



FRI Frontline Resource
Institute

Frontline Momentum

Youth Engagement and Agency

Issue 6: Fall 2024

A LETTER FROM FRI'S ACTING DIRECTOR

“CHILDREN REPRESENT NONE OF OUR PAST, PART OF OUR PRESENT, AND ALL OF OUR FUTURE.”

When I think about this quote, which I used many times when I worked at the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, I am reminded that today's youth will be leading our planet through a future shaped by the climate crisis. They need and deserve all of our support.

This came into focus for me once again at the HBCU Climate Change Consortium held in New Orleans, Louisiana. [Dr. Beverly Wright](#) and [Dr. Robert Bullard](#) founded the Consortium in 2011 to provide HBCU students an opportunity to learn about climate change science, policy, and advocacy and to present research on climate change-related topics. The coolest thing about the consortium is its exponential growth over the last decade. Every time I go, I am inspired to see the hundreds of youth in attendance who are pursuing careers in science or the humanities and applying that knowledge to solve real-world, climate-related problems.

FRI sponsors the HBCU Climate Change Consortium and works in service with its leaders to provide the resources they need to ensure the consortium's sustainability and growth. We also support the Nairobi Summer School for Climate Justice, which brings together hundreds of youth aged 18 - 35 from around the world to learn and share knowledge. I am honored to sit on the planning board for the school, which has also seen strong momentum and growth. The 2024 school hosted 300 youth out of more than 2,000 applicants.

FRI will continue to engage youth-led or youth-focused organizations who invite us to support and promote their work. We are also developing a middle school climate justice curriculum that will help students not only learn about climate change but also understand the inequities that are inherent in the problem and its solutions. At the end, students will have an opportunity to exercise their own agency by addressing a real-world climate-related problem in their community.

I would like to close with a quote by Nelson Mandela. "There can be no keener revelation of society's soul than the way it treats its children." Now, more than ever, it is imperative for those in the environmental and climate justice space to support youth agency and autonomy to lead, to respect the ideas and solutions they put forward, and to make sure they have a seat at decision-making tables. After all, it's their future, they deserve to play a role in shaping it.

Dr. Margot Brown

Margot Brown

In This Issue

Page 2

Partner Spotlight:
Youth Climate
Collaborative

Page 5

Stepping Up and
Speaking Out: Youth
Take a Stand for
Environmental and
Climate Justice

Page 8

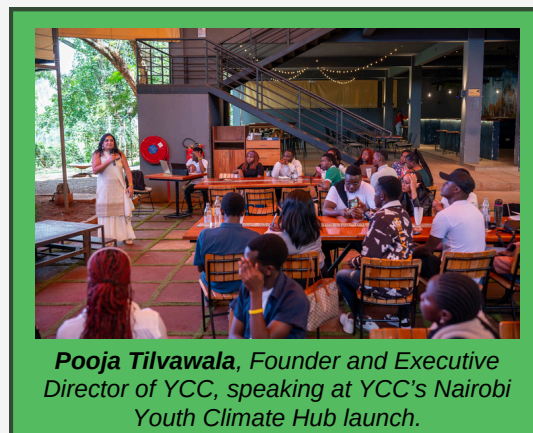
Three Steps
Organizations Can
Take to Engage
Youth in Frontline
Climate Action



PARTNER SPOTLIGHT

YOUTH CLIMATE COLLABORATIVE

Youth Climate Collaborative (YCC) is a global, youth-led organization that is creating a more accessible, inclusive, and intergenerational climate movement. Founded in November 2020 by Pooja Tilwawala, YCC offers programs, tools, and a community to empower youth to deepen their impact and encourage others to meaningfully engage youth in climate action. Its core focus areas include capacity-building, storytelling, intergenerational power sharing, climate mental health, community-building, and cross-sector partnerships.



Pooja Tilwawala, Founder and Executive Director of YCC, speaking at YCC's Nairobi Youth Climate Hub launch.

