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Integral Inclusion: A Renewed Way of Supporting Youth Trajectories in Development Policies

For several years now, youth issues have occupied a central place in development policies. They encompass a complex reality and a wide range of definitions, particularly in terms of age groups and social status.

International institutions, development banks, civil society organizations, and research institutions are paying increasing attention to the transition period between childhood and adulthood, marked by social, economic, and identity-related transformations. This interest emerges in a context of contrasting global demographic trends. While Europe is experiencing rapid population aging, many African countries are characterized by very young demographic structures. This dynamic fuels the idea of a potential “demographic dividend.” It calls for strengthened youth-related development policies, as young people’s trajectories are

shaped by structural transformations such as changes in labor markets, rapid urbanization, social and territorial inequalities, and the effects of climate change.

In response to these transformations, how are development actors managing to move beyond sector-based, siloed approaches to youth support programs in order to adopt “integral” approaches that take into account the complexity and multiplicity of pathways toward inclusion?

How Do Development Actors Envision the Role of Youth in International Solidarity Through the Lens of the Three Pillars of Sustainable Development?

Based on institutional publications from various development actors, an analysis was conducted drawing on the three dimensions of sustainable development defined in the 1987 Brundtland Report: economic prosperity, social progress, and environmental sustainability.

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Pillar	Main Themes	Actors Analyzed	Dominant Intervention Logic
Economic	Youth employability; Technical and vocational education and training (TVET) Entrepreneurship Digital skills Integration into value chains	World Bank African Development Bank French Development Agency International Labor Organization	Enhancing youth human capital and contributing to the demographic dividend Developing skills adapted to economic and technological transformations
Social	Education Mental health Sexual and reproductive health and rights Gender equality Civic participation Sport and social cohesion	UNICEF UNFPA French Development Agency Civil society organizations (Plan International, Gret)	Recognizing youth as rights-holders and actors of social transformation Promoting social inclusion and civic participation
Environmental	Green jobs Climate justice Agroecology Environmental resilience	IPBES IPCC French National Research Institute for Sustainable Development	Highlighting the role of youth in ecological transitions and in the emergence of new sustainable development models

Source: technical review conducted by the authors

The review of publications highlights dominant forms of action.

Training and Professional Integration: A Priority

Skills development and employability mechanisms are at the heart of youth policies aimed at better aligning technical and vocational education and training with the real (current and future) needs of local economies. Partnerships between public and private actors can play a central role by facilitating connections between training systems, businesses, and economic sectors. Support for sectors driving ecological transitions (green and blue jobs, agroecology, environmental services) also appears as an important lever for creating sustainable

economic opportunities adapted to contemporary economic and climate transformations. Finally, in certain territorial contexts, the use of mobile public services (mobile career guidance units, itinerant training buses, or mobile clinics providing health and counseling services, for example) may constitute a relevant tool for reaching young people in rural, isolated, or fragile areas and improving access to support mechanisms.

Youth Participation in Civic Life

Publications and strategic frameworks from development actors highlight the importance of strengthening mechanisms for integrating youth into local, national, or sectoral decision-making

The Three Fundamental and Interconnected Pillars of Integral Inclusion

Integral youth inclusion refers to young people's ability to successfully transition toward full autonomy, to sustainably and actively exercise their rights, and to become full-fledged actors in dynamics of change. It is rooted in a set of interdependent dimensions that must be considered in an interconnected manner: i) social (including gender) and civic dimensions; ii) economic and professional dimensions; iii) environmental and climate dimensions.

Social and civic inclusion considers young people as full members of society, endowed with rights and responsibilities. It notably encompasses education, health, equity, social justice, gender equality, and participation in civil, social, and political life.

Economic and professional inclusion refers to young people's access to financial autonomy through employment, entrepreneurship, or participation in local economic dynamics. It includes training, skills development, access to opportunities, and support in entering the labor market.

Environmental and climate inclusion refers to young people's involvement in ecological transitions, the preservation of natural resources, and environmental justice. It highlights the role of youth in developing concrete responses to ecological challenges through their initiatives, mobilization efforts, and their capacity to influence individual and collective behaviors.

It is the interconnected nature of these three dimensions that makes youth inclusion "integral": the transformations sought in each dimension cannot be conceived or implemented independently from one another.

bodies. These efforts aim to increase young people's involvement in social dialogue, territorial planning processes, and the decision-making and implementation of climate and environmental policies. Transferring resources and decision-making capacities to youth organizations or youth-led local hubs also constitutes an important avenue for action. The systematic integration of gender equality and anti-discrimination issues further promotes inclusive participation among diverse youth groups through an intersectional perspective. Finally, supporting youth so they can become agents of change—not only at the scale of a project but also throughout their lives—remains central.

Securing Youth Trajectories Through Social and Economic Transitions

Personal and professional pathways are characterized by phases of experimentation, mobility, and restructuring, which can weaken inclusion trajectories but may be supported through adapted social protection mechanisms. So-called “cash-plus” models represent an innovative approach combining cash transfers with complementary services such as livelihood training, employment support, access to health coverage, entrepreneurship support, and mental, sexual, and reproductive health services. These mechanisms help strengthen young people's economic and social resilience and support their sustainable integration into productive and social systems. Likewise, greater attention to social norms and gender inequalities—particularly regarding early marriage and the domestic workload borne by young women—could foster effective access to training and decent employment.

