



Table of Contents

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	3
Key Takeaways	4
A final word	4
I. KEY CONCEPTS AND DEFINITIONS.....	5
Climate change, environment, and planetary health, and the Canadian context	5
Top climate and environmental issues.....	8
II. INTRODUCTION	10
The critical role of young leaders in climate and environment	10
Best practices for fostering youth leadership	11
III. ECOSYSTEM MAPPING: THE STATE OF PLAY	12
What are young environmental and climate leaders working on?	12
What approaches are young people using to create change in their communities?	14
What challenges are young environmental and climate leaders facing?	15
Challenges specific to BIPOC and Indigenous youth	18
Understanding the Gaps: Why Youth-Led Climate Organizations Struggle	19
IV. ANTIDOTES TO BURNOUT AND ECO-ANXIETY AMONGST YOUNG CLIMATE AND ENVIRONMENTAL LEADERS	20
V. ALTERNATIVE APPROACHES BEYOND TRADITIONAL GRANTMAKING	21
VI. CONCLUSION.....	23
Summary of Key Insights	23
Key Takeaways	23
Final thoughts	24
APPENDICES.....	25
Appendix A: Resources for young environmental and climate leaders: the ecosystem of movement infrastructure organizations	25
Appendix B: Mapping key initiatives and organizations onto the movement ecology framework	28
Appendix C: Who is funding young environmental and climate leaders in Canada?*	30
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	29

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Executive Summary

Young people today are at the forefront of efforts to combat climate change and environmental degradation, motivated by an urgent sense of justice and responsibility. With a clear focus on climate justice, youth leaders view environmental issues as inseparable from social and economic inequities, bringing an equity-oriented approach to tackling environmental threats. However, young leaders face significant challenges, from limited access to resources and networks to high levels of burnout and eco-anxiety. This report examines the Canadian climate and environmental context, the challenges and opportunities facing young leaders, and presents a framework for philanthropic foundations to provide robust, meaningful support to empower youth-led initiatives.

The Critical Role of Young Leaders in Climate and Environmental Movements

Young leaders in Canada are reshaping the climate movement, highlighting the interconnectedness of environmental health, social justice, and economic justice. Research shows that exposure to nature and engagement in climate action can foster resilience, mental well-being, and physical health, especially for youth. Supporting youth leadership within the climate sector is not only ethically vital but strategically beneficial, as young leaders bring innovative approaches that are crucial for addressing complex environmental challenges.

Key Concepts and Definitions

This report defines foundational terms—such as climate change, planetary health, and environmental justice—in the context of Canada’s unique landscape. Critical concepts are **climate justice** and **movement ecology**. **Climate justice** emphasizes solutions prioritizing the needs of vulnerable and marginalized communities disproportionately impacted by the climate crisis. **Movement ecology**, a framework for understanding social change, maps out the different roles organizations play within the movement, highlighting how diverse approaches contribute to a cohesive strategy. By grounding the analysis in these concepts, the report offers a roadmap for understanding the holistic and justice-driven nature of youth climate leadership.

Climate and environment are no longer seen as one issue area unto itself; it is seen as a multiplier of all issues, and one that affects marginalized communities disproportionately.

Ecosystem Mapping and Challenges Facing Young Leaders

Canada’s youth-led climate initiatives span a broad array of interconnected issues, from economic justice and reconciliation with Indigenous communities to advocacy for affordable, sustainable energy and resilient housing. Yet, young leaders face significant systemic obstacles. Funding is a primary barrier, with few resources allocated specifically to youth-led organizations. As Devika Shah, Executive Director of Environment Funders Canada, notes, youth organizations often struggle to secure larger grants due to limited organizational maturity, despite delivering high-impact outcomes. The competitive funding landscape also contributes to burnout, with young leaders balancing underpaid or volunteer roles while striving to meet growing demands. Moreover, a lack of strategic capacity and mentorship, particularly in areas like fundraising and advocacy, leaves many youth organizations without the resources needed to scale their impact effectively.

Alternative Approaches Beyond Grantmaking

Traditional grantmaking is essential, but it alone cannot meet the needs of the youth climate sector. This report emphasizes alternative support strategies, such as peer-to-peer learning, capacity building, and advocacy within funder spaces. By investing in infrastructure and intermediary organizations, funders can enhance the resilience of the movement. These organizations are well-positioned to multiply the impact of youth organizing by offering capacity-building, convening youth leaders, and fostering collaborative networks. Additionally, integrating youth leaders in funding decisions enables funders to champion approaches that amplify impact.

Key Takeaways

Investing in a Movement Ecology of Change

This report encourages funders, youth leaders, and social change agents to adopt a **movement ecology** approach, supporting a range of organizations and actors with different roles and capacities that together create a resilient ecosystem. This approach fosters collaboration over competition, helping organizations understand their unique niches within the movement and mitigating competition for resources. By supporting diverse, complementary efforts, a movement ecology approach can enhance the sector's adaptability and sustainability.

Addressing the Funding Gap for Youth Organizations

Young leaders face ongoing funding challenges due to limited organizational maturity and networks. Funders are urged to increase support for youth-led initiatives, as they can deliver impactful results per dollar invested, especially with sustained funding. Bridging this gap will strengthen the movement by enabling youth organizations to develop, innovate, and create impact.

Supporting Intermediary and Infrastructure Organizations

Infrastructure organizations play a vital role in scaling youth climate efforts across Canada. Youth-led intermediary and infrastructure organizations have invested years in relationship-building and program development, providing critical support to youth leaders. Ensuring these groups have adequate funding will allow them to continue supporting a strong, interconnected movement, addressing burnout and other challenges facing young leaders.

Convening Youth Leaders for Cross-Pollination

Convening opportunities allow youth leaders to share resources, exchange knowledge, and align strategies. These gatherings help organizations understand where they fit within the movement ecology, reducing competition and fostering a collaborative network. Intermediary organizations play a key role in these gatherings, facilitating a more efficient, interconnected movement.

A final word

This report underscores the urgent need for funders, policymakers, and others to invest in youth-led climate initiatives and infrastructure organizations, building a resilient movement capable of addressing the scale of Canada's environmental challenges. By recognizing the unique contributions and needs of young leaders, funders can catalyze transformative change, positioning Canada's climate movement as a powerful, intergenerational force.

I. Key concepts and definitions

Climate change, environment, and planetary health, and the Canadian context

Climate Change

Climate change refers to long-term shifts in global or regional climate patterns, primarily driven by human activities that increase greenhouse gas emissions in the atmosphere.¹ This phenomenon is characterized by rising global temperatures, extreme weather events, melting polar ice, and changing precipitation patterns, all of which impact natural ecosystems and human societies. Key contributors to climate change include burning fossil fuels, deforestation, and industrial activities that release carbon dioxide, methane, and other greenhouse gasses.

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) emphasizes that climate change affects food security, water availability, and public health, disproportionately impacting vulnerable populations.² Among those most affected within Canada are Indigenous communities, who often live close to the land and rely on traditional knowledge and natural resources for sustenance. Northern and rural communities are also deeply impacted, as melting ice makes transportation and resource access more challenging, further isolating them. Additionally, low-income urban residents face heightened health risks due to limited access to heating and cooling during extreme temperatures or a lack of safe housing altogether. Addressing climate change requires urgent global cooperation to reduce emissions, transition to renewable energy, and implement equitable policies for climate adaptation and resilience.

Environment

The environment encompasses all living and nonliving elements that interact within ecosystems, including air, water, soil, plants, animals, and human-made structures. It provides the essential resources and conditions necessary for life, such as clean air, water, food, and habitat.³ However, human activities such as pollution, deforestation, and urbanization have severely impacted environmental health, leading to issues like biodiversity loss, soil degradation, and climate change. Environmental health is also interdependent with social and economic factors; protecting it requires sustainable practices that balance human needs with ecological preservation. International agreements like the Paris Agreement and Sustainable Development Goals aim to address environmental degradation by promoting conservation, reducing pollution, and fostering more sustainable economies.⁴

¹ Unep, "Facts about the Climate Emergency," UNEP.

