

Youth Leadership Transition in Environmental Governance

The Case of Model Forests (MFs)

Maria Steffanny Bashi Pizarro, Bemmy Granados, Natalia Ruiz-Guevara, and Claudia Rojas Ríos

Background and Rationale

Latin America is a strategic region for global sustainability: it is home to nearly 40% of the planet's species and encompasses immense cultural and territorial diversity. However, the region faces increasing pressures associated with climate change, environmental degradation, extractive expansion, and socio-environmental conflicts. In this context, place-based governance spaces become especially relevant. Model Forests (MFs), organized through the Latin American Model Forest Network (LAMFN), function as multi-stakeholder platforms that promote integrated landscape management through a place-based governance approach. The sustainability of these spaces depends largely on their ability to ensure generational leadership transition. However, while youth participation is frequently promoted in discourse, structural gaps persist that limit young people's effective influence in decision-making processes and leadership transitions.

Research Question

How can youth leadership transitions in environmental governance be facilitated in Latin America and the Caribbean, using the Model Forest framework?

Specific Questions:

- What practices and initiatives facilitate youth inclusion and participation in environmental governance within the LAMFN?
- What gaps and opportunities remain for making generational leadership transition effective?

Methodology

This study adopts a Community-Engaged Research (CER) approach, which promotes meaningful participation of territorial actors throughout the research process. Between May and September 2025, semi-structured interviews and dialogues were conducted with 15 individuals connected to ten Model Forests across Latin America and the Caribbean. The study was complemented by document review and participant observation within the LAMFN Youth Network.

Findings

The analysis identified two major categories: **enabling conditions for leadership transition** and **persistent gaps and barriers**.

Conditions that Facilitate Youth Leadership Transition

Connection to the territory and sense of belonging	Universities as entry points	Intergenerational mentoring and horizontal accompaniment	Strategic networks and alliances	Shared principles of inclusion and equity
--	------------------------------	--	----------------------------------	---

Other enabling factors include: dedicated funding for youth, strategic use of technology, environmental education as a transformative political practice, ecotourism as a space for youth leadership, and decentralization of operations.

Gaps and Challenges

Internal Challenges (Governance Platforms)

Unequal participation (especially Indigenous youth)	Lack of clarity in governance structures	Governance perceived as weak or lacking legitimacy	Resistance from traditional leaders	Limited recognition of youth contributions
---	--	--	-------------------------------------	--

Structural Challenges

Employment instability and dependence on projects	Youth migration due to lack of opportunities	Economic and political barriers to exercising leadership	Risk of tokenistic participation	Limited recognition of youth contributions
---	--	--	----------------------------------	--

Key Messages

- Integrated landscape management presents a strategic opportunity: strengthening territorial identities can help consolidate sustainable youth leadership.
- Effective leadership transition requires validation, dialogue, and shared decision-making spaces.
- When young people do not understand how the platform operates or do not feel validated, participation loses sustainability.
- Merely symbolic participation limits genuine transition into decision-making spaces.

Recommendations

- Institutionalize spaces with youth voice and voting power.
- Create formal intergenerational mentoring programs.
- Ensure governance structures are clear and accessible.
- Strengthen territorial incentives that reduce migration.
- Design differentiated strategies for underrepresented youth.
- Consolidate youth networks as platforms for professional development.
- Improve management capacities and access to funding.

The authors are deeply grateful to EcoAgriculture Partners for promoting the emergence of this research pathway. We also thank the Semillas de Mokatán Research Seedbed for providing this first opportunity to engage in Participatory Action Research.