

P O L I C Y B R I E F

WILFRED LUNGA, MOREMI NKOSI, KONOSOANG SOBANE, THANYANI MADZIVHANDILA, TSHEGOFATSO RAMAPHAKELA, PRECIOUS TIRIVANHU, DIMPHO MAKITLA, NONCEDO MAPHOSHO | JULY 2023

Engaging youth in disaster risk reduction and management in the Southern Africa Development Community (SADC)

Summary

Most governments in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), including the Southern Africa Development Community (SADC), are actively seeking methods to enhance and expand opportunities for public participation and involvement, create innovations, and improve climate change preparedness and adaptation. This is in recognition of the acceleration of anthropogenic (pollution or environmental change originating from primarily human activity and externalities from industries and multi-national cooperation) and climate change risks and costs associated with catastrophes. The SADC nations have signed the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction (SFDRR) and have committed to a societal approach to Disaster Risk Reduction and Management (DRRM), which includes youths as equal partners. In the context of catastrophes throughout Africa, particularly in SADC, the youth have increasingly and frequently been defined as a demographic that is at high risk of suffering negative effects during and after disasters and, consequently, a population in need of protection. The ability of the youth to influence change in their communities and to participate in the development and implementation of innovative and participatory DRRM policies and practices has only lately come to light. The youth have never-before-seen levels of technology know-how, entrepreneurial mindsets, and self-assurance, which they can proactively draw on and utilise to make a difference effectively and sustainably in the world. Accordingly, the youth aged between 12 and 24 years have the potential to significantly increase the SADC region's ability to lessen the risks and effects connected with anthropogenic and climate change-induced catastrophes. This policy brief examines the current levels of youth engagement and the prospects for increasing and strengthening their involvement in DRRM in SADC.

Keywords

Youth, SADC, youth engagement, participation, disaster risk reduction, climate change, preparedness, adaptation, youth-adult partnerships.

Introduction

Disaster occurrences are having an increasingly negative impact on the planet. The frequency of documented catastrophes, including floods, cyclones, and droughts, has increased significantly during the past several decades in the Southern Africa Development Community (SADC). More and more individuals are suffering from devastating effects from these catastrophes, being severely affected by sudden emergencies, and enduring negative consequences that last for a very long time, far beyond initial fatalities and infrastructure damage. According to scientists¹, climate change is expected to exacerbate this situation. Youth will be disproportionately affected, both now and in the future (Peek et al, 2028, Boehmer, et al., 2022). Youth in the SADC, particularly those in South Africa, are extremely vulnerable to the effects of anthropogenic and climate change-induced disasters. This is particularly the case for young people residing in marginal locations and are experiencing poverty. The organizations that make up the Youths in a Changing Climate Coalition (CCC) are aware that more must be done to mitigate the hazards that catastrophes pose to youth. To emphasize that youth may engage in DRRM activities in their homes, schools, and communities while learning about disasters and climate change, this policy brief lists some of the Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) activities in which youth in SADC have participated and can engage in.

The Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction (SFDRR) and its predecessor, the Hyogo Framework for Action (HFA)2000-2015, both set goals for DRR that emphasizes lowering the risks of disasters and boosting the resilience of people, communities, and nations through multi-stakeholder engagement and involvement. The SFDRR asks for a "gender- and age-sensitive and inclusive" approach to DRRM that encompasses the entire society (UNISDR 2015:7). Due to their potential sensitivity to catastrophic occurrences and their potential to be change-makers, present and future leaders, youth have been identified as a crucial stakeholder group in these initiatives (Cox 2017).

¹ See for example Kapuka and Hlásny (2021); Ramirez-Villegas et al. (2021).

However, as this policy brief illustrates through a focus on youth and DRR activities in SADC, ensuring the meaningful engagement of young people requires a concerted effort at both the policy and practice levels.

Context

Nearly 50% of the African continent's population are under the age of 18. The SADC and its Member States are at risk from external calamities such as environmental, economic, biological, and social disruptions. In the face of possible disruption, regional policy prioritises actions to ensure long-term growth and development (Edoun and Bakam, 2022). Currently, significant attention is placed on reducing the effects of climate change, and the SADC Climate Change Strategy and Action Plan is one example of this (Pretorius et al., 2021). However, without paying particular attention to this aspect throughout the design and execution of any intervention, DRRM activities cannot adequately account for and reflect young people's needs and expectations. Such DRRM might be described as "youth-focused" or "youth-centred." Moreover, actively involving young people in the planning and execution of DRRM initiatives brings numerous advantages. In this regard, several DRRM awareness and training programs have previously been launched in SADC, and their effects have also been documented.

