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MAPPING YOUTH ROLES IN THE CIRCULAR ECONOMY FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS (SDGS) 8, 12, AND 13, GLOBAL EVIDENCE AND AFRICAN GAPS: -A REVIEW

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Abstract: The circular economy (CE) has emerged as a transformative framework for achieving sustainability through resource efficiency, waste reduction, and innovation. Youth, representing the largest generation in history, are uniquely positioned to drive CE practices that advance Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 8 (decent work and economic growth), 12 (responsible consumption and production), and 13 (climate action).

This review synthesizes literature from 2020 to 2025 to map how youth engagement in the CE contributes to these SDGs at global and regional scales. Evidence indicates that young people play critical roles as innovators, entrepreneurs, activists, and change agents in CE-related sectors such as agriculture, renewable energy, waste valorization, and digital platforms.

Despite growing global recognition of their contributions, significant research and policy gaps persist in African contexts, where structural barriers, weak institutional support, and limited access to finance constrain youth potential. By integrating insights from cross-regional studies, this article not only highlights the transformative potential of youth-led CE initiatives but also interrogates the uneven geography of evidence, illustrating how Africa's underrepresentation in CE scholarship risks perpetuating global sustainability asymmetries.

The review advances a research agenda emphasizing context-specific data, capacity building, the integration of indigenous knowledge, and inclusive policies to unlock youth agency in CE transitions.

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Ultimately, the study underscores that achieving SDGs 8, 12, and 13 depends on moving beyond the rhetorical inclusion of youth toward building enabling ecosystems where their innovation and resilience can reshape production and consumption systems for a just and sustainable future.

Keywords: *Circular economy, youth, sustainable development goals, decent work and economic growth, responsible consumption and production, climate action*

INTRODUCTION

The urgency of global sustainability challenges climate change, biodiversity loss, resource scarcity, and widespread unemployment has intensified calls for transformative development pathways. The circular economy (CE) has gained prominence as a viable strategy for reconfiguring economic systems by decoupling growth from resource depletion, reducing waste, and generating inclusive opportunities for innovation and employment [1,2]. Unlike the traditional linear model of "take, make, dispose," the CE emphasizes restoration, regeneration, and long-term resilience, aligning closely with the targets of the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Youth, who constitute the largest generation in history at 1.2 billion people aged 15years –24years, represent both a demographic challenge and a unique opportunity for sustainability transitions [3,4]. They are disproportionately affected by unemployment and climate change, yet they also bring creativity, digital fluency, and entrepreneurial drive that are essential for advancing CE practices. Globally, youth have demonstrated growing involvement in green enterprises, sustainable consumption, and climate advocacy, positioning them as pivotal actors in advancing multiple SDGs simultaneously.

This review is situated at the intersection of CE and youth engagement with particular attention to three SDGs where these contributions are most visible and impactful. SDG 8 seeks to promote sustained, inclusive economic growth and decent work; SDG 12 emphasizes sustainable consumption and production patterns; and SDG 13 underscores urgent climate action. Together, they represent domains where youth participation in CE can deliver tangible outcomes for sustainable development [5,6].

Despite global recognition of these synergies, evidence indicates uneven participation. In high-income regions, youth are often integrated into CE transitions through supportive policies, financing, and educational programs. By contrast, African youth remain constrained by systemic barriers, including limited institutional support, weak policy frameworks, inadequate financing, and low levels of CE literacy, despite high rates of youth unemployment and pressing climate vulnerabilities [7,8]. This imbalance risks perpetuating global inequalities in sustainability transitions.

The objective of this paper is therefore to map the roles youth play in CE globally and examine their contributions to SDGs 8, 12, and 13, while critically analyzing the African context to highlight gaps in evidence, policy, and practice. The scope covers peer-reviewed literature and policy reports published between 2020 and 2025, synthesizing insights from both developed and developing regions. By adopting a comparative lens, the article contributes to ongoing debates on how youth can be empowered to drive CE and proposes directions for future research and policy, with particular emphasis on Africa.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

This review adopts a narrative synthesis approach to explore how youth participation in circular economy (CE) initiatives contributes to the achievement of SDGs 8, 12, and 13 globally, while identifying gaps in African contexts.

A narrative review was deemed appropriate because the literature on youth and CE is still emerging, fragmented across disciplines, and often situated in policy reports rather than consolidated empirical studies. This approach allows for integration of diverse sources and thematic analysis of patterns, barriers, and opportunities.

