

# Spinning the Yarn: Exploring the Potential of Narratives Framed by Children and the Youth in Shaping Ethics, Beliefs and Value Systems for Plastics Governance in Africa

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## Abstract

*It is now widely acknowledged that formal law is limited. This is particularly in contexts where: 1) the law permits the coexistence of different legal orders, and 2) there exist juridical norms that have a greater appeal compared to the formal norms. This limitation of formal law has especially been evidenced in the modern and democratised era of international environmental law and policy. For this reason, interest has been sparked regarding other informal norms, such as ethics and belief and value systems, that can be leveraged in environmental governance. Furthermore, the limitation has raised questions about the actors that will participate in the formulation of these informal norms. Based on the foregoing, this study seeks to investigate the role children, and the youth can play in shaping ethics, beliefs and customs for plastic governance in Africa. Employing the Narrative Policy Framework, the study makes the argument that children and the youth in Africa have the capacity to frame persuasive narratives which could mould ethics, beliefs and customs to the advantage of plastic governance in Africa.*

**Keywords:** Children, informal law, narratives, Africa, environmental governance, plastic pollution

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## I. Introduction

The idea of divergence between ‘the rules that purport to govern the relations of man and those that in fact govern him’ is not novel. Jurisprudential scholars have conceptualised and framed this dichotomy in different ways over time; Roscoe Pound with his law-in-books vis a vis law-in-action<sup>1</sup> and Ehrlich with his law-in-books vis a vis living-law.<sup>2</sup> Pound’s and Ehrlich’s dichotomies are underscored by other scholars from the historical and anthropological schools of thought. These scholars stressed that any study of law is incomplete without reference to the society within which it emanates. This is based on the understanding that law is an expression of a society’s peculiar culture, values and norms.<sup>3</sup>

The ‘law in books’ can be understood to be formal law. It emanates from the state and is formulated by the different legislative bodies.<sup>4</sup> Notably, the law in books is not the only ordering force in society. ‘Living law,’ which can be referred to as informal law, cannot be ignored.<sup>5</sup> Though expressed and enforced in different ways, it is just as influential as the formal law.<sup>6</sup> Echoing Kameri-Mbote, colouring norms as formal or informal may change the way these norms are perceived, but not their influence in society.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Roscoe Pound found issue with the legal gap that existed between the ‘law in books’ vis a vis ‘the law in action.’ Law in books here referred to the legal writing, old established principles and regulatory statutes found in lawyers’ books, while ‘law in action’ referred to the law administered by the courts. According to Pound, it was the latter that preserved ‘an appearance of life in legal theory.’ See Pua-schunder J, ‘Behavioural international law: Law-in-books vs. law-in-action resembling the neoclassical economics vs. behavioural economics debate’ 28th Research Association for Interdisciplinary Studies Conference, Washington, 26-27 June 2022, 30; Halperin J, ‘Law in books and law in action: The problem of legal change’ 64(1) *Maine Law Review*, 2011, 46; Pound R, ‘Law in books and law in action’ 44(12) *American Law Review*, 1910, 16-22.

<sup>2</sup> Ehrlich’s legal philosophy presented the ‘law in books’- ‘living law’ dichotomy, stressing that the core of legal development lies in society itself, not legislation or judicial decision. Based on this, his formulation of law in books not only included statutory enactments but also the law in casebooks. Living law was perceived to exist outside the law in books and accurately reflect the interactions of man and man. See Singh S, ‘Eugen Ehrlich’s ‘Living Law’ and its Legacy for Legal Pluralism’ Social Science Research Network, 2010, 3; O’Day J, ‘Ehrlich’s living law revisited- further vindication for a prophet without honour’ 18(1) *Case Western Reserve Law Review*, 1966, 213.

<sup>3</sup> Wacks R, *Understanding jurisprudence: An introduction to legal theory*, 6ed, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2021, 196.

<sup>4</sup> Kameri- Mbote P, *Contending norms in a plural legal system: The limits of formal law*, University of Nairobi School of Law, Nairobi, 2021, 12.

<sup>5</sup> Halperin J, ‘Law in books and law in action: The power of legal change’, 52.

<sup>6</sup> Kameri- Mbote P, *Contending norms in a plural legal system: The limits of formal law*, 12.

<sup>7</sup> Kameri- Mbote P, *Contending norms in a plural legal system: The limits of formal law*, 12.

It is under the umbrella of informal law that ethics, beliefs and value systems, in addition to the notorious customary and religious norms fall.<sup>8</sup> These informal laws emerge from social practice and acquire legitimacy over time, specifying the acceptable behaviour in the social contexts from which they are formulated.<sup>9</sup> Adherence to these informal laws is not based on coercion but on fear of disapproval, censure, shaming, loss of face, reputation or consequences beyond life.<sup>10</sup> This has been largely expounded on in Moore's work, which developed the idea of semi-autonomous social fields. These semi-autonomous social fields are defined by their normgenerating and complianceinducing capacities.<sup>11</sup>

Due to the existence of these informal laws, and their often-understated influence in society, the effectiveness of formal law is limited. Space is created for people to adhere to other norms/laws that they believe are better suited for them.<sup>12</sup> Formal law is particularly limited where: 1) there is more than one legal order in a social field and 2) there exist legal orders that have a greater appeal than the formal one. In such instances, formal law can be pushed aside (whether legally or illegally) to give way to the informal laws.<sup>13</sup> This is the context in which the calls for 'beyond formal law' are situated.