² IPCC, Climate Change 2023: Synthesis Report. Contribution of Working Groups I, II and III to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, doi: 10.59327/IPCC/AR6-9789291691647

³ "The Environment: Living and Non-Living Things," Department of Education, Victoria State Government.

⁴ "The Paris Agreement," United Nations Climate Change.

Environmental justice

Environmental justice is the recognition that environmental racism— the disproportionate proximity and greater exposure of Indigenous, Black, and communities of colour to polluting industries and environmental hazards—must be addressed to ensure equitable protection from environmental harm and access to environmental benefits for all.⁵

Planetary Health

A core principle of a planetary health approach is recognizing that human health is dependent on healthy ecosystems and a healthy planet. Indigenous knowledge has long understood this connection: the ecosystem itself is our health system.⁶

Individual health refers to a person’s physical, mental, and emotional well-being. While it is inherently personal, it also has ripple effects on the health of the community. For example, an individual’s choices, behaviors, and health status can influence the spread of diseases, the burden on healthcare systems, and the overall resilience of their community.

Public health focuses on the well-being of populations, recognizing that health challenges transcend borders. Pathogens, such as viruses and bacteria, do not respect geopolitical boundaries, emphasizing the interconnectedness of health across nations. Public health also accounts for the health of animals, as many diseases—like COVID-19—arise when pathogens jump from animal hosts to humans (a process called zoonosis). This recognition has given rise to the concept of *One Health*, which highlights the need to address human, animal, and environmental health collectively to prevent and manage health crises effectively.

Planetary health takes these concepts further by considering the broader system that sustains life, encompassing people, plants, animals, and ecosystems. It emphasizes the interconnectedness of all life forms and recognizes that human health cannot be separated from the health of the planet. By de-localizing our perspective on health, planetary health encourages a holistic understanding of the complex relationships between environmental degradation, climate change, and the well-being of all living systems.⁷

The Canadian context

Canada has historically been a high contributor to global greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, both as a major energy producer and through high per-capita emissions, placing it as the 13th largest emitter per capita and the 4th largest exporter of oil.^{8,9} While Canada represents a small fraction of the global population, its emissions are disproportionate. This imbalance underlines the differential impact of climate change, where nations in the Global North, including Canada, contribute more to emissions but experience fewer immediate and severe effects compared to those in the Global South. Within Canada, these inequities extend to vulnerable populations, with

⁵ Ingrid Waldron, “Environmental Racism in Canada,” The Canadian Encyclopedia, December 14, 2020.

⁶ “SFU’s Medical School Needs To Be Grounded in Planetary Health — An Open Letter,” Mental Health and Climate Change.

⁷ *Nature = Health Webinar, Blue Sky Funders Forum, 2024.*

⁸ “Provincial and Territorial Energy Profiles – Canada” Canada Energy Regulator, September 10, 2024.

⁹ Iea, “Canada - Total CO2 Emissions from Energy ,” IEA.

Indigenous communities, racialized groups, and low-income households often bearing the brunt of environmental harm.

Intergenerational equity and the asymmetric impacts of climate change

Intergenerational equity is the principle that future generations deserve a stable environment, and today's actions should not compromise their well-being. This perspective reinforces both the moral and ethical imperatives for supporting youth-led climate initiatives.

This idea can be found in the Haudenosaunee concept of the Seventh Generation: the idea that decisions today should consider the impact on future generations, thinking seven generations into the future.¹⁰ This principle is rooted in the belief that the world is being borrowed from future generations and should be respected. In 2023, the Canadian Environmental Protection Act was amended to recognize that every individual in Canada has a right to a healthy environment, similarly reflecting the principle of intergenerational equity.¹¹

For Canadians today, climate impacts are not felt symmetrically across the population. These disparities are likely to grow more severe in future generations unless bold and equity-oriented climate action is taken. Northern Indigenous communities are particularly impacted by climate change, as warming temperatures and shifting ecosystems threaten traditional hunting practices, food security, and cultural ties to the land.¹² Many of these communities, who are already isolated, rely on ice roads for transportation of resources and access to healthcare and social networks. Northern residents have pointed out that permafrost thaw is affecting the quality of transportation infrastructure. According to the Canadian Climate Institute's *Due North Report*, "Damaged roads are making it more difficult for them to travel and are creating safety risks. Damage to roads is also limiting access to food, essential supplies, and medical services."¹³

Climate change also exacerbates extreme weather events that disproportionately impact low-income urban neighborhoods and vulnerable groups, including the elderly, youth, and people with disabilities. These groups may face greater risks from heat waves, cold snaps, and other climate-related hazards due to lack of access to heating and cooling systems or heightened social isolation and lack of support during extreme weather events.¹⁴

These are just a few examples illustrating that the asymmetric impacts of climate change are a structural issue, disproportionately affecting those already living at the margins of society. Addressing these challenges in Canada requires a commitment to equitable climate action that prioritizes those most affected by environmental risks, including policies supporting Indigenous land rights, targeted adaptation strategies, and a just transition to a sustainable economy.

¹⁰ Marie Haley, "Introducing The Seventh Generation Principle – to Promote True Sustainability," The Seventh Generation.

¹¹ Environment and Climate Change Canada, "A Right to a Healthy Environment under the Canadian Environmental Protection Act, 1999," Government of Canada.

¹² "Understanding the Effects of Climate Change on Food Security in Northern Indigenous Communities," Government of Canada, January 10, 2024.

¹³ Dylan Clark et al., rep., *Due North: Facing the Costs of Climate Change for Northern Infrastructure* (Canadian Climate Institute, June 2022).

¹⁴ "The Impact of Climate Change on Vulnerable Populations," Statistics Canada, June 5, 2024.

Top climate and environmental issues

The Challenges

Canada's main environmental challenges involve heavy industry impacts, especially from the tar sands, and worsening extreme weather from climate change. Below is an overview of some of the key climate and environmental issues facing the country.

The tar sands in Alberta, one of the country's largest and most controversial projects, produce substantial greenhouse gas emissions and contribute to Canada's place as the 4th largest oil exporter, and create vast toxic tailings ponds that leach chemicals into nearby ecosystems.^{15,16} This and other heavy industries—such as mining, oil and gas production, and plastics manufacturing—are major contributors to pollution and environmental degradation. Toxic chemicals used in these industries not only threaten local ecosystems but also have adverse effects on human health.

Meanwhile, wildfires, intensified by climate change, are becoming more frequent and severe, emitting smoke that affects air quality and threatens public health and results in catastrophic damage to homes, businesses and livelihoods.¹⁷ Many parts of the country have already experienced disastrous flooding and droughts, impacting food and water security.

Urban sprawl adds another layer of complexity, contributing to habitat loss and deforestation, increased emissions as commute times and idling increases, and declines in keystone species like salmon as ecosystems are paved over, which are critical to both ecological balance and Indigenous cultural practices. Another pressing issue is greenwashing by the oil and gas industry, which often promotes small-scale sustainability efforts while continuing to invest in large-scale fossil fuel extraction.¹⁸

The Stakes

As climate and environmental degradation intensify, the stakes continue to rise. Among the many risks, some key areas include public health, intergenerational equity, and environmental justice.

Public health

Wildfire smoke has become a significant health hazard, worsening respiratory conditions and straining healthcare systems. Health Canada's *Human Health Effects of Wildfire Smoke* report highlights increased hospital visits, higher mortality and morbidity rates, and specific impacts on vulnerable populations such as women, children, and seniors. Wildfire smoke exacerbates asthma, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, and cardiovascular events. Beyond wildfires, other climate-induced disasters—like heatwaves, floods, and droughts—further threaten public health. Heatwaves can cause heatstroke and worsen respiratory and cardiovascular conditions;

¹⁵ "Provincial and Territorial Energy Profiles – Canada" Canada Energy Regulator, September 10, 2024.

¹⁶ Rep., *Alberta's Tailings Ponds: One Trillion Litres of Toxic Waste and Growing*, accessed 2024.

¹⁷ "Fact Sheet: Climate Change and Wildfires in Canada," Canadian Climate Institute, July 23, 2024.

