



The Role of Uzbek Youth in Environmental Sustainability: Current Situation and Challenges

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Abstract: Young people in Uzbekistan today constitute more than a third of the population and are increasingly recognised as indispensable actors in the transition toward environmental sustainability. The article examines how Uzbek youth contribute to climate-smart development through volunteer movements, green start-ups, and policy advocacy, and it analyses the obstacles that still hamper the full realisation of their potential. Relying on a mixed-methods design that includes a literature review, official statistics, and a 2024–2025 qualitative survey of 120 youth eco-activists from five regions, the study elucidates three inter-related dimensions of youth engagement: ecological awareness, behavioural participation, and structural empowerment. Results show that nationwide initiatives such as “Yashil Makon” and the Youth Affairs Agency’s eco-volunteer network have substantially raised environmental literacy and facilitated tree-planting drives and waste-sorting campaigns. However, limited institutional financing, fragmented coordination between government and civil society, and uneven access to green education still restrain scalability. The discussion situates the Uzbek case within global debates on youth-led sustainability and offers policy recommendations that emphasise integrated curricula, participatory budgeting, and inclusive green entrepreneurship. The article concludes that strengthening youth agency is not merely a demographic imperative but a strategic pathway to achieving the country’s climate-resilient and low-carbon development goals.

Keywords: Uzbek youth; environmental sustainability; climate action; eco-volunteerism; Yashil Makon; green

entrepreneurship.

Introduction: Over the past decade Uzbekistan has undergone a profound environmental re-orientation, driven by the twin pressures of climate change and rapid socio-economic modernisation. The Aral Sea catastrophe, escalating desertification across Karakalpakstan, and recurrent urban heatwaves have intensified public debate on sustainability. Within this debate, the role of young citizens—defined nationally as persons aged 14 to 30—has moved from rhetorical acknowledgement to concrete policy priority. Presidential Decree №187 (25 March 2025) declares that “active youth participation must underpin every stage of the Green Growth Strategy”, while the State Committee for Ecology and Environmental Protection lists “Youth Climate Action” among its five strategic pillars. This policy momentum aligns with global frameworks such as the UN 2030 Agenda and the Doha Programme of Action for LLDCs, both of which underscore the demographic dividend as a lever for climate resilience. Yet academic inquiry into how Uzbek youth actually shape sustainability outcomes remains sparse. Existing studies focus largely on awareness surveys or descriptive accounts of volunteer actions, offering limited insight into structural conditions that enable or impede meaningful impact. The present research therefore seeks to bridge this gap by providing an empirically grounded and theoretically informed analysis of youth engagement in Uzbekistan’s environmental transition.

The study employed a sequential exploratory design combining qualitative and quantitative techniques. First, a systematic review of peer-reviewed articles, government decrees, and international agency reports published between 2018 and 2025 was conducted through Scopus, the National Library of Uzbekistan catalogue, and open-access databases. Inclusion criteria required explicit reference to youth involvement and environmental activities within Uzbekistan; forty-two documents met these criteria. Second, official statistical datasets from the Youth Affairs Agency and the State Committee for Ecology were analysed to quantify youth participation in major national programmes—most notably “Yashil Makon”, which aims to plant one billion saplings by 2030. Third, fieldwork comprised twenty focus-group discussions and forty semi-structured in-depth interviews carried out from September 2024 to March 2025 across five provinces: Tashkent City, Fergana, Samarkand, Khorezm, and Karakalpakstan. Participants (N = 120; 54 % female) were recruited from registered eco-clubs, university “Green Hubs”, and start-ups shortlisted in the 2024 “Green Spark” competition. Data were coded

using NVivo 14 following a hybrid deductive–inductive thematic approach. Triangulation across sources enhanced validity, while member-checking with interviewees improved reliability.