However, long-term adaptation and an accompanying strategy are needed to minimize risks. The most effective DRR and management involves all community members and must be implemented using a localised approach. Researchers and practitioners are both realizing that it takes active involvement from those who are affected in the knowledge creation process to fully comprehend the dynamics of vulnerabilities, hazardous exposure, resistance, and recovery. Indigenous and scientific knowledge do not always have to conflict with one another; local wisdom and culture must be respected and appropriately integrated into the design and implementation of sustainable solutions. As in other parts of the world, the risks and expenses related to catastrophes have increased, making DRR an even greater problem in SADC. The SADC area is highly susceptible to natural and man-made calamities. The yearly national Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of the SADC Member States is significantly impacted by the costs of floods, droughts, pandemics, and other disasters. The high number of fatalities and losses of public and private property and infrastructure in the SADC due to disasters may be attributed to several interrelated factors such as inadequate public awareness, a lack of inclusive citizen participation, a lack of disaster preparedness, poor governance, a lack of coordination between the relevant government agencies, a lack of financial resources, and a lack of technical expertise for disaster mitigation.

The cost of disasters is increasing in SADC, which aligns with global trends (UNISDR 2015). In 2015, the UN predicted that catastrophe losses would amount to between \$300 and 314 billion dollars (USD) per year, considering only expenditures related to damage to the built environment were taken into consideration (UNISDR 2015). The estimates would be far higher if the whole spectrum of effects and losses (such as health related expenditures, effects on employment, and economic disruptions) were considered. As the effects of climate change on weather patterns, sea levels, and sea ice continue to deteriorate, these catastrophes are anticipated to get worse (UNISDR 2015; Kelman et al. 2015). Researchers have traditionally ignored young people's catastrophe experiences, despite forecasts that they will be disproportionately impacted by climate change (Barkin et al., 2021; Peek, 2008). When it comes to how their human and creative capital, civic involvement, and employability may be leveraged to further SADC's DRR agenda, the youth aged between 12 and 24 years, represent an untapped demographic dividend. However, the difficulty that many countries and practitioners still encounter lies in finding methods to effectively promote and entrench the involvement and participation of the youth in a way that goes beyond a checkbox process.

To achieve this, one must comprehend the ambiguity of the term "youth", the difficulties, and possible chances for making DRRM relevant to young people, as well as the need for establishing and providing enough resources for youth-friendly and/or youth-centric engagement opportunities. Therefore, there are several ways to conceptualize how youth engage in DRR and adjust to it (Tanner 2010). Prioritising actions, advocacy and mobilisation, coalition building with parents and guardians, community members, and other stakeholders, project conception, design, and implementation that address climate and disaster risks relevant to youths' lives, communicating risks, sharing, and contextualizing knowledge, establishing credibility and trust, and persuading others to act are the issues or modes that need to be taken into consideration. This allows for deeper insight into the challenges and opportunities for meaningful youth engagement in DRRM and climate change action in SADC.



Who are the youth?

The youth are not a homogenous group but instead diverse range of individuals with varying economic, cultural, social, political, and other demographic traits. In respect to how age restrictions are established within the SADC nations, the category of youth, which is normally defined by age, is also a moving target. Youths are typically considered as a single category in catastrophe research despite the extreme age gaps that such a category may entail, which further complicates and, in some instances, may hinder their involvement and participation in climate change and DRR initiatives. For instance, in sociology, “youth” refers to the transition between infancy and maturity, and in civilisations like those in rural Africa, the ability to enter a “legal” marriage plays a significant role in determining adulthood (Abdullah 1998). Unmarried people are viewed as having failed the maturity transition in these communities. In certain cultures, the transition is frequently connected to a person having gone through and finished rites that signify such a person’s new position as an adult (Thorsen 2007).