¹⁸ Melissa Aronczyk, Patrick McCurdy, and Chris Russill, "Greenwashing, Net-Zero, and the Oil Sands in Canada: The Case of Pathways Alliance," *Energy Research & Social Science* 112 (June 2024): 103502, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.erss.2024.103502>.

flooding spreads waterborne diseases and contaminates drinking water; and droughts impair food security while increasing respiratory issues from poor air quality.

Intergenerational inequity

Climate change disproportionately affects younger and future generations, spotlighting intergenerational inequity as current inaction leaves a legacy of escalating environmental challenges. Grassy Narrows First Nation exemplifies this injustice. Decades of mercury contamination in their waters—caused by industrial activity in the 1960s—have led to severe neurological and physical health issues, especially among youth. Cultural practices like fishing have been disrupted, and the community’s future remains at risk as warming temperatures and extreme weather events threaten clean water, food security, and traditional land use. Grassy Narrows underscores the broader need for policies that address past harms while protecting future generations from environmental injustices.

Environmental racism

Environmental racism refers to the disproportionate proximity and greater exposure of Indigenous, Black, and communities of colour to polluting industries and environmental hazards. In Nova Scotia, predominantly Black communities like Shelburne and Lincolnville are disproportionately situated near landfills, resulting in higher exposure to toxins that degrade air and water quality. These environmental hazards have led to elevated rates of respiratory illnesses, cancer, and other diseases, perpetuating health disparities. The historical roots of environmental racism in systemic discrimination have left these communities with limited resources to oppose such siting decisions, further deepening intergenerational inequity. Beyond physical health, the mental toll of enduring environmental degradation fosters feelings of disempowerment and injustice.

The Solutions

Addressing these challenges requires a multi-faceted approach grounded in equitable solutions that prioritize the environment alongside human well-being. Key strategies include a just transition, protecting Canada’s forests, implementing urban planning reforms, and safeguarding freshwater sources. Central to these efforts is the need to prioritize Indigenous leadership and commit to implementing the 94 Calls to Action outlined by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Additionally, it is essential to support the leadership of young people, BIPOC, rural, Northern, and other marginalized communities, who are disproportionately affected by climate and environmental crises, to ensure that no one is left behind in the fight for a just and equitable future. As disability justice organizers aptly state, “Nothing About Us Without Us” underscores the principle that those most impacted by an issue must play a central role in making decisions that shape their lives.

A just transition refers to a framework that ensures workers and communities reliant on the fossil fuel industry are supported during the economic shift toward clean energy. This approach prioritizes equity and aims to minimize social and economic disruptions. Key elements of a just transition include providing targeted economic support, retraining and education, job creation, strengthening social protections, while centering worker and community voices. Protecting Canada’s forests, which act as vital carbon sinks and biodiversity havens, is critical to climate mitigation and ecosystem resilience. Urban planning reforms, including increased density and improved zoning, are needed to reduce urban sprawl, lower emissions, and create more

sustainable communities. Protecting freshwater sources is a priority for both environmental health and human rights, as water security is fundamental for ecological stability and public health.

II. Introduction

The critical role of young leaders in climate and environment

The well-being of young people and the health of the natural world are deeply interconnected.

Research, such as Gifford and Chen's *Children and Nature*, has shown that access to nature is associated with numerous physical and psychological benefits, including lowered blood pressure, improved immune function, and enhanced cardiovascular health. Additionally, time spent in nature promotes mental well-being, resilience, and focus while reducing symptoms of ADHD and eco-anxiety. Exposure to natural environments also fosters social skills, imaginative play, and ecological understanding, laying the foundation for lifelong environmental stewardship. Conversely, "Nature Deficit Disorder"—the cumulative impact of limited nature exposure—can lead to adverse psychological and physical outcomes in children.¹⁹

Climate change intensifies these challenges, as rising CO₂ levels and increasingly severe weather events—such as wildfires, floods, droughts, and heat waves—restrict access to nature, often permanently. Nearly every region in Canada has been or will be affected by these events, which not only disrupt ecosystems but also reduce young people's opportunities to engage with nature.

The existential threat of climate change profoundly impacts young people's mental health. A 2023 study in the *Journal of Climate Change and Health* found that 56% of young Canadians report feelings of fear, sadness, anxiety, and powerlessness about climate change, with 37% indicating these feelings interfere with daily life.²⁰ Yale's Program on Climate Change Communication shows Gen Z and Millennials are experiencing climate anxiety 400-500% more than Baby Boomers.²¹

For young people, climate and environmental issues also raise significant questions of intergenerational equity—the principle that future generations deserve a stable environment, and today's actions should not compromise their well-being. This perspective reinforces both the moral and ethical imperatives for supporting youth-led climate initiatives.

Beyond these ethical reasons, there are strategic benefits to supporting youth leadership. Adolescents and young adults tend to be more innovative, creative, and less risk-averse, as the prefrontal cortex (the brain's center for logic and reason) continues developing until age 25. This youthful adaptability enables young people to act with urgency—a quality essential for responding to high-stakes crises like climate change.

¹⁹ Robert Gifford and Angel Chen, rep., *Children and Nature: What We Know and What We Do Not*, March 31, 2016.

²⁰ Lindsay Paige Galway and Ellen Field, "Climate Emotions and Anxiety among Young People in Canada: A National Survey and Call to Action," *SSRN Electronic Journal*, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4217725>.

²¹ Sri Saahitya Uppalapati et al., "The Prevalence of Climate Change Psychological Distress among American Adults," Yale Program on Climate Change Communication, June 21, 2024.

Additionally, young people face the direct, long-term consequences of today's environmental challenges. They will live with the intensifying impacts of climate change, making them natural leaders in demanding urgent action. History shows that transformative political and social movements are often led by young people. From the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa to the Vietnam war protests in the United States, students and young people have consistently championed the call for justice and change.

Catalyzed by Greta Thunberg, the September 27, 2019 climate strikes were driven by young people, with demonstrations taking place in every major Canadian city. Montreal-based activists mobilized 500,000 in their city alone. This wave of mobilizations sounded the alarm on climate on an unprecedented level, despite decades of institutional research, campaigning and lobbying, and it was thanks to young people who spent countless hours organizing and mobilizing within their communities.

Young climate and environmental leaders are employing a wide range of strategies to address the crises we face. From civic engagement to mass mobilization, and from storytelling to building alternative solutions, they are tackling the climate crisis with creativity and diversity. To achieve another breakthrough moment for climate justice, like the one in 2019, young people's efforts must be supported, and the connections between them strengthened.

Best practices for fostering youth leadership

Philanthropy can play a key role in fostering young people's leadership, which can in turn transform the climate and environmental sectors. Foundations must prioritize meaningful engagement and recognize young leaders as equal partners, providing them with real opportunities to shape outcomes in youth leadership development.

The *Youth & Innovation Report*²² highlights the following best practices for foundations supporting youth-led organizations and youth-led movements to amplify their social and environmental impact:

- **Prioritize Equal Partnerships:** Foundations can commit to an equal partnership with youth-led organizations and movements by sharing control of grant-making decisions equally with young people as well as by designating the time and resources to build trusting relationships with young people. This entails an ongoing commitment to examining how power and control impact decision-making within the foundation.
- **Support Youth Convenings:** Providing dedicated spaces for youth-led networking helps young leaders exchange insights and foster partnerships. This approach also allows funders to gain insight into pressing youth issues and emerging strategies while allowing youth to lead discussions and organize events on their terms.
- **Embed Youth in Formal Structures:** Including young people in boards or advisory councils ensures their voices are embedded in strategic planning. This integration demonstrates long-term commitment to youth engagement and aligns organizational goals with the evolving needs of young leaders.
- **Recruit Diverse, Hard-to-Reach Youth:** Engaging a broad spectrum of young people, particularly those from underrepresented backgrounds, enriches leadership perspectives

²² Amelia Clarke and Ilona Dougherty, rep., *Build Power, Share Power, Leverage Power: How Foundations Can Best Support Youth-Led Organizations and Movements to Amplify Their Impact*, April 12, 2023.

and prevents a reliance on “usual suspects.” Diverse representation fosters a more inclusive environment and helps foundations understand community-specific issues.

