

## YOUTH-LED ACTIONS FOR CLIMATE AND PEACE: REFLECTIONS ON LAUDATO YOUTH INITIATIVE

There is growing evidence-based acknowledgement of the instrumental role of young people can play in combating climate change effects and environmental degradation across Africa. Youth have shown capacity to innovate new ideas and knowledge, and expressed political activism and dynamism required offer solutions and exert pressure on leaders and local communities for climate action (Barford *et al.*, 2021a). Another study cited in Johnson *et al.*, (2013) reveals that youth in East Africa exude the willingness and capacity for responsible citizenship advocating for valuable information to local communities and agents of change in environmental conservation. Generally, the discourse on youth-led responses against climate in Africa can be conceptualized from two broad approaches: Marginalization, which explains youth exclusion from policy and decision-making; and mobilization, which foregrounds the youth voices through political engagement, civic action and dynamism (Anyidoho *et al.*, 2012). This section presents reflections on the work of *Laudato Youth Initiative*, a Catholic-based youth-focused organization in Uganda, which is inspired and oriented to amplify the universal appeal of Pope Francis in *Laudato Si'* (2015) on the care for the environment.

### ***Background of Laudato Youth Initiative***

Laudato Youth Initiative, the Initiative hereafter, is a Catholic youth-led initiative founded in 2022 to empower young people to take action against anthropogenic environmental challenges and promote sustainable practices. It promotes youth engagement in climate action, ecological advocacy and education, fostering a sense of responsibility towards the planet in the spirit of Pope Francis' universal appeal of environmental care and ecological conversion. The Initiative targets young people premised on the conviction that environmental education can transform the youth into environment-conscious leaders, who will ultimately challenge humanity to become better stewards of creation. There is evidence that cultivating capacities of young people to address climate-induced challenges is critical to building sustainable future in Sub-Saharan Africa (Johnson *et al.*, 2023). The Initiative seeks to inspire a generation of leaders to address climate change and environmental degradation through various programs and resources. By connecting young people with like-minded peers and mentors across Laudato Si Clubs, the Initiative aims to cultivate a community of young people committed to creating a more sustainable future. It currently has a network of twelve Laudato Si Clubs in different schools, universities and parishes, spread across East Africa through which programs are conducted, under four broad thematic areas: (a) Tree planting and tree-zoning, (b) Climate education through training, conferences and workshops, (c) Research and publications, Media to raise awareness and (d) Sustainable environmental projects. How do the Initiative activities and programs foster climate action and peace?

### ***a. Building ecological knowledge***

Environmental education is a key activity through which members acquire and share information about climate change and its human and environmental impact. This is done through regular meetings, workshops and conferences, which enable peer-to-peer learning through information sharing based on both individual and collective experiences of climate change. Members discuss the nuanced effects of environmental destruction through human activity, such as deforestation, encroachment on wetlands, poor waste disposal and management, use of single-use

plastics and poor water management; and share best simple practices which can be applied to protect nature. Experience has over time shown that empowered with such practical knowledge, young people grow in environmental awareness, which fosters activism and zeal for engagement with others, including family and peers, challenging them to act. These experiences broaden learners' understanding of climate change as they are able to link their classroom knowledge with practical realities within their club activities, which triggers innovative and creative ideas. For instance, in response to the prevailing heat waves in Uganda, clubs engaged in an online exploratory study to deepen their knowledge about the causes and impact of heat waves in the country and beyond; whereas the club in Nairobi, Kenya uses art and paintings to promote environmental conservation in partnership with Climate Fresk and 3Es Experience (LYI, 2025). Roser and Swim (2011) reveal that whereas environmental knowledge of young people drives them to respond to ecological problems, with personal responsibility and enhanced civic engagement, others remain disinterested and indifferent, as cited by Johnson *et al.* (2013, p. 31). This parallels to the experiences in the Initiative where activities such as tree planting and environmental clean ups disinterest some students, albeit attract others (Nabakooza, 2025).