This limitation of formal law is particularly witnessed in the realm of international environmental law, policy and governance, which is 'undergoing a complex transition from youth to middle age.'<sup>14</sup> The international environmental regime is becoming increasingly democratised, untraditional, multi-layered and deformalized, with non-state actors such as NGOs, corporate bodies, citizens and indigenous communities becoming more relevant and influential.<sup>15</sup> This paradigm shift can be attributed to the growth of environmental governance,<sup>16</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Kameri- Mbote P, *Contending norms in a plural legal system: The limits of formal law*, 15.

<sup>9</sup> Kameri- Mbote P, *Contending norms in a plural legal system: The limits of formal law*, 125.

<sup>10</sup> Ambani J and Ahaya O, 'The wretched African traditionalist in Kenya: The challenges and prospects of customary law in the new constitutional order' 1(1) *Strathmore Law Journal*, 2015, 43.

<sup>11</sup> Moore S, 'Law and social change: The semi-autonomous social field as an appropriate subject of study' 7(4) *Law and Society Review*, 1973, 722.

<sup>12</sup> Kameri- Mbote P, *Contending norms in a plural legal system: The limits of formal law*, 12.

<sup>13</sup> Kameri- Mbote P, *Contending norms in a plural legal system: The limits of formal law*, 5.

<sup>14</sup> Bodansky D and Asselt H, *The art and craft of international environmental law*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 2010, 35.

<sup>15</sup> Cassotta S, 'The development of environmental law within a changing environmental governance context: Towards a new paradigm shift in the Anthropocene era' 30(1) *Yearbook of International Environmental Law*, 2019, 60.

<sup>16</sup> Environmental governance refers to the sum total of rules, practices, policies and institutions that shape how individuals interact with their environment. See Cassotta S, 'The development of environmental law within a changing environmental governance context', 59-60.

coupled with the transboundary status environmental concerns are beginning to acquire.<sup>17</sup> Environmental law itself is simply playing catch up, with environmental governance being much broader than the law.<sup>18</sup> This change justifies the need to investigate the strength of other informal norms that could be just as (if not more) influential and effective than formal norms.<sup>19</sup>

In this non-state centric, pluralistic and modern era of environmental law, for the purposes of effectiveness, all actors that impact the environment should be taken into consideration in shaping the informal norms that have started to play a more important role in environmental governance. This includes children and the youth, who are persons that fall below the age of 24 years.<sup>20</sup>

Unlike any other demographic, children and the youth have notable concerns and responsibilities towards the environment given that: 1) they are the most vulnerable and 2) they will inherit the consequences of current actions or inactions.<sup>21</sup>

This translates to the area of plastics pollution, particularly in Africa, where the continued unregulated dumping of single use plastics has created a variety of public health challenges for children and the youth. These range from water-borne diseases, harmful gases generated from plastic incineration and microplastics released during the plastic life cycle that pervade food chains.<sup>22</sup> To go beyond formal laws effectively in plastics governance, children and youth ought to be involved. It has been noted that the involvement of children and

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<sup>17</sup> Ben-David M, 'Review: Defining international environmental law' 38(2) *Ecology Law Quarterly*, 2011, 555; Cassotta S, 'The development of environmental law within a changing environmental governance context', 60.

<sup>18</sup> Cassotta S, 'The development of environmental law within a changing environmental governance context', 60.

<sup>19</sup> Ben-David M, 'Review: Defining international environmental law' ,558-559; Bodansky D and Asselt H, *The art and craft of international environmental law*, 106.

<sup>20</sup> The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child defines a child to be any person below the age of 18 years. This definition can be considered to be somewhat universal, unlike that of the youth age group. There is no universally agreed definition of the youth age group. However, as per the World Youth Report, they are considered to be the persons between the ages of 15-24. See United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, *World youth report: Youth and the 2030 agenda for sustainable development*, 2018, 12; Article 1, *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child*, 20 November 1989, 1577 UNTS 3.

<sup>21</sup> Benkenstein A et al, *Youth climate advocacy*, South African Institute of International Affairs, 2020, 42-43.

<sup>22</sup> Dasgupta S, Sarraf M and Wheeler D, 'Child health implications of plastic waste reduction in West Africa' 13(1) *Journal of Management and Sustainability*, 2023, 139-140.

young people in climate projects is crucial in Africa, and they should be treated as ‘active stakeholders or agents of change’.<sup>23</sup>

Based on the foregoing, this study seeks to investigate the role children play in shaping ethics beliefs and customs for plastic governance in Africa. The study makes the argument that children and the youth in Africa have the capacity to frame persuasive narratives which could mould ethics beliefs and customs to the advantage of plastics governance in Africa. This is based on the understanding that: 1) narratives are an important aspect of human communication, and 2) due to this importance, narratives have the capacity to impact the attitudes, beliefs and behaviours of individuals.<sup>24</sup>

The study proceeds as follows: The second part of this article, with the first one being this introduction, establishes the theoretical framework that will guide the study. The section will particularly outline the content of the framework and demonstrate how it will be employed in the study. Building on the prior discussion, the third part of this article will elaborate on the possible form and potential of narratives framed by children and the youth, with a particular focus on African children and youth. This will be followed by the fourth part, which will outline the interests of African children and the youth in conversations concerning plastics governance and how they can employ narratives to shape ethical beliefs and value systems in line with these interests. The final section will end the study with concluding remarks in light of the study’s findings.