- **Build Trust-Based Relationships:** Consistent support, mentorship, and creating safe spaces for open dialogue are critical for nurturing trust. Relationships built on mutual respect allow youth to express themselves authentically, helping both youth and funders develop actionable, community-centered solutions.
- **Deepening support for youth-led organizations:** Foundations can improve granting practices by providing adequate and long-term funding to youth-led organizations, providing training on technical, financial and project management to young leaders, providing clear and simple reporting guidelines, and committing to regularly fund organizations without charitable status.

III. Ecosystem Mapping: The State of Play

What are young environmental and climate leaders working on?

In young peoples’ eyes, the climate and environmental movements are no longer seen as separate from other issues; rather, they are intrinsically intertwined. *The five young environmental leaders interviewed for this report clearly emphasized climate justice as a critical reorientation of the climate movement. They define climate and environment as the multipliers of all issues, affecting marginalized communities disproportionately.* The notions of *climate justice* and *environmental justice* are central to many young Canadians’ advocacy work today. Contrasting these two notions to a more traditional conception of the climate and environmental movements, one can see how the *justice-oriented* movements emphasize the uneven impacts of climate and environmental issues on people across race, class, and Global South/North lines.

When we look at what young Canadian environmental and climate leaders are working on today, we see links being drawn between climate and affordability, good green jobs, economic justice, reconciliation with Indigenous communities, and international solidarity with anti-war movements.

Climate and Affordability

Climate action intersects with affordability as rising energy costs and adaptation expenses disproportionately impact low-income communities. Policies ensuring affordable, sustainable energy, public transit, and resilient housing can mitigate these costs, fostering accessible climate solutions that address economic disparities and protect vulnerable populations from financial strain.

Climate and Labour

Climate action and labour rights are closely linked, as the transition to a low-carbon economy necessitates job security, fair wages, and safe working conditions. Workers in high-emission sectors require support through retraining and equitable policies that guarantee job opportunities in the green economy. Labour unions play a critical role in advocating for sustainable jobs, ensuring that climate policies support workers’ rights and protect livelihoods as industries

transform to meet climate goals.²³ Building a strong, equitable green workforce advances both environmental sustainability and social justice, making labour an essential partner in the climate movement.

Climate and Green Jobs

Equitable climate action supports creating diverse, sustainable jobs through renewable energy, conservation, and green infrastructure projects. Initiatives focused on fair wages, inclusivity, and workforce development ensure that green jobs support all demographics, benefiting the environment while fostering economic resilience and reducing inequality in the labour market. The campaign for a Youth Climate Corps is calling on the BC government to implement a transformative public program that would provide good green jobs to young Canadians.²⁴

Climate and Migrant Justice

Climate change increasingly drives migration as environmental disasters displace communities. Climate justice advocates for inclusive policies supporting migrants' rights, recognizing how racialized and displaced populations are affected disproportionately by climate crises. Advocating for migrant rights and legal protections for displaced communities is vital for a just transition.

Climate and Economic Justice

Income inequality intensifies the climate crisis by exposing low-income communities to higher environmental risks and limiting their resilience against climate impacts. Marginalized populations, often living in areas with higher pollution and fewer environmental protections, bear the brunt of climate hazards like flooding, extreme heat, and air pollution.

Climate and Reconciliation with Indigenous Communities

Indigenous communities are central to climate solutions, given their traditional ecological knowledge and land stewardship. Climate action must respect Indigenous rights, support self-governance in resource management, and include Indigenous voices in climate policy to protect lands and biodiversity for future generations.

Climate and Anti-War Movements

The climate and anti-war movements intersect by highlighting how imperialism and militarization drive environmental degradation. Military operations not only produce significant carbon emissions but also deplete resources and pollute ecosystems, often in countries exploited for strategic gain. Anti-war movements argue that demilitarization and the end of imperialistic resource extraction are essential for sustainable climate action, calling for investments in peacebuilding, renewable energy, and resilience efforts. This approach underscores that a shift from imperialism toward global cooperation and equity is crucial to effectively addressing climate change.

²³ Scharbonneau, "Canada's Unions: Canadian Sustainable Jobs Act an Unprecedented Opportunity for Collaboration," Canadian Labour Congress, June 14, 2023.

²⁴ "Climate Action: Youth Climate Corps BC," Youth Climate Corps BC, January 2021.

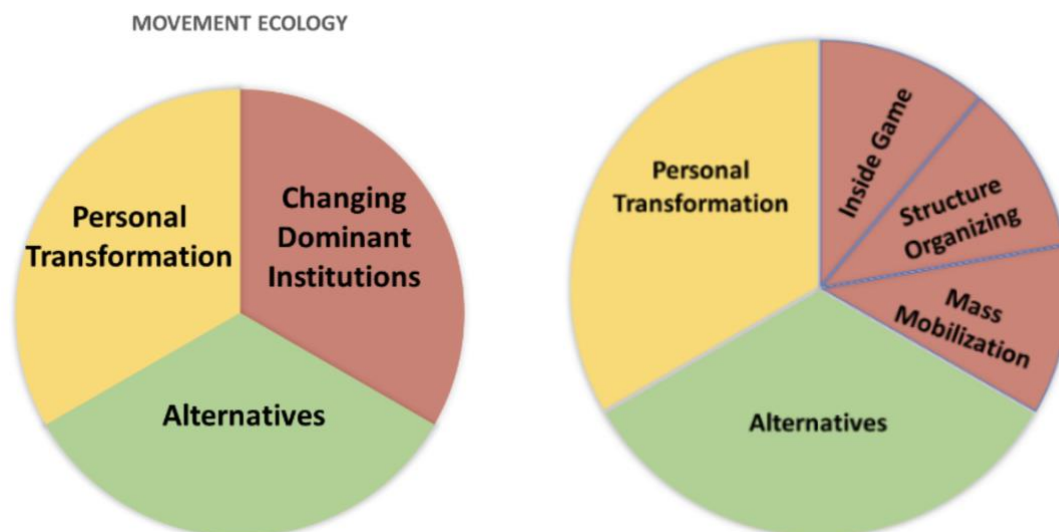
What approaches are young people using to create change in their communities?

To understand the various different approaches young people use to drive positive change in their communities, one framework that we can consider is called *movement ecology*. This is one way to make sense of how many types of initiatives can work together in an “ecosystem” of diversified efforts to collectively create impact. Developed by Carlos Saavedra and Paul Engler at the Ayni Institute, movement ecology is a framework that organizes social change efforts into complementary approaches or “wedges,” each fulfilling a distinct role to build a cohesive and effective movement. The concept recognizes that impactful change requires a combination of strategies working in concert, each addressing different facets of social transformation.

In *Philanthropists Must Invest in an Ecology of Change*, the three main wedges of movement ecology are highlighted: personal transformation, building alternative institutions, and changing dominant institutions.²⁵

The **personal transformation** wedge involves fostering change at the individual and community level by reshaping values and behaviors. **Building alternative institutions** focuses on creating new systems outside dominant institutions, prioritizing sustainability and equity that mainstream frameworks often lack. The **changing dominant institutions** wedge uses three sub-strategies: **mass mobilization**, which builds public momentum; **structured organizing**, which pushes forward demands through advocacy; and the **inside game**, which achieves change through policy and legal reform.

Together, these wedges form a comprehensive approach, enabling movements to address issues from multiple angles, creating an “ecology” where each strategy strengthens the others. This ecology enables philanthropy and social change organizations to identify and support a balanced array of initiatives, recognizing that no single approach can achieve systemic change alone.



Source: *The Stanford Social Innovation Review*

²⁵ Chloe Cockburn, “Philanthropists Must Invest in an Ecology of Change,” *Stanford Social Innovation Review: Informing and Inspiring Leaders of Social Change*, June 25, 2018.

Within the climate movement, young people work across all these wedges. The climate protests of 2019 exemplify **mass mobilization**—student activists rallied hundreds of thousands across Canada, elevating the climate crisis to the forefront of public discourse. Young leaders are also advancing ambitious policies within electoral and legislative systems, exemplifying the **inside game**. Through community-led renewable energy projects, they’re building **alternative institutions** to reduce dependence on fossil fuels, while also driving **personal transformation** through storytelling, community-building, and celebrating environmental wins.

