

Small-scale fisheries: Africa cannot afford to lose its young people

In Mombasa, the African Confederation of Professional Organisations for Small-scale Fisheries (CAOPA) has highlighted a crucial divide: Africa's young people lack neither ideas nor energy when it comes to small-scale fisheries, but they continue to come up against barriers in the form of funding, training and political exclusion. And at this rate, it is coastal food security as a whole that risks paying the price.

The danger is not theoretical; it is already here

The programme prepared by CAOPA for its side event at the 11th Our Ocean Conference on 17 June 2026 in Mombasa does not seek to sugar-coat reality. The chosen theme sums up the urgency: "2030 Review: Young leaders and small-scale fishers on what works and what is holding back action for the oceans". It states the obvious: "small-scale fisheries are the livelihood and socio-economic backbone of millions of African coastal communities". It then identifies the crux of the problem: "this sector is currently facing a major structural challenge : the gradual withdrawal of young people".

Everything is encapsulated in this tension. On the one hand, a sector vital for food security, employment and local economies. On the other, generational renewal threatened by mounting obstacles : barriers to entry, a lack of vocational training, insufficient access to finance, and under-representation in decision-making forums. The question, therefore, is no longer whether young people are important to small-scale fisheries. The real question is more stark: how long can this sector survive if it continues to wear down, hold back or discourage those who must carry it forward?

Young people aren't waiting: they're already transforming the sector

One of the clearest merits of the parallel event is that it debunks a convenient narrative – that of a youth that is absent or disengaged by default. The presentation by Dorcas Kilola Malogho, a member of CAOPA's youth group in Kenya, tells a completely different story. She highlights young people who are already working in the blue economy, already involved in transforming value chains, and already capable of turning significant constraints into productive activities.

She describes initiatives in which organic waste from food scraps, markets, poultry or fish is used to rear black soldier fly larvae, which are then processed into protein-rich animal feed, whilst the residues are turned into organic fertiliser. She also mentions young people who collect plastic and glass from rivers, beaches, the ocean and landfill sites to feed them back into recycling streams. Others still produce fuel briquettes from agricultural and organic waste.

The sentence she places at the heart of her speech says much more than a mere slogan: "Young people are at the forefront of transforming Kenya's fisheries and blue economy sectors," says Dorcas Kilola Malogho.

The message is clear. Whilst policymakers often speak of young people as a future to be prepared for, the reality on the ground already shows a generation of

young people who are producing, innovating, sorting, processing, organising and selling.

Dorcas extends this reality far beyond the circular economy. She highlights young people engaged in mariculture, fish processing, the cold chain, the ornamental fish trade, maintenance, maritime jobs and related services. Artisanal fishing thus ceases to be reduced to the image of a static activity. It re-emerges as what it truly is: a complete, vibrant economy, capable of absorbing a diverse range of skills – provided it is given the means to do so.

The problem is not the young people's ambition. It is the system around them

The CAOPA programme is wise enough not to turn young people into romantic heroes. It keeps its feet firmly on the ground. The obstacles are there, explicitly listed: limited funding for women and young people, inadequate infrastructure, market access constraints, climate shocks, cultural and gender barriers, insufficient representation in decision-making bodies, and insufficient investment in youth-led initiatives.

The presentation by Mercy Mghanga, coordinator of Coastal Women in Fisheries Entrepreneurship, lends concrete depth to this picture. She explains that her organisation has supported small-scale fisheries "by strengthening women's economic empowerment".

Behind this phrase lie very practical mechanisms: entrepreneurship training, value-added initiatives, links to markets, financial literacy, business management, savings and investment groups, and access to information and networks.

Her message also applies to young people. CWIFE says it has engaged young women and men in opportunities within the blue economy, supported their leadership, and facilitated mentoring and skills development. The effects outlined in the document are crystal clear: greater youth engagement in sustainable fisheries, improved livelihoods, and stronger participation in community initiatives. Then comes the political call to action, clear and direct: "Increase investment in fishing enterprises for women and young people", adds Mercy Mghanga.

This sentence says what many speeches avoid. Inclusion cannot be funded with applause alone. As long as young people are celebrated in public forums but underfunded in budgets, small-scale fisheries will move forward with their potential deliberately held back.

Tokenistic participation has gone on long enough

The message delivered by Mohamed Baimba Kallon, a member of CAOPA's youth group in Sierra Leone, is one of the most incisive. He does not stop at the general idea of participation. He dismantles the way in which this participation is all too often fabricated. His starting point is simple: "The process of drafting the plan demonstrates just how important it is for small-scale fishers and fisheries

workers to be active partners in fisheries governance,” emphasises Mohamed Kallon.