BUILDING COMMUNITY, CAPACITY, AND CONNECTIONS ACROSS THE GLOBE AND GENERATIONS

Tilwawala founded YCC to help youth overcome the challenges they face in the climate movement. For example, youth have limited access to funding and opportunities to gain relevant knowledge and skills to advance their climate work and advocacy. YCC has created several avenues to help youth build their social capital and access financial resources. The organization's social platform, called Jaali, connects social impact actors with one another to facilitate knowledge sharing, collaboration, and coordination across similar initiatives. The platform also features an opportunity board to share information about jobs, grants, and events, and connects youth with potential funders via a "funder's view" where funders can locate and learn about youth-led projects. Jaali is currently under construction, and the new and improved version will soft-launch in November 2024. In addition, YCC also hosts a number of WhatsApp groups that connect young leaders from around the world to network, build community, share opportunities, and coordinate around key climate events. Recently, they launched a hub model to enhance community building at the grassroots level and strengthen communication and collaboration with other key players at the local and national levels. YCC launched the Nairobi Youth Climate Hub, in partnership with FRI, and will soon launch hubs in London (December 14th), New York City, and Delhi.

Another challenge for youth is their exclusion from decision-making tables and a lack of meaningful youth engagement opportunities. YCC is working to shift this power imbalance and elevate youth voices by tracking board and advisory council vacancies and matching youth with these vacancies when they arise. YCC is also leading a research consortium that is summarizing existing research on intergenerational collaboration and leading a study to capture case studies of intergenerational collaboration models to share best practices and lessons learned. The consortium aims to develop a framework for meaningful youth engagement and share replicable practices and models of effective intergenerational collaboration and decision making.

CREATING SAFE SPACES TO EXPLORE CLIMATE EMOTIONS

Climate change evokes strong emotions among youth, so it is important to provide them with spaces that promote dialogue and healing. YCC's Climate Courage program consists of two components: Climate Courage Workshops and a climate mental health journal. Climate Courage Workshops provide a safe space where youth can discuss how climate change is impacting them

and their communities. They can also exchange resources and strategies for self-care and supporting those experiencing climate anxiety or post-disaster trauma. The Climate Courage Journal is a tool YCC co-created with 40 youth from around the world that is meant to help individuals process their emotions and thoughts about climate change through art, poetry, and storytelling. Starting in 2025, YCC will offer biweekly healing sessions, led by global south young creatives as a consistent virtual space where participants can use the arts to heal collectively. [Explore a preview of the journal here.](#)

YCC's Climate Courage program provides a safe space for youth who might not traditionally feel comfortable speaking about their emotions. For example, some cis-gender males who attend these workshops

relate that it is not socially acceptable for them to share their feelings about climate change with their families or community. The workshops give them the space they need to share and receive support from like-minded peers. The Climate Courage program also helps youth who are thinking about leaving the climate space learn healthy ways to care for themselves so they can stay engaged for the long-term, and even pursue climate-related careers.

USING STORYTELLING TO ADVANCE CLIMATE ACTION

YCC is working to provide opportunities for youth to share their stories and make their voices heard. At COP28 in Dubai, YCC hosted an Entertainment + Culture pavilion where culture-based organizations used a variety of creative mediums, including storytelling, narrative change, and preservation of culture, to communicate how they are implementing climate solutions in their



Photo courtesy of Pooja Tilwawala and Youth Climate Collaborative.

communities. YCC also worked with the COP media team to ensure youth were featured in their daily videos. [Explore their impact report here.](#)

Later this year, YCC will launch a program called the Reclaim Your Narrative Fellowship. The fellowship will train 30 youth on the frontlines of climate change in public speaking and journalism, including how to write op-eds and a variety of short- and long-form pieces about the issues they care about and the solutions they are implementing in their communities. In the meantime, YCC is elevating youth voices by serving as an intermediary between youth and media outlets to secure speaking and writing opportunities, giving youth platforms to reach critical audiences. The objective is for these stories to influence key political decision-making. Applications will be available in January.