The movement ecology framework provides a valuable lens for understanding how funders can support youth leadership across these varied approaches, investing in an “ecology of change” that empowers young people to make a lasting impact on climate and environmental issues.

See Appendix A for a list and descriptions of youth-led organizations building the infrastructure of the youth climate movement and serving as intermediaries between institutions and young people. This list aims to capture the major organizations but should not be interpreted as a complete representation of the Canadian youth-led climate and environmental landscape.

See Appendix B for a mapping of key initiatives and organizations onto the movement ecology framework.

What challenges are young environmental and climate leaders facing?

Funding

In interviews conducted for this report, young environmental and climate leaders consistently emphasized the urgent need for increased funding. *As Kyle Empringham, Executive Director of Finance and Development at The Starfish, notes, “Environmental funders make up only 2-4% of grants given out in Canada per year, and only a fraction of that goes to youth leadership. This is very low for such a complex problem; young people are woefully underfunded.”*²⁶

Kat Cadungog, Executive Director of Finance Engage Sustain, highlighted that youth climate leadership often feels tokenized, explaining that while funders acknowledge the importance of supporting young leaders, “there is this perception that young people can carry out the work for a very small price tag. No wonder we are seeing high rates of burnout and young people leaving the sector.”

With low salaries across the sector, Cadungog also observed that funding challenges can “feel like a race to the bottom. When we share our budgets with funders, it can feel like a question of who is willing to do this work for the least amount of money. It’s simply not sustainable.” This funding landscape leaves young leaders stretched thin, risking burnout and undermining the sector’s long-term sustainability.

Disjointed efforts

Interviewees noted positive progress as funders increasingly recognize the importance of providing unrestricted operational funding. However, they highlighted a need for additional resources to support capacity-building and enable collaboration. Bringing youth movement organizations

²⁶ “Read the Giving Report 2024,” CanadaHelps, April 17, 2024.

together could unlock potential by helping groups figure out what each organization’s superpower is, streamlining efforts, and enhancing efficiency across the sector.

“We don’t have a coalition; we have informal networks,” observed Empringham. “We’d be better served by having a coalition of movement infrastructure organizations. In the U.S., well-coordinated support systems exist, but we don’t have the same in Canada. Sometimes, our target audiences don’t know who to go to for support—or even that we exist.”²⁷

Lack of strategic capacity

Sara Adams, Executive Director of the Climate Justice Organizing HUB, emphasizes the distinction between strategy and strategic capacity: “Strategy is the roadmap to winning a campaign with clear goals, targets, and tactics. Strategic capacity, however, involves the instincts and skills needed to adapt as conditions shift.” She and her team have observed a significant gap in strategic capacity that extends beyond youth movements to the broader Canadian climate sector, underscoring the need for robust movement support.

For activists within the HUB’s community, 13 top issue areas emerged from the HUB’s Tools For Change Report, which interviewed 21 community organizers across the country. These top challenges include: campaign development, hard organizing skills, media and communications skills, security culture, recruitment and retention, group structure optimization, community care, conflict transformation, space for convenings, multi-racial organizing, funding, an understanding of the ‘polycrisis’, and resources tailored to Canada’s unique political, geographical, economic and governance contexts.

The report found that “funded support structures such as the HUB can play an important role in supporting climate justice groups in meeting [their] needs, fostering movement connections and dialogue, and helping to ... amplify grassroots knowledge within a long-view of social movement development.” Findings from the study also revealed that “while organizers across so-called Canada are making use of resources and support from the HUB, many organizers are still seeking additional support. Meeting these needs will require expanding the capacity and reach of funded support structures across [the country].”²⁸

Lack of mentorship and burnout

Burnout among young climate and environmental leaders is a growing concern. We can look at a number of explanations for this— eco-anxiety and climate grief, increased political polarization and feeling helpless, being overworked and under-paid, feeling disillusioned with the tactics, strategy, and a lack of cohesion within the movement; the list goes on.

Interviewees emphasized that climate movements are inherently relational. People come to these movements and stay because of friendships, mentorships, a sense of camaraderie and

²⁷ Examples of US-based coalitions support systems: Mosaic is a national funder and field catalyst that invests in movement infrastructure to connect and equip advocates and activists in the USA (<https://mosaicmomentum.org/what-we-do/>); The Sunrise Movement is nation-wide youth movement in the USA advocating for a Green New Deal. (<https://www.sunrisemovement.org/about/>)

²⁸ Amanda Harvey-Sánchez, rep., *Tools for Change: Understanding the Needs of Climate Justice Organizers in Canada*, May 2024.

community. Adams lamented, “the pandemic broke so many links and connections. Many people left during and after the pandemic, and it intersected with the burnout of a huge generation of activists after the immense push to organize the climate strikes of 2019. The grassroots climate justice movement is still recovering from this.”

When young leaders experience burnout and leave the sector, they end up taking with them the expertise and know-how they developed over the years and prevent this knowledge from being passed onto the next leaders in their organizations or communities.

Organizational capacity and know-how

Kat Cadungog, Executive Director of Finance Engage Sustain (FES), identified budget planning, governance, project management, partnership building, fundraising, and impact evaluation as skills that young leaders commonly need. While youth leaders are known for their creativity and innovation, Empringham points out that young people often need help “learning how to build good relationships that can lead to partnerships, which doesn’t come overnight.” These gaps in organizational skills are especially challenging when combined with limited resources.

Emotional wellbeing

A 2023 study in the *Journal of Climate Change and Health* reports that 56% of young people feel afraid, sad, anxious, and powerless about climate change, with 37% saying these feelings affect their daily lives. Interviewees described young people’s anxiety as layered: climate concerns, economic pressures, and constant exposure to global crises via social media all contribute to high levels of distress.²⁹

To counter these emotions, interviewees highlighted the importance of community-building and collective action. Empringham shared that “Unconference” models—bringing people together in an unstructured, natural setting—have been successful in fostering connections and organic conversations, offering a restorative space for young leaders. “We’ve had a lot of success with an ‘Unconference’ model – bringing people together in an unstructured space in nature, allowing connections and conversations to form organically.”

The unique challenge of civic engagement in 2024

Young people are coming of age during a time of heightened political polarization and feelings of distrust in institutions.³⁰ Yet, the rise of populist and authoritarian regimes around the world also makes it an urgent imperative to invest in our democracy. So, how are young people approaching civic engagement amidst the erosion of trust in democracy?

Samantha Reusch, Executive Director of Apathy is Boring, reflected on how the fate of our democracy is tied to the future of our planet. “Humans are wired to create institutions, and these institutions are only as good as what we put into it. We have rights and we also have responsibilities. What happens to democracy is tied to our capacity to meet the challenges we are facing. Our movements should be working together—all of us need to take responsibility; without all our voices, there is a vacuum.”

²⁹ Lindsay Paige Galway and Ellen Field, “Climate Emotions and Anxiety among Young People in Canada: A National Survey and Call to Action,” *SSRN Electronic Journal*, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4217725>.

³⁰Justin Steinburg, rep., *Trust in Canada: Recent Trends in Measures of Trust*, April 2024.

When asked about how Apathy is Boring approaches youth civic engagement, Erika De Torres, Director of Impact and Development, shared, “civics and democratic education is lacking across all provinces. The language we use is youth-friendly; and being youth-friendly, it’s approachable to anyone.” Reusch went on to observe that “there’s this notion that the government is impenetrable. But as soon as young people break it down into people they can interface with, it becomes demystified and young people better understand the power they hold. And what’s more — many elected officials are really excited to talk to young people!”

Organizations like Apathy is Boring and the Climate Justice Organizing HUB emphasize this idea of facilitating young peoples’ learning through doing. “Once you learn the skills of advocacy work and you’re able to get that first yes, that is so energizing,” Reusch says. Sara Adams, Executive Director of the Climate Justice Organizing HUB adds, “social movements—which are overwhelmingly led by young people—wield incredible power; more than what NGO campaigns and lobbying can do alone. Yet movements are severely under-supported because they are less tangible, less quantifiable. There needs to be an understanding that movement-building and civic engagement has enormous effects, and begins with young activists.”

