



## Youth-led Initiatives

### What can be done to Harness the Power of Youth?

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#### Key messages >>>

- Youth-led initiatives may not be revolutionary models that would immediately lead to a paradigm shift, but they can lead to a positive ripple effect for changing attitudes and behavior.
- The world has reached a stage where the global problem of climate change simply cannot be contained without a global approach, youth included. Young people are going to be the most affected by global environment issues.
- Transformative changes are only possible through curriculum design and technology use to better engage with youth on decision-making and for designing environmental solutions.
- Policy makers can better engage with youth through initiatives such as youth parliaments. Social media can be used to better engage with youth on public policy and political issues.
- Businesses can mentor youth and also provide support through corporate social responsibility initiatives. Artificial intelligence can help to match young entrepreneurs with business mentors.

#### Personal experience and 'Project Nishtha'

The youth of today are one of the most critical stakeholders in the creation of a sustainable world. We are surrounded by ever-growing environmental issues and the immediacy of action required cannot be emphasized enough. I am writing this discussion paper as a sixteen years old global citizen who wants to make a difference but has been put down and told that policy makers and the government are the people who have the 'real power'. But the truth is the world has reached a stage where the global problem of climate change simply cannot be contained without a global approach, youth included.

Everyone needs to come to the realisation that excusing yourself from taking a portion of the blame will not solve anything; we all need to take steps, whether big or small. Two years ago, I came to this realisation and founded 'Project Nishtha', an environmental initiative that aims to convert organic floral waste from temples to compost manure for nurturing plants. This was not going to be a revolutionary model that would immediately lead to a paradigm shift; but it was a step that had a positive ripple effect in changing the individual choices of priests and religious institutions across Delhi.

As a part of the corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiative of Angelique International Limited, I installed a composting machine with a capacity of 100 kilograms at the Jagannath Mandir in Hauz Khas, New Delhi and employed a rider who would collect flowers thrice a week from ten temples and take them for composting. After the flowers are composted, the manure is used in gardens around the temples, creating a circular flow of resources. I was determined to not only make temples adopt this model but also to educate stakeholders on

more sustainable practices for which I held interactive discussions about the immense impact of organic waste has on river Yamuna. As a result, priests have started to become more interested and saw the benefits of upcycling flowers. I will now analyse the importance of youth-led initiatives, the possibilities of projects that youth can be involved in, and lastly, the ways in which policy makers can support these environmental initiatives.



Project Nishtha involved converting organic waste from temples to manure

### Why are youth-led initiatives important?

Youth-led initiatives have the power to create a significant change in our society in many ways. Four reasons are discussed.

Firstly, youth are essential stakeholders on crucial issues around environmental action for a more informed future generation. Youth of the world are going to be disproportionately affected by a deteriorating environment caused by previous generations, and preparing them to respond to these environmental challenges is pivotal now more than ever.

Secondly, the sheer impact that youth can have in the world is significant to creating a more sustainable world. Many countries and regions around the world have a significant proportion of young people. India has about [248 million people](#) in the age group of 15–24 years. Ten of the world's youngest countries are in [Africa](#) which has a large [proportion](#) of youth. Globally, more and more young people are coming forward to influence decision-making processes by expressing their discontent with the existing policies and mechanisms. The scale of impact that it would have, if society encouraged even a quarter of them to take the path of global citizenship, is colossal.

Thirdly, it is becoming more and more self-evident that the youth are becoming motivated to take on a more active role in environmental activism. Their fresh new

perspectives and courage to work for a better future is something you can find in no other segment of society, making them unique vehicles of change. The social media, an important tool uniquely suited to the upcoming generation, is beginning to be used effectively in the mass dispersal of information, making the youth a key stakeholder in mitigating environmental issues.

