dialogue and Action Model (GDAM) sessions and the VGG Newsletter, CEFRESA amplifies youth agency, builds civic leadership, strengthens accountability, and advances inclusive, equitable governance across Kenya.

Vision

An inclusive and prosperous society anchored in resilience and equity.

Mission

To strengthen community agency and drive systemic transformation by advancing inclusive governance, fostering participation, generating knowledge, and promoting evidence-based advocacy and collaborative action for equity, resilience, and shared prosperity.