Challenges specific to BIPOC and Indigenous youth

Money and funding

It’s well-known that nonprofit sector salaries are lower than in for-profit companies, a disparity that seems embedded in the system. For BIPOC and Indigenous youth, who often enter the workforce already at an economic disadvantage, this poses a real question of financial sustainability. Factoring in the growing affordability crisis, one interviewee noted, “why would young people enter this non-competitive industry? We’ve structured it so that only those with economic privilege can afford to participate.”

Networks and representation

“There are networks – and generational networks – that we just don’t have as newcomers or BIPOC leaders,” one interviewee explained. In a sector where relationships can unlock funding, BIPOC leaders are put at a significant disadvantage as they often enter the sector without these networks, or with significantly fewer network relationships compared to non-BIPOC peers. Representation can also shape these opportunities; as another interviewee observed, “It’s a completely different experience to see people like you in the halls of power.” While representation is improving, there’s still much progress to be made in expanding access to these networks.

Tokenization and societal pressure

Big strides have been made in recent years towards supporting the leadership of BIPOC youth and other equity-deserving groups, but it brings unique pressures. “There’s an expectation not to fail,” one interviewee shared. You’re not just an Executive Director, you are a BIPOC, woman Executive Director. There is an added pressure to make statements, represent your organization *and* the community you’re from. It’s a lot of pressure to be judged on the basis of if you can do your job well *and* if you can be a good BIPOC leader.”

Language and Jargon

Reflecting on his organization’s work with Indigenous communities, Kyle Empringham emphasized, “syntax matters. In the past we have used the word “environmental” in Inuit communities, and have been invited to think about that word.” For many Indigenous communities, mainstream environmental and climate movements reflect a legacy of settler colonial values, which clash with Indigenous worldviews that emphasize relationality, reciprocity and respect for the natural world.

Inflexible systems

While some foundations are moving toward trust-based philanthropy, grant processes often remain inaccessible to BIPOC leaders unfamiliar with the system. Government grants, in particular, are notorious for rigid reporting requirements. One interviewee shared an experience of trying to pay honoraria to Indigenous youth with government funds; the grant only allowed honoraria for “Indigenous elders,” creating barriers despite the funds being allocated to a youth-serving organization.

Lacking support infrastructure

Canada’s youth climate and environmental movement struggles with limited infrastructure, and Indigenous and BIPOC youth especially lack tailored support, as well as those living in rural and Northern communities. While initiatives like the Seven Gen Indigenous Youth Energy Summit, ImaGENation Indigenous Youth Mentorship Program, and the 4Rs Youth Movement provide some support, the need remains high.

Allyship & leveraging privilege

Allies in the sector can help address these barriers by leveraging their privilege. “It’s obvious,” says Kyle Empringham, “but many people don’t know how to do it.” Those in positions of power should ask, “What do you need? How can I help?”—and then act on those requests to create meaningful change.

Understanding the Gaps: Why Youth-Led Climate Organizations Struggle

The disconnect between funders and young climate leaders highlights an urgent need for more strategic support of youth-led climate initiatives. Presently in Canada, only a handful of foundations fund youth as their top environmental funding priority. This limited pool of dedicated support contributes to significant competition for funds among youth-led organizations, underscoring the need for more funders to prioritize youth climate initiatives.

According to Devika Shah, Executive Director of Environment Funders Canada, most climate funders also fund some amount of youth-led work. Even so, there remains a critical gap between available resources and the needs of youth climate organizations. Shah attributes this discrepancy to the differences in organizational size and maturity.

Larger, established organizations, despite also scrambling for funds, have built credibility, recognition, and strong relationships with funders, alongside dedicated staff who focus on fundraising. In contrast, youth-led groups are often newer, with fewer established networks, making fundraising more difficult despite their impactful work. Furthermore, funders are understandably hesitant to award larger grants to smaller, newer organizations.

Elaborating on this point, Shah says, “the [fundraising] challenges that most youth-led organizations face are no different than that of any other newer-less established organization. If anything, being youth-led makes them more attractive than other organizations in that same size and phase.”

“There is a strategic value in investing in youth leadership,” Shah notes. “Funding for youth organizations often has a greater impact dollar-for-dollar than for established groups.”

According to Kat Cadungog, this is because youth are most effective at shifting culture, political will, and societal attitudes to pressure decision-makers and power holders. There has never been a strong social justice movement that wasn’t undergirded by a robust youth movement.

It’s also worthwhile to define *intermediary and infrastructure organizations* here. These are the youth-led organizations that are liaising between the institutional spaces (i.e. government, philanthropic foundations, policy-oriented NGOs and research institutes) and their young audiences. Intermediary and infrastructure organizations play a critical role in leveraging power and resources from the institutional world, and shifting this power towards younger demographics. Their activities may range from re-granting funds to youth-led initiatives, to convening young people to network and collaborate, to providing educational and capacity-building offerings to young audiences.

To make sense of the funding gap faced by young leaders in the sector, developmental maturity clearly plays a large role, as Shah noted. But within the youth-led sector, we also see a wide range of developmental maturity between organizations. Some have been around for 10+ years and have built up strong foundations and funding relationships, while others are composed of unpaid volunteers who are in the early stages of setting up their organizations.

To take this one step further, we can also integrate the movement ecology framework covered earlier in this report. There are multiple organizations working in each wedge of the movement ecology pie chart, and each of them are at varying levels of maturity. *With this in mind, funders may consider supporting a diverse array of youth-led organizations from both standpoints of developmental maturity and movement ecology ‘wedge’ areas.*

Supporting youth organizations through their maturation phase, and supporting a diversity of approaches, not only strengthens the climate movement but also builds a more sustainable leadership conduit. Bridging this gap will be crucial for creating a robust and intergenerational climate movement capable of lasting impact.

IV. Antidotes to burnout and eco-anxiety amongst young climate and environmental leaders

When asked, “How can we better address burnout and eco-anxiety among young leaders deeply engaged in climate work?” interviewees shared several insights:

Funding

Many interviewees emphasized that preventing burnout ultimately requires adequate funding. Young leaders in environmental and climate organizations often accept lower salaries or unpaid roles to work in the nonprofit and grassroots sectors. While meaningful work holds value, the affordability crisis is straining young people's well-being, making it difficult for many to work in these sectors due to salaries not keeping up with inflation.

One interviewee highlighted the specific challenges faced by young Executive Directors: "Young leaders need funded sabbaticals. If there were a fund for youth leaders who have been Executive Directors for two years, that would be amazing." Others echoed that funded sabbaticals and similar supports could help young leaders feel resourced and sustain their work over time.

Centering relationships

Building on the mindset shift, interviewees noted how we must resist giving into an overwhelming sense of urgency. Feeling rushed to have a magic solution immediately can feel paralyzing. Instead, interviewees suggested that we move at the speed of trust. "Relationships are so important, and these often don't come quickly," one interviewee shared.

A mindset shift for eco-anxiety

Eco-anxiety often arises from the perceived threat of a catastrophic future. To address this, Sara Adams suggested reframing climate change not as humanity's first existential threat but as part of a historical continuum of resilience, learning from communities that have survived colonization, genocide, and slavery. "It's interesting how this intersects with Black and Indigenous histories. These communities live in a post-apocalyptic world. They still resist."

Collective action as an antidote to eco-anxiety

Adams further observed that responses to eco-anxiety often favour individualistic solutions, like self-care and sharing circles. These solutions are valuable but they're only half of the equation. "We need to meet people where they're at. [*Grief and anxiety can be gateways to community-building and collective action.*](#) The question is: how do we cultivate agency and leadership? How do we address the emotional health needs of young people without individualizing it and making it into palliative care? The answer is building power in community. Activism is a powerful antidote to despair. Community is an antidote to anxiety and despair."

She continued, "People desperately want to feel effective and lead meaningful lives. Individually, we don't have a sense of our own power, but building power to counter hegemonic power is a strong antidote to eco-anxiety."

V. Alternative Approaches Beyond Traditional Grantmaking

Strengthening peer-to-peer learning

Interviewees emphasized the importance of strong communication and collaboration between movement support organizations, each focusing on a unique aspect of the movement ecosystem.