Data Sources and Search Strategy

Relevant publications were identified through searches of academic databases including Scopus, Web of Science, ScienceDirect, and Google Scholar, complemented by organizational repositories from the United Nations [9,10]. The search covered the period January 2020 to March 2025, to capture recent developments and align with the surge of CE research within the last five years.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Studies and reports were included if they:

1. Were published between 2020 and 2025.
2. Explicitly addressed youth (aged 15–35, consistent with African Union's extended youth definition).
3. Focused on CE practices relevant to SDGs 8, 12, or 13.
4. Were peer-reviewed journal articles, systematic/narrative reviews, or authoritative policy documents.

Sources were excluded if they:

- Focused solely on CE without any youth dimension.
- Were published prior to 2020, unless highly cited and directly relevant background references.
- Were opinion pieces, blogs, or non-peer-reviewed content lacking methodological rigor.

Data Extraction and Analysis

A total of 60 high-quality publications were retained after screening for relevance and credibility. Data were extracted on key variables such as type of youth role (innovator, entrepreneur, consumer, advocate), sectoral focus (agriculture, waste management, renewable energy, digital platforms), and linkages to SDGs 8, 12, and 13. Publications were then analyzed thematically, with findings organized into global trends and African-specific evidence.

Scope and Limitations

The review focuses primarily on academic literature but integrates grey literature (e.g., UN reports, NGO briefs) to capture African evidence where peer-reviewed publications remain scarce.

While the narrative approach provides flexibility and inclusivity, it does not allow for statistical meta-analysis, meaning findings are interpretive rather than quantifiable. Nevertheless, the synthesis offers a robust overview of global patterns and highlights critical evidence gaps in Africa.

Youth Roles in Advancing SDG 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth

Global evidence underscores that the circular economy (CE) provides significant opportunities for youth employment and entrepreneurship. By shifting production systems toward resource efficiency and waste reduction, CE sectors such as waste management, renewable energy, green manufacturing, and sustainable agriculture are opening new frontiers for labor markets and enterprise creation [3]. The International Laboure Organization estimates that the transition to greener economies could generate millions of jobs worldwide, many of which are particularly suited to the skills and adaptability of young people. In high-income regions, youth-led startups illustrate how circular enterprises foster inclusive growth and job creation. For example, in Europe, youth entrepreneurs in the sustainable fashion sector are reducing textile waste through upcycling and digital resale platforms, creating jobs while reshaping consumer culture [11]. In Asia, young innovators in India and China are launching CE-based enterprises in renewable energy and e-waste management, sectors that have rapidly expanded with government incentives and private investment [12]. These cases highlight how supportive ecosystems combining access to finance, incubation programs, and strong policy backing enable youth to actively contribute to SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth).

In Africa, however, the picture is more constrained. While youth show strong interest and creativity in CE enterprises, structural barriers often limit the scalability of their initiatives. Poor access to affordable finance, inadequate technical and business skills, and weak institutional support reduce opportunities for growth [7,8]. [8] for instance, document how Nigerian youth engage in palm-oil byproduct recycling and agro-waste valorization, creating jobs at the micro-enterprise level, but face challenges of market access, infrastructure, and regulatory recognition. Similar patterns are evident in Kenya, where young innovators in renewable energy have developed low-cost solar and biogas solutions but struggle to scale due to fragmented policy and financing ecosystems.

These contrasting realities reveal that while CE presents a promising pathway for youth employment globally, Africa's ability to harness its demographic dividend for CE transitions depends on addressing systemic gaps. Policies that expand access to green financing, embed CE skills in vocational training, and strengthen institutional support are essential if African youth are to fully realize their potential in driving inclusive and sustainable economic growth.

Youth Roles in Advancing SDG 12: Responsible Consumption and Production

Youth engagement is pivotal in reshaping consumption and production systems, making them more sustainable and aligned with the principles of the circular economy (CE). Globally, young people have demonstrated a willingness to embrace alternative consumption models, from zero-waste lifestyles to the use of digital platforms for sharing and reuse.

Their preferences exert pressure on producers and retailers to adopt environmentally responsible practices, directly advancing SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production) [13,14].

