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Climate Diplomacy in Practice: Transformational Learning Among UAE Youth at UNFCCC Negotiations

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About the Author



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Summary

- This Insight examines how direct participation in UN climate negotiations shapes the learning and agency of youth, using the United Arab Emirates (UAE) as a case study. Youth have been formally recognised through Agenda 21 and the YOUNGO constituency, yet a gap persists between access and substantive agency, driven by financial, bureaucratic and procedural barriers.
- The Insight situates the UAE's approach within this context, tracing its youth initiatives:
  - » the UN Youth Delegates Programme;
  - » the Arab Youth Center;
  - » the COP28 Youth International Climate Delegates Program; and
  - » the 2026 Global Youth Water Envoys Programme.
- Drawing on literature on experiential learning, negotiation simulations and academic scaffolding, it argues that combining structured classroom preparation with first-hand exposure to negotiations can foster transformational learning, self-efficacy and empowerment.
- Empirically, the study draws on semi-structured interviews with six students from the Anwar Gargash Diplomatic Academy (AGDA) who attended the Bonn Climate Change Conference (SB64) after completing a pre-departure training course.
- The students consistently reported a marked contrast between theoretical knowledge and negotiating practice. They highlighted:
  - » the importance of informal settings such as corridor discussions and "huddles";
  - » the weight of national interests in shaping outcomes; and
  - » the slow pace of multilateral progress.
- They also described gains in active listening, notetaking, networking, negotiation, and understanding of rules of procedure, alongside greater motivation to engage in climate action. These findings echo research on student and youth participation in COP24, COP26 and COP27, which also shows that what young people gain depends heavily on their preparation, resources and access.
- Given the small sample, the Insight presents its findings as indicative and calls for further research using larger cohorts, pre- and post-conference surveys, longitudinal follow-up, participant observation, and comparative designs. It concludes with the following early recommendations:
  - » integrating simulations with real-world attendance;
  - » providing robust academic scaffolding;
  - » supporting student-led engagement;
  - » reducing financial and bureaucratic barriers; and
  - » institutionalising youth voices through national and regional youth councils.

The Issue

The global community faces unprecedented environmental challenges, with climate change representing a "wicked problem" characterised by ill-structured nature, complexity and lack of a clear path to a solution. The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) seeks to protect "future generations" from the impacts of runaway climate change, and current day youth are the best possible representatives. Indeed, they represent over 50% of the global population and will bear the brunt of the long-term impacts of current policy decisions. According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), an individual born in the 2000s or later will inherit a planet that is 0.8–2.6°C warmer with sea levels 5 to 32 centimetres higher.[1] This generational burden has galvanised a global youth movement, exemplified by activists and young policymakers who have highlighted the urgent need for young people to influence international negotiations.

Additionally, constituencies and observers are critical for the procedural legitimacy and longevity of the UNFCCC process. These include NGOs, Indigenous peoples, businesses, farmers, and local governments, among others. Youth were recognised as an independent stakeholder group in Agenda 21 at the 1992 Rio Earth Summit and were later formally organised within the UNFCCC as the constituency of Youth NGOs, or YOUNGO, which received provisional status in 2009 and full constituency status in 2011. This constituency brings together diverse youth organisations to advocate for climate action. Despite this formal recognition, young people face significant barriers to effective engagement, including few opportunities to learn the complex structures and practices of the COP. These barriers are material as much as procedural. Interviews and observations at COP26 and COP27 identify financial costs and bureaucratic requirements, such as accreditation and visa procedures, as the most serious obstacles, and show that they weigh most heavily on young people with fewer socio-economic resources and those living furthest from summit venues. Such conditions shape not only who becomes a youth representative, but also which claims and strategies are open to them once on site.[2]

The importance of youth representation at UNFCCC conferences extends beyond mere presence; it is about transforming students from passive observers into active agents of positive change. Engaging youth at the COP allows them to challenge the perceived current politics such as power asymmetries, historical responsibilities and eroded commitments. Furthermore, parties who involve youth early in the process are considered to have a "head start" as the global youth population continues to grow. This helps address a central tension within youth participation at the UNFCCC due to a gap between access and substantive agency. Although youth participation in climate negotiations has grown over the past decade, youth voices remain underrepresented, and institutional mechanisms to integrate them into the negotiations seldom extend beyond showcasing their experiences.[3]

