

# RESILIENT AFRICA

.....  
2025: Volume I

## CREATING OPPORTUNITIES FOR PEOPLE

*Youth as Change Agents for Conservation*



BUILDING A FUTURE WHERE  
PEOPLE AND WILDLIFE THRIVE





## YOUTH ARE THE LEADERS WE NEED TODAY

Young people under the age of 35 make up more than 70% of Africa's population. They are the most highly educated demographic in Africa, connected with the rest of the world in ways previously unimaginable. They are creators and disruptors. They embrace innovation and challenge the status quo.

Above all, they *aspire*. For many, that means leaving rural communities and seeking opportunity in our growing cities—because there aren't jobs in the communities where they were born. In cities, it means chasing dreams of prosperity, dreams that often remove them from a direct connection to the natural world, except perhaps when they visit family in far-flung villages. For many, conservation does not feel relevant. But we know it is. And we see opportunities to make the case for conservation by linking it to the aspirations that drive young people.

While Africa's youth are defining a future that their parents' generation may only have dreamed of, that future is not boundless. It is tethered, inexorably, to the choices made by previous generations. Many of these choices have been made without the long view in mind. Short-term profit and political gain have shaped the natural and economic

landscapes our youth are navigating today. Resistance from older generations to listening to young people is also contributing to a disconnect between what is and what could be.

This is a crucial moment to demonstrate to Africa's youth that living in balance with the natural world is essential to defining a sustainable future for themselves and *their* children and grandchildren. We must ensure that youth are at the table and driving decision-making. That is why AWF invests in a variety of activities designed to help youth find opportunity in conservation and empower them as leaders. Whether it is founding a nature-friendly business, leading within organizations, influencing laws and policies that affect all of society, creating media that inspires people to see themselves in conservation, or pursuing a career within the conservation sector itself, AWF creates pathways that weave nature into young people's values and lives.

**Kaddu Sebunya**  
AWF Chief Executive Officer



**7 out of 10** people in  
Africa are under age **35**

Resilient Africa is a newsletter from the African Wildlife Foundation exploring how Africa is defining and meeting conservation challenges on the continent.

COVER: AWF-WALL LEADERSHIP & MANAGEMENT FELLOWS AT A GROUP WORKSHOP IN 2023. THE 9-MONTH PROGRAM INCLUDES IN-PERSON TRAINING AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT.

**HEADQUARTERS**  
Ngong Road, Karen  
P.O. Box 310, 00502  
Nairobi, Kenya

Phone +254 (0) 711 063000  
Fax +254 20 2765030

[awf.org/linkedin](https://www.awf.org/linkedin)  
 [awf.org/facebook](https://www.awf.org/facebook)  
 [awf.org/instagram](https://www.awf.org/instagram)  
 [awf.org/youtube](https://www.awf.org/youtube)

[africanwildlife@awf.org](mailto:africanwildlife@awf.org)  
[www.awf.org](http://www.awf.org)



## How Can We Make Conservation Relevant to Africa's Youth?

PHOTO ABOVE: YOUTH PARTICIPANTS OF THE IUCN YOUTH CONSERVATION FORUM FOR AFRICA IN JUNE 2024, ON A GAME DRIVE IN NAIROBI NATIONAL PARK.

Last year, youth protests across Africa, from the streets of West Africa to the bustling cities of Kenya and Uganda, were a clarion call for change. They reflected the collective frustrations of young people no longer willing to accept the status quo. Protestors called for better governance, accountability, and justice. The urgency was palpable. That urgency continues to be a force across Africa, making it more essential than ever before that conservation be tied to youth's visions of a prosperous and just future.

Many of AWF's landscape-level interventions target people under age 35. From after-school based programs teaching about the environment, to trainings on how to set up and market small businesses or pursue sustainable livelihoods and agriculture, AWF invests in giving Africa's youth the skills and know-how to seize economic opportunity in ways that appreciate and conserve Africa's rich natural heritage.

We also help young professionals across a wide variety of occupations develop skills that increase positive decision-making for nature and help them progress in careers. Our programs build leadership across law enforcement, agriculture, wildlife management, research, media, civil society, and within the conservation sector itself.





AWF-WALL POLICY FELLOWS AT NEGOTIATION SIMULATION EXERCISES AT THE UNITED NATIONS NAIROBI COMPLEX IN JULY 2023.



