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South African Youth Statement to COP 31

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SUBMITTED TO: MR DAVID MAYNIER, MINISTER OF FISHERIES, FORESTRY AND THE ENVIRONMENT, AT THE NATIONAL MINISTERIAL STAKEHOLDERS' CONSULTATION



Kingdom of the Netherlands



forestry, fisheries
& the environment

Department:
Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA



Preamble

We, the youth of South Africa, comprising nearly one-third of the country's population, recalling the principle of intergenerational equity in Article 3.1 of the Convention and the recognition in the Paris Agreement of the rights of children and of intergenerational equity, recognise that young people bear the least historical responsibility for the climate crisis yet will live with its consequences the longest.

We recognise Article 12 of the Paris Agreement and the Glasgow work programme on Action for Climate Empowerment as the basis for meaningful youth participation, and welcome South Africa's Climate Change Act (Act 22 of 2024) and its second Nationally Determined Contributions (NDC).

We are concerned that progress in policy has not been matched by implementation, finance and accountability. Noting this year's theme being Dialogue, Consensus and Action, our statement focuses on the implementation strategies that hold parties accountable. We call upon parties to the 31st Conference of the Parties (COP31) to place young people at the centre of decision-making on the matters set out below. In our capacity as students, researchers, children, and future leaders, we take it upon ourselves to help make the Earth a more habitable environment for future generations.

While we note with satisfaction the efforts made to address the climate crisis, we emphasise the importance of prioritising youth voices in these initiatives.

This statement, in turn, addresses:

- 1. Accountability and Monitoring**
- 2. Climate Finance**
- 3. Action for Climate Empowerment**
- 4. Just Transition Mechanism**
- 5. UAE Just Transition Work Programme**
- 6. Loss and Damage**
- 7. Adaptation**
- 8. Mitigation**
- 9. Conclusion**

1. Accountability and Monitoring

For both adaptation and mitigation, while the government has made progress in creating legislation and policy, all is in vain without the necessary frameworks to ensure the success of these endeavours. Recalling the Enhanced Transparency Framework under Article 13 of the Paris Agreement, we call upon the government to:

- (a) Give full effect to the independence of the Presidential Climate Commission and establish, with it or alongside it, an independent, multi-stakeholder mechanism that publicly tracks finance and implementation of NDC and sectoral targets, with youth representation.
- (b) Publish accessible and updated reports on climate expenditure and results, aligned with national reporting under the enhanced transparency framework. Credible transparency tracking will also help create an enabling environment for public and private investment, consistent with Article 2.1(c) of the Paris Agreement.

2. Climate Finance

We recognise that progress has been made in climate finance as developed countries provided and mobilised \$136.7 billion for developing countries in 2024, exceeding the previous \$100 billion annual goal for the third consecutive year. Recalling that COP29 established the New Collective Quantified Goal (NCQG) (decision 1/CMA.6) of at least \$300 billion annually by 2035, we also recall the COP30 call to at least triple adaptation finance by 2035, with efforts to up-scale climate finance from all sources to \$1.3 trillion per year by 2035.

We are deeply concerned that progress in commitments has not been matched by progress in implementation. The \$100 billion target was only reached for the first time in 2022, two years after its original deadline. Developing countries continue to face barriers in accessing finance, while concerns remain about debt-creating instruments, complex application processes, unequal distribution of resources and insufficient finance for adaptation. About two-thirds of public climate finance from developed countries in 2024 was provided as loans, and adaptation finance totalled \$34.7 billion.

The evidence shows the scale of the gap. The UNFCCC Standing Committee on Finance estimates that cost needs contained in the NDCs of developing countries amount to roughly \$5–6.9 trillion up to 2030, equivalent to about \$455–584 billion annually. These estimates do not even capture all developing-country needs. Funding shortfalls have delayed mandated activities, while the proposed 2026–2027 core budget of the UNFCCC secretariat covers only 83.9% of the resources required for essential and recurring work.

As young people, we therefore call on COP31 parties to:

- (a) Move from promises to delivery through proper implementation mechanisms. We demand predictable and accessible climate financing structures, with developed countries taking the lead in meeting their obligations in line with Article 9.1 of the Paris Agreement.
- (b) Ensure that finance is increasingly new, additional public, grant-based and concessional rather than deepening the debt burdens of vulnerable countries.

- (c) Advocate for adaptation to receive greater and more balanced support alongside mitigation and deliver on the commitment to at least triple adaptation finance by 2035. Access procedures for the Green Climate Fund and other climate funds must be simplified, particularly for developing countries, local communities and youth-led initiatives, including direct access.
- (d) Ensure that the work programme on climate finance, including Article 9, paragraph 1, delivers concrete outcomes.