YCC is open to youth worldwide, aged 35 and under, and there are many ways to get involved. One of the best ways to start is by joining one of YCC's [WhatsApp groups](#). Youth are also encouraged to sign up for YCC's [newsletter](#) and follow the organization on [LinkedIn](#) and [Instagram](#).



LEARN MORE AND CONNECT!

Contact Pooja Tilwawala at pooja@youthcc.org to explore ways to get involved and collaborate. If you would like to support YCC's work, [donate here.](#)

NEWSLETTER FEATURE

STEPPING UP AND SPEAKING OUT: YOUTH TAKE A STAND FOR ENVIRONMENTAL AND CLIMATE JUSTICE

Article informed by interviews with **Lil Milagro Henriquez**, Executive Director and Founder, Mycelium Youth Network; **Diamond Spratling**, Executive Director, Girl Plus Environment; and **Joel Tolman**, Director of Community Impact and Engagement, Common Ground High School, Urban Farm, and Environmental Education Center



Lil Milagro Henriquez,
Executive Director and
Founder, Mycelium Youth
Network



Diamond Spratling,
Executive Director, Girl Plus
Environment



Joel Tolman, Director of
Community Impact and
Engagement, Common
Ground High School

If you visit [Common Ground High School](#) in New Haven, Connecticut, you are bound to encounter the school's educational wetland. This special place was created to honor Javier Martinez, a Common Ground student who lost his life to gun violence. In 2023, a group of ninth-grade students started an afterschool wetlands stewardship program to care for this space, and many who attend Common Ground feel a personal and emotional connection to this place. This student-led program provides an opportunity for students to joyfully engage with the natural world while taking action to mitigate the impacts of climate change on a place they love, creating a space where they can show up as their authentic selves. It is just one example of how young people are stepping up and using their voices and actions to create a more just and sustainable future.

THE GROWING INFLUENCE OF YOUTH IN THE ENVIRONMENTAL AND CLIMATE JUSTICE MOVEMENT

Today's youth are experiencing the effects of climate change firsthand and witnessing how its impacts are affecting not just the environment but also their families, friends, and communities. They also see how the issues that revolve around climate change are not being addressed or taken seriously. And they are fed up with it. More and more, young people are joining the environmental and climate justice movement to take a stand against the inaction and apathy of prior generations. Like the Common Ground students mentioned above, many of these young activists are drawn to this work because they have had deeply personal experiences that have fostered a love for the natural world and a desire to protect it. They understand the path the world is following is not sustainable. They worry about future generations and the world they will inhabit. Most importantly, they understand that it is going to take significant, collective action to shift our current trajectory, and they are willing to take the lead in advocating for policy and actions that result in meaningful change.

YOUTH ADVOCATES MAKE A DIFFERENCE IN THEIR COMMUNITIES

In Atlanta, Georgia, a nonprofit organization called [Girl Plus Environment](#) is empowering young women of color to get involved in addressing climate and environmental issues in ways that they have not historically had access to. Their [Protecting Our Energy Project](#) is a great example. Through this program, the organization trains a cohort of 25 local Black and Brown young women about the issue of energy burden and how it impacts their health and well-being, and gives them tools and skills to advocate for themselves and their communities. The program also teaches them how to submit public comments and speak at public hearings in opposition to raising energy rates. Despite being a relatively new program, these young women are already having a significant impact, influencing decisions made around raising rates and changing the face of those advocating for energy justice in Atlanta.

At Common Ground High School, students have opportunities to engage in advocacy activities as part of their tenth-grade curriculum, which focuses on environmental and social justice issues in New Haven. During a quarter-long unit on climate change and climate justice, a group of students traveled to Hartford, the state capitol, to advocate for an omnibus climate bill that was making its way through the Connecticut general assembly. The students participated in press

conferences, testified and sat in on hearings, and engaged in small group conversations with their legislators in support of the climate bill. Back on campus, all tenth-grade students took part in a climate exhibition and rally where they used artistic expression, including painting murals and reciting spoken-word style poetry, to share their feelings, thoughts, and solutions for climate change with an audience of local climate leaders and K-8 students.