Stronger ties would allow leaders to rely on each other for support or resources, rather than operating in isolation. Although informal connections exist, interviewees felt there's potential for deeper collaboration and efficiency, but these leaders, already overworked and under-resourced, lack the time and resources to organize such convenings. This is where funding partners could play a supportive role.

Supporting community-driven leadership models

Young leaders are not only advancing climate and environmental justice but are also experimenting with leadership structures that reflect their vision for the world. Many youth-led initiatives employ horizontal decision-making and shared leadership. Supporting youth leadership means embracing these models, fostering openness, and helping young people navigate new systems rather than expecting them to conform to traditional norms.

Advocating for youth leadership within philanthropy

One of the primary barriers young people face in securing sustained funding is a lack of established relationships and networks within the philanthropic sector. Without years to build these networks, young leaders are often still developing the skills and capacity needed for successful fundraising. A powerful way funders can support youth-led organizations is by advocating for them within philanthropic circles, championing their work to build credibility and expand networks. This approach not only strengthens the impact of the initial investment but also invites other funders to support transformative youth initiatives. Empringham notes, "When I get money, I think about how to leverage that money to get more...If we're in community and partnership, I'll do my part and they should do theirs too."

Developing fundraising skills and capacity

Many young leaders are also in the early stages of developing the skills required for successful fundraising and operational management. Without resources for dedicated fundraising staff or development consultants, many youth-led organizations rely on small teams to juggle program delivery and fundraising efforts. Building skills in proposal writing, donor engagement, and financial reporting is crucial for these organizations, yet it requires time and training they often cannot afford. Funders who invest in capacity-building—such as providing grant writing workshops or strategic planning sessions—equip youth-led organizations with tools for more self-sustained growth, allowing them to fundraise independently and more effectively.

Responding to political forces and current events

Anecdotally, youth-led climate and environmental organizations have been facing significant challenges in 2024 due to delays in federal grant disbursements, causing cash-flow issues and stress across the sector. Unfortunately, support from philanthropy, high-net-worth donors, and corporate funders has also decreased this year, largely due to economic challenges. Without additional support from these sources, youth organizations are left vulnerable to financial instability, hampering their ability to sustain critical climate work. Moreover, potential changes in government leadership could further endanger environmental progress, especially as policy shifts may deprioritize climate initiatives. Philanthropic funders can play a vital role by proactively increasing funding to help bridge these gaps and stabilize the sector in uncertain times.

In November 2024, nine affluent Canadian families announced the largest-ever philanthropic commitment to climate action in Canada, pledging \$405 million over the next decade to accelerate the transition to a low-carbon economy. This initiative, known as the Climate Champions, represents a significant milestone in Canadian climate philanthropy. Although details on the allocation of these funds are yet to be revealed, the pledge marks a significant step in mobilizing capital and highlighting the urgent need to address the scarcity of climate funding within the sector. This initiative could also enhance philanthropy’s flexibility and responsiveness during times of political uncertainty.

Confronting disinformation and nurturing a healthy democracy

Environmental issues are deeply intertwined with democratic health, as recent surges in disinformation have obscured facts and fractured public trust. Tackling climate challenges requires public trust and credible information; however, misinformation weakens both. “We have to start building the connective tissue between different areas. So much of this is about trust,” explains Sam Reusch, Executive Director of Apathy is Boring. While foundations have supported journalism to address misinformation, few have confronted disinformation directly. Addressing this “democracy problem” is critical for effective climate action, as cohesive democratic processes enable reliable information and collective action.

VI. Conclusion

Summary of Key Insights

In summary, this report highlights the vital role young people play in addressing Canada’s climate and environmental challenges. Despite their potential, young leaders face significant barriers, from limited funding and capacity to high levels of burnout and eco-anxiety. Addressing these challenges requires a coordinated approach, with funders stepping up to advocate for youth-led initiatives, build strategic networks, and support capacity development. Foundations can catalyze transformative change by providing flexible funding, championing young leaders within philanthropic spaces, and addressing systemic issues like disinformation that intersect with environmental goals.

The urgency is clear: we are at a pivotal moment to invest in youth-led climate action to foster a resilient, equitable future. By bolstering youth leadership now, funders can help create a robust, intergenerational climate movement capable of tackling the environmental crises facing Canada and the world.

Key Takeaways

Investing in an ecology of change within the youth climate and environmental sector

Adopting the “movement ecology” framework allows funders and organizations to see where each organization’s unique niche lies and how they complement one another, fostering deeper collaboration rather than competition for limited funding. It’s important to note that multiple organizations often occupy similar “wedges” within the movement ecology framework—and this is positive. Like in a forest ecosystem, duplication and overlaps in roles can actually bolster

resilience, as the variety and redundancy within efforts make the movement more robust and adaptable. This view encourages funders to support a broad ecology of organizations, recognizing that similar efforts are not a flaw but an asset.

Understanding the funding gap: Why youth organizations struggle

Youth-led organizations face significant funding challenges, as funders are often hesitant to award larger grants to smaller, newer organizations. As Devika Shah notes, this funding gap limits these groups' potential, even though their impact per dollar can be exceptionally high. This report encourages funders to take a bold approach by increasing their support for youth-led initiatives, recognizing the high-impact outcomes that often result from their work.

Investing in intermediary and infrastructure organizations

Intermediary and infrastructure organizations play critical roles in supporting and scaling youth movements in Canada. These groups bring extensive experience in relationship-building, program design, and audience engagement, making them essential pillars of support for youth climate and environmental efforts. Yet, they face constant funding pressures, and their leaders are often overworked and underpaid. By investing in these intermediaries, funders can exponentially increase the efficacy and reach of youth organizing across the sector.

Convening youth leaders

Convening opportunities for youth leaders strengthen the overall movement by facilitating collaboration, resource-sharing, and cross-pollination. Through these gatherings, leaders gain a clearer understanding of the movement ecology framework and learn where each organization fits, enhancing mutual support and reducing competition. These interactions also help intermediary and infrastructure organizations understand one another's roles, allowing them to refer youth to the most relevant support services, ultimately creating a more interconnected and efficient network.

Final thoughts

Young climate and environmental leaders in Canada are driving essential change within a complex landscape marked by urgent environmental challenges, limited funding, and structural barriers. Their work, shaped by a commitment to social and environmental justice, is both innovative and resilient. However, without targeted support, the full potential of these young leaders remains constrained. Funders are encouraged to recognize the high-impact, cost-effective outcomes of youth-led initiatives and to invest in the sustainability of these efforts through increased funding, capacity building, and the cultivation of strategic networks.

This report highlights how support for intermediary and infrastructure organizations, alongside funding for youth-led groups, is vital to creating a connected, resilient ecosystem of climate action. By embracing a movement ecology approach, stakeholders can foster collaboration over competition, increase resource sharing, and mitigate burnout, ultimately strengthening the youth environmental movement's impact. Investing in youth leadership is not only a moral imperative but a strategic opportunity to ensure that Canada's climate movement is dynamic, inclusive, and equipped to tackle the pressing challenges of our time.

Appendices

Appendix A: Resources for young environmental and climate leaders: the ecosystem of movement infrastructure organizations

Key initiatives and organizations: The Starfish, Finance Engage Sustain, The Climate Justice Organizing HUB, Apathy is Boring, Shake Up The Establishment, Youth Climate Lab, Student Energy, Re-generation; Change Course; Environnement Jeunesse (ENJEU); l'Écothèque; CityHive (Vancouver), Research for the Frontlines, Seven Gen Indigenous Youth Energy Summit, ImaGENation Indigenous Youth Mentorship Program, 4Rs Youth Movement.

This list represents key initiatives and organizations primarily on the capacity-building side and excludes organizations that focus mainly on grassroots campaigning and advocacy.