Finally, climate finance must be transparent and accountable. COP31 should strengthen systems that track not only how much finance is announced but also how much is disbursed, where it goes, and who benefits, using the Enhanced Transparency Framework. Young people must also have meaningful participation in decisions about the allocation and monitoring of climate finance.

The lack of such initiatives weakens the institutions responsible for tracking finance, supporting developing countries and ensuring accountability. COP31 must therefore ensure predictable funding not only for climate action itself, but also for the institutions responsible for monitoring delivery and enabling meaningful participation by developing countries and young people.

3. Action for Climate Empowerment

We recognise the progress made in advancing the Action for Climate Empowerment (ACE) agenda through the Glasgow Work Programme (2021) (decisions 18/CP.26 and CMA.3) and the Action Plan (2022) (decisions 32/CP.27 and 22/CMA.4, covering 2023 to 2026), alongside South Africa's integration of climate change, environmental sustainability and sustainable development across the school curriculum since 2011 and ongoing efforts to strengthen Education for Sustainable Development. The midterm review of the work programme continues, with a decision on a new action plan expected at COP31.

However, there remains a serious gap between policy recognition and implementation. Nearly half of the world's national curriculum frameworks reviewed by UNESCO in 2021 made no reference to climate change, and where the content appears, it is often treated superficially. At the same time, teachers are expected to deliver complex climate knowledge without adequate training, resources or continued support. Urgent action remains a priority; therefore, we call upon parties to:

- (a) Adopt an ambitious, adequately resourced new action plan under the Glasgow work programme, with measurable, time-bound targets across all six ACE elements (education, training, public awareness, public participation, public access to information and international cooperation).
- (b) Strengthen the implementation of ACE by integrating accessible, inclusive and community-based climate education, training, and capacity-building into national climate action with a particular focus on youth and underserved communities.
- (c) Establish measurable national targets for climate education and all six elements of ACE and regularly update curricula to reflect current climate science and local climate risks and strengthen practical initiatives such as school gardens and community climate projects.
- (d) Strengthen monitoring and reporting so that ACE progress can be measured against clear outcomes such as the number of teachers trained, as well as schools delivering climate education, curricula updated and the influence of young people on policy.

Acknowledging that the inclusion of climate-related content in the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) since 2011 has created an important foundation for climate learning, we therefore call upon the government of South Africa to fully integrate climate change into national curricula as a substantive, cross-cutting theme embedded across subjects and grade levels. This can be done by implementing climate education content in schools that is updated to reflect current climate risks and presented in formats that are accessible and relevant to learners.

We note with deep concern that the capacitation of teachers remains a critical weakness globally. Climate education cannot succeed when teachers are expected to deliver increasingly complex climate knowledge without adequate training, resources or continued professional support. Governments therefore need clear national strategies for training and supporting teachers and schools to deliver climate education effectively.

We propose:

- (a) Developing national teacher-training strategies for climate education.
- (b) Providing schools with practical resources for climate learning and action.

Taking into consideration that youth participation has become more institutionalised, it is important to note that participation does not always mean influence. Young people are often invited into consultations, NGOs and climate structures without meaningful decision-making power. Institutions also struggle to retain young people after programmes, consultations or leadership initiatives end. Youth participation must move beyond representation towards sustained involvement in designing, implementing and monitoring climate policies. Climate education should equip young people with an understanding of the climate crisis, but even more so, to participate meaningfully in shaping the policies, institutions and solutions that will determine their future. To make this education and skills agenda achievable, we turn to improving the accessibility and availability of financial and technical support for ACE implementation.

The absence of clear targets also weakens accountability. Governments cannot claim progress when there are no measurable targets showing how many teachers are trained, how many schools provide climate education, how curricula have been updated, or whether young people meaningfully influence climate policy.

Building from this foundation, we further call for:

- (a) Guaranteed meaningful and sustained youth participation in climate decision-making by providing resources for youth-led climate initiatives.
- (b) Fast-tracking funding that capacitates youth-led climate projects, and establishing long-term mechanisms that sustain deep, lasting impact rather than once-off or short-term interventions.
- (c) The accelerated development of green skills, including renewable energy skills, to enable meaningful youth participation in the just transition and to open pathways to decent work and entrepreneurship. Progress on this must be tracked through measurable targets and transparent reporting under relevant national frameworks.
- (d) ACE must move from awareness raising to action or implementation.

4. Just Transition Mechanism

We reaffirm Decision 1 at COP27 to discuss pathways for achieving a low-carbon transition that remains fair, equitable, and inclusive of workforce needs. This falls in line with the mitigation of South Africa's youth unemployment crisis.