However, in terms of policy, youth as a social category are often described in terms of an age range. There is little agreement as to who the “youth” are as in different contexts and approaches, different age ranges are used to categorise them (i.e., 14 to 25; 15 to 24; 15 to 29; 15 to 30; 15 to 35; 18 to 35), (Anyidoho, et al 2012). Although there has been a tendency to extend the category to 30 years and beyond in certain circumstances, most African nations have either embraced the UN categorisation of 15 to 24 or the Commonwealth classification of 15 to 29. To track changes in labour market involvement as young people approach maturity, South Africa extended its definition of youth which now includes individuals aged 15 to 34. The term in the new National Youth Policy (NYP)2015-2020 is the same as the one in this extended definition. This latter definition, which is the one used in this policy brief to examine youths and DRR, is congruent with that utilised by the UN, which defines youth as “anyone between the ages of 15 and 24” (UNDESA 2018). However, much like their adult counterparts, many young people in SADC are suffering from what Levinson (2010) referred to as a widening “gap in civic empowerment”. Young people appear to have too little influence over the choices governments make and the laws that control them (Coletto 2018: 4).

What does youth engagement mean?

The terms youth engagement, youth participation, youth empowerment, and youth voices are often used interchangeably to signify the involvement of youth in meaningful and sustained ways on issues of importance to them and their communities and in ways that contribute to the shaping of their communities and the decisions that affect them. As with most abstract concepts (e.g., resilience, risk, and vulnerability) there is no homogenous, universally applicable definition, and there are many theories and typologies that inform how these terms are understood and applied. Some of the most recognised of these models include Hart’s (1992) adaptation of Arnstein’s Ladder of Citizen Participation, Shier’s (2001) Pathways to Participation, Treseder’s (1997) Degrees of Participation, and Wong et al. (2010) Typology of Youth Participation and Empowerment Pyramid. These theories generally coalesce around five core principles as outlined by Frank (2006):

- 1) Give youth responsibility and voice;
- 2) Build youth capacities;
- 3) Encourage youthful styles of working;
- 4) Involve adults throughout the process; and
- 5) Adapt the socio-political context.

The typology of Youth Participation and Empowerment Pyramid suggests a range of typologies or degrees of participation in which youth and adults share power, responsibilities, and decision-making to varying degrees based on youth’s developmental needs, capacities, and interests (Wong et al. 2010: 105).

This power-sharing approach to youth engagement emphasises the need for youth–adult partnerships (Y-APs) that acknowledge a mutuality of concerns and benefits. This is where adults “look to youth to provide legitimacy, on the ground knowledge and perspective, and cause-based passion” and youth gain support from adults in the form of coaching, dialogue, and connections to resources and community leaders (Camino and Zeldin 2002:218). Y-APs encourage shared ownership in decision-making processes and the success and failure of the outcomes. For Y-APs to succeed, both youth and adults require skills and knowledge that support sustained engagement and successful group dynamics (e.g., trust and team building, process facilitation, project management, and leadership). It is this understanding of youth engagement as meaningful, sustained, and having influence in decisions and policies that shapes the discussion of youth engagement in DRRM as outlined in this policy brief.

What does youth engagement in DRR look like?

In the process leading up to the adoption of the SFDRR, UNISDR intentionally involved youth in decision-making, describing these actions as the “start of the enhanced participation of youths in setting the global disaster risk reduction agenda” (UNISDR n.d.). Youth have also been integral to other policy agenda-setting around the globe, such as in the establishment of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (Billimoria 2016; UNDP 2015) and in developing and implementing the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Youth Strategy in 170 countries (UNDP 2018). The strategy aims at supporting youth entrepreneurship and removing barriers to the inclusion of youth in development, employment, civic engagement, and political participation (UNDP 2017). Several frameworks guide youth development and empowerment at the regional level including the SADC Declaration on Youth Development and Empowerment (updated August 2016); SADC Youth Empowerment Policy Framework (2021-2030); and African Youth Charter (2006).

Youth engagement can be in the form of (Youth NGOs). YOUNGO is a model that provides a successful example of a structured approach to including youth in policy discussions that could be applied at Intergovernmental levels. YOUNGO is a collaboration of youth NGOs participating in the UN’s climate change negotiations. As one of nine official civil society constituencies at the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), it is supported through logistical support and financial resources from the UN to participate in the UNFCCC conferences and hold special youth-focused sessions during high-level meetings (UN 2010). YOUNGO makes “official statements, provides technical and policy inputs to negotiation groups, engages with decision-makers through high-level meetings and in informal settings, and raises awareness through various advocacy activities” (International Youth Climate Movement n.d.). Other examples of youth engagements are presented in Table 1.