**Simangele Msweli is the senior manager of AWF's Youth Leadership Program, which includes initiatives such as the AWF-Wall Youth fellowships: the AWF-Wall Leadership & Management Fellows and the AWF-Wall Policy Fellows. She also runs our Young Conservation Heroes programming with schools and wildlife clubs.**

### Why is AWF so focused on African Youth?

Imagine trying to protect a forest or savanna that hosts elephants but sits right where someone wants to build a road, a farm, or a housing estate. Now, ask yourself: Who's making the decisions about how that land gets used, and in whose best interest are they making those decisions? Who's shaping the future of development on this continent? That's where youth must come in.

The median age of African leaders is somewhere around 63 years old. Meanwhile, the median age in Africa is just 19 years old. That's a massive gap. But also, a massive opportunity. If we want to secure Africa's biodiversity, we have to be intentional in ensuring the majority of Africa's population, who are also the next immediate leaders, are effectively engaged and shaping conservation action and policy.

We need young people who don't just see nature as something "out there" but as something deeply connected to their own futures. We need them to realize that forests, rivers, and wildlife are cultural and economic assets, not obstacles to development. That's why AWF is all in on youth. Not because it's a buzzword. But because it's crucial for sustainability and the future of Africa.

### What do youth care about? Do you see differences based on age groupings or other demographics?

"Youth" covers a huge range of experiences. Some grew up in cities, some in rural areas. Some have access to education and resources, others don't. Culture, gender, religion, and income all shape what they care about. That said, there are some things we do see across the board. Most young people are in a transition phase. They're moving from being taken care of to taking care of themselves and others. They're starting to make their own decisions, build their identity, and find their voice in society.

It's a time when many start asking: How do I want the world to look, and what role can I play in shaping it? They want to be involved in real conversations and actions about real issues. Whether it's jobs, climate change, inequality, or education, they're paying attention. They care, not just because these things affect them now, but because they know they'll be the ones dealing with the consequences in the long run. Their care about all societal issues is evident by the booming number of youth-led organizations and initiatives all designed to improve the world around them.

A 15-year-old in a school wildlife club will think differently from a 28-year-old



trying to start a business. But one thing is consistent: youth are taking action and want to be taken seriously. So yes, young people care about the world around them. Deeply. The real question is, are we listening? And are we creating space for them to lead, contribute in the issues they care about, and amplify their impact, not just later, but now?

### How does conservation connect to their lives?

Conservation documentaries have shown the side of conservation that is about pristine forests, majestic animals, or protected areas far away from everyday life. But conservation is much closer than that. Think about where your food comes from. The water you drink. The air you breathe. Or nature-based jobs. That's all conservation. If your local river dries up, that affects farmers. If trees are cleared for poor development, your neighborhood becomes hotter and more flood-prone. If ecosystems collapse, so do the jobs and economic outcomes built around them.

For young people especially, conservation is tied directly to their future, whether they live in cities or rural areas. It's not a luxury issue, it's a survival issue. Whether you're a farmer, tech innovator, policymaker, or artist, your world is shaped by the state of your environment. And let's not forget, Africa's biodiversity is one of our biggest cultural and economic assets. If young people don't get involved in shaping how they protect and use it wisely, someone else will, often without them in mind. So in short: conservation isn't something separate from their lives—it is their lives. Their health, their work, their food, their future.

### What's a misconception people bring to the table when they think about Africa's "youth?"

The biggest is this: young people are seen as "recipients" or "beneficiaries," not as contributors and leaders. They are seen as people to be "helped." Rarely as equal partners or agents of change.



THE FIRST COHORT OF AWF-WALL LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT FELLOWS GATHERED AT AWF HEADQUARTERS IN NAIROBI.

You see this mindset in how institutions treat youth-led initiatives. When funding is available, it's usually for small, short-term activities, like planting trees, organizing cleanups, or handing out branded t-shirts. Rarely are youth-led groups trusted with long-term investments, either with driving what funding must look like or what the priorities must be. But when given the chance to lead, youth demonstrate amazing drive, perseverance, and impact.

Another common misconception is that young people are just "dreamers," full of ideas that aren't grounded in reality. This plays out in global policy spaces all the time, such as Multilateral Environmental Agreements, where youth are allowed to attend, even speak, but are rarely included in official delegations where real decisions are made.

Our programs, from policy to action, are designed to center youth as the leaders and innovators that they truly are.

### What are you most excited about right now?

Generally? The growing movement of African youth challenging the status quo.

