

# Policy Report

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*Young Leaders' Perspectives on Potentials and  
Prospects for Saudi-German Cooperation*

No. 2

# Youth Empowerment as a Pillar of Saudi- German Climate Cooperation

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## Introduction

The last report by the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) dramatically highlighted the urgency of climate adaptation and the importance of mitigation in order to at least minimise the global effects of climate change.<sup>1</sup> Both Saudi Arabia and Germany are committed to international agreements, such as the Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) agreed in the Paris Climate Agreement to reduce greenhouse gases, or the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), in order to mitigate the global effects of climate change.

Moreover, both countries are willing to support young people as key voices in the field of climate diplomacy, as agreed at COP28 in Dubai. Young generations are environmental agents: not only will they be particularly affected by climate change due to their age, but they also possess the ability to act as multipliers in their societies, engaging in the process of formulating, negotiating, and implementing climate policy. Although 56.6 percentage of its population is over the age of 40<sup>2</sup>, the German government has taken steps to strengthen these multipliers, including through promoting civic engagement among young people in its education system at home and its development-cooperation initiatives abroad, and by responding to public pressure and passing the Climate Protection Act in 2019. On the other hand, Saudi Arabia, with its predominantly young population, emphasises and promotes the inclusion of youth in its climate and sustainability initiatives and beyond. The country's flagship initiatives in this regard are the comprehensive 'Vision 2030' and the Saudi Green Initiative (SGI).

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## Youth Empowerment as a Pillar of Saudi-German Climate Cooperation

This policy paper argues that against the backdrop of intensifying Saudi-German cooperation in recent years, especially in the field of renewable energy with a particular focus on hydrogen<sup>3</sup>, there is an opportunity to include youth empowerment as a pillar of cooperation in the field of climate and sustainability. In this way, the potential that young environmental agents have can be exploited more comprehensively. Moreover, stronger inclusion of youth in Saudi-German cooperation provides the opportunity to overcome different understandings of what youth-led engagement in climate action means and to engender a greater awareness of the contexts in which young environmental agents engage within local communities in Germany and Saudi Arabia.

### Youth-led Engagement and Climate Action

The challenges presented by the effects of climate change are significant. It is therefore imperative to take mitigation and adaptation measures to address its physical and socio-economic impacts. This includes, for example, achieving net-zero emissions by mid-century. The key outcomes of the international community's negotiations at COP28 in this respect include signalling the 'beginning of the end' of the fossil fuel era, linking climate action and nature conservation, making global efforts to strengthen resilience, and establishing a "Loss and Damage Fund" to assist developing countries that are particularly vulnerable to the effects of climate change.<sup>4</sup>

Research shows that addressing climate change requires systemic transformations.<sup>5</sup> Such transformations necessitate a range of responses, interventions, strategies, and approaches.<sup>6</sup> Here, youth play a significant role: Already in 1992, the UN identified young people as one of the key stakeholders in addressing climate issues as they will live longer on earth, which will increasingly alter as a result of increasing temperatures and changing environments.<sup>7</sup> The United Nations describes youth as persons who are between 15 and 24 years old, an age group that corresponds to the period of transition from the dependence of childhood to the independence of adulthood.<sup>8</sup> Several aspects of the lives of youth will be negatively affected by climate change, including the ability to achieve water and food security, which, if satisfying these basic needs becomes more difficult, brings with it increased risks of social and armed conflict.<sup>9</sup> In addition, the well-being, mental health, and socio-economic conditions of youth are negatively impacted by climate change.<sup>10</sup>

Young people can also be understood as environmental agents: Studies indicate that they are more likely to advocate and support activities that actively mitigate climate change, i.e. measures to reduce emissions.<sup>11</sup> In this context, the importance of engagement in civic activities should be emphasised. These can contribute to the development of social responsibility among individuals, making them more valuable members of society.<sup>12</sup> Such youth-led activities can address climate change locally and involve local and informal community-based actions such as awareness-raising events, educational programs, and sustainability campaigns.<sup>13</sup> Leading climate-focused initiatives thus allows young individuals to influence positive environmental attitudes, behaviours, and actions in various spheres of climate action.<sup>14</sup>

Among others, education, volunteering, and involvement in national programmes and governmental policies are commonly considered important elements of youth empowerment to create climate-conscious societies and implement national commitments.<sup>15</sup> Research repeatedly emphasises education and access to information as a key response to strengthen resilience and adaptive capacity in the context of climate change: It helps to better understand the geophysical, social, economic, and technological aspects of this phenomenon.<sup>16</sup>

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In recent years, young people have been active advocates for ambitious climate action globally. This was particularly evident at COP28, where young people were at the forefront of climate diplomacy. One notable example is YOUNGO<sup>17</sup>, the official youth constituency of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). To strengthen the voice of youth within international climate events such as the Conferences of the Parties (COP), YOUNGO organises the Conference of the Youth (COY). In order to make access universal and inclusive, COYs are regularly organised in various formats, such as Global COY, Virtual COY, Regional (RCOY) and Local COY (LCOY). LCOYs are held in Saudi Arabia and Germany, among other countries.

