



# Air Aware: Youth Statement on Air Pollution in Johannesburg

Youth voices for clean air,  
health and environmental  
justice





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# 1. Summary

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Air pollution is a daily reality for many young people in Johannesburg. It affects our health, our education and our futures. From waste burning and vehicle emissions to household energy use and industrial pollution, young people – especially in vulnerable communities – are exposed to harmful air every day.

This statement represents the voices and lived experiences of hundreds of young people engaged through the Air Aware: Youth-Led Air Pollution Awareness Campaign. It documents what we see, what we experience and what we demand to strengthen air quality management in Johannesburg.

## **We call on decision makers to:**

- prioritise health-centred air quality management;
- improve waste management and end waste burning;
- strengthen clean and safe mobility systems;
- ensure meaningful youth participation in air quality governance;
- invest in clean energy access and green jobs; and
- increase monitoring, transparency and enforcement.

Young people are not just beneficiaries of policy – we are partners in shaping solutions. Clean air is a constitutional right, and it is time for decisive action.

## 2. Who we are & why we speak

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We are young people from communities across Johannesburg, including Alexandra, Soweto, Orange Farm, Diepsloot, Protea Glen and Snake Park. We are learners, students and out-of-school youth who live with the daily consequences of polluted air.

We speak from classrooms where learners struggle to concentrate due to headaches, from homes where families must choose between warmth and clean air, and from communities where waste burning is common because services fail.

Through the Air Aware campaign, we have been trained, mobilised and supported to understand air pollution and advocate for solutions. We have engaged schools, universities and communities, and we have built a youth movement for clean air. We speak because our lives are directly affected. We speak because we have solutions. We speak because our future depends on the decisions made today.

## 3. On the ground: Our lived experiences

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Air pollution in our communities is not abstract – it is visible, felt and breathed every day.

### 3.1 Daily exposure

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Many young people live near dumpsites, busy roads or industrial areas. Waste is often burned due to inconsistent collection and lack of infrastructure. Households use coal, wood and paraffin in poorly ventilated spaces.

## 3.2 Health impacts

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Communities experience the following adverse health impacts due to air pollution:

- Asthma and respiratory illness
- Persistent sinus problems
- Eye irritation and headaches
- Lung infections
- Cardiovascular strain among the elderly

These illnesses affect school attendance, concentration and family finances.

## 3.3 Inequality & environmental justice

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Air pollution disproportionately affects low-income and marginalised communities. Those contributing least to pollution often suffer the most. This is an environmental justice issue.

## 4. The policy & legal context

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Section 24 of South Africa's Constitution guarantees everyone the right to an environment that is not harmful to their health or well-being and requires government to prevent pollution and ecological degradation. South Africa has air quality laws and standards, yet implementation gaps remain. Communities still experience:

- Weak enforcement
- Limited monitoring
- Poor service delivery
- Lack of transparency

Policies alone are not enough without effective implementation and accountability.

## 5. How youth have engaged so far

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Young people have taken active steps to understand and address air pollution in their respective communities. Through workshops, training sessions and community-based air quality advocacy campaigns, youth:

- learned about air pollution sources and policies;
- participated in negotiation simulations and stakeholder dialogues;
- conducted air quality awareness-raising campaigns in schools and universities;
- mapped pollution hotspots in communities;
- led recycling and waste education initiatives; and
- engaged in national and academic platforms.

These activities show that youth are informed, capable and ready to contribute meaningfully to governance.

# 6. Youth analysis: What we understand

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Through engagement and learning, we as the Youth Air Champions of the City of Johannesburg recognise the following:

<b>Key Sources of Pollution</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Waste burning</li><li>• Household fuel use</li><li>• Transport emissions</li><li>• Industrial pollution</li><li>• Weak enforcement of regulations</li></ul>
<b>Who is Most Affected</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Children and learners</li><li>• Elderly people</li><li>• Low-income communities</li><li>• Informal settlements near pollution hotspots</li></ul>
<b>System Gaps</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Irregular waste collection</li><li>• Limited monitoring data access</li><li>• Insufficient public awareness</li><li>• Poor enforcement of by-laws</li></ul>

Clean air is not just the absence of smoke – it is air that supports healthy living for all.