Country	Engagement examples	Description	Source
Mozambique	Pilot project involved a stakeholders’ workshop to introduce the UNESCO-VISUS (Visual Inspection for defining Safety Upgrading Strategies) methodology for multi-hazard school safety assessment to about 100 schools’ initial phase of implementation working key partnerships with the Ministry of Education and Human Development for its adaptation to the Mozambican context.	The engagement included professors, teachers, and students applying their knowledge to conduct a survey and assessment of 94 schools in the Maputo, Gaza, and Inhambane provinces. Youths involved are using VISUS paper codification forms as well as a dedicated mobile phone app, VISUS Finder. The engagement spurred a broader construction programme involving private and public schools right across Maputo. Many schools now have secure classrooms and initiative was successful because it focused on educating and engaging a range of responsible actors including students themselves – most importantly – so they understand the hazards and helped to plan local projects and ensure standards were enforced.	https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/improving-school-safety-mozambique
South Africa	GIRRL Power! Participatory Action Research for building girl-led community resilience in South Africa	The Girls in Risk Reduction Leadership (GIRRL) Program assisted in building resilient communities through the integration of adolescent girls into local level decision-making and action for reducing disaster risk. The GIRRL Program, utilizing Participatory Action Research, helped to catalyse the capacities of girls through personal empowerment to drive the agenda for inclusive involvement of vulnerable populations to build community resilience.	Forbes-Genade and van Niekerk (2019)
Tanzania	New digital approach to evidence-based violence prevention	A new digital approach to evidence-based violence prevention was developed and tested and has been adopted by the national government for scale-up as a new national programme.	Awah et al. (2022)

Zimbabwe	Youth theater groups	The erratic access to the network in that month and a half in the aftermath of the cyclone meant that communities had to rely on each other to pass information around. Youths used a combination of handwritten letters, door-to-door information, theatre performances, and digital messages to enhance information flows in the absence of formal communication. A theatre play creatively expressed the different experiences and issues that had emerged in the area.	(Chiimba and Verne, 2022)
Zambia	The role of youth networks in peace and conflict resolution processes	The engagement provides insights and illustrations of unique and unexploited potential of the Youth networks, relevant in the application of peace and conflict resolution processes in Zambia. Youth networks work with community learning centre, church group and arts empowerment centre help fostering good citizenship, enhancing youths' self-worth and human rights knowledge, personal development through arts to skills building and provision of media platforms for raising youth voices.	Chitah, C.P., (2022).

These examples reveal full participation of youths as partners in co-learning and the co-design of initiatives, and how their direct involvement can assist in shaping policies, practices, and decisions that can add sustainable value in DRRM. A scan of existing programmes reveals that the majority of DRRM actions with youth in SADC focus primarily on educational programmes focused on cultivating disaster preparedness and resilience building. Other programs include school-based curriculum, diplomas, bachelors, and Master of DRRM/preparedness programmes which offers learning modules to build awareness and preparedness with school-age youths.

Some of the current youth focused DRRM programmes in SADC are intentional about building the leadership capacities of youth in disaster preparedness. For example, the Engaging African GIRRLs in Gendered Enriched Risk Reduction (EAGER) project was conceptualised following the success of two previous initiatives based in Southern Africa. These initiatives sought to empower adolescent girls by addressing their personal and community-based vulnerabilities comprehensively. This multi-faceted empowerment programme taught girls not just basic information, but also equipped them to be well-informed, make effective decisions, and utilize their newfound understanding to positive impact their own lives and the lives of others in their communities. These projects were set within the context of reducing vulnerability, developing youth as emergency preparedness leaders in their communities through local engagement and skills-building workshops. The project builds on model of engaging youth as active co-creators of programmes and initiatives.

These and other community- or government-based initiatives are engaging a limited number of youth and doing so in ways that increase awareness, build capacity, and in some cases, develop local action around preparedness. However, with a primary focus on disaster preparedness, such programs are reaching only a small number of youth and often fail to fully engage them as active stakeholders in achieving the Sendai Framework and principles of a whole of society approach to DRR and resilience.