CHALLENGES TO YOUTH ENGAGEMENT IN ENVIRONMENTAL AND CLIMATE JUSTICE WORK

Despite the growing role of youth in the environmental and climate justice movement, many young people feel tokenized and disrespected when it comes to engaging in honest discussion with adults. Lil Milagro Henriquez, Executive Director of [Mycelium Youth Network](#), notes seeing firsthand in environmental justice spaces where an organization will invite a young person or a group of young people to speak on an issue, only to move them off stage once their talk is done. Says Lil, “You almost get this feeling of, okay, you’ve said your piece, now the adults need to do the work and you can leave. Adults love using young people and youth voice to inspire action, but we aren’t doing the hard work of creating and nurturing space for real agency.” Mycelium Youth Network is tackling this challenge by creating intentional spaces for youth to have meaningful agency. Their newly launched Data Warriors program brings together high school students, Mycelium staff, educators, organizers, and community members to come up with a set of measures to help the organization evaluate its programming and define success. This program is an important step for the organization, and one that, Lil acknowledges, requires a deeper level of accountability and sometimes uncomfortability because she assumes young people will have different measures of success. However, she is excited to have these conversations because, as she says, “We are serving young people and they should have a huge say in what it means for Mycelium to serve them and how we are doing it.”



Caption: Youth shared their visions for a just climate future during FRI's Street Works Earth activity, showing how powerful artistic expression is in youth climate education and advocacy. Photo by Brentton Wilson.

“ADULTS LOVE USING YOUNG PEOPLE AND YOUTH VOICE TO INSPIRE ACTION, BUT WE AREN'T DOING THE HARD WORK OF CREATING AND NURTURING SPACE FOR REAL AGENCY.”

Lil Milagro Henriquez

Another challenge for young people in the environmental and climate justice space is a lack of compensation for their work. That is a big reason why Mycelium Youth Network and Common Ground offer paid opportunities for young people to engage in meaningful work. Mycelium's Data Warriors program and Youth Leadership Council both offer compensation for youth's time and energy. Common Ground's Green Jobs Corps program hires around 80 Common Ground High School students each year into paid jobs with community environmental nonprofits. Many of these jobs entail on-the-ground activities like tree planting and urban agriculture-related work; however, more young people are beginning to engage in activism and leadership work. For example, a group of students are serving as the community outreach team for New Haven's next round of comprehensive planning. These students are getting paid to lead workshops and listening sessions focused on how New Haven can become a more resilient, equitable city. Other students have taken on paid roles at a local food recovery organization called Haven's Harvest, where they help with community outreach and education concerning the environmental and equity impacts of food recovery work.

CHALLENGES TO YOUTH ENGAGEMENT IN ENVIRONMENTAL AND CLIMATE JUSTICE WORK

Young people have a vital stake in the future of our world, and their burgeoning engagement in environmental and climate activism will only grow as climate change intensifies. And this new generation of youth activists is bringing more to

the movement than a fresh perspective. They have bold ideas for the future they want to create, and they are not afraid to push the rest of us to think more deeply about how we can make that future a reality. They understand that environmental and climate-related issues are connected to other social justice issues and are taking an increasingly intersectional approach to the work. As digital natives, they are using social media to shift the narrative of environmental and climate activism. Climate influencers like Kristy Drutman ([@browngirlgreen](#)) and Isaias Hernandez ([@queerbrownvegan](#)) demonstrate to their followers and others that everyone has a place in the movement. With equal parts enthusiasm and compassion, young people are showing us the way to a better, more sustainable, and just future. Who would not want to follow their lead?