UAE Youth Engagement in International Processes

The UAE has actively engaged youth in both policymaking and multilateral negotiations. This engagement reflects a commitment to shifting youth from observers to active participants with agency. Some of the most notable examples include the UAE UN Youth Delegates Programme through which the country appoints two young Emiratis as youth delegates to the UN.[4] This support also extends beyond Emirati nationals to regional and global youth, as reflected in the UAE's establishment of the Arab Youth Center during the World Government Summit in 2017. Since its inception, the Center has trained and supported Arab youth to attend climate negotiations. This regional focus matters. Interviews with youth advocates from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region at COP27 show that their demands were framed in strongly place-based and regional terms, and that they perceived the transnational youth climate movement as distributing attention and opportunities unevenly across regions. While youth climate advocacy in the MENA region may not resemble the mass mobilisations seen in the West, it is active and offers distinct perspectives on climate justice.[5] Furthermore, at COP28, the UAE launched the Youth International Climate Delegates Program to improve youth participation from underrepresented groups in climate change negotiations. The UAE COP28 Presidency selected 100 delegates for the Program to embed within the COP process, with a priority for delegates from countries on the list of Least Developed Countries (LDCs), Small Island Developing States (SIDS), Indigenous Peoples, and other minority groups around the world.

The UAE has since extended this model beyond the climate regime. In July 2026, during the UN High-Level Political Forum in New York, it announced the Global Youth Water Envoys Programme ahead of the 2026 UN Water

Conference, which the UAE co-hosts with Senegal in Abu Dhabi in December. Led by the Arab Youth Center in strategic partnership with the UAE Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and supported by the Children's Investment Fund Foundation, the programme will prepare up to 100 young people aged 18 to 35 from six global regions, with particular attention to water-stressed areas in Africa, the Arab States and Asia-Pacific. Its design closely mirrors the scaffolded approach discussed below: participants complete virtual training on water governance, climate and policy between September and November, engage with national delegations and institutional partners, and selected envoys then contribute to the Conference's Interactive Dialogues. The initiative signals a deliberate effort to position young people as contributors to multilateral outcomes rather than observers.[6]

Transformational Learning Beyond the Classroom

Embedding sustainability and climate change in education through classroom learning and simulations provides students with essential tools to navigate real-world complexities. This matters because young people's understanding of climate change remains uneven. A synthesis of 51 international studies of 8- to 19-year-olds found that, while scientifically accurate knowledge generally increases with age, misconceptions persist across age groups and levels of belief, concern and willingness to act vary considerably between countries. Through these findings, the authors draw out direct implications for educational policy and practice.[7] Traditional "passive" educational approaches are often insufficient for teaching "wicked" problems like climate change. Instead, experiential learning models and simulations (such as Model United Nations and other negotiation simulations) have been shown to enhance student learning outcomes across three distinct levels: factual knowledge, procedural knowledge and soft skills.

Active learning environments allow students to formulate critical positions on social and environmental issues in a relatively safe space. Simulations are particularly effective because they allow students to experience the dynamics of international bargaining and develop soft skills like negotiation and diplomatic behaviour. Research indicates that more comprehensive simulations—those including extensive preparation, faculty support and longer stages—lead to more profound learning across all knowledge levels. For instance, students participating in the National Model United Nations (NMUN) reported a significant increase in their understanding of political processes and the difficulty of finding common solutions.[8]

To bridge the gap between the classroom and the real world, educators at universities that send student observer delegations to UNFCCC meetings have developed "academic scaffolding", which provides interactive support to help students participate in tasks beyond their unassisted abilities. This scaffolding often includes pre-departure training, online modules and familiarisation with the norms and procedures of the UNFCCC. In one such programme, students attending COP24 received in-person and online training in the UNFCCC, its processes and the main issues under negotiation, and presented their own work at a COP side event. Most reported that this support gave them the tools to navigate the complexities of the conference.[9] The Anwar Gargash Diplomatic Academy (AGDA) programme described below adopts a comparable model, and such training is increasingly advocated beyond individual institutions, with youth-led policy recommendations calling for the creation and expansion of negotiation training programmes for young people.[10] By combining classroom theory with real-world experience at a COP, students can engage in transformational learning, a process involving critical reflection, validation through trusted relationships and the challenging of prior beliefs. This integrated approach builds self-efficacy, or an individual's belief in their capacity to handle intimidating situations, ultimately generating increased agency and empowerment.

Methods

Following the UAE's vision for empowering youth, the Anwar Gargash Diplomatic Academy offers Emirati youth and future diplomats the opportunity to attend climate negotiations either at the Conference of the Parties (COP) or the Bonn Climate Change Conference in Germany, which hosts the sessions of the Subsidiary Bodies (SBs).

The students take a collective pre-departure training course as part of their preparation for the trip. The training covers basic climate science and governance, thematic topics and skills such as notetaking. The students are also given the opportunity to meet experts who have attended climate negotiations in the past. Additionally, there are sessions dedicated to covering logistics, protocol and safety. These activities are designed to provide clear direction and clarify the purpose of the engagement so that students can understand their roles and tasks. By establishing

the classroom training as a prerequisite setting for attending negotiations, the course aims to reduce confusion and uncertainty while clarifying purpose and expectations.