In Europe, student-led campaigns have successfully influenced universities and municipalities to ban single-use plastics and implement campus-wide circular waste systems. Similarly, in Japan and South Korea, youth movements have popularized eco-labeling and circular consumption platforms, creating ripple effects across regional markets. These examples highlight how youth-driven consumer trends and activism reshape supply chains and promote accountability in production.

African contexts present a more complex picture. On one hand, limited CE awareness and weak consumer education have constrained large-scale adoption of sustainable practices [10]. On the other hand, youth initiatives demonstrate significant potential. In Nigeria, young entrepreneurs are promoting agro-waste upcycling into compost and animal feed, while in Ghana, youth cooperatives engage in plastic recycling and resale for construction materials. In Kenya, digital platforms run by youth groups facilitate the resale of electronics and secondhand clothing, embedding CE principles into urban consumer culture.

These examples suggest that African youth are not passive consumers but active agents influencing local production and consumption systems. However, without systemic interventions such as embedding CE education into schools, incentivizing circular supply chains, and supporting youth-led sustainable enterprises their contributions will remain fragmented. Strengthening the consumer voice of African youth could transform markets while aligning local production systems with global sustainability agendas.

Youth Roles in Advancing SDG 13: Climate Action

The intersection of youth participation in the circular economy (CE) and climate action is particularly significant for SDG 13 (Climate Action). CE practices such as reducing waste, enhancing resource efficiency, and promoting renewable energy directly contribute to both climate mitigation and adaptation. Youth, as frontline actors, are increasingly recognized as catalysts in linking circularity to climate resilience.

Globally, youth movements have elevated the climate debate, with advocacy networks such as Fridays for Future framing climate justice as a generational imperative [15]. Beyond activism, young innovators are translating CE principles into practical climate solutions. For example, youth-led renewable energy start-ups in India and Southeast Asia are deploying off-grid solar technologies, reducing carbon emissions while expanding energy access [16]. In Europe, youth-driven enterprises in sustainable construction and low-carbon transport are reducing emissions across urban systems [17].

African youth are also linking CE practices with climate action, though within challenging structural contexts. In Kenya, young innovators are producing biogas from agricultural waste, reducing dependence on fossil fuels while addressing rural energy insecurity. In South Africa, youth advocacy groups are integrating CE into climate justice campaigns, pressing for renewable energy adoption and waste-to-value initiatives as part of national climate strategies. Nigerian youth have similarly engaged in agro-waste valorization, producing bio-briquettes as clean alternatives to firewood, thereby mitigating deforestation and emissions [8].

Despite these promising initiatives, African youth face hurdles such as limited climate financing, policy fragmentation, and weak institutional backing [7,18].

Unlike in Europe and Asia, where youth-led climate innovations often receive government and private-sector support, African efforts tend to remain small-scale and under-resourced. Strengthening access to climate finance, scaling youth innovations, and mainstreaming CE in national climate strategies would significantly enhance Africa's contribution to SDG 13.

Overall, youth engagement in CE not only contributes to climate mitigation but also builds resilience against climate-related shocks, positioning them as essential actors in the global climate agenda.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

African Gaps and Challenges

Although youth participation in the circular economy (CE) is gaining global recognition, African contexts remain underrepresented in both research and practice. The review highlights four interrelated challenges that explain this imbalance: policy gaps, financial constraints, educational deficits, and institutional weaknesses.

Policy Gaps. While Europe and Asia have established clear policy frameworks that mainstream CE into national sustainability agendas, African policies are often fragmented or remain at the pilot stage [2,19]. For instance, the European Union's Circular Economy Action Plan provides a comprehensive roadmap with explicit youth inclusion strategies [20], while China's circular economy law mandates resource efficiency across industries and promotes green skills training for young professionals. In contrast, many African governments only reference CE indirectly through waste management, climate adaptation, or green growth policies [7]. For example, South Africa's 2020 Circular Economy Roadmap outlines principles of resource recovery and industrial symbiosis but lacks strong mechanisms for youth capacity-building and entrepreneurship. Similarly, Nigeria has embedded elements of circularity in its National Policy on Solid Waste Management (2020) and the Energy Transition Plan (2022), but these documents remain fragmented and do not provide a coherent national CE strategy. Efforts by state governments such as Lagos State's ban on single-use plastics and Oyo State's digital waste management app illustrate localized action, but they are yet to be harmonized into a national framework. This lack of coherent policy direction limits opportunities for youth to access structured support, funding, and training, and reduces the visibility of CE as a viable career pathway. By comparison, youth in Europe and Asia benefit from institutionalized programs that integrate CE into education, entrepreneurship incubation, and job creation initiatives.