## II. Introducing the Narrative Policy Framework

Policy scholars have long insisted on the importance of stories in influencing public opinion, and resultantly shaping public policy. This led to the development of the Narrative Policy Framework (NPF), aimed at empirically testing the relationship between narratives, public opinion and public policy.<sup>25</sup>

NPF is essentially the science of stories. It studies the different ways in which stories are narrated and how those ‘ways’ could convey different understandings

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<sup>23</sup> The United Nations Children’s Fund, *Time to Act: African Children in the Climate Change Spotlight*, 2023, 4.

<sup>24</sup> Bullock O, Shulman H and Huskey R, ‘Narratives are persuasive because they are easier to understand: Examining processing fluency as a mechanism of narrative persuasion’ *Frontiers in Communication*, 2021, 1 -<<https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fcomm.2021.719615/full#B32>> on 20 November 2023.

<sup>25</sup> Jones M, ‘Communicating climate change: Are stories better than “just the facts”?’ 42(4) *Policy Studies Journal*, 2014, 644.

of reality, eventually shaping different opinions and actions.<sup>26</sup> It is particularly concerned with policy narratives, which are those political stories framed in both formal and informal forums that inform what governments do. NPF stresses the power of these narratives in shaping public policy.<sup>27</sup>

There are five underlying assumptions of NPF. The first is the ‘social construction of policy realities’. Essentially, NPF adopts a Kantian logic. It assumes that human beings do not perceive reality objectively. They do so subjectively, through social constructions that they use to interpret their world. NPF thus places focus on what individuals believe something *means*, rather than what it *is*. The second assumption is ‘bounded reality’. NPF assumes that there are limits to the number of interpretations that individuals can make of the objective reality. This is attributed to the fact that there are limited social constructions that individuals can use to interpret. The third assumption is that narratives have ‘generalizable components’. In as much as narratives could take different forms, NPF assumes that there is a common structure that they adopt. Furthermore, NPF assumes that this common structure can be broken down into component parts which can be individually analysed.<sup>28</sup>

The fourth assumption is that there are three levels of narrative inquiries, which can be scaled upwards or downwards. The first level, the micro, examines the influence of a narrative on an individual. The second level, the meso, examines the influence of narratives on groups while the final level, the macro, broadly examines the influence of narratives on cultures and institutions.<sup>29</sup> The final assumption, referred to as ‘*homo narrans*’, basically presumes that humans are not exclusively creatures of reason. It posits that humans are also creatures of emotion and that this emotion precedes reason. This serves the role of making a narrative, which is likely to be emotive, the preferred primary heuristic (mental shortcut) in human cognition, communication and decision making.<sup>30</sup>

Based on these assumptions, NPF further divides the study of policy narratives into two conceptual literary categories. These are form and content.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Jones M, ‘Advancing the Narrative Policy Framework? The musings of a potentially unreliable narrator’ 46(4) *Policy Studies Journal*, 2018, 726.

<sup>27</sup> Shanahan E et al, ‘The Narrative Policy Framework’ in Shanahan E et al (eds) *Theories of the policy process*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed, Routledge, Oxfordshire, 2018, 173.

<sup>28</sup> Jones M, ‘Advancing the Narrative Policy Framework?’ 727.

<sup>29</sup> Jones M and Radaelli C, ‘The Narrative Policy Framework: Child or monster?’ 9(3) *Critical Policy Studies*, 2015, 345.

<sup>30</sup> Velsekova M, ‘Narrative Policy Framework: Narrative as heuristics in the policy process’ 27(1) *Human Affairs*, 2017, 181.

<sup>31</sup> Jones M, ‘Advancing the Narrative Policy Framework?’ 728.

Concerning form (related to the third assumption), NPF defines policy narratives as consisting of those components common to the study of literature. These are: 1) the setting which foregrounds the narrative, 2) the characters consisting of at least one victim, villain and hero, 3) the plot which links the setting and the characters and 4) the moral/ message which is the point of the policy narrative. It could take the form of a call to action or a policy solution. Content refers to those unique elements that are related to the specific context of the story.<sup>32</sup> For instance, a story about refugees in Kenya, though having a similar structure, is undisputedly different in content from a story in Congo about child labour.

A possible critique that may be levied against NPF is narrative relativity. This principle posits that, despite form and content, there may be other factors, some of which are unique to the host of the story such as ideology, that may influence how a narrative is interpreted. In some cases, these interpretations may be unexpected, by the ‘policy formulator’ despite the assumption of bounded relativity. This has the potential of undermining the persuasive power of the narrative.<sup>33</sup> In response to this, NPF also studies other potential drivers that would strengthen the causal relationship between narrative and opinion.<sup>34</sup> The ones of relevance to this study are narrative transportation, congruence and incongruence and narrator trust.

Narrative transportation refers to the ability of a story to export its audience from engagement with the real world to the setting of the story itself. This can be likened to the idiom ‘fall into a story’.<sup>35</sup> How this creates a stronger causal relationship between the narrative and opinion, as the audience becomes more immersed in a story, they become less aware of the real-life facts that may contradict some assertions made in the narrative. They may experience strong emotions, motivations and possible belief change, even though the events of the story are not real. Transportation essentially makes a narrative more persuasive and is hypothesised to invoke belief change.<sup>36</sup>

Turning to congruence and incongruence, the causal relationship between a narrative and opinion is likely to strengthen if the elements of the narrative correspond or alternatively fail to correspond with the recipients’ cultural

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<sup>32</sup> Jones M and Radaelli C, ‘The Narrative Policy Framework’, 341.

