



“The Future of Democracy in Kenya must be shaped with Youth, not for Youth” – Reflections from the EU Youth Dialogue on Democracy and Human Rights in Kenya

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On February 9th, I had the privilege of participating in a dialogue hosted at the offices of the Delegation of the European Union to Kenya, where youth alumni of EU programs for democracy and political empowerment and EU officials gathered to reflect on democracy, elections, and human rights in Kenya. The meeting was particularly significant as H.E. Kajsa Ollongren, the EU Special Representative for Human Rights, who was on an official visit to Kenya, joined us.

The dialogue was centered on the WYDE initiative, which seeks to strengthen the rights, empowerment, and participation in public and political life of youth and women as key actors of development and change. WYDE fellows who were present shared their experiences and transformation post-training. For me, the meeting was very meaningful as I felt actively welcomed in a space traditionally dominated by diplomats and policymakers.

Bringing Youth Research into Policy Conversations

During the discussion, I had the opportunity to share insights from a recent study I conducted on youth participation in Kenya's electoral processes. The research examined patterns of youth engagement, perceptions of electoral processes, and the structural barriers that continue to shape political participation among young people in Kenya.

One of the key reflections I shared was that while Kenyan youth are highly politically aware, their participation in civic processes is threatened by police brutality, goon violence, high cost of living, unemployment, and exclusion from decision-making processes. Young people remain both the most mobilized and the most vulnerable actors during elections.

The Importance of Listening to Youth

What made the conversation particularly valuable was the openness of H.E. Kajsa Ollongren to listen and engage with our perspectives. Rather than treating our presence as a symbolic exercise, the discussion allowed space for critical reflection on the structural challenges facing democracy and human rights in Kenya. We questioned the EU's response towards the police killing of protestors during the Gen Z protests and the forms of support granted to young people who aspire to contest electoral seats in the upcoming 2027 General Elections.

In my remarks, I emphasized that youth should not only be seen as beneficiaries of capacity-building programs but as knowledge producers and partners in governance reform. Young researchers, activists, and community organizers are already generating evidence, mobilizing communities, and proposing solutions to our governance challenges.

Programs such as WYDE demonstrate the value of investing in youth, but their impacts will depend on what comes next. Will the youth insights be integrated into policy processes? Will young people be supported in their quest to put theory into practice? Will such programs be cascaded to the grassroots where there are arguably more needed?