YOUNGO and COP28 launched the “Youth Stocktake” initiative, which comprehensively analyses youth involvement in climate diplomacy and provides a strategic blueprint to enhance their participation in the COP process. However, although research ascribes youth a key role as stakeholders in climate action, a 2019 evaluation of NDCs worldwide indicates that only around half of the 160 NDCs evaluated referenced “children” and “youth” in their goals, and only seven NDCs recognise the role of young people as stakeholders in decision-making processes and climate action.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, only 38 countries have agreed to sign the UNESCO Greening Education Partnership Declaration, which entails a commitment to incorporate climate education into NDCs and National Adaptation Plans (NAPs).

### **Youth Empowerment: A promising potential pillar of Saudi-German climate cooperation**

#### **Saudi Arabia's path towards a sustainable transformation**

All countries in the world, including Saudi Arabia, are affected by the implications of climate change on a socio-economic and physical level. According to climate projections, the effects of global warming that likely will be experienced in Saudi Arabia are the increased incidence of extreme weather events, heat, and water scarcity.<sup>19</sup> In order to address these challenges, Saudi Arabia has introduced various reforms, programs, and initiatives as part of its ‘Vision 2030’, which provides a plan that aims to diversify the Saudi economy and promote the potential of the Saudi population and nation. The majority of the Saudi population, according to the latest census, is under the age of 35. The share of youth (people between 15 and 24 years of age) is around 15 percent of the total population.<sup>20</sup> Consequently, Saudi Arabia's youth are considered key enablers of the diversification programmes contained in ‘Vision 2030’. Under this umbrella, Saudi youth are to be furnished access to educational and professional opportunities and their engagement in charity is to be encouraged.<sup>21</sup> The Vision Realization Programmes, which aim to implement the goals of ‘Vision 2030’, target general education, higher education, and technical and vocational education and training (TVET).<sup>22</sup>

This youth-inclusive approach is also reflected in the ambitions of the Saudi Green Initiative (SGI) and the Middle East Green Initiative (MGI). Under the SGI, the Saudi government has been addressing aspects of sustainability since 2021. It aims to reduce emissions, for example, by expanding renewable energies, investing in new technologies such as carbon capture storage (and utilisation), and protecting the environment. By doing so, the country plans to achieve net-zero emissions by 2050 and meet the SDGs. Launched by Saudi Arabia, the MGI supports the SGI and underlines the Kingdom's regional role in promoting energy diversification and environmental engagement. Under this framework, the Saudi government aims to increase regional cooperation on climate and environmental protection in order to reduce emissions, protect the environment and climate, and create a prosperous economic environment in the region. In addition to the six member states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), countries such

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as Algeria, Brazil, Egypt, Greece, India, Italy, Jordan, Morocco, Russia, Tunisia, and Yemen participate in this initiative.

Also in this context, the relevance of young people and their empowerment is emphasised. For example, young voices in the field of climate, environment, and energy are given platforms and opportunities to network with each other and key policymakers through the 'Youth Summit.' During this summit, discussions have highlighted the importance of political leaders in strengthening the voice of youth and addressing important issues that young people can contribute to. Furthermore, the establishment of the 'Saudi Youth Climate Network'<sup>23</sup> recognises young people as the cornerstone of the country's sustainability efforts and development. The network provides concrete opportunities for young people to gather, such as the 2022 Youth Green Summit.

Youth participation is not only supported by government initiatives; universities and non-profit organisations have also played a significant role in this regard. For example, Saudi Youth for Sustainability (SYS) was established by students from King Abdullah University of Science and Technology (KAUST) and is a youth-led national organisation that aims to connect young leaders and drive positive changes toward a sustainable future. Another example is the non-profit organisation 'Environmental Development Association' (Faseel).<sup>24</sup> In addition, there are young environmental agents in the private sector, like Sarah Alharthey, who was named Saudi Arabia's climate ambassador for the World Bank Group's Youth-to-Youth (Y2Y)<sup>25</sup> initiative in 2021. She also works at ACWA Power, where she is focusing on the energy transition in Saudi Arabia.