The word that changes everything is ‘partners’. For that is the crux of the matter. In many public processes, artisanal fishers and workers in the sector are consulted, but rarely established as co-creators. They are brought in at a late stage. They are given little information. They are often left to comment on choices that are already all but finalised. As a result, participation becomes a charade of listening rather than a genuine sharing of power.

The demographic shock demands an immediate response

The contribution by Delvis M. Graça Fortes, Senior Fisheries Officer at UA-BIRA, lends this debate a continental dimension. He calls for gender and youth issues to be integrated into policies, laws and plans, and for this to be based on sound knowledge: “Gender and youth considerations must be included in policies, laws and plans, and must be based on knowledge”.

Behind this statement lies a very practical requirement: to have data disaggregated by sex, age and occupational category, to analyse it thoroughly, and to use it to guide decision-making.

The figures cited illustrate the scale of the challenge. Africa is currently the world’s youngest region. Its median age is 19. By 2026, 28 per cent of young people will be living on the continent; by 2100, this proportion could reach 46 per cent. At the same time, he points out that post-harvest losses exceed 30 per cent and that young people’s involvement in value addition, digital marketing and climate-resilient practices can help reduce these losses. The equation is crystal clear: food security, employment and sustainability depend on young people, not on bypassing them.

Delvis Fortes also emphasises the effective participation of women and young people in decision-making processes, from the local to the regional level. Here again, the message is more forceful than it appears. He tells African institutions that they can no longer treat young people as an afterthought in their investment plans.

Tarub Bahri sounds the alarm: the issue is a continental one

The contribution by Tarub Bahri, from the FAO Regional Office for Africa, broadens the debate to a continental scale. Her message is crystal clear: “the future of a sustainable, resilient and inclusive African small-scale fisheries sector depends on young people being given a genuine role in commitments, debates and governance mechanisms”. She highlights a demographic fact that no one can any longer treat as a footnote: over 60 per cent of the African population is under 25.

Tarub Bahri links this reality to another urgent issue: food security. Africa must increase its production of aquatic products by 67 per cent, compared with 19 per cent globally. And small-scale fisheries, far from being marginal, support around 500 million livelihoods worldwide.

Her speech frames this pressure around three priorities: the sustainable expansion of aquaculture, the effective and sustainable management of fisheries, and the development of viable aquatic value chains.

Above all, she distils her policy stance into three verbs that ring out like a roadmap: 'RECOGNISE', 'INCLUDE' and 'SUPPORT'. This is more than just a slogan. It is a formal call to action addressed to the institutions. Recognising young people does not mean relegating them to the margins. Including them does not mean adding them at the last minute. Supporting them does not mean asking them to make up for the sector's structural shortcomings on their own.

With Salvador Malheiro, the issue takes on a strongly political dimension

Professor Salvador Malheiro, Portuguese Secretary of State for Fisheries and Maritime Affairs, brings a useful perspective to the debate: the inclusion of young people can also become a catalyst for concrete public reform. "Generational renewal is essential to securing the future of a crucial sector such as fisheries." asserts Salvador Malheiro, who adds: "We need the fisheries sector to guarantee our food sovereignty and reduce our dependence on foreign markets".

This link between generations and food sovereignty deserves to be heard in Africa. It serves as a reminder that the issue of young people is not merely a social one in the narrow sense; it is strategic. When a sector that feeds entire populations struggles to attract and retain those who must take over, it is not just a question of employment. It is a matter of security.

He also highlights the 'Young Fisher Bill', a draft law launched in Portugal in 2026, aimed at removing the barriers faced by young people entering the profession by simplifying administrative procedures and providing start-up funding.

The message is clear: young people do not need to be told to love fishing. They need the barriers preventing them from entering the sector on a long-term basis to be removed.

In Mombasa, CAOPA demonstrates a simple truth

Young people are not merely window dressing in the African oceanic discourse. They are already part of the solution. They reduce losses, create value, open up market opportunities, innovate within the circular economy, and engage with value chains and communities.

What is lacking is not their willingness. It is the trade-offs that accompany the rhetoric. If 2027 is to become the African Year of Youth in Small-Scale Fisheries, as CAOPA hopes, this year will only be meaningful if it finally compels governments, regional institutions and technical partners to treat young people as a structural priority. Not as a category to be mentioned in passing. As a force to be equipped. Not as a symbol. As a condition for survival.

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