From Fragmented Approaches Toward Integral Youth Inclusion

The analysis highlights the siloed structure of youth-related strategies and programs, mainly organized according to sectors such as employment, education, health, or civic participation, reflecting the areas of expertise and institutional mandates of organizations. It also appears that youth are still often confined to stereotypes such as “youth and employment” or “youth and sport.”

These approaches frequently prioritize one aspect at the expense of others, which become adjustment variables or operational blind spots. For example, a program focused on employability may strengthen young people's professional skills without addressing, in training *curricula*, issues related to the sustainability of occupations (waste management, sustainable value chains, sustainable raw materials, renewable energy, etc.) or the social issues linked to professional practice (labor rights, gender, the social role of businesses). As a result, young people may practice their profession without paying sufficient attention to the social and environmental issues inherently connected to it or may even adopt practices detrimental to them.

Moreover, social, family, territorial, or gender-related constraints often determine effective access to employment. Young women may, for example, be trained in a profession without being able to truly enter the workforce if domestic burdens, social norms, lack of childcare solutions, transport insecurity, or mobility restrictions are not taken into account. Similarly, entrepreneurship support mechanisms may encourage the creation of economic activities without addressing access to land, financing, professional networks, social protection, or rights. These limitations reflect a difficulty in understanding inclusion as a multidimensional process.

The analysis also reveals an unequal presence of the three pillars of sustainable development. Economic and social dimensions largely dominate institutional strategies, while the environmental dimension appears more limited. Only institutions with mandates explicitly focused on environmental issues, such as the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) or the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), thoroughly document the effects of climate crises and biodiversity loss on living conditions, resources, territories, and economic activities. In doing so, they help remind us that youth trajectories are directly affected by environmental transformations and that youth participation in ecological responses is a central issue in development policies.

In publications from other institutions, the environmental dimension is often integrated into existing analytical frameworks. It appears through themes such as green jobs, agroecology, the circular economy, or new economic sectors linked to ecological transition. The environment is therefore mainly approached through the lens of employment opportunities and productive transformation. In other cases, environmental issues are associated with forms of youth civic engagement. Climate mobilizations, community initiatives, or advocacy actions for climate justice are then presented as expressions of civic participation by younger generations facing climate change challenges.

These two entry points (through green jobs or environmental engagement) are essential, but they remain partial when not connected to the concrete conditions enabling young people to act sustainably: access to resources, training, rights, financing, decision-making spaces, and support mechanisms. They may also obscure the social, territorial, and gender inequalities that shape both access to green economic opportunities and the ability to participate in mobilizations and local decision-making.

The role of youth as actors in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) offers a new perspective here. Economic, social, and environmental transformations directly influence their trajectories, while young people themselves will be essential to the design and implementation of sustainable development pathways. In this context, the notion

of integral inclusion proposes understanding youth policies through a comprehensive analysis of youth trajectories. It enables youth inclusion to be conceived as a multidimensional process combining access to economic opportunities, social and civic participation, and integration into territorial and environmental transformations. It also invites us to consider young people as actors of economic, social, and environmental transformations—not merely as beneficiaries—by strengthening their capacity for initiative, their participation in decision-making and implementation processes, and their contribution to territorial dynamics.

A Concept Already Being Put into Practice

Although still recent, the concept of integral youth inclusion is already being implemented in initiatives that combine the economic, social, and environmental dimensions of inclusion while recognizing youth as actors of territorial and ecological transformations.

Implemented by Gret with the support of AFD, the JADE program (“Youth as Actors of Tomorrow’s World”) aims to renew both the analysis and the practices used to support youth within development policies. Based on an action-research approach, the program documents and experiments with approaches promoting integral youth inclusion. The first phase of the program (2020–2023), comprising 11 projects carried out in Guinea, Haiti, the Republic of Congo, Mauritania, Mali, and Senegal, helped support more than 13,000 young people—nearly half of them women—toward socially and environmentally sustainable employment, raised awareness among more than 5,600 young people regarding social, civic, and environmental issues, and supported dozens of local initiatives. In the Republic of Congo, for example, the Jagov project established a certified training

mechanism for young people in the profession of waste pre-collection operator, integrating technical, social, and environmental skills. Trained youth thus become actors in the circular economy and ecological transition within their territories.

The “Youth for Sustainability” initiative, implemented in Morocco within the framework of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), aligns with international orientations aimed at strengthening the role of youth in sustainable transitions. It is based on an approach that does not view young people solely as beneficiaries of development policies, but as active partners in ecological transition. The initiative seeks to mobilize Moroccan youth alongside small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) involved in a green growth and employment acceleration project. Young people participate through three complementary profiles: technical profiles providing SMEs with skills and solutions related to green growth; civic and ecological engagement profiles promoting business ethics and corporate social responsibility; and impact communication specialists responsible for showcasing green initiatives to various audiences.

An Open Research Agenda

The development of analytical tools capable of capturing the diversity of youth trajectories and the interactions between these different dimensions constitutes an important area of work for both research and public action. The integral inclusion approach to youth thus opens a rich research agenda, and AFD is exploring several avenues: the articulation between training, socio-economic opportunities, and ecological transitions; the forms of youth engagement in territorial transformations; and the institutional mechanisms that strengthen their effective participation in public policies and their implementation.

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