CONNECT AND LEARN MORE

To learn more about each of our featured organizations, visit their websites here:

- [Mycelium Youth Network](#)
- [Girl + Environment](#)
- [Common Ground High School, Urban Farm, and Environmental Education Center](#)

GUEST ARTICLE

THREE STEPS ORGANIZATIONS CAN TAKE TO ENGAGE YOUTH IN FRONTLINE CLIMATE ACTION

Pooja Tilvawala, Founder and Executive Director, Youth Climate Collaborative

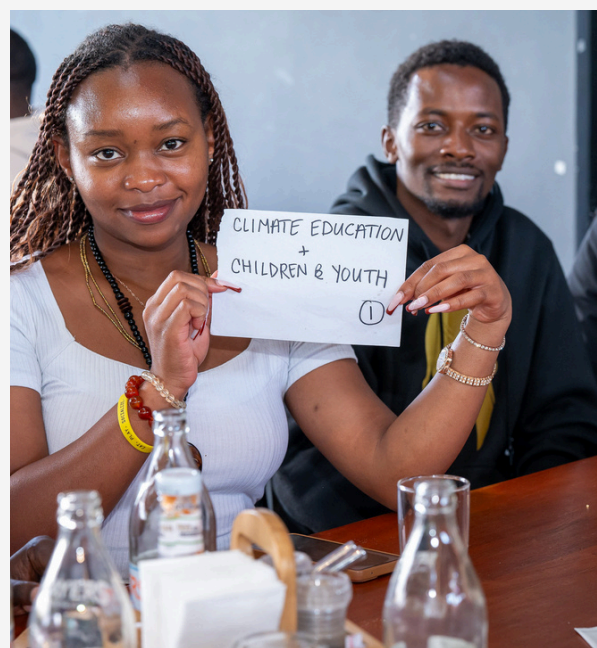


Youth are a vital audience and partner for frontline organizations in driving impactful climate action. They bring energy, creativity, and a sense of urgency to the movement. Many are already engaged and eager to engage further. While climate change affects everyone, those who contribute least to the crisis—children, those in poverty, and future generations—are most affected. In fact, [UNICEF has concluded](#) that nearly half of the world's children (roughly one billion) live in one of 33 countries classified as “extremely high risk” due to climate change impacts. Empowering youth ensures fresh perspectives, innovative solutions, and sustained action, and is a necessary practice for participatory justice. [According to the United Nations](#), youth aged 15-24 make up 16% of the global population. If you include those aged 24 years and younger, they account for nearly 40% of the global population, highlighting their significant impact potential.

By involving youth, organizations can foster intergenerational collaboration, build resilient communities, and inspire broader societal engagement for decades to come. Encouraging youth agency also promotes inclusivity, equity, and long-term commitment to climate justice. Here are three ways your organization can meaningfully engage with youth.

SHARE POWER BY PRACTICING INTERGENERATIONAL COLLABORATION AND GOVERNANCE

[A global study](#) by We Are Family Foundation found that 96% of those surveyed believe intergenerational collaboration holds significant value and can generate positive change, and 87% recognize the powerful potential of youth ideas and solutions in addressing global challenges. However, only 19% agree that youth are currently given enough opportunities to lead and contribute to important social issues. In the youth movement, we like to say, “Nothing about us, without us!” as a way to advocate for our meaningful inclusion in decision-making processes. [Youth Climate Collaborative](#) (YCC), along with our partner, [Penn State University Global Youth Storytelling and Research Lab](#), works with organizations and other entities to add youth to their boards, advisory councils, and other decision-making bodies as a practical solution, as well as match older individuals with vacancies in youth-led organizations.



Attendees of YCC's Nairobi Climate Hub share the importance of climate education and global youth. Photo courtesy of Pooja Tilvawala and YCC.

EXAMPLES OF INTERGENERATIONAL COLLABORATION

- Inviting youth leaders to collaborate with policymakers to draft legislation.
- Establishing an intergenerational committee to provide insights on organizational culture, strategy, and vision.
- Working across generations to plan and execute an advocacy campaign.
- Ensuring equitable representation of youth voices during climate change policy negotiations at all governance levels.
- Working with youth to help shape the agenda and framework for major convenings.

PROVIDE OPPORTUNITIES FOR TWO-WAY MENTORSHIP

Mentor/mentee relationships can organically develop when someone with more experience (the mentor) offers valuable insights to someone with less experience (the mentee). But establishing formal mentorship programs can provide the structure and consistency necessary for long-lasting and fruitful outcomes. [This Forbes article](#) provides examples of types of mentorship (e.g., traditional, reverse, group, virtual, peer-to-peer) and their benefits.