Strengthening African policy coherence around CE is therefore critical for unlocking the demographic dividend of youth and ensuring that circular strategies contribute meaningfully to SDGs 8, 12, and 13.

Financial Constraints. Access to finance remains one of the most persistent barriers for African youth in CE. Unlike regions where venture capital, impact investing, and green financing instruments are expanding rapidly, African youth entrepreneurs often rely on small grants, family networks, or informal savings groups [21]. This reliance on micro-finance mechanisms restricts the scalability, innovation, and long-term sustainability of youth-led circular initiatives.

For example, while youth start-ups in Europe benefit from robust support through incubators, accelerator programs, and blended finance instruments that de-risk green ventures (World Economic Forum, 2021), similar mechanisms remain rare or underfunded across much of Africa [7,22]. In Nigeria, youth circular start-ups such as Pakam and Ecobarter have struggled to scale without access to consistent investment, depending largely on donor-backed competitions, crowdfunding, or prize funding. National development banks and commercial lenders have yet to mainstream CE financing, with most loan products still designed for conventional agriculture or manufacturing. Some progress is emerging. The African Development Bank's Youth Entrepreneurship and Innovation Multi-Donor Trust Fund and the African Circular Economy Facility (ACEF) are piloting targeted financing schemes, but their reach is limited relative to the scale of youth demand. Similarly, Nigeria's YouWin Connect and Tony Elumelu Foundation entrepreneurship programs occasionally fund circular enterprises, though not as a strategic priority. Without institutionalized green finance pipelines such as concessional loans, tax incentives, and venture partnerships youth entrepreneurs across Africa remain at a disadvantage compared to their global peers.

Addressing this financing gap is essential for unleashing the full potential of youth in CE, as it directly impacts their ability to create sustainable jobs, reduce waste, and drive climate-friendly innovation, thereby advancing SDGs 8, 12, and 13. Educational Deficits. Youth engagement in CE is closely tied to education and skills development. In Asia and Europe, CE concepts are being mainstreamed into curricula at vocational, tertiary, and professional levels, equipping young people with the technical knowledge required to lead CE transitions [23, 24]. In contrast, most African education systems have been slow to integrate CE into formal curricula, leaving many young people without the green skills demanded by emerging CE industries [25,10]. The absence of targeted CE training contributes to a gap between youth enthusiasm for sustainability and their practical capacity to engage meaningfully.

Institutional Weaknesses. Finally, weak institutional support undermines youth participation in CE across Africa. While youth-led cooperatives and grassroots initiatives exist in waste valorization, agriculture, and renewable energy, they often operate informally, without adequate infrastructure, regulatory recognition, or market linkages [26,8]. This contrasts sharply with other regions, where enabling ecosystems including research centers, innovation hubs, and multi-stakeholder platforms facilitate youth engagement in CE transitions [1,27].

Taken together, these challenges underscore a structural imbalance: Africa possesses one of the world's largest youth populations and faces some of the most urgent sustainability threats, yet its youth remain marginal in CE transitions. Unless systemic reforms are undertaken through coherent policies, targeted financing, educational integration, and institutional strengthening African youth risk being excluded from global CE opportunities, perpetuating sustainability asymmetries between regions.

Future Directions and Research Gaps

This review identifies three priorities:

1. Empirical evidence from Africa: More field-based studies are needed to document youth contributions to CE and SDGs in African contexts.

2. Policy-focused research: Comparative studies on enabling environments could guide African governments.
3. Interdisciplinary approaches: Integration of indigenous knowledge, digital innovations, and CE practices could strengthen youth-led initiatives [28].

CONCLUSIONS

This review has examined the multifaceted roles of youth in advancing circular economy (CE) practices and their contributions to Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 8 (decent work and economic growth), 12 (responsible consumption and production), and 13 (climate action).. The synthesis of global evidence demonstrates that young people act as innovators, entrepreneurs, consumers, and advocates in driving CE transitions. Their participation has fostered job creation, promoted sustainable production and consumption, and contributed to climate action through both grassroots activism and enterprise innovation. These roles underscore the transformative potential of youth as agents of systemic change in sustainability pathways.