<sup>33</sup> Jones M, ‘Advancing the Narrative Policy Framework?’ 728.

<sup>34</sup> Jones M, ‘Communicating climate change’, 647.

<sup>35</sup> Jones M, ‘Communicating climate change’, 648.

<sup>36</sup> Green M and Brock T, ‘The role of transportation in the persuasion of public narratives’ 79(5) *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 2000, 702.

worldviews.<sup>37</sup> If the narratives are congruent with one's worldview, it could strengthen their beliefs towards a particular object. On the contrary, in the event the narrative is incongruent, it could play a key role in shifting beliefs away from a particular object.

Finally, narrator trust relates to the narrator's trustworthiness, expertise, accuracy and objectivity, likeability and ideology. Scholarship suggests that factors such as these are likely to influence a recipient's willingness to accept the message of a narrative. The factors all point to aspects that may influence the plausibility of a story beyond the knowledge of the recipient.<sup>38</sup>

Bringing the discussion closer home, it is important to note that the concepts advanced in NPF are not exclusive to policy narratives. The idea of a link between narratives and public opinion is not novel. The professional media has historically exploited this link to spin and control stories.<sup>39</sup> Additionally, rhetoric, the close cousin of NPF, has been studied with famous orators such as Winston Churchill.<sup>40</sup> It has also been acknowledged that social media has now presented individuals with readymade avenues to shape stories of their own.<sup>41</sup> The concepts advanced in NPF can be employed in any field really, and this includes environmental governance.

This theoretical framework demonstrates the potential of narratives in shaping public opinion and beliefs in the generation and implementation of public policy. It will be employed in this study to demonstrate the potential of narratives framed by children and the youth in Africa, with a particular emphasis on their ability to influence beliefs, ethics and value systems.

### **III. The form and potential of Narratives Framed by African children and youth**

Narratives have conventionally been understood to play a central role in how we communicate with each other and how we understand our world.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Jones M, 'Heroes and villains: Cultural narratives, mass opinions and climate change' Published, University of Oklahoma Graduate College, Oklahoma, 2010, 90-91.

<sup>38</sup> Jones M, 'Heroes and villains: Cultural narratives, mass opinions and climate change' Published, University of Oklahoma Graduate College, Oklahoma, 2010, 91-92.

<sup>39</sup> Jones M, 'Communicating climate change', 645.

<sup>40</sup> Shanahan E et al, 'The Narrative Policy Framework' 174.

<sup>41</sup> Jones M, 'Communicating climate change', 645.

<sup>42</sup> Tuwe K, 'The African oral tradition paradigm of storytelling as a methodological framework: Employment experiences for African communities in New Zealand' 38<sup>th</sup> African Studies Association of Australasia and the Pacific Conference, Melbourne, 28-30 October 2015, 2.

This is especially true in Africa, where our traditions are rooted in oral culture. Storytelling has been a way of passing on ‘traditions, codes, values of acceptable behaviour as well as upholding and preserving good social order’.<sup>43</sup> In fact, it has been acknowledged that African storytelling is unique due to the twofold role it plays; entertainment and moral education.<sup>44</sup> This section aims to demonstrate that African children and the youth can play this role of storytelling, historically played by the elderly in society, in shaping ethics, beliefs and value systems. To this end, this section examines the possible media in which a narrative can be presented and the potential of narratives framed by African children and youth.

i) *Form of narratives*

A narrative can be presented in any media<sup>45</sup> so long as it adheres to the generalizable structure of setting, characters, plot and message. These narratives could be presented in physical, digital permanent or temporary media. They could also be written, oral or even in other forms that do not fit squarely within the oral and written categories.

Turning to the physical means, a narrative can be presented as a novel, article, magazine, short story, pamphlet, booklet, comic, poem, to mention a few.<sup>46</sup> Furthermore, a narrative could be presented verbally through speeches, songs, stage plays, poetry and storytelling. Due to the use of words in these media, it becomes rather obvious that a narrative can be presented in these forms. Narrativity has frequently been associated with verbal discourse, be it oral or written.<sup>47</sup> Such media can conventionally adopt the structure of setting, character, plot and message. It is important to note that these media could also be represented in digital form.

A narrative could also take the physical form of a poster, banner, painting, photograph, drawing, impression, artwork or any other form that may not exactly

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<sup>43</sup> Tuwe K, ‘The African oral tradition paradigm of storytelling as a methodological framework: Employment experiences for African communities in New Zealand’ 38<sup>th</sup> African Studies Association of Australasia and the Pacific Conference, Melbourne, 28-30 October 2015, 3.

<sup>44</sup> Tuwe K, ‘The African oral tradition paradigm of storytelling as a methodological framework: Employment experiences for African communities in New Zealand’ 38<sup>th</sup> African Studies Association of Australasia and the Pacific Conference, Melbourne, 28-30 October 2015, 3.

<sup>45</sup> Media here refers to means of communication. It shall be used in this study as the plural of ‘medium’.

<sup>46</sup> Spacey J, ‘14 examples of print media’ Simplicable, 21 June 2020 -<<https://simplicable.com/en/print-media>> on 15 October 2023.

<sup>47</sup> Ranta M, *How pictures tell stories: Essays on pictorial narrativity*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Newcastle, 2022, 1.

use words but does possess the elements of setting, character, plot and message. For illustration, the author will discuss how these forms can adopt the structure of a narrative.