Mobilising and harnessing youths' views and reflections

Youths have their own views on what they want to achieve as they mature into adulthood. Today's youth are better educated than ever in human history, and the spread of democratic governance in some SADC countries offers many of them the opportunity to participate in civic and political life. The skills and resources of globalisation offer unprecedented challenges and opportunities. For various reasons, including their poor preparedness and lack of local opportunities, most of the today's youth will not be able to maximally benefit from the globalisation agenda. Many youths are of the opinion that their continued exclusion in policy formulation and implementation, especially in rural areas, is worsening their socio-economic wellbeing (Ile & Boadu, 2018). They face a "complex and messy institutional context" in establishing livelihoods, and where "lines of authority and control are constructed in overlapping and often contested institutional settings". When youth are engaged in projects initiated by government or development agencies

some apprehension is expressed. This apprehension is derived from the belief that they are more likely to be, discredited by the audience, policy makers or even by their parents. In most cases they lack confidence and fail to recognise their unique abilities as risk communicators. Youth are of the view that they regularly face great hurdles to get their voices heard and consequently, their capacities to inform and influence planning and decision-making processes, communicate risks to their communities and take direct action to reduce risks have been neglected (Mariam, 2015; Yahya, 2017).

A common message from the youth is that they want to be heard and valued as partners with contributions to make to DRRM. They want to be involved, they know they have a right to be involved, and they are interested and capable of identifying, designing, and enacting strategies that contribute to their own resilience and that of their peers and communities (Seneviratne, 2017). In this way, their comments echo the sentiments expressed in the SFDRR goal of achieving a whole of society approach to DRR (UNISDR 2015). Additionally, youths demand that their engagements and participation in various fora and platforms requires more than merely adding a youth to the agenda of an existing process or meeting. They desire to be actively engaged in ways that clearly and unequivocally signal a valuing of the contributions, knowledge, skills, and assets they bring to the table, and an ongoing commitment to engaging in actions that can make a material difference to the contexts they live in and their circumstances.

Youths also highlight some of the limitations of where youth their engagement in DRRM is currently at in the SADC. Many youths in SADC countries are not aware of DRRM, and they have demonstrated a general lack of awareness and knowledge about specific hazards risks. They lack knowledge on the local, national, or international efforts for DRRM; as well the intersection between climate change and hazard risks within the region or even at national or local levels. Therefore, actively dedicated resources and effort towards building youth awareness and knowledge about hazards, the influence of climate change and DRRM is an area for strategic attention as part of a more holistic and meaningful approach to involving and engaging youth in DRRM policies, decisions and practices.

How can SADC and South Africa strengthen youth engagement in DRRM?

SADC faces the growing challenges of disasters and a changing climate. In this context, engaging youth in DRRM is pivotal for meeting the goals outlined in the SFDRR. The local community is of immense significance for mitigation, preparedness, early warning, and emergency response to early and resilient recovery. The local community is on the frontline towards minimising vulnerability and building resilience towards disaster. Policy and decision makers, researchers, and practitioners of DRRM have a consensus on the role of community in disaster risk reduction and building capacity to handle disaster issues. Gaillard (2010) elaborates on the role that local level promotion of community participation plays in active assessment of risk, reduction of vulnerability and building capacity for sustainable and equitable disaster resilience. Engaging society using proactive participatory and inclusive approaches in DRRM enables the empowerment of local population with sustained efforts to resist the unforeseen disasters. Strategies that are inclusive rely on local resources rather than external support while coping with extreme event.

The exemplars indicated in the preceding sections provide practical snapshots of how best to create and leverage opportunities for youth to work in partnership, to co-create and implement initiatives towards SADC's agenda for reducing the costs and risks of disasters and increasing the resilience of its citizens and communities. While there appears to be a strong commitment to involving and engaging youth in DRRM initiatives, translating this commitment from mere rhetoric to action has proved more challenging. Policy and decision makers and practitioners seem to be supportive of involving youth in DRRM but remain uncertain as to how best to do this. This uncertainty relates to whether youth have the capacity to be so engaged and leads to situations where youth engagement in DRRM is solely in terms of disaster preparedness education. It is clear from both national and global awareness building efforts that while education and disaster preparedness are clearly necessary elements of DRRM, awareness and knowledge building alone are insufficient to address the generally shared lack of progress in increasing community participation, engagement, and preparedness in DRRM (Henstra and Thistlethwaite 2016; Pietropaolo 2015). A societal approach to DRRM and resilience requires linkages to other complex issues of concern to youth and others (e.g., climate change, unemployment, educational opportunities, safety and security, gender empowerment, etc.) and supports the identification and application of youth's existing and potential competencies as change makers and future leaders.