To implement this, we call on the South African government to:

- (a) Compile a report of all available entry points into the green job market, including the leaders of change and strategic entry point areas.
- (b) Provide accessible courses on basic value chain industrial upgrading, along with social and economic upgrading.

We note with satisfaction Decision 47, which calls for the convening of an annual high-level ministerial round table on just transition, as part of the just transition work programme beginning at the fifth session of the Conference of the Parties serving as the meeting of the parties to the Paris Agreement. However, we note with deep concern that there are no youth voices included in these processes. We urge the government to:

- (a) Create spaces for meaningful youth participation in these ministerial discussions, giving them equal decision-making power.

Reaffirming Decision 3 CMA, paragraph 5, to discuss pathways to achieve the goals of the Paris Agreement while focussing on equity, and poverty eradication, as well as the progress made through the creation of the UAE Just Transition Programme, we are concerned about the lack of implementation due to monitoring and accountability shortfalls.

We call upon parties to:

- (a) Strengthen monitoring and accountability by launching a coordinated effort at the national level to initiate a tender procurement process to identify organisations and companies that offer alternative waste treatment solutions, to align with national emission targets.
- (b) Provide safe, reliable transport that is aligned with our emission targets and does not contribute to the climate crisis.

As the second-largest contributor to our country's carbon emissions, the transport sector accounts for 14% of total greenhouse gas emissions.

Thus, we recommend:

- (a) The phasing in of low-carbon public transport that utilises cleaner energy sources, such as the scaling up of proven technologies like hydrogen fuel cells.
- (b) Measurable emission targets that can be revisited and presented to the public for stronger accountability.

In line with the agenda of the fifth meeting of the Just Transition Work Programme dialogue, we, the youth, strongly support the safeguarding of food security and workforce protection in the transition to low-emission practices.

As such, we recommend the delegation of safeguarding responsibilities directly to local municipalities, such as:

- (a) The provision of climate-resilient agricultural training to young farmers.
- (b) The provision of a pathway to enter the green job sphere to encourage entrepreneurship.

We recognise the findings of the Just Transition Finance Lab and Climate Action Network International discussion paper, which identify the operationalisation of the Just Transition Mechanism, also known to civil society as the Belém-Antalya Mechanism (BAM), as an important opportunity to address long-standing gaps in the quantity, quality, and governance of Just Transition finance. We therefore support efforts to ensure that the mechanism facilitates meaningful coordination, accountability, and resource mobilisation in accordance with agreed Just Transition principles.

Moreover, we emphasise that advancing Just Transition finance requires simultaneous progress on quantity, quality, and governance. Efforts focused solely on increasing financial volumes, without addressing the terms, accessibility, accountability, and decision-making structures of finance, will be insufficient to deliver equitable, inclusive, and development-oriented transitions. We therefore support continued work under the UNFCCC to strengthen coherence across the international financial architecture and to ensure that Just Transition finance responds to the priorities and nationally determined pathways of developing countries.

5. UAE Just Transition Work Programme

We are concerned about the lack of progress in global transitions to renewable energy and the ever-present non-resilience of Global South economic infrastructure in the context of a decarbonising world. Within a country with rising inequality and the highest youth unemployment rate in the world, our priority remains to push for equitable sustainable development that is youth-inclusive, climate-sensitive, and free from the neo-colonial dynamics that govern current financing models.

Recalling Article 2 of the Paris Agreement on temperature limits, we recognise the importance of countries' carbon emission responsibilities, including the principle of equity and common but differentiated responsibilities, in the light of different national circumstances.

We note with appreciation the UAE Belém Work Programme and the UAE Just Transition Work Programme's commitment to strengthening and institutionalising capacity-building, knowledge-sharing, and technical assistance, especially on finance. Yet we are concerned by the lack of finance, capacity building, and knowledge sharing of this implementation strategy, leading to inadequate local and regional decision-making capacity at the highest level.

Therefore, we call upon parties to:

- (a) Increase accountability and monitoring in financing mechanisms to increase confidence and end the funding stalemate.
- (b) Shift towards public, grant-based, targeted funding to reduce the financial dependency of the Global South on Western financial systems such as the World Bank.
- (c) Strengthen community-based intervention programmes in disaster-prone areas.
- (d) Expand the capacity of local government and indigenous communities in terms of decision-making.

- (e) Ensure active engagement with innovative disaster response technology through South-South collaborations.
- (f) Increase technical capacity through specialised personnel to identify and verify GHG emissions data and tax.