Ranta elaborates on the narrativity in pictures, which she defines as ‘depictions of objects, persons, landscapes or states of affairs’.<sup>48</sup> Based on this definition the term ‘picture’ could include drawings, paintings, photographs, impressions, sculptures or other artwork. In defending the narrativity in pictures, Ranta gives historical examples of pictures that have played a narrative function. The first example she gives is of static pictures that form part of a series with a chronological order, resembling modernday comics. Among these is the Bronze doors from St. Mary’s Cathedral in Hildesheim, which depict Bible stories. These are the creation of Adam and Eve and their expulsion from the Garden of Eden on one side and the birth and passion of Jesus Christ on the other.<sup>49</sup>

However, Ranta does acknowledge that some static pictures play less of a straightforward narrative function, with a single arrested/’pregnant’ moment. The example of the sculpture group ‘Laocoön and his Two Sons’ is proffered. The particular sculpture depicts the ‘pregnant moment’ of a fight against Laocoön and his two sons with two snakes sent by Athena as punishment. An observer with some background knowledge of Laocoön and Athena is likely to understand the narrative that the sculpture depicts.<sup>50</sup>

Today, it has become a common expression that ‘a picture is worth a thousand words’. Williams and Susan note that pictures can be used as an alternative to written descriptions, being used as a primary storytelling tool.<sup>51</sup> They also note the possibility of adding captions under photographs to assist the observer in comprehending the event captured further.<sup>52</sup>

With regard to digital media, pictures, in addition to the media mentioned earlier, could be translated into digital form. Moreover, there are particular narrative media that can only be disseminated in digital form such as movies, short films, audio-recordings, television shows, documentaries and radio shows.<sup>53</sup> Furthermore, due to social media, individuals have been able to craft

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<sup>48</sup> Ranta M, *How pictures tell stories: Essays on pictorial narrativity*, 1.

<sup>49</sup> Ranta M, *How pictures tell stories: Essays on pictorial narrativity*, 9-10.

<sup>50</sup> Ranta M, *How pictures tell stories: Essays on pictorial narrativity*, 15-16.

<sup>51</sup> Thompson S and Williams K, ‘Using photography to tell a story’ 20(3) *Social Studies and the Young Learner*, 2008, 18.

<sup>52</sup> Thompson S and Williams K, ‘Using photography to tell a story’, 19.

<sup>53</sup> Schiller C, ‘It depends: Choosing the medium – how you tell your story has consequences’ *Script*, 10 January 2019 -<<https://scriptmag.com/features/it-depends-choosing-the-medium-how-you-tell>

stories of their own at low costs.<sup>54</sup> Options range from tweeting to sharing photos and posting short videos in the form of reels or tik tocks.

Additionally, it is the position of this author that narratives can be generated indirectly and be disseminated by the means described above. For instance, narratives could be generated through public interest litigation. An example is the *Minors Oposa v Factorian* case decided in the Supreme Court of Philippines. Here, a group of minors filed a petition against the Secretary of the Department of Natural Resources to cancel all existing timber licences in the Philippines and to desist from processing and granting new ones. The petition was based on the right to a balanced and healthy ecology, which the petitioners associated with intergenerational responsibility and justice.<sup>55</sup> The minors were successful in their petition, generating the narrative that each generation has a responsibility to the next to preserve the environment, and children can sue to enforce that right on behalf of the environment, their generation and future generations. This can be evidenced by some headlines the case attracted such as ‘to save the Philippines’ forests, he sued for future generations’<sup>56</sup> and ‘innovative legal actions to make peace with nature’.<sup>57</sup>

Tied to the prior point, innovations have the potential to generate narratives. For example, in 2019, schools in Ivory Coast built classrooms out of plastic bricks utilising a recycling process developed by a Colombian social enterprise.<sup>58</sup> This created the narrative that it is possible to use recycled plastic for construction. This initiative attracted headlines such as ‘classrooms made from recycled plastic waste come to Ivory Coast’ and ‘from classrooms made of recycled plastics to green initiatives’. It appears the former possibly inspired further environmentally friendly practices in schools in Ivory Coast.<sup>59</sup>

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your-story-has-consequences> on 6 November 2023.

<sup>54</sup> Rizvi J, ‘Storytelling and the power of social media’ *Forbes*, 29 September 2021 -<<https://www.forbes.com/sites/jjawertz/2021/09/29/storytelling-and-the-power-of-social-media/?sh=627843e56da3>> on 6 November 2023.

<sup>55</sup> *Minors Oposa v Factorian* (1993) Supreme Court of the Philippines.

<sup>56</sup> Rieger J and Young T, ‘To save the Philippines’ forests, he sued for future generations’ *The Asia Foundation*, 26 July 2023 -< <https://asiafoundation.org/2023/07/26/to-save-the-philippines-forests-he-sued-for-future-generations/#:~:text=In%201993%2C%20a%20young%20attorney,%20generations%20as%20yet%20unborn>> on 16 November 2023.

<sup>57</sup> Pace University Faculty of Law, ‘Innovative legal actions to make peace with nature’ -< <https://law.pace.edu/news-and-events/events/%E2%80%9Cinnovative-legal-actions-make-peace-nature%E2%80%9D>> on 15 November 2023.