However, the analysis also reveals sharp global asymmetries. While youth in Europe, Asia, and parts of Latin America benefit from supportive ecosystems that integrate policy, finance, and education, African youth face persistent structural barriers. Limited access to finance, weak policy frameworks, inadequate integration of CE into education systems, and fragile institutional support constrain their ability to scale innovations. This underrepresentation not only reduces Africa's contribution to global CE transitions but also risks deepening sustainability inequalities between regions. The review makes three key contributions. First, it maps youth roles in CE across multiple contexts, aligning them explicitly with Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 8 (decent work and economic growth), 12 (responsible consumption and production), and 13 (climate action). Second, it identifies critical gaps in African contexts, highlighting the need for context-specific research and policy. Third, it advances a future agenda that emphasizes building enabling ecosystems through coherent policies, inclusive financing, integration of indigenous knowledge, and targeted capacity building.

Ultimately, the achievement of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 8 (decent work and economic growth), 12 (responsible consumption and production), and 13 (climate action) depends not only on technological or policy innovation but also on recognizing and empowering youth as central actors in CE transitions. For Africa, this requires moving beyond rhetorical inclusion to practical action investing in youth capacities, expanding opportunities for green employment, and embedding CE in educational and institutional systems. Doing so will not only unlock the demographic dividend but also position African youth as co-creators of a just and sustainable global future.

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MAPIRANJE ULOGA MLADIH U CIRKULARNOJ EKONOMIJI U OSTVARIVANJU CILJEVA ODRŽIVOG RAZVOJA-COD 8, 12, 13: -PREGLED GLOBALNIH DOKAZA SA FOKUSOM NA NEDOSTATKE U AFRICI

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Apstrakt: Cirkularna ekonomija (CE) pojavila se kao transformativni okvir za postizanje održivosti kroz efikasno korišćenje resursa, smanjenje otpada i inovacije.
Mladi, kao najveća generacija u istoriji, jedinstveno su pozicionirani da podstiču prakse cirkularne ekonomije koje doprinose ostvarivanju Ciljeva održivog razvoja-COR, (eng. SDGs) 8 (Dostojanstven rad i ekonomski rast), 12 (Odgovorna potrošnja i proizvodnja) i 13 (Akcija za klimatske promene).
Ovaj pregled sintetizuje naučnu literaturu iz perioda od 2020 do 2025. godine, kako bi mapirao-pokazao na koje načine angažovanje mladih u CE doprinosi ovim ciljevima na globalnom i regionalnom nivou.
Dokazi pokazuju da mladi imaju ključne uloge kao inovatori, preduzetnici, aktivisti i akteri promena u sektorima povezanim sa CE, kao što su poljoprivreda, obnovljivi izvori energije, valorizacija otpada i digitalne platforme.
Uprkos rastućem globalnom prepoznavanju njihovog doprinosa, značajne istraživačke i političke praznine i dalje postoje u afričkim kontekstima, gde strukturne prepreke, slaba institucionalna podrška i ograničen pristup finansijama ograničavaju potencijal mladih. Integracijom uvida iz međuregionalnih studija, ovaj rad ne samo da ističe transformativni potencijal inicijativa mladih u okviru CE, već i problematizuje ne ujednačenu geografiju dokaza, pokazujući, kako nedovoljna zastupljenost Afrike u oblasti CE istraživanja može doprineti održavanju globalnih nejednakosti u održivosti.
Pregled predlaže istraživačku agendu koja naglašava potrebu za kontekst-specifičnim podacima, izgradnjom kapaciteta, integracijom autohtonog znanja i inkluzivnim politikama koje mogu osloboditi agenciju mladih u tranzicijama ka cirkularnoj ekonomiji.

Konačno, studija naglašava da postizanje COR (Ciljeva održivog razvoja, eng. SDGs) 8, 12 i 13 zahteva prelazak sa retoričkog uključivanja mladih na stvaranje podsticajnih ekosistema u kojima njihove inovacije i otpornost mogu preoblikovati sisteme proizvodnje i potrošnje u pravcu pravedne i održive budućnosti.

Ključne reči: *Cirkularna ekonomija, mladi, ciljevi održivog razvoja, dostojanstven rad i ekonomski rast, odgovorna potrošnja i proizvodnja, klimatska akcija*

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