6. Loss and Damage (Flood and Drought Management)

Concerned about the inefficiency of climate disaster management initiatives and recognising the need for climate-resilient city infrastructure in the face of rising interior and urban surface temperatures, we call for:

- (a) The strengthening of community-based intervention programmes in disaster-prone areas.
- (b) Expansion of the capacity of local and traditional government regarding decision-making.
- (c) Active engagement with innovative disaster response technology through South-South collaborations.
- (d) The implementation of legislation targeted at adaptation.
- (e) Legislature to tighten requirements of city infrastructure to be climate-friendly (more green spaces, corridors and rooftops) by at least 30% in five years.

7. Adaptation (Agriculture)

We support the National Climate Adaptation Strategies because they provide an integrated framework to strengthen climate resilience and reduce vulnerability across all levels of government, economic sectors and society.

However, this policy instrument fails to provide a detailed cost estimate and funding sources, which has led to agricultural shortfalls such as the degradation of ecosystems, damaged storm drains and unmonitored biological invasions.

Recognising the goals outlined in the second NDC put forth by the Republic of South Africa in 2025, with concern for the resilience of our agricultural architecture, we call on the DFFE for the provision of detailed cost estimates and funding sources.

Further, we ask the government to:

- (a) Protect key ecosystems, such as mangrove forests, wetlands, and forests, for the restoration and preservation of their services.
- (b) Strengthen control and monitoring systems at entry points for biological hazards, such as alien invasive species.
- (c) Introduce of a threshold for carbon production for unit farms and penalties for exceeding the limit.
- (d) Increase the carbon tax from R263/metric tonne GHG emissions by at least 25% per degree of warming.
- (e) Put in place subsidy arrangements for organic and regenerative farms to increase access to pesticide-free food products to discourage use of HHPs.

8. Mitigation Work Programme (Urbanisation)

South Africa submitted its second NDC in October 2025, where it is stated that the country intends to reduce annual greenhouse gas emissions to a range of 320-380 megatons of CO₂e by 2035 as part of its global goal. However, South Africa still faces significant domestic structural hurdles, such as the continued heavy reliance on coal infrastructure and financial constraints.

The South African Climate Change Act provides a legally binding framework to manage greenhouse gas emission and build climate resilience. But the non-renewable energy is not directly targeted by the legislation, which results in the emission target not being ambitious enough to keep within the 1.5 °C target.

We urge the South African government to:

- (a) Increase the upper carbon budget threshold set for 2035 by 25% per percentage increase from the 1.5 °C limit.
- (b) Strengthen green energy shifts through the procurement of more auctions in solar and wind energy capacity. We would like to see a 50% increase in bids by 2030.
- (c) Formalise South-South cooperation for renewable energy projects.
- (d) Increase the carbon emissions budget from the upper threshold of 397 megatons by 10% for an extra five years.
- (e) Set a cut-off date for non-renewable energy production.
- (f) Galvanise grid infrastructure to increase compatibility with clean energy systems.

Noting with deep concern the amount of waste dispersed across the country due to climate disasters, we propose finding new solutions to reclaim waste to be used to support our urbanisation.

To fulfil this goal, we propose:

- (a) Using waste to develop infrastructure-building materials like Ecobricks.
- (b) Collaborating with Gulf countries to share knowledge on water purification to recycle flood water by purifying, desalinating, and returning it to communities to close the water access gap.

Concerned about the myriad socio-economic issues and constraints facing South Africa's youth, and the dire need for increasing industrialisation in the context of a decarbonising world, we encourage:

- (a) The implementation of skills-training initiatives for youth in green industrial areas.
- (b) The identification of key areas of growth for value chain upgrades.
- (c) Increasing diversity of representation at the national level to at least 50% of the population.
- (d) Implementation of education initiatives and workshops to increase civic engagement.

Conclusion

Viewing with appreciation the numerous policies and efforts that the South African government has put in place, we still note with deep concern the lack of implementation of these policies on a national level, and we hope that this paper provides effective pathways to mitigate this issue. As the youth, we avail ourselves to assist in these processes to move from commitment to delivery by engaging at the grassroots level.

We urge parties to ensure that the decisions taken in Türkiye are measurable, funded, and driven by accountability and monitoring.

We stress the importance of youth participation in ensuring the implementation of these decisions and advocate for biannual reports on the progress made by the responsible stakeholders. Organising educational programmes that will capacitate the youth, so they are able to make these decisions once they are meaningfully involved, is one of the crucial first steps of this process.

The process of developing the youth statement was convened by Youth@SAIIA. The statement will be presented at the National Ministerial Stakeholder Consultation to Minister David Maynier of the Department of Forestry, Fisheries and Environment and the South African Party Delegation to COP31 on 16 October 2026 in Johannesburg.

For any queries, please send your email to youth@saiia.org.za.

The views expressed in this publication/statement are those of the author/s and do not necessarily reflect the views of the South African Institute of International Affairs (SAIIA).

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