Programmatically? This is an amazing time for the AWF Youth Leadership Program. The AWF-Wall Youth Leadership

Program is in its fourth year, with a current enrollment of 108 fellows from 31 African countries. That's 108 young professionals being trained to lead with a conservation mindset, whether it's in policy or management. Their influence is exponential—we call it the multiplier effect, where investment in one person creates a cascade of influence and opportunities around them. And we're building a digital version of the program. This will open the door for anyone interested in environmental governance and leadership to learn and grow, wherever they are. That's huge for us, it's about scaling our impact in a real way.

In Kenya, we are working with Wildlife Clubs of Kenya to empower thousands of school-going children to lead conservation action. In Rwanda, we are launching a new initiative alongside the Sabyinyo Community Livelihood Association that focuses on engaging youth networks in climate resilience and livelihoods. It's funded by the EU and really demonstrates what local, grassroots action looks like when young people are at the center of it. We are also working with the Africa Chapter of the Global Youth Biodiversity Network to organize the 3rd African Youth Summit on Biodiversity, where leaders and innovators get to meet for peer and intergenerational learning and collaboration.



## BRINGING YOUTH INTO DECISION-MAKING



**Gervais Mudherwa** (age 26), a 2022 AWF-Wall Policy Fellow, is an example of the “multiplier effect” in action. For Mudherwa, the AWF-Wall fellowship allowed him to gain invaluable experience participating in international negotiations by joining the 2022 UN Biodiversity Conference in Montreal, Canada, as part of the AWF delegation. Building on experiences from the fellowship, he went on to participate in the 2024 conference in Cali, Colombia, and the UNEP Assembly in February 2024, among others. “It all started with my desire to strengthen my leadership and negotiation skills. As a young advocate for the conservation of Africa’s biodiversity, I saw a simple aspiration turn into a real opportunity to learn, network, and share experiences during the nine-month [AWF-Wall] fellowship,” he says.

Currently serving as Director of the Environment, Conservation, and Climate Change at Mkaaji Mpya Asbl, a national NGO that defends women’s rights and the environment in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Mudherwa was inspired by his experience as an AWF-Wall fellow to “pay it forward” by

founding the Congolese Academy of Young Negotiators.

Recognizing the lack of representation of Congolese youth in international biodiversity negotiations and their limited knowledge in this field, Mudherwa established the academy to provide leadership, negotiation, and advocacy skills while fostering collaboration with the Congolese government. He aims to influence global biodiversity negotiations by pushing for the inclusion of young DRC negotiators in the steering committees of the Convention on Biological Diversity.

In March 2025, the inaugural cohort of 15 fellows completed their training at a workshop in Kinshasa. Representatives from influential institutions attended, including the DRC national focal points for the UN Conventions on Desertification and Biodiversity and the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services, all of which pledged support to the program and youth engagement in the DRC, one of the most important countries in the world for both biodiversity and climate mitigation due to the Congo Basin ecosystem.

## SUPPORTING YOUNG AFRICAN JOURNALISTS TO MAINSTREAM CONSERVATION



**Dorcas Wangira** (age 34) began her journalism career at the Standard Group, one of East Africa’s largest media organizations. In 2021, she was covering feature stories at Kenya’s Citizen TV when she took part in an AWF-sponsored journalism workshop. It was part of AWF’s African Conservation Voices initiative, which provides training for young filmmakers and African journalists interested in conservation storytelling and reporting.

The AWF training allowed her to combine health and science reporting to focus on One Health stories, which explore places where animal and human health intersect. This includes reporting widely on zoonotic disease, showing how human

health, animal health, and ecosystem health are interconnected. When asked about the impact of the AWF training, Wangira, who is now a senior health journalist for East Africa at the BBC, credits it with helping her hone pitches to editors and break into radio and podcast reporting. Most important to her, though, are the networks and connections made with like-minded journalists and the trainers with whom she has stayed in touch.

“Conservation journalism matters,” she says, “but it is important that it is weaved into every aspect of our daily lives, including economics, livelihood, health, conflict, and politics. It should not stand alone.”



## PROVIDING OPPORTUNITY IN THE BIODIVERSITY ECONOMY



**Eliud Mwasingo** (age 28) is a natural leader. He currently serves as chairperson of the Mwaroko Youth Group and as deputy secretary of the previously defunct Chawia Forest Association. He was inspired to reinvigorate a forest association in the Chawia mountains of southern Kenya after COVID-19, when many young people relocated to rural family homes from schools or urban centers. Together, Mwasingo and his partners took action where they could, focusing on forest conservation as part of protecting the headwaters of the river system that supports the Taita Taveta and Lumo conservancies. A water tank provided by AWF at their tree nursery provides clean water for the community. Community members no longer need to fetch water from inside the forest, further reducing human impacts on the forest.