### ***b. Sense of ecological responsibility***

Physical engagements with nature are core to the Initiative activities, and these include planting trees, environmental clean ups and, nature walks in places with rich biodiversity, such as *Amabere ga Nyina Mwiru*, located in western Uganda. Through the mentorship of club patrons in schools, the Initiative equips learners with basic knowledge on tree planting and care for tree nursery beds, which they apply through our tree planting initiatives across the clubs. Two core features about tree planting are worth noting. One, the Initiative prioritizes fruit and indigenous trees. The underlying rationale is to creatively critique the common practice of tree planting for commercial purposes, which leaves the soil bare and susceptible to top soil erosion upon tree harvesting, by selecting trees types whose incentives transcend financial value. Fruit trees are a source of nutritious foods as they provide fruits upon maturity, which can be harvested for subsistence or commercial purposes, but without cutting the tree; whereas indigenous trees support survival of biodiversity and act as a source of herbal medicines. Two, the experience of nurturing a young tree beyond its first year is transforming. Members develop deeper conviction that through their work, they can provide solutions to not only ecological, but also social problems. This builds their sense of confidence and esteem, and responsibility. Chawla (2007) reveals evidence of how impactful children and youth's first-hand experiences with nature can be in as far as cultivating a sense of environmental care. She affirms that with mentorship and peer-to-peer guidance and support, childhood experiences with nature can foster conservation behaviour in their adulthood.

### ***c. Cultivating sense of self-care***

The need to integrate mental health awareness in education institutions has attracted increased attention, as it is critical in enabling learners to thrive holistically. The global picture revealed by WHO (2024) raises serious concern as one out of seven adolescents (10-19 years) experiences a mental disorder; and even worse, suicide ranks third among the leading causes of death among those aged 15–29 years. These findings are parallel to Uganda where nearly 20% of adolescents experience mental health challenges; and suicide cases reported among learners in school are on the rise (WHO, 2021; *Daily Monitor* 2025). Adolescence is a critical stage in human development given the physiological and physical changes learners experience;

amidst rapid sociological, digital and ecological changes in their surroundings. Yet, studies on mental health in children and adolescents recommend orphans, HIV/AIDS-affected youth, former child soldiers and refugees as high-risk groups (Iversen *et al.*, 2021); however, omit children from climate-affected areas. The government has initiated programs aimed at promoting mental well-being among students, with emphasis on the importance of peer support and counselling services, which can create channels for open and free communication for learners (MoES, 2022). However, there is need to broaden the spaces for learners to express themselves freely outside the classroom environs, where they can not only interact with each other, but with nature (Kisembo, 2025). The Initiative has a network of school clubs in both primary and secondary schools through which learners freely interact with each other, and nature as they participate in activities such as planting trees and flowers, and weeding young trees, and nature walks, *inter alia*. Connection with nature has a therapeutic calming effect as it draws individuals to mindfulness, gratitude and appreciation of nature, thereby, cultivating a sense of responsibility to protect and conserve environment. This sense of care for the environment transposes into a sense of self-care among learners, which enable them to take care of themselves, mentally and physically.

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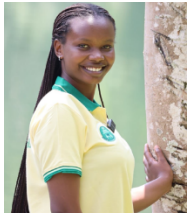
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**Immaculate Kiseembo** is an English Language teacher at Holy Cross Lake View S.S. Jinja with specialization in Linguistics, dedicated to the fields of language documentation and preservation. She is Publications Editor at Laudato Youth Initiative. With a strong passion for research and academia, she continuously seeks to explore the intricacies of language and its impact on society. Her areas of interest include mental health and digital storytelling, aiming to raise awareness and foster understanding in these areas. She holds a Bachelors of Arts with Education from Kyambogo University in Uganda.



**Augustine Bahemuka** is a peace scholar, social justice advocate and social environmentalist affiliated with Laudato Youth Initiative at John Paul II Justice & Peace Centre (Kampala, Uganda) as Research Editor. His research focuses on climate change and migration, refugees, non-violence, financial inclusion, and human trafficking. He has published extensively on forced displacement, environmental peacebuilding, and migration economics, contributing to academic and policy discussions. He is a member of the Ecotheology Early Career Network based at Laudato Si' Research Institute (LSRI). He is also a customer experience professional with 7 years experience in the banking sector across Uganda and Kenya. He holds BSc in Biomedical Laboratory Technology (Makerere University), Diploma in Theology (Tangaza University), and MA in Peace Studies & International Relations (Hekima University College). He is currently pursuing an MBA at Uganda Management Institute, focusing on sustainable development.