

Rural Action for Climate Resilience: Youth Experiences of Climate Change

As we commemorated Youth Month this year was “Skills for the Changing World – Empowering Youth for Meaningful Economic Participation,” the resilience and innovation of rural youth needs to be included in national understanding. The rural youth who are participating in the Youth Ambassadors for Climate Change (YACC) are sharing their stories about how climate change threatens not only their environment but also their economic futures, and yet in the centre of this crisis, they are showing leadership and ways to build community resilience.

As climate change continues to affect communities across the globe, its impacts are becoming increasingly felt in South Africa’s rural regions. For many young people living in provinces like the Eastern Cape and Limpopo, the experience of climate change is not theoretical; it is a lived reality. However, with limited formal education on the issue and the migration of skilled youth to urban centres, rural communities face growing challenges in adapting to the climate crisis.

Through community-based workshops, informal education, and personal observation skills, rural youth in the Rural Action for Climate Resilience (RACR) project are identifying the severity of changing weather patterns, water scarcity, and land degradation, and finding ways to educate others. The YACC youth leaders from Dordrecht Legal Advice and Community Development Agency, Flagstaff Paralegal Advice Office, Mount Frere Paralegal Advice Centre and Sandsloot Youth Development Centre have been working to raise awareness and engagement with climate change in their communities. They conducted interviews with youth in their communities to highlight their experiences of climate change.

Sandsloot, Ga-Masenya in Mogalakwena Municipality, Limpopo

In Limpopo, within the Mogalakwena municipality, young people have noticed uncharacteristic weather changes. Increased rainfall during the rainy season and soaring summer temperatures have contributed to water scarcity. Mining activities have already negatively impacted their quality of life, making these communities more at risk to climate shocks. Tshego Molokomme, residing in Sandsloot Ga-Masenya, shared, “Mining activities contribute significantly to climate change by polluting the air and causing abnormal weather patterns.” Tshego added that, “Climate change has impacted my family's financial stability, as farming operations are disrupted by extreme weather, leading to the 'no work, no pay' situation.” In Sandsloot, Tebatso Lekalakala noted, “Some community members are actively discussing the negative impact of chemical use in mining, yet mining companies are reluctant to engage effectively on climate change issues”.



Thato William Molokomme, a Youth Ambassador for Climate Change (YACC), with the top three scorers of a climate change quiz conducted in his community.



Thato William Molokomme, and young people preparing the soil at the Sandsloot Youth Development Centre Food garden which supports the community and the organisation through selling and donating the produce. It's also used for permaculture trainings.

Flagstaff, Eastern Cape

In Flagstaff, the dry winter months have led to a heavier reliance on dams and rivers for water. When rain does fall, it often comes in heavy downpours that cause flooding, and the water is frequently of poor quality. "Sometimes it is dirty and dark, so it cannot be used," said Bhekikhanya Thanzi, a 27-year-old from the Gabajana location. Flooding and droughts have also resulted in widespread crop failure in this area, while veldfires continue to pose serious environmental and safety risks. Poor waste management and sanitation services have polluted scarce water sources. Ms. Balungile, a 28-year-old from Mhlanga location, said, "This becomes a bigger problem in winter as it is the dry season, so people rely heavily on water from rivers, which is dirtied by pollution. This causes people and livestock to be sick."



Siyasanga Mhatu, a Youth Ambassador for Climate Change (YACC), with learners and a teacher from Zamekile Junior Secondary School.

Dordrecht, Eastern Cape

In Dordrecht, youth reported increasingly erratic weather patterns. According to Alime Skweliti, a 14-year-old, "The Weather changes three times a day. Winter is very cold, and summer is very hot, and that leads to dry soil." Severe water shortages caused by droughts have led to prolonged water cuts, leaving communities without water for days. This, in turn, has caused vegetation loss, crop failure and livestock deaths, deeply impacting local livelihoods.

In a country where the national unemployment rate stands at 32.9% and youth unemployment, 46.1% in the first quarter of 2025, climate change has made earning an income even more difficult in rural areas. In Dordrecht, many depend on food gardening for income. Siphwe Tyobeka, a 22-year-old, shared, "My family's sole income comes from vegetable production and selling veggies, so when we saw a decline in our production, we suffered dearly." In his case, his aunt was forced to relocate to farming areas to seek employment.

Similarly, Anganathi Langa, a 23-year-old, explained that her mother lost her job due to climate impacts, prompting her to move to another city where the effects were less severe. Structural challenges, such as poor service delivery, have further worsened the impacts of climate change. Anganathi Langa also shared that roads in Dordrecht are often damaged by heavy rains and left unrepaired, making it difficult to commute. "Most of the time, road workers are not going to work every day, and they are not getting paid enough," she said.

Despite these challenges, communities are finding ways to adapt. Many have started using communal initiatives using permaculture practices in their gardens. Alime Skweliti from Dordrecht Legal Advice and Community Development Agency shared that their community was also taught how to make compost, harvest water, and avoid the use of chemical fertilisers.



Lusakhanya Ndondlo, a Youth Ambassador for Climate Change (YACC), conducting a climate change awareness workshop with learners from Anako Primary School in Dordrecht.



Learners making climate change awareness posters to use during a picket on Deforestation.

Mount Frere, Eastern Cape

In Mount Frere, similar to Dordrecht, climate change awareness-raising initiatives have been introduced in schools and churches. Usesetu Nongongo, a 29-year-old Agricultural student from Mount Frere, shared, "Religion plays a significant role in climate change adaptation, by incorporating environmental stewardship into our faith practices".



Recipients of the training run by Mount Frere Paralegal Advice Centre and their Youth Ambassador for Climate Change (YACC) on organic gardening.



Recipients of seedlings following a workshop run by Asipumze Luthuli, the YACC based at Mount Frere Paralegal Advice centre.

Common Thread

The experiences shared by youth across rural South Africa underscore the increasing barriers to sustainable adaptation and highlight the urgent need to increase youth participation in building climate resilience within communities. Despite the challenges faced by these communities, new practices have been implemented to adapt to the disruption caused by climate change. More communities have started communal initiatives where they make use of permaculture practices in their gardening.

Collaboration between all stakeholders is vital to ensuring the sustainability of rural communities. While school and church campaigns are valuable tools in

educating the public about climate change, more action is needed to advocate for climate-resilient practices and empower youth to lead these initiatives as custodians of the future.

The voices of rural youth highlight both the deepening urgency of the climate crisis and the gaps in support structures needed to confront it. Though grassroots efforts such as permaculture and community education offer promise, they are not enough. For real and lasting adaptation, South Africa must invest in youth-led solutions, infrastructure, and inclusive, sustained dialogue. Only through coordinated action can rural communities be equipped to face the climate challenges of today and those yet to come.

Through developing adaptation skills, engaging in advocacy, and leading local initiatives, young people are already laying the groundwork for change. What they need now is targeted support, training, investment, and inclusion in decision-making to scale these efforts and secure their rightful place in shaping a sustainable future. Empowering youth is not only a response to the climate crisis; it is a national imperative for economic justice and resilience.

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The Rural Action for Climate Resilience (RACR) project empowers rural communities in South Africa to build resilience against climate change. By partnering with community-based organisations and faith leaders, RACR enhances the social, economic, and environmental well-being of rural populations, particularly in the Eastern, Western, Limpopo, Free State and Northern Cape provinces. The project is funded by the Embassy of Ireland.