Apathy is Boring: Serves young Canadians (ages 18-30) across Canada who are keen to better understand or get involved with the democratic system. AisB provides a suite of programming to meet young people where they're at, providing education about civic engagement and opportunities to develop and execute projects on the ground. (www.apathyisboring.com/)

Change Course: Change Course mentors young environmental leaders who are pushing financial institutions to divest from the fossil fuel industry. Through hands-on campaigning, workshops, and mentorship, Change Course equips youth to become advocates for systemic change in climate policy and action. (<https://changeecourse.ca/>)

CityHive: CityHive is a Vancouver-based organization that drives youth engagement in urban sustainability by providing skills training, collaborative city projects, and pathways into environmental decision-making, focusing on transforming city policies and projects through youth-led initiatives. (<https://cityhive.ca/>)

The Climate Justice Organizing HUB: Serves grassroots young climate justice organizers and activists across Canada, teaching them how to build political power from the ground up through mobilization efforts, demonstrations, and base-building. Facilitates coalition building and network-building convenings and delivers skills training to activists through online and in-person workshops, written resources, coaching, and mentorship. (www.lehub.ca)

Decolonial Solidarity: Decolonial Solidarity is a grassroots youth-led movement across so-called Canada that mobilizes and organizes support for land defenders taking action against RBC, one of the top fossil fuel financiers in Canada. (<https://www.instagram.com/decolonialsolidarity/?hl=en>)

l'Écothèque: This Montreal-based grassroots organization bolsters the work of francophone climate justice activists by providing learning materials (podcasts, books and readings) on decarbonization and social justice, and collaborating with local campaigns and fundraisers to support grassroots efforts fighting for climate justice.

ENJEU: This Quebec-based organization supports young environmental advocates through campaigns and leadership training, emphasizing community-based action. Their programming empowers youth to tackle local climate issues and foster environmental engagement. (<https://enjeu.qc.ca/en/>)

Finance Engage Sustain: Serves the Canadian youth climate movement with funding, networking, co-working spaces, and capacity-building. Some young people in the FES community are building initiatives into organizations, whereas some identify as grassroots organizers and activists. (www.fesplanet.org)

ImaGENation Indigenous Youth Mentorship Program: ImaGENation supports Indigenous youth by providing mentorship in energy and climate fields, emphasizing leadership skills and the integration of Indigenous knowledge into sustainable energy solutions. (<https://www.imagenationenergy.com/>)

Re-Generation: Focused on catalyzing a green economy, Re-Generation mobilizes Canadian youth to lead in sustainable business practices. They offer training, mentorship, and connections with environmental sectors to drive impactful changes in workplaces and communities. (www.re-generation.ca)

Research For the Frontlines: This organization connects frontline and grassroots climate justice activists with volunteer academics to support community-led environmental research. They focus on developing evidence-based advocacy through collaborative projects that address pressing local climate justice issues. (<https://researchforthefrontlines.ca/>)

4Rs Youth Movement: Centered on reconciliation, 4Rs empowers Indigenous and non-Indigenous youth to engage in climate justice. They offer leadership development through workshops and dialogues, fostering a collaborative approach to environmental advocacy. (<https://4rsyouth.ca/>)

Seven Gen Indigenous Youth Energy Summit: The summit convenes Indigenous youth to discuss energy sovereignty, blending traditional knowledge with modern energy practices. They provide mentorship and leadership development specific to energy and environmental stewardship. (<https://sevengenenergy.org/>)

Shake Up The Establishment (SUTE): Promotes climate justice through awareness campaigns, educational resource creation, and via collaborations directly with groups and communities working to address injustice, alongside ongoing work towards environment and climate literacy and political action. Non-partisan, scientifically-informed, and youth-led. (Source: [SUTE Updated Mandate](#))

The Starfish Canada: Serves young environmental change makers across Canada with education, resources and networking. Provides climate communications and educational opportunities for young climate leaders to lead on, hosts an annual Youth Environmental Changemakers Summit,

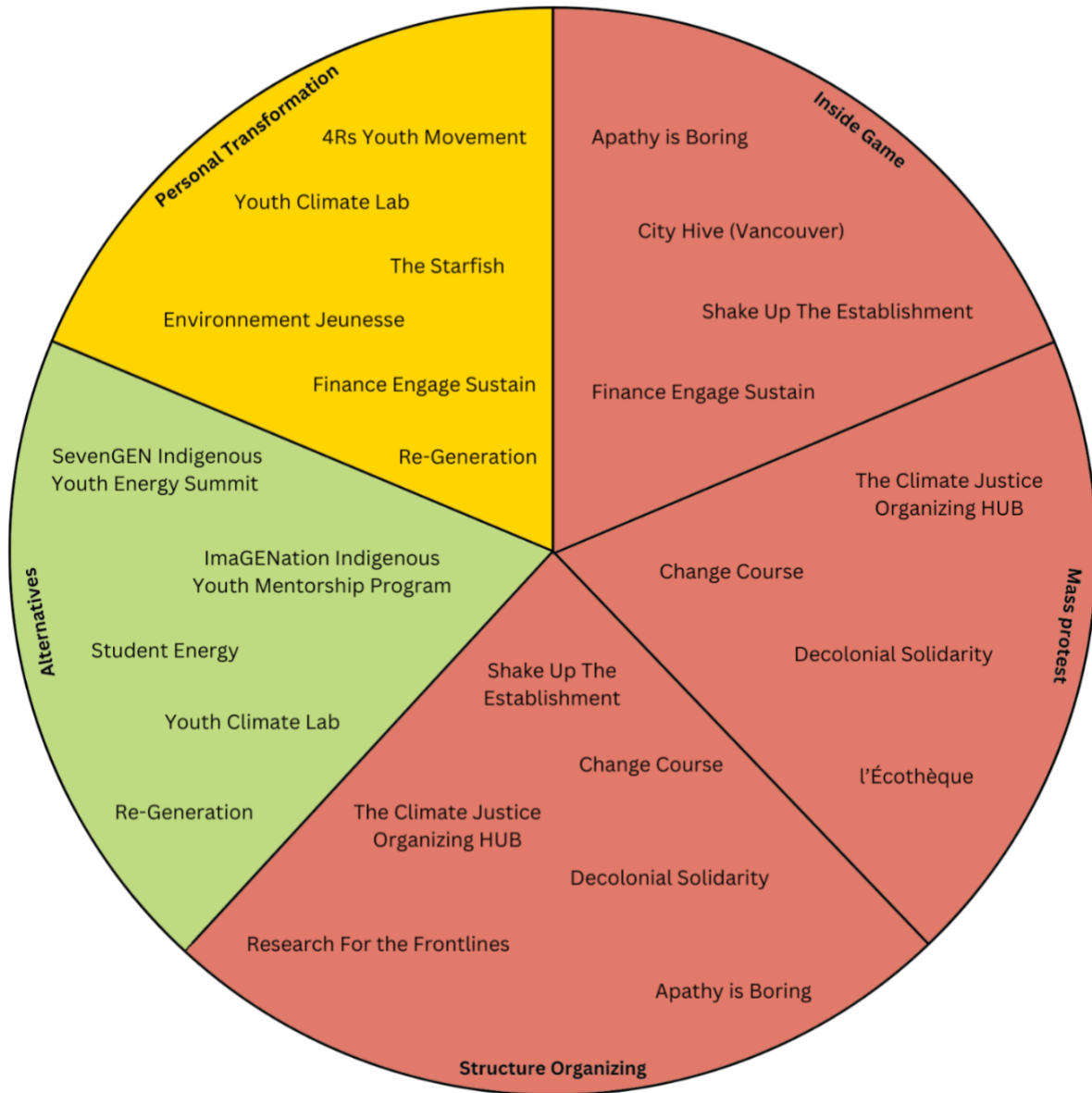
and celebrates young leaders through the Top 25 Environmentalists Under 25 Awards Program. (www.thestarfish.ca)

Student Energy: This global youth-led organization educates and empowers young leaders to advance sustainable energy solutions. Through programs such as the Student Energy Chapters and Career Training, they connect students to develop hands-on skills and networks for energy transitions. (www.studentenergy.org)

Youth Climate Lab: Youth Climate Lab works with young Canadians through initiatives like the RAD Cohort, fostering skills in radical collaboration, research, and community transformation. The organization supports youth in building partnerships and activating community projects aligned with climate justice and sustainability goals. (www.youthclimatelab.org)

Appendix B: Mapping key initiatives and organizations onto the movement ecology framework

Please note: This visual is a subjective attempt to provide a snapshot of the variety of approaches used by major youth-led organizations in Canada and should not be interpreted as conclusive.



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