Gen Z Blog
Series

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Gen Z, Youth Participation, and the Politics We Are Avoiding

When older generations hear “Gen Z,” they often picture teenagers, kids who were just born yesterday, a demographic to be managed, placated, or at best, symbolically included to fill a quota. We see the "youth" label tossed around carelessly, sometimes even co-opted by older politicians parading as "GenZs at heart" while holding on to the seats meant for us. Rarely are we treated as a political constituency with real agency, real power, and real legitimacy.

But we need to set the record straight on who this generation actually is. GenZ refers to those born from 1997 to 2012. This means that by 2027, the oldest members of generation-Z will be turning 30 years old. With the enactment of the Not Too Young to Run Act, we are no longer merely "future leaders" in a theoretical sense. We are now constitutionally eligible to contest elections from the age of 25 to secure seats in the House of Representatives or State Assembly, thereby enabling us to influence public budgets, represent our constituents, enact laws and shape national policy that responds to the needs of the people.

The problem, therefore, is not age eligibility. The problem is participation.

> **Politics does not wait for readiness, and power does not pause for generations to feel prepared. If we delay engagement until we feel invited, the system will continue to function without us and against our interests.**

Currently, Nigeria is slowly drifting into a dangerous illusion: the belief that youth political energy automatically translates into youth political power. We dominate digital spaces, trend hashtags in minutes, shape narratives on X Spaces, and mobilise outrage to influence popular culture. But awareness is not power. Yiaga Africa's National Voting Intentions Survey exposes a troubling contradiction: young Nigerians aged 18–35 are less likely to vote than older citizens. The data reveal what can only be described as a "youth paradox": intense political expression online, yet weak participation in the very processes that produce political outcomes.

This paradox forces us to confront an uncomfortable truth:

'visibility' is not 'influence'. Noise is not governance. A viral tweet is not a policy amendment.

For years, young people have perfected the language of political criticism. We know how to call out government failure and dominate public discourse. But critique without structure does not produce change. If decades of calling out power have not shifted outcomes, then the strategy must change.

> **Participation cannot be something we wait to be invited into; it must be something we build, organise, and occupy.**

Budgets are not written on social media. Laws are not negotiated online. Policies are not shaped in hashtags. They are written in meetings, committees, party secretariats, and government offices, spaces where young people are still largely absent. While we win arguments online, decisions are being made offline. Gen Z is often described as "politically aware," and while that description is not wrong, it is incomplete. Awareness without access produces frustration, not power.

Democracy does not function only on election days; it runs on daily civic presence. It lives in local government meetings, ward structures, constituency offices, policy consultations, and institutional processes that rarely trend but always matter.

Real youth participation means showing up in these spaces. It means understanding how budgets work, tracking constituency projects, engaging party structures, and monitoring implementation rather than just promises. Without this daily presence, elections become symbolic rituals rather than tools of accountability. We risk becoming a generation that is politically expressive but structurally absent, loud in conversation, invisible in governance.

This participation gap is not gender-neutral. As a young woman and through my work in the development space, I have seen how girls experience a deeper form of political exclusion. Young women face safety risks in civic spaces, social stigma around leadership, cultural expectations of silence, and political structures that were never designed with them in mind. When young women and girls disengage from politics, it is not because they lack interest. It is because the system signals, subtly and consistently, that they do not belong. This is not just an inclusion problem; it is a governance problem. When young women and girls participate, they do more than add representation; they change priorities. They shift focus toward education, healthcare, community safety, social protection, climate resilience, and long-term development. Their presence reshapes outcomes. Any youth participation agenda that does not intentionally centre young women and girls is structurally incomplete. Inclusion cannot be accidental; it must be designed.

The Yiaga Africa survey simply tells us that

Nigeria risks producing a generation that debates politics but does not shape it. A generation that reacts to power but does not occupy it.

A generation that critiques systems it does not enter. If that continues, governance will not become more inclusive; it will become more closed. To change this,

Participation must be rebuilt as structure, not sentiment, not seasonal mobilisation, but sustained civic presence.

That means civic education that teaches systems, not just ideals. Political literacy that explains processes, not personalities. Mentorship pathways that connect young people, especially girls, to institutions, not just activism. It means building bridges between youth energy and governance structures, not treating them as separate worlds.

Democracy does not collapse dramatically. It erodes quietly, through disengagement, disconnection, and distance between citizens and power. Youth participation is not only about the 2027 elections, but also about now. It is about presence. It is about literacy. It is about access. It is about occupying spaces.

The future is not inherited, it is organised. And participation is how generations organise power.

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