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Governing the Margins: How Social Protection Deficits Turn Climate-Vulnerable Youth into Either Peacebuilders or Spoilers in Africa

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Abstract

Across much of Africa, a generation of young people is coming of age at the intersection of three compounding pressures: climate shocks that erode rural livelihoods, social protection systems too thin and fragmented to absorb the fallout, and political orders that offer them few credible channels of voice. This paper argues that this governed margin is also where the line between conflict and peace is increasingly drawn. Where the state recedes as a protector, the vacuum is filled by other actors — from informal patronage networks to violent extremist organisations that recruit on the currency of grievance and exclusion.

Methodologically, the study adopts a qualitative, multi-case synthesis design, drawing on the author's commissioned programme evaluations of livelihood, food-security, and climate-resilience interventions in Southern and East Africa — combining key-informant interviews, community-level assessments, Climate Risk Informed Decision Analysis (CRIDA), and geospatial risk mapping — triangulated with secondary literature and comparative evidence from fragile and post-conflict settings.

From this evidence, the study develops a “conflict–citizenship nexus” framework. It contends that social protection is not merely welfare policy but conflict-prevention infrastructure, and that climate-vulnerable youth become spoilers or peacebuilders largely according to whether the state recognises them as citizens with claims rather than as risks to be managed.

By connecting three usually separate literatures — climate adaptation, social protection governance, and peacebuilding — the paper explains why siloed policy responses keep failing. It concludes with implications for adaptive, youth-responsive governance aligned with Agenda 2063 and the Sustainable Development Goals, offering a Global South contribution to debates still dominated by Northern frameworks.

Keywords: Climate-Vulnerable Youth, Social Protection, Peacebuilding, Citizenship, Governance;
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