Six students – three of which were enrolled in the Post Graduate Diploma and three in Master's programmes – were selected to attend the Bonn Climate negotiations (SB64) in 2025. They participated in the training course and were interviewed post-conference. For all students, this was their first multilateral climate negotiation. Additionally, the students had different educational and professional backgrounds.

Semi-structured interviews were selected because they allow participants to describe their experiences in their own words while keeping the discussion anchored to a common set of themes, which makes them well suited to exploratory work with a small cohort. Qualitative designs remain comparatively rare in research on young people's climate perceptions, which has been dominated by questionnaire-based studies,[11] yet recent research on youth at UN climate summits has relied on interviews, often combined with surveys or on-site observation, to capture how young participants experience and navigate these settings.[12] Combining the two, as in this study, allows individual accounts to be read against a consistent set of responses across the cohort. While the students' interviews provide valuable insights into their experiences, learning and the challenges they faced, the size of the cohort means that the findings should be read as indicative. They provide an early assessment of the programme ahead of a more extensive study, expected to follow with subsequent cohorts, which will allow these initial observations to be tested more systematically.

Findings

This section presents qualitative findings from semi-structured interviews with six students (S1–S6) who attended the Bonn Climate Conference (SB64) as part of the UAE delegation. The interviews explored their learning experiences, skills development and reflections on the conference process. This data was collected as part of a primary institutional evaluation of student participation and complements the wider academic literature reviewed in this brief.

Key Themes from student responses:

S1 identified the following as primary learning outcomes:

- Improved technical, personal and diplomatic skills
- Learning different processes such as developing an intervention and its approval process
- Understanding how UAE ministries coordinate with each other at multilateral negotiations

The students consistently reported a stark contrast between theoretical learning and real-world observation.

S1 noted:

> "No matter how much I read about the country's perspective, you never really know until you speak to them, especially for example, in more informal settings, where you hear their true opinions and what the country believes and what are the red lines."

S3 similarly reflected:

> "I would have never imagined that it's like this, you actually know how things work when you're put in the action itself and you see it in practice."

S2 described the experience as an "insightful exposure to the diplomacy world", adding:

> "This gave me an insight or like an observation of the real-world policy, not just on the theoretical part we're taking."

S4 echoed this sentiment:

> "I didn't expect it to be this way — learning things in theory is completely different than how it is in practice."

Diplomatic and Professional Skills

Multiple students identified specific professional competencies that were developed through COP attendance. **S1** and **S5** both described a deeper understanding of when countries and negotiators deliver statements or interventions and when it is strategically preferable to remain silent and resolve issues informally in corridors — a nuance that is virtually impossible to convey through classroom instruction alone.

One example by **S6** summarised the main differences between classes and practical experiences:

> "I sort of have a picture of what to expect when I go to multilateral negotiations. It is very informal. I think they call it a huddle, where they discuss strenuous points or points of disagreement. So we're seeing stuff that I don't think I learned in the Academy."

S1, **S3** and **S5** all reported that they had learned the value of active listening. **S5** additionally highlighted the importance of notetaking as a professional skill. **S2** and **S6** identified networking as an essential competency developed through conference participation. **S3** noted improved negotiation skills and observed that some of these concepts were transferable to the private sector. **S4** highlighted improved communication skills more broadly.

S1 reflected on a significantly improved understanding of rules of procedure:

> "I used to have this understanding that most multilateral meetings are quite the same, but this one was very different, so it was a nice experience to really understand the procedures."

Perceptions of the UNFCCC Process

Overall, the students perceived the UNFCCC process as broadly positive and capable of progressing solutions, though they also observed deep divergences between parties and groups, and noted the slow pace. **S3** pointed to difficulties with the technical complexity of negotiations. **S2** highlighted that differences between parties will always be present but emphasised the importance of bridging those differences and the capacity to compromise. S4 added an important observation:

> "Sometimes it's not about the technical things — it's about the country's national priorities."

S6 had a similar observation:

> "it's not an easy thing as we sit on the table, we put [aside] our differences, and we try to find consensus because even then you cannot agree because of … national interests."

S1 noted the remarkable diversity of COP attendees, including NGOs, youth and Indigenous peoples:

> "I think this is the most [well] represented … conference I've ever been to."

S5 observed that, while observers attended negotiation sessions, they rarely had the opportunity to speak due to time restrictions — a finding consistent with analysis of structural constraints on youth agency.[13] **S3** expressed surprise at the significant number of youth delegates present both within formal party delegations and among observer organisations. **S3** also noted admiration for both the professionalism of large, well-resourced delegations and the tenacity of smaller delegations in attending most negotiation rooms.