# 7. Youth asks (demands)

## THEME 1

### AIR QUALITY & HEALTH

#### We call for:

Health impact assessments in affected communities.

Mobile and accessible healthcare for air pollution-related illnesses.

Early warning systems for poor air quality days.

School-based health and air quality programmes.

More air quality monitors with public real-time data.

Long-term research on youth health impacts.

## THEME 2

### CLEAN MOBILITY SOLUTIONS

#### We call for:

Dedicated and reliable school transport systems that reduce reliance on private vehicles and so help reduce vehicle emissions.

Safe walking and cycling infrastructure in our city and communities.

Regular vehicle emissions testing.

Stronger penalties for excessive vehicle emissions.

Low-emission zones near schools and residential areas.

## THEME 3

### WASTE-TO-VALUE & NO-BURN SOLUTIONS

#### We call for:

Reliable and frequent waste collection.

Recycling facilities in all communities.

Door-to-door education on waste separation.

Strong penalties for illegal burning.

Community reporting platforms.

Support for youth-led recycling initiatives.

Investment in circular economy opportunities.

# Youth asks (demands) cont...

## THEME 4

## YOUTH ACCOUNTABILITY & GOVERNANCE

### We call for:

Structured youth participation in air quality policy formulation and decision-making processes.

Youth advisory bodies in environmental governance.

Transparent and accessible air pollution data.

Feedback mechanisms showing government action in addressing air pollution in Johannesburg.

Context-sensitive policies for different communities in Johannesburg.

## THEME 5

## CLEAN AIR FUTURE – VISION 2030

### We call for:

Clean energy access in informal settlements in low income and disadvantaged communities in Johannesburg.

Green jobs for young people.

Long-term air quality targets with timelines and measurable indicators of success.

Full implementation of clean air zones in Johannesburg.

Protection for schools and children from air pollution.

## 8. Vision 2030 for Johannesburg

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A successful clean air future for Johannesburg is possible. By 2030, we envision:

- cleaner skies and measurable air quality improvement;
- reduced respiratory illnesses linked to air pollution exposure;
- reliable waste management (collection) services;
- increased recycling and reduced illegal waste dumping in low income and marginalised communities;
- safe walking and cycling infrastructure;
- youth actively shaping air quality and environmental governance; and
- clean air recognised as a shared responsibility.

## 9. Youth commitments

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Young people commit to:

- reducing personal contributions to air pollution in Johannesburg;
- promoting recycling and responsible waste practices in our communities;
- using public transport where possible to reduce our contribution to high vehicle emissions;
- participating in air quality policy processes;
- reporting air pollution to relevant city departments and local authorities;
- leading community air quality awareness-raising initiatives; and
- building partnerships for clean air.

**We are ready to lead by example to ensure a clean air future for Johannesburg.**

# 10. Closing statement

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This Youth Statement on Air Pollution for the City of Johannesburg is a powerful testament to the Air Aware campaign journey, transitioning from learning to decisive action. It was crafted through a series of dynamic training workshops that enhanced our knowledge of air quality; impactful awareness-raising campaigns that activated our schools and communities; and reflection sessions that grounded us in our lived experiences. In our final pre-conference workshop, we united our voices around our shared priorities and demands in addressing air pollution in Johannesburg. This journey has not only equipped us to understand air pollution but has also empowered us to speak with confidence and purpose. This statement is a declaration of the strength of our journey – youth who are informed, organised and ready to engage with decision-makers to secure a clean air future. Importantly, this journey does not end here; it is a resolute call for partnership, accountability and immediate action.

# 11. Call to action & next steps

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We call on the City of Johannesburg and decision makers to:

- establish formal youth engagement platforms that enable young people to actively engage in air quality policy formulation and decision-making processes;
- hold regular intergenerational youth–government dialogues on air quality and environmental governance;
- provide transparent progress updates; and
- partner with youth in solution design and implementation.

Air pollution is solvable. The knowledge exists. The solutions exist. What is needed now is political will and inclusive action.



**Clean air is not a privilege. Clean air is a right.**