Traditional mentorship is defined by a power dynamic where one member holds some kind of elevated status, whether that is age, seniority, lived experience, or subject matter expertise. It can be particularly useful when onboarding new employees by having a more experienced mentor pass institutional knowledge forward. With two-way mentorship, both individuals act as mentor and mentee. This creates a mutually beneficial learning environment where knowledge is shared

multi-directionally. One way to do this is to implement an “open door policy,” inviting employees of any age to drop by for coffee chats. on their areas of expertise. In practice, this could look like a younger employee reaching out to a senior about career advice or to learn about other roles in the organization. This could also look like an older employee reaching out to a younger one with an “open door” for support with communication strategies tailored to reach younger audiences. Preparing a list of who is open to meet and about which topics would be a welcoming way to start a two-way mentorship program. You could also consider creating an employee guide that covers best practices for mentorship in your community and organizational context. See: [The Seven Habits of Highly Effective Mentees](#), [this guide](#) on two-way mentorship, and [this article](#) from Harvard Business Review about two-way mentorship.

SUSTAIN YOUTH INVOLVEMENT WITH SOCIAL AND FINANCIAL CAPITAL AND CAPACITY BUILDING RESOURCES

While youth are often at the forefront of social innovation, a 2020 UNICEF report found that over 85% live in “capital deserts” with little access to social and/or financial capital that is critical for launching new ideas. Co-designing a fund with youth to fund youth-led projects that advance frontline climate action could help bridge the gap. Dedicated funding streams for youth-led projects, grants, and scholarships would help sustain their work. Many youth would also benefit from financial literacy training to help manage resources effectively and introductions to potential partners such as businesses, funders, and NGOs. [The Iris Project](#), [Youth Climate Justice Fund](#), [Walking Softer](#), and [FRIDA](#) are successful models of financial and social capital support for youth-led work. Youth are also hungry for resources that can build their expertise and leadership capacity. Consider the kinds of resources your organization, partners, or networks can offer youth, like the following examples.

EXAMPLES OF ORGANIZATIONAL RESOURCES FOR YOUTH

- Training on project management, leadership, public speaking, and intrapreneurship
- Paid internships
- Stipends for learning, including online courses, purchasing books, or participating in conferences
- Access to subscriptions for news outlets, research tools, and grant databases

CONCLUSION

Before your organization engages with youth, consider the following organizational protocols to center equity and well-being in youth programs. First, have a robust youth safeguarding policy in place and make sure all employees sign on. Second, avoid tokenizing youth by ensuring their roles have power, purpose, and substance. Finally, consider providing youth mental health support or partnering with an organization that can provide such services. At YCC, we offer climate mental health workshops and journals to strengthen the emotional resilience of youth.

Though it can be intimidating to start or deepen your engagement with youth, the best way to begin is to speak with the youth you want to work with. Create an intergenerational committee with those you wish to serve so you can co-design solutions and actions that will benefit all. And remember - it is okay to make and learn from mistakes because we are all in this together.

Pooja Tilvawala is Founder and Executive Director of Youth Climate Collaborative and Founder and CEO of Jaali. She focuses on youth empowerment, intergenerational collaboration, storytelling, climate mental health, community building, and climate philanthropy.

FEATURED STORIES FROM THE FRI NETWORK

Our blog, Stories from the Frontlines, supports frontline environmental justice storytelling and knowledge sharing across FRI's network. We'll be featuring different frontline organizations, individuals, and partners as they share their stories, histories, and the work they're doing to further climate and environmental justice in their communities and beyond.



[Click here](#) to read about La Mujer Obrera's story, highlighting their history organizing for employment, housing, education, nutrition, health, peace, and political liberty in the barrio Chamizal of El Paso, Texas.



[Click here](#) for takeaways from Street Works Earth, a free street art festival hosted by Make Justice Normal in partnership with FRI.