



Youth Leaders to EU: Kenya's Democracy Needs Young People at the Center

By Mercy Chelangat

I was honored to attend a recent youth engagement meeting at the European Union Delegation to Kenya. The meeting brought together youth representatives from political party foundations under the Women and Youth Democratic Engagement (WYDE) project to reflect on the role of young people throughout Kenya's electoral cycle, before, during, and after elections.

The dialogue was held in the presence of the Kajsa Ollongren, who was in Nairobi for a three-day visit focused on human rights dialogue. In attendance were staff from the Governance and Political Section of the EU Delegation to Kenya and key international partners supporting youth participation in democratic processes. We were also joined by three members of the EU Youth Sounding Board, who shared valuable insights on youth participation at national, regional, and international levels, as well as how youth-led research can inform democratic decision-making.

The discussions went far beyond voter turnout. Participants reflected on how young people influence political outcomes through civic education, digital advocacy, community mobilization, peacebuilding, and post-election accountability initiatives. The dialogue also foregrounded human rights, underscoring the growing risks youth face when engaging politically—from shrinking civic space to threats against freedom of expression.

Despite representing different political party backgrounds, participants reached a clear consensus: youth issues transcend party lines. Unemployment, political inclusion, protection of civic space, access to information, and safety during election periods emerged as shared concerns. This convergence showed that while political ideologies may differ, the lived realities of young people in Kenya remain remarkably similar.

The conversation drew heavily on real-life Kenyan experiences, with particular reference to recent Gen Z-led protests that have reshaped youth political engagement. These moments of youth-led mobilization illustrated both the power of collective action and the risks young people face when demanding accountability and justice. Participants also noted that the digital sphere has become a powerful organizing tool, accelerating civic participation while simultaneously exposing young people to surveillance, intimidation, and misinformation.

Importantly, the meeting modeled inclusive engagement. Representatives from special interest groups, including persons with disabilities and indigenous communities, shared how electoral processes affect youth differently depending on social location, geography, and access to resources. Their participation reinforced the need for election-related programming that prioritizes inclusion, accessibility, and the protection of marginalized youth voices.

As Kenya prepares for the 2027 General Elections, the message from the meeting was clear: young people are not merely beneficiaries of democracy, they are its architects. Creating safe, inclusive, and meaningful avenues for youth participation is not optional; it is fundamental to the legitimacy and resilience of Kenya's democratic processes.

In a political landscape often characterized by polarization, the convergence of youth voices across party lines serves as a powerful reminder: when young people are centered, democracy becomes more representative, accountable, and alive.

This publication was funded by the European Union. Its contents are the sole responsibility of Mercy Chelangat and do not necessarily reflect the views of the European Union.



In partnership with



The African Women's
Development and
Communication Network



SDGs KENYA FORUM
Coalition for Sustainable Development