<sup>58</sup> Hersey F, ‘Classrooms made from recycled plastic waste come to Ivory Coast’ *France24*, 26 September 2019 -< <https://law.pace.edu/news-and-events/events/%E2%80%9Cinnovative-legal-actions-make-peace-nature%E2%80%9D>> on 15 November 2023.

<sup>59</sup> Trazić C, ‘From classrooms made of recycled plastics to green initiatives’ *UNICEF*, 8 March 2021 -<

In summary, this subsection has explored the variations narratives could adopt. These can be utilised by children and the youth in disseminating their narratives. Furthermore, with the use of social media, dissemination of information has become virtually cost-free. Cost will therefore not operate as a barrier for African children and youth to tell their stories. It is important to note that the media discussed in this subsection are not exhaustive. There is a possibility that there may be other means that narratives could adopt.

ii) *Potential of narratives framed by African children and youth*

African children and youth could leverage the potential of narratives discussed in the second section, employing stories to influence ethics, beliefs and value systems. They are particularly placed in an advantageous position to do so due to some unique characteristics they possess. Some of these align with narrative transportation, congruence and incongruence and narrator trust.

Generally, children and youth are considered to be a vulnerable demographic due to their young age.<sup>60</sup> For this reason, adults tend to sympathise more with them. Recent research has confirmed that the mere presence of children elicits prosocial behaviour in adults, such as helpfulness and responsibility, across different settings and demographic variables.<sup>61</sup> The cause of this could be examined from an evolutionary perspective, which suggests that adult humans played a caretaker role to facilitate the survival of their offspring, and resultantly the species.<sup>62</sup> Furthermore, children in particular are considered innocent due to their lack of knowledge and assumed ‘purity’. Essentially, children are perceived by adults to be uncorrupted by ‘mundane affairs’.<sup>63</sup>

Based on the foregoing, children and the youth can frame persuasive narratives, which can shape ethics, beliefs and value systems. First, their characteristics strengthen the narrator’s trust and hence are likely to influence

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<https://www.unicef.org/cotedivoire/en/stories/classrooms-made-recycled-plastic-bricks-green-initiatives>> on 15 November 2023.

<sup>60</sup> Buhler-Niederberger D, ‘Innocence and childhood’ Oxford Bibliographies, 28 July 2015 -< <https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/display/document/obo-9780199791231/obo-9780199791231-0161.xml>> on 28 October 2023.

<sup>61</sup> Wolf L et al, ‘The salience in children increases adult prosocial values’ 13(1) *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, 2022, 165.

<sup>62</sup> Hrdy S, ‘Evolutionary context of human development: The cooperative breeding model’ in Ahnert C et al (eds) *Attachment and bonding: A breeding synthesis*, MIT Press, Cambridge, 2004, 6.

<sup>63</sup> Buhler-Niederberger D, ‘Innocence and childhood’ Oxford Bibliographies, 28 July 2015 -< <https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/display/document/obo-9780199791231/obo-9780199791231-0161.xml>> on 28 October 2023.

adults to accept the message of their narratives. Second, their characteristics have the capacity to make their narratives elicit strong emotions and motivations, especially when it comes to harm, hence enhancing narrative transportation. It therefore comes as no surprise that organisations that lobby for the poor and vulnerable have continued to put children at the front and centre of their campaigns to generate adult support.<sup>64</sup> An illustration could be derived from the case of Aylan Kurdi, who was a child refugee who died en route to Europe. A study carried out by Smith et al suggests that the circulation of the photo of his body on Twitter ‘increased expressions of solidarity with refugees over time’.<sup>65</sup>

It is the position in this study that African children and youth are likely to elicit even more emotion, motivation, belief change and action with their narratives. This is because they are more vulnerable compared to their Western counterparts. It has been reported that children in Africa continue to have limited access to quality health and nutrition services, safe water, sanitation and hygiene and quality education. Furthermore, children in Africa are highly exposed to poverty.<sup>66</sup> These points of vulnerability are likely to be exacerbated by climate change, with a UNICEF report highlighting that 39 out of the 49 African countries assessed are at a *high or extremely high risk* of the impacts of climate change, which will disparately affect children.<sup>67</sup>

Regarding congruence and incongruence, African children and youth, by virtue of their ‘African-ness’, are likely to frame narratives that align with African cultural worldviews. Their narratives are likely to be more relatable, hence more persuasive compared to those emanating from the West. For instance, Greta Thunberg’s speech calling the European Parliament to forget Brexit and focus

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<sup>64</sup> Wolf et al, ‘Adults are more generous in the presence of children- new research’ *The Conversation*, 5 May 2021 -< <https://theconversation.com/adults-are-more-generous-in-the-presence-of-children-new-research-160311>> on 2 November 2023.

<sup>65</sup> See generally Smith L, McGarty C and Thomas F, ‘After Aylan Kurdi: How tweeting about death, threat and harm predict increased solidarity with refugees over time’ 29(4) *Psychological Science*, 2018.

<sup>66</sup> UNICEF, *Children in 98 percent of African countries at high or extremely high risk of the impacts of climate change: UNICEF* 1 September 2023 -<<https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/children-98-cent-african-countries-high-or-extremely-high-risk-impacts-climate#:~:text=Despite%20substantial%20progress%20made%20by,and%20hygiene%2C%20limited%20access%20to>> on 24 October 2023.