Duration and Motivation

Three of the six students independently mentioned that it took them considerable time to understand the conference setting and its dynamics. All three argued that attending both weeks of negotiations — rather than a single week — would have been substantially more valuable for their learning.

S4 also reported a marked increase in motivation and personal commitment to climate action following COP participation:

"I feel like I would want to be more involved [with] climate change, even on a community level, help raise awareness and take action."

S6 had a more balanced view of optimism and disappointment:

"It was both insightful but also disappointing, as youth, … we are seeing how in these platforms that are supposed to address global issues like climate change. We're having the same agenda item being negotiated over and over for a couple of years now but also inside what we can still have a forum where people come together and meet."

S4 further reflected on the human dynamics of the negotiation process, expressing particular appreciation for the informal bargaining that occurs between sessions:

"Between [the huddles], how they try to find a way to give everyone what they want, even though [it's] for the greater good."

These student reflections powerfully corroborate the academic literature's findings on the transformative potential of direct COP engagement. They demonstrate that real-world participation builds not only knowledge but also professional identity, intercultural competence and a sustained motivation to contribute to climate solutions.

These findings resonate with experiences reported elsewhere. Students from a university delegation to COP24 who received structured preparation described similar gains, and for all of them, engagement with the negotiations supported greater self-efficacy and climate literacy.[14] Research involving youth representatives at COP26 and COP27 found that young people experience the physical design and rules of the summits as hierarchical and, at times, tokenistic, but also learn to work around these spatial orderings to strengthen their position,[15] a pattern that echoes the UAE students' growing awareness of the corridors and huddles where much of the bargaining takes place. Interviews with MENA youth at COP27 similarly show that young people from the region bring distinctly place-based concerns to the negotiations and remain conscious of how unevenly attention is distributed within the wider youth movement.[16] Taken together, these accounts suggest that the learning reported by the AGDA cohort forms part of a broader pattern, while also highlighting that what young people gain from COP attendance depends heavily on the preparation, resources and access available to them.

Conclusions and Early Recommendations

The evidence from both negotiation simulations and direct participation in UNFCCC conferences demonstrates that experiential climate education is essential for developing the next generation of leaders. Students who attend climate conferences gain a nuanced understanding of negotiation literacy that far exceeds what can be achieved in a traditional classroom. They move from idealistic views of influencing negotiators to a more realistic and sophisticated perspective on international diplomacy.

Key Findings for Leadership:

- **Building Self-Efficacy:** Participation in real-world negotiations significantly boosts students' self-efficacy, helping them feel confident in tackling complex global issues.
- **Professional Development:** Students develop core competencies such as communication in diplomatic settings, analysing UN documents and country positions and understanding UN structures and procedure.
- **Career Pathways:** The experience often elevates environmental awareness and agency and serves as an inspiration for students to pursue environmental policy careers, providing them with a clear vision of their future work.
- **Addressing the "Wicked" Nature of Climate Change:** By observing the heated debates of negotiators and less formal "huddles", students gain first-hand experience with the necessity of compromise and the slow pace of international change.

Recommendations:

1. Integrate Simulations and Real-World Experience: Universities should prioritise programmes that couple classroom-based negotiation simulations with actual attendance at international conferences like the COP.

2. Provide Robust Academic Scaffolding: Institutions should support the development of pre-departure training that includes history, terminology and social norms to reduce student confusion and maximise learning.

3. Support Student-Led Engagement: Programmes should encourage student-led initiatives, such as side events and press conferences, which have been shown to be primary drivers of student agency and empowerment.

4. Mitigate Financial and Logistical Barriers: Financial constraints can be a major hurdle for youth participation, and bureaucratic requirements such as visa procedures compound these costs for those travelling furthest.[17] Providing logistical and financial support and early assistance with accreditation and travel documentation is essential to ensure continued youth representation.

5. Institutionalise Youth Voices: Beyond individual programmes, governments should consider formal national and regional youth councils or committees that connect young people with decision-makers, so that the skills students acquire at the negotiations translate into sustained and meaningful input rather than one-off participation.[18]

In conclusion, embedding climate and sustainability education and exposure in international negotiations is a powerful tool to elevate students' engagement, allowing them to understand and interact directly with existential crises and become leaders of future solutions. For the UAE, which has placed youth empowerment at the centre of its multilateral engagement from COP28 to the 2026 UN Water Conference, programmes such as those at AGDA offer a practical means of turning that commitment into diplomatic capability. The early evidence presented here suggests that even a short period of time spent at the negotiations can reshape how students understand national interests, compromise and the informal practices of diplomacy. Realising this potential more widely will require sustained investment, continued attention to the material barriers that still limit who is able to participate and more systematic evaluation across future cohorts. In this way, youth engagement can move beyond presence towards the substantive agency that the UNFCCC process increasingly recognises it needs.

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