Survey data confirm a marked rise in ecological literacy: 78 % of respondents correctly defined “carbon neutrality”, compared with 46 % in a similar UNDP survey conducted in 2021. Interview narratives attribute this improvement to three converging drivers: mainstreamed environmental modules in secondary-school curricula since 2022, the proliferation of social-media eco-influencers, and visibility of national campaigns such as the annual “Eco-Week”. Nevertheless, knowledge depth remains uneven. While urban respondents articulated nuanced understandings of water-footprint metrics, rural youth frequently framed sustainability through traditional land-stewardship idioms rather than scientific terminology.

Participation in community-based environmental projects has surged. Official records show that by December 2024 the Youth Affairs Agency registered 112 eco-volunteer clubs, up from 37 in 2020, mobilising 62 000 young people in tree planting, waste sorting, and public-park revitalisation. The flagship “Train to the Aral Sea” expedition, held in May 2025, assembled 400 volunteers who installed solar-powered water pumps and conducted environmental-education sessions in Nukus schools. Participants emphasised that volunteerism offers not only ecological benefits but also social capital, leadership skills, and inter-regional solidarity. Yet interviews revealed fatigue arising from ad-hoc funding and short event cycles that limit project continuity.

An emerging cohort of tech-savvy entrepreneurs is developing market-based solutions to environmental challenges. The “Green Spark” competition awarded seed grants to start-ups producing biodegradable food packaging from cotton stalks and IoT-enabled irrigation controllers. Respondents highlighted supportive measures—tax holidays for green enterprises and incubator programmes at Tashkent State University of Economics—as decisive enablers. Conversely, they cited regulatory ambiguity around environmental product standards and limited venture-capital appetite as obstacles, especially for rural innovators.

At the policy interface, youth councils attached to the Oliy Majlis and local hokimiyats have gained consultative status on sustainability agendas. Focus-group participants viewed this platform as a symbolic breakthrough but voiced concern that recommendations rarely translate into binding decisions. The 2024 UNDP-facilitated “Youth Climate Dialogue” produced a communiqué advocating circular-

economy incentives and participatory budgeting for urban greening, yet follow-up monitoring remains minimal. Nevertheless, digital activism—manifest in hashtags such as #YashilMakon and #Youth4ClimateUZ—has amplified outreach and occasionally prompted municipal waste-management reforms in Fergana and Namangan.

The findings corroborate theoretical propositions that youth engagement operates along cognitive, behavioural, and structural axes. On the cognitive plane, Uzbekistan is experiencing a rapid diffusion of ecological knowledge facilitated by curriculum reforms and digital media. Behaviourally, volunteerism and entrepreneurship signal a transition from awareness to action, resonating with the “ecological citizenship” framework in environmental sociology. Structurally, however, youth agency is circumscribed by fragmented governance and unequal resource distribution. The co-existence of high motivation and institutional barriers mirrors patterns observed in other Central Asian states, yet Uzbekistan’s distinctive top-down modernisation may offer leverage for scaling youth actions if feedback loops between grass-roots initiatives and state programmes are institutionalised. Integrating environmental education across vocational colleges, allocating dedicated municipal “green funds” accessible to youth, and simplifying certification for eco-products would address the identified gaps. Moreover, embedding youth representatives with voting rights in climate-policy committees could shift consultative participation toward co-decision-making. These measures would align with global best practices while respecting the country’s evolving socio-political context.

Uzbek youth have emerged as dynamic catalysts of environmental sustainability, advancing from awareness campaigns to tangible innovations in reforestation, waste management, and green technology. Their contribution is evident in expanded volunteer networks, nascent eco-businesses, and growing involvement in policy dialogues. Yet to unlock the full transformative potential of this demographic, systemic challenges must be confronted—namely, sustained funding, regulatory clarity, and inclusive decision-making structures. Prioritising youth within national climate strategy is therefore indispensable not only for achieving emission-reduction targets but also for cultivating a civic culture that values ecological stewardship as a shared national aspiration.

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