<sup>67</sup> The United Nations Children’s Fund, *Time to Act: African Children in the Climate Change Spotlight*, 2023, 3. The risk was measured using the Children’s Climate Risk Index (CCRI) developed by UNICEF which provides a measure of the risks faced by children as a result of climate change. It measures immediate susceptibility and long-term resilience incorporating indicators from two pillars. These are exposure to environmental hazards and vulnerability to the hazards.

on climate change<sup>68</sup> is unlikely to turn heads in Africa compared to Natalie Silantoi's address at the close of the African Youth Climate Assembly in 2023. She commented on 'Africa's narrative on climate change', moving the audience by stating that 'Africa is dying'.<sup>69</sup>

It is worth noting that African children and youth are very many. Today's youth are estimated to be 1.2 billion, comprising 16% of the world's population.<sup>70</sup> Children aging 0-18 amount to a total of about 2.3 billion<sup>71</sup> which accounts for about a quarter of the world's population. In total, children and youth combined amount to about 3.5 billion, comprising about 40% of the world's population. Africa hosts a majority of this number.<sup>72</sup> Additionally, as per a UNICEF report, it is estimated that by 2050, 1 in 3 children in the world will live in Africa.<sup>73</sup> By utilising their numerical majority status, African children and youth can take a page out of the book of their seniors, such as the African group in multilateral negotiations.<sup>74</sup> With the use of the power of numbers, that can employ narratives to further convince adults to rethink their moral, value and belief based positions.

This section of the essay has demonstrated that African children possess the tools and influence to shape ethics, values and beliefs, alluding to their capacity to do so in environmental governance spaces. The next section examines the interests of children regarding plastics governance in Africa and outlines how exactly African children and youth can employ narratives to shape ethics, beliefs and value systems in line with these interests.

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<sup>68</sup> Rankin J, 'Forget Brexit and focus on climate change, Greta Thunberg tells EU' *The Guardian*, 16 April 2019 -< <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/apr/16/greta-thunberg-urges-leaders-wake-up-climate-change-school-strike-movement>> on 15 November 2023.

<sup>69</sup> Chironda M, 'We want more than just empty promises- African Youth Climate Assembly' *Gale*, 4 September 2023 -< <https://go.gale.com/ps/i.do?p=EAIM&u=anon~90e915a5&id=GALE|A763264631&v=2.1&it=r&sid=sitemap&asid=9ca3bf4d>> on 5 November 2023.

<sup>70</sup> United Nations, 'Global Issues: Youth' -< <https://www.un.org/en/global-issues/youth#:~:text=Today%2C%20there%20are%201.2%20billion,cent%2C%20to%20nearly%201.3%20billion.>> on 15 October 2023.

<sup>71</sup> UNICEF Data, 'How many children are there in the world?' -< <https://data.unicef.org/how-many/how-many-children-under-18-are-in-the-world/>> on 15 October 2023.

<sup>72</sup> UNICEF, *Children in Africa: Key statistics on child survival and population*, 2017, 1.

<sup>73</sup> UNICEF, *Children in Africa: Key statistics on child survival, protection and development*, 2015, 1.

<sup>74</sup> Gupta J, 'Explained: The negotiating blocs that will steer COP26' *China Dialogue*, 1 November 2021 -< <https://chinadialogue.net/en/climate/explained-the-negotiating-blocs-that-will-steer-cop26/>> on 1 November 2023.

#### IV. Interests of African children and youth in plastics governance and the framing of narratives

Children and youth have notable concerns and responsibilities towards the environment, partly attributed to the fact that they will face the future consequences of current actions or inactions regarding environmental protection. Some studies have shown that younger generations, such as the Gen Zs and the Millennials recognize environmental concerns and care more about addressing environmental concerns compared to older generations such as the baby boomers.<sup>75</sup> This phenomenon can be extrapolated to the realm of plastics governance in Africa.

It can be concluded that African children and youth have two particular interests or concerns with regard to plastics governance. These interests stem from the challenges plastics pollution pose to them currently and in the future. With regard to the present, children and the youth in Africa continue to deal with water-borne diseases, harmful gases generated from plastic incineration and microplastics released during the plastic life cycle that pervade food chains. This can be attributed to the uncontrolled use and disposal of plastic in African countries.<sup>76</sup> These challenges not only present short-term effects but also long-term ones. Evidence has shown that the entry of microplastics into the food chain can contribute to various cancers and birth complications.<sup>77</sup> Additionally, gases produced from incinerations not only contribute to climate change but also have the potential to contribute to long-term chronic illnesses such as various cancers.<sup>78</sup>

Turning to the future, if plastic pollution is not put to an end, it is likely that the effects stated in the prior paragraph will worsen. It has been reported that in the absence of ambitious and coordinated global policy action, there will be a 70% increase in annual plastics use and disposal in 2040 compared to 2020. This could lead to higher plastic waste mismanagement, despite the possible growth in recycling. With regard to terrestrial leakage of plastics, which more so affects

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<sup>75</sup> Milfont T, 'Ten-year panel data confirm generational gap but climate beliefs increase at similar rates across ages' 12(1) *Nature Communications*, 2021, 2; Ballew M et al, 'Do younger generations care more about global warming' Yale Program on Climate Change Communication, 11 June 2019 -<<https://climatecommunication.yale.edu/publications/do-younger-generations-care-more-about-global-warming/>> on 10 October 2023.

<sup>76</sup> Dasgupta S, Sarraf M and Wheeler D, 'Child health implications of plastic waste reduction in West Africa' 139-140.

<sup>77</sup> UNEP, *From pollution to solution: A global assessment of marine litter and plastic pollution*, 2021, 35-37.