Overall, there is a growing community of young environmental agents in Saudi Arabia working on the implementation of climate and sustainability measures and cooperation with local communities. They are supported by the Saudi government's initiatives, but still face challenges and obstacles that need to be overcome. One of these challenges lies in the recognition of the form of engagement, which might differ from German youth engagement, and the resulting promotion of these efforts at the international level and bilateral cooperation between Germany and Saudi Arabia. As the challenges posed by climate change require global efforts, there is immense potential in promoting young people in an intensifying Saudi-German cooperation.

### **Germany's international programs as a good starting point to foster Saudi-German cooperation for young environmental agents**

In Germany, the average age of the population is 45<sup>26</sup> years, 16 years older than the Saudi population's average age of 29.<sup>27</sup> However, climate protection has constitutional status, as future generations, i.e. today's youth and beyond, also have a right to a liveable future, as the Federal Constitutional Court in Germany ruled in 2021. As in Saudi Arabia, youth-led engagement in Germany is heterogeneous. For example, young people are involved in youth organizations of environmental associations (NGOs) such as BUNDjugend or Naturschutzjugend (NAJU) of Naturschutzbund Deutschland (NABU). In addition, smaller civil organisations from various areas of climate and environmental protection, such as water protection, transport, housing, or recycling, organise themselves in networks such as the Green League. Civil engagement in this area is often financially supported by the German federal government or state governments. However, this support falls into the category of civil-society engagement for climate and sustainability, and thus does not necessarily focus explicitly on youth. One example where young environmental agents in Germany are explicitly empowered is the Local Conference of Youth (LCOY) which is financed by the Federal Ministry of Economic Affairs and Climate Action on the basis of a decision by the Bundestag.

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It is the declared aim of the German Federal Government to integrate aspects of climate, environmental protection, and sustainable energy into its international cooperation, as can be seen in its International Climate Initiative.<sup>28</sup> For this reason, the Federal Ministry of Economic Affairs and Climate Action, the Federal Foreign Office, the Federal Ministry of Education and Research, the Federal Ministry for the Environment, Nature Conservation, Nuclear Safety, and Consumer Protection, and the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development in particular have expanded and created international cooperation programs in this regard. Under the umbrella of a 'Just Transition', the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development, for example, aims to work worldwide to create decent and sustainable jobs, promote a socially and ecologically sustainable transformation of the economy, and sustainably strengthen the rights of vulnerable groups, including women, children, and youth.<sup>29</sup> Although the German government recognises the special role of youth in climate action, for example by providing for their participation in its climate protection program<sup>30</sup>, youth empowerment is not a pillar in the strategies of international cooperation.

With regard to international cooperation in the field of education, which constitutes an essential component of youth empowerment, Germany has been able to establish formats and services in the past. In the higher-education sector, the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) is the most important funding organisation for the international exchange of students and academics in Germany. The organisation, which is financed with public funds, supports students and academics from Germany and abroad with scholarships. This support contributes significantly to the international networking and knowledge transfer of young people. A particular focus here is on sustainability, which is intended to help in overcoming global challenges by promoting international cooperation. For example, the DAAD offers special funding programs for international exchange in this area, such as the 'ClimapAfrica' program, which supports climate research and protection in Africa. The DAAD-funded 'Make Our Planet Great Again' programme promotes interdisciplinary research on the Paris climate goals at German higher-education and research institutions.<sup>31</sup>

In addition to promoting academic exchange, the German federal government has also been involved in international vocational education and training cooperation (iBBZ) for several decades, meeting a growing demand for German expertise in dual vocational education and training. Dual vocational training in Germany combines company-based and school-based learning. Through sharing its expertise in effective and practical vocational education and training internationally, the German government is pursuing the goals of contributing to ensuring economic and social participation, raising the level of qualifications of employees, securing qualified skilled workers, supporting technological developments and competitiveness, and creating prospects for target groups to find work in their home countries. Partner countries are selected on the basis of educational, economic, cultural, social, and foreign-policy objectives, among others.<sup>32</sup> In selected partner countries, the German embassies and the German Chambers of Commerce Abroad (AHKs) are the primary partners for vocational education and training cooperation. In the Saudi case, this role is fulfilled by the German Saudi Arabian Liaison Office for Economic Affairs (GESALO).