In addition, with AWF's support, Mwasingo's Mwaroko Youth Group established a profitable sustainable

farming enterprise combining quick-growing crops with planting trees. As a conservation-minded entrepreneur, Mwasingo has built a diversified green livelihood through multiple activities. He is a licensed beekeeper, farmer, and board member of the local primary and secondary school who believes more rural people need to understand the economic potential of conservation. "If we don't conserve nature," he says, "it'll not conserve us. And we need that sustainability... to hold what our grandfathers left us. As a motivation, to me, it is not about having a passion for nature. There are a lot of opportunities in the green job sector for youth [like me]."

## CREATING PATHWAYS FOR CONSERVATION CAREERS



**Maeva Tene** (age 24) was working towards an engineering certificate in protected area management when she reached out to wildlife authorities and AWF in July 2024, offering to assist in a survey of wildlife species in Faro National Park, in northwestern Cameroon. A student at Cameroon's Garoua Wildlife College (which AWF helped to establish in 1970), Tene used the experience as a foundation for her dissertation.

The survey, supported with funds from the European Union, was conducted as part of ongoing conservation efforts within the Faro landscape, where AWF is focusing on increasing the effectiveness of wildlife conservation strategies both inside the park and outside through partnership with local communities.

Tene grew up in the coastal city of Douala, so Faro's dry heat, inaccessible terrain, and torrential rains were new experiences for her. Each field day commenced before dawn, with the team covering between 10km and 15km daily, moving on foot along predefined transects. Tene, whose goal is to become an eco-guard, was among the youngest on the team. "Sometimes I saw the animals, sometimes I relied on indirect signs such as tracks, scat, or far-off calls. I was being trained to read... the forest—the snap of a twig, the droppings, the path. The park was telling us a story, and we were being asked to listen," Tene recalls.

PHOTO: WILDLIFE SURVEYORS DURING A TRANSECT IN CAMEROON'S FARO NATIONAL PARK.



## Ensuring a Seat at the Table

In 2022-2023, the Swedish International Development Agency (Sida) made a significant investment with AWF to support the representation of African youth and Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities in two major global negotiations—the 15th UN Biodiversity Conference (COP15) and the 27th UN Climate Conference (COP27). The funding also enabled engagements in strategic side events, contributing significantly to the outcomes of the two conventions.

Leading up to the Biodiversity COP15, AWF-Wall Youth Policy Fellows helped to strengthen Africa's positions at the conference by connecting African civil society organizations and protected area leaders with the African Group of Negotiators on Biodiversity, facilitating preparatory meetings to align on issues, and supporting resources for language interpretation. This resulted in a coordinated African representation in finalizing the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework, the international agreement ratified at COP15 that set global targets to safeguard biodiversity. Contributing to the negotiation process was a life-changing and career-defining opportunity for the fellows.

At the Climate COP27, Sida support allowed AWF to help African youth, Indigenous people, local communities, and civil society participate in negotiations. AWF brought 11 delegates, including seven representatives of youth and/or community organizations. The delegation established key relationships with organizations working on climate resilience and mitigation strategies in the Congo Basin rainforest, the world's largest forest-based carbon sink.

“

Success of conservation policy and action requires informed populations as well as strong partnerships between youth, women, civil society organizations, and government institutions. The Sida funding allowed us to enhance participants' understanding of environmental policy, contribute to their engagement in developing it, and help them forge lifelong multidisciplinary and intergenerational partnerships.

**SIMANGELE MSWELI**

Senior Manager, AWF Youth Leadership Program



MEMBERS OF THE AWF DELEGATION AND OTHERS AT A YOUTH OPPORTUNITIES PANEL AT THE 15TH UN BIODIVERSITY CONFERENCE IN MONTREAL, CANADA.

## 2024 ANNUAL REPORT

Read our 2024 Annual Report to learn how the African Wildlife Foundation is building a future where people and wildlife thrive:

[ANNUALREPORT.AWF.ORG](https://annualreport.awf.org)



## LEADING for Wildlife | LIVING with Wildlife | CARING for Wildlife

We believe in a vision of Africa where sustainable development includes thriving wildlife and wild lands as a cultural and economic asset for Africa's future generations. **Your generous gift today can help us build a resilient future for Africa where people and wildlife both thrive.**

Support by visiting:  
[AWF.ORG/RESILIENT](https://awf.org/resilient)