Seballos and Tanner (2011) discuss the characteristics of an enabling environment for "youths" agency in DRRM, emphasising the need for resources (e.g., funding, training, skills transfer and education) that help build connections between youths, formal and informal DRRM structures and processes. In line with the argument being proposed in this policy brief, it is recommended to move beyond teaching and awareness-building to establishing and maintaining spaces for "youths-centred community-level action" and "proactive co-learning and knowledge sharing" between youths and adults (the Y-APs approach). There is need to establish youth branches of existing DRRM policy and practice spaces and processes and ensure that when youth are engaged, they are participating in ways that ensure they are seen and valued as capable agents from the onset. The successful examples of DRR-

focused programmes summarised previously point to various opportunities for scaling up actions and programmes to broaden and deepen youth engagement in DRRM in the SADC region and respective Member States. However, without the intentional and active promotion of youth voices, youth-led initiatives, and youth expertise, such enhanced youth engagement in DRRM is likely to remain untapped and very limited.

Engaging youth and other populations considered to be at higher risk in DRRM because of their social and economic marginalisation (e.g., those living in poverty, or with disabilities, recent immigrants and refugees, Indigenous peoples) requires first engaging them as legitimate stakeholders in the design of processes that are more inclusive and reflective of their values and discourses. Supporting the capacity of target populations, and specifically youth, to work with complex, interconnected, and intractable global dilemmas requires new approaches. Conventional methods are often seen as inadequate because they are based on a problem-solving model that assumes a well-defined problem and a linear problem-solving process. However, complexity requires inter- and trans-disciplinary, cross-sector collaboration, and a general quantum leap in innovative thinking to achieve a resilient future (Bastien and Holmarsdottir 2017).

Social innovations are new responses to social needs that are not, or only partially, resolved by the institutional and organisational systems in place. Further, integrating skills and capacity building within the social innovation laboratory or other participatory processes can both advance the agenda of DRRM and youth involvement, while simultaneously contributing to the youths' employment competencies (e.g., creative problem solving, adaptive planning, knowledge sharing and communication) and facilitating their development as change makers and future leaders equipped to navigate and thrive in the twenty-first century.

Conclusion

The youth are prepared for and capable of playing an essential role as leaders and innovators in the creation and implementation of solutions and strategies to combat DRRM, particularly when anticipated catastrophe risks manifest because of a changing climate. The time has long come when youth require that institutions and systems stop viewing their involvement as solely a checkbox process. Moving beyond considering youth involvement and participation in DRRM as a tick box process demands creativity and ongoing dedication to inclusive, creative approaches given the technical sophistication of youth and the range of attitudes, learning styles, job opportunities, and circumstances in which they live. DRRM policy and decision makers and practitioners, including the research community must be willing to consistently collaborate with young people to co-create accessible, relevant discourses and procedures to make DRRM relevant to them (Oliveras et al., 2018).

The case studies noted in this policy brief offer a glimpse into the current level of youth participation and involvement in DRRM in SADC and the possibilities for improving it further. In line with the literature on youth engagement, it is evident that developing broad-based youth involvement in DRRM necessitates Y-APs that acknowledge the capacities of youth to contribute and to initiate pertinent DRRM actions and strategies, while also acknowledging the advantages of working with adults who can provide resources, access to networks, and the fusion of diverse perspectives and expertise. Through the capacity multiplier effect that youths represent in their homes and communities, such collaborations may also increase youth engagement in DRRM and provide chances for enhancing broader public participation in achieving the SFDRR goals. Most importantly, co-operation, engagement with interdisciplinarity and integration, acceptance, and inclusion of you, and attainment of SDGs for youth and the societies they can influence and one day lead a successful roadmap for future DRRM efforts.



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