In this context, another pillar of German cooperation abroad is the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ). The non-profit federal enterprise supports technical cooperation in sustainable development and international education activities worldwide. For example, the H<sub>2</sub>-Diplo Initiative promotes cooperation in the fields of renewable energies – especially green hydrogen – and decarbonisation in Saudi Arabia, among other countries. H<sub>2</sub>-Diplo has an office in Riyadh. In the Kingdom, the initiative complements the German-Saudi Climate Dialogue and supports bilateral

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cooperation in the climate sector. In particular, it promotes cooperation with companies, civil society actors and scientific institutions.

In this context, efforts to establish a strategic partnership between the European Union (EU), and therefore Germany, and the GCC states, and therefore Saudi Arabia, at bilateral and regional level are being promoted. As part of the EU's climate- and energy-policy ambitions, strategic cooperation with the Gulf states has been strengthened since May 2022. In its Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council titled 'A strategic partnership with the Gulf,' the EU Commission highlighted its intention to support cooperation in "education, vocational training, skills development, and civic participation through the Erasmus+ program."<sup>33</sup> Erasmus+ is a funding program of the EU that promotes international cooperation and exchange among EU and participating non-EU countries in the fields of education, training, youth, and sport in school, university, and vocational education. Furthermore, EU-GCC cooperation is to be intensified, particularly in the field of research, for example by enabling scientists from the Gulf States to participate in the Marie Skłodowska-Curie actions, an EU postdoctoral fellowship program that includes international doctoral networks and staff exchanges.<sup>34</sup>

### Conclusion

In light of the challenges posed by climate change, both Saudi Arabia and Germany are seeking to strengthen their cooperation in relevant areas. Although the governments in Riyadh and Berlin attribute a prominent role to youth in climate action, their cooperation does not include substantive measures that explicitly promote youth exchange and knowledge transfer. Given the importance of youth as environmental agents and the potential of Germany and Saudi Arabia to serve as multipliers with respect to climate action in their respective regions and on the world stage, the failure of the partnership between Riyadh and Berlin to place a greater emphasis on empowering young people constitutes a missed opportunity.

To begin capitalising on the potential of deeper climate cooperation targeting youth, the German and Saudi governments should consider engaging with one another in the field of environmental education. Exemplified by institutions such as the DAAD, Germany can draw on a long history of international cooperation, especially in areas such as education and exchange, which are considered crucial for youth empowerment. Established opportunities such as those provided by the DAAD offer valuable avenues for promoting knowledge transfer and academic exchange between the two countries. However, funding is often reserved for selected countries, making it more difficult for Saudi students and academics to receive support. Other established platforms such as GESALO and GIZ have been present in the Kingdom for decades and promote exchange and cooperation projects. For its part, Saudi Arabia can contribute by promoting higher education exchanges with German universities through the King Abdallah Scholarship Program.

### Policy Recommendations

This paper argues that the Saudi and German governments should work together to foster a more enabling environment for youth engaged in climate action. To establish youth empowerment as a pillar of Saudi-German cooperation, decisionmakers in Saudi Arabia and Germany should consider the following recommendations:

1. Promoting established funding programs such as the DAAD and the expansion of their funding opportunities to Saudi researchers.

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2. Encouraging cooperation between German and Saudi universities through activities like joint research initiatives, exchange programmes, and networking events.
3. Leveraging the private sector through advertising established formats within the German International Vocational Training Cooperation (IBBZ), which are organised by the German mission in Saudi Arabia and GESALO.
4. Encouraging German decisionmakers to promote projects in Saudi Arabia that are explicitly aimed at young people in the field of climate and sustainability to a greater extent, which can be implemented by GIZ on the ground.
5. Creating new opportunities for exchange between young Saudi and German citizens. This can be achieved through jointly funding summer schools, establishing a Saudi-German Youth Forum for committed young environmental agents, and/or encouraging cooperation between German and Saudi Local Conferences of Youth (LCOYs).
6. German and European decision-makers involved in shaping the EU-GCC strategic partnership should furthermore promote the increased participation of Saudi Arabia in funding programmes such as Erasmus+ to further strengthen international networking, knowledge transfer and youth empowerment via exchange programmes with Saudi universities and companies.
7. Saudi decision-makers should expand existing scholarship programmes to create additional opportunities for German students and promote joint research initiatives in fields such as technology and sustainability. Additionally, the Saudi government can organise collaborative events and workshops to facilitate networking opportunities. This approach aligns with the goals of Saudi Vision 2030 and will establish long-term cooperation between the two countries.

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