<sup>78</sup> See generally Verma S et al, 'Toxic pollutants from plastic waste- A review' 35(1) *Procedia Environmental Sciences*, 2016.

children and youth in Africa, it is estimated to increase from 20 metric tons to 30 metric tons between 2020 and 2040.<sup>79</sup> Furthermore, Africa is expected to account for the largest global share of plastics pollution by 2060.<sup>80</sup>

The first interest African children and youth in plastics pollution, related to the present state of affairs, is ending plastics pollution as soon as reasonably possible. This is reflected in the 2022 resolution of the United Nations Environment Resolution to end plastics pollution by 2040.<sup>81</sup> Furthermore, it is of interest to African children and youth that this ‘ban’ of plastics pollution should go beyond waste management and address the full life cycle of plastics, including: 1) extraction of raw materials for the manufacture of plastics (extraction phase), 2) the production of the chemical components required in the manufacture of plastics (chemical phase), and 3) the actual manufacturing, distribution and consumption of the plastics (material phase).<sup>82</sup>

The second interest, concerning the future, is that any action taken against plastics pollution should be sustainable. That is, the consumption, production, disposal, product design and other factors that find themselves in the plastics life cycle should be environmentally sound<sup>83</sup> and take into consideration future generations.

Proceeding to how African children and the youth can use narratives to influence plastic governance in Africa, this part of the study will address the content and subsequently the form their narratives should take. With respect to the content, the general *message* of the narratives framed by African children and youth should be intentionally themed around the two interests. In other words, the two interests should form the guiding criteria in formulating the specific messages narratives of African children and youth will adopt. Additionally, in selecting the other elements of the narrative such as the setting and the plot, children and the youth should remember that the idea is not to influence multilateral negotiations, but to persuasively shape beliefs, ethics and value systems in manners supportive

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<sup>79</sup> OECD, *Towards eliminating plastic pollution by 2020: A policy scenario analysis interim findings*, 2023, 5-6.

<sup>80</sup> Dasgupta S, Sarraf M and Wheeler D, ‘Child health implications of plastic waste reduction in West Africa’ 40.

<sup>81</sup> UNEP, ‘Historic day in the campaign to beat plastic pollution: Nations commit to develop a legally binding agreement’ 2 March 2022 -<<https://www.unep.org/news-and-stories/press-release/historic-day-campaign-beat-plastic-pollution-nations-commit-develop>> on 10 October 2023.

<sup>82</sup> Secretariat of the Basel, Rotterdam and Stockholm Conventions, *Global governance of plastics and associated chemicals*, 2023, 10.

<sup>83</sup> Secretariat of the Basel, Rotterdam and Stockholm Conventions, *Global governance of plastics and associated chemicals*, 2023, 8; Paragraph 3(b), *Resolution adopted by the United Nations Environmental Assembly on 2 March 2022*, UNEP/EA.5/Res.14, 7 March 2022.

of their interests. They should place key emphasis on narrative transportation, congruence and incongruence and narrator trust.

With regard to the form or media that Africans and children use to disseminate their narrative, the world is their oyster. However, it should be noted that the media chosen forms a large part of the narrative. Different narratives require different media, depending on 1) the different components of the narrative the narrator wishes to emphasise and 2) the audience the narrator is aiming to reach.<sup>84</sup> For instance, if one would like to tell a story about a child who has grown up in a landfill, a photograph is unlikely to suffice. It may become important to use a written medium such as a blog post accompanied by a photo. Similarly, if the narrator would like to communicate their story to an artistic community, it would make more sense to use a song or picture rather than a written article.

African children and youth should not formulate and disseminate narratives sporadically and unthinkingly. To tap into the persuasive nature of narratives and their capacity to influence beliefs, value systems and ethics for plastics governance in Africa, the factors which have been outlined in this section ought to be taken into consideration.

## V. Conclusion

In spaces where young people and adults interact, it is not uncommon to hear the phrases ‘children are the future’ and ‘youth are the leaders of tomorrow.’ This study has challenged these ideas, demonstrating that children and youth are valuable resources in today’s world. This is especially true with regard to shaping ethics, beliefs and value systems for plastics governance in Africa.

This article set out to investigate the role children and the youth play in shaping ethics, beliefs and customs for plastic governance in Africa. From the lens of NPF, it first explored the form and potential of narratives framed by African children and youth. Here it was concluded that children and youth in Africa have the capacity to frame persuasive narratives which could mould ethics beliefs and customs. Additionally, it was alluded that this could be employed in the realm of environmental governance.

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<sup>84</sup> Schiller C, ‘It depends: Choosing the medium – how you tell your story has consequences’ *Script*, 10 January 2019 -<<https://scriptmag.com/features/it-depends-choosing-the-medium-how-you-tell-your-story-has-consequences>> on 6 November 2023.

Thereafter, the study went on to examine the interests of African children and youth with regard to plastic governance. It also outlined the way African children and youth can frame their narratives to the advantage of plastic governance. It was particularly demonstrated here that it is possible and practical for children and youth to employ their storytelling potential in the realm of plastics governance in Africa.

This study confirmed that children and youth in Africa have the capacity to frame persuasive narratives which could shape ethics, beliefs and value systems to the advantage of plastics governance in Africa. Remembering the importance informal norms play in society, the ball is now in their court to utilise their numbers, influence and tools to effectively and sustainably bring an end to plastic pollution. The time has come for African children and youth to acknowledge their power and tell their stories.