Finally, engaging young people in government and policy initiatives can help foster active citizenship for the world's common future. This can contribute to social wellbeing at an individual level, by building self-esteem and a sense of empowerment, and bring about important benefits for societies such as an increased awareness of common challenges and a joint commitment to identify solutions that work in the long run. Social movements such as Fridays for Future and Extinction Rebellion establish the fact that the youth play a key role in participating in environmental issues and leading environmental movements. However, a major gap in society remains as youth are not involved or not allowed to be involved in policy making and discussions to the extent that they should be. Young people should be actively involved in decision making so that their concerns are considered by governments and business leaders. Greater youth involvement will result in an overall increase in trust between the youth and the government. Since the youth represents an

important share of electoral voters and workers of the future, their active engagement in society is pivotal.

### **How can environmental education be tailored for youth?**

Transformation is only possible with a change in mind-sets involving youth and the society; tackling the problem of lack of environmental education needs to be urgently addressed. This will require a structural change involving curriculum design as is envisaged in the sustainable development goals. Schools should include local environmental issues in curriculums which would create interest in students to take action on problems directly affecting their community. As per the [International Environmental Education Programme](#) of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) and United Nations Environmental Programme, “if we want to develop a large number of learners who are skilled and dedicated environmental citizens, the learners must feel a sense of ownership towards issues needing resolution and a sense of empowerment with respect to helping with that resolution”. Therefore, to instil a sense of empowerment and ownership, the discussion of local issues directly affecting the students is essential.

Furthermore, more resources should be devoted to creating and integrating environmental education into school curriculum by presenting modules about the environment to students. These modules can be made by specific volunteers from non-governmental organizations and other environmental organisations for the youth. This would raise the awareness of the children about the environment and this knowledge can be tested through assignments too. In order to create more interest in the field of sustainability and the environment, more incentives should be given to students in the form of awards to students who have displayed exemplary work in the field of environmental protection. Environmental education modules should be interactive and inquiry based, focussing on the concept of [sustainable development](#). Teachers can also begin by explicitly stating the link between the topic in the mandated syllabus and sustainability. Schools should also integrate into their curriculum engaging extracurricular activities such as ‘plant a sapling’ drives, bake sales to raise money for environmental organizations, as well as peer-tutoring programs where senior students educate their juniors about the environment.

The government should specifically work in inculcating the mentioned programs in government schools in order to bridge the gap between private and public school environmental education. Local bodies are very instrumental in this regard. These models can be seen to be successfully in practice in [South Delhi Municipal Corporation Bhim Nagri Primary School in New Delhi](#). Here students are made to learn about organic farming in a farm within the school premises; teachers integrate

math multiplication tables with sowing seeds, which goes a long way in creating students with a genuine passion and love for the environment.

Forming youth groups and clubs have massive potential to increase youth involvement in environmental issues. These could be in schools, colleges or in neighbourhoods which provide a platform for children to come together and discuss solutions or environmental concerns or simply share innovative ideas. There are numerous opportunities for the youth to get involved in environmental discussions and action. The ideas discussed here indicate that engaging youth in environmental issues will take not only an increase in the will of the youth to step up and take action, but also the rest of society who will need to support the upcoming generation of environmentalists in order to have an observable impact.

### **How can technology be used for youth engagement?**

Governments of countries should carry out surveys of youth groups and use technological linkages to engage with their work and thus, bridge the gap between the youth and the government. The link between increasing youth involvement and the use of social media is something that needs to be explored. However, technology is currently not being used to its fullest potential; only 40 per cent of [young Europeans](#) interact online with the public administration while only 18 per cent use social media to engage in civic and political life.

Digital participation is effective in reaching a wide range of people easily and it is not a strain to government budgets. More and more collaborative projects should be launched on these digital platforms through which youth skills can be honed and the young can feel more involved with the policy making aspect of environmental issues. For instance, in Africa, the Text to Change Project launched the [Voice Africa’s Future](#) initiative, which engages young people from Africa, asking them what they think the future of their own countries should look like. Canada too has launched an [online platform](#) to encourage involvement; it makes use of hashtags to identify content pertaining to the organisation.

More stories of youth using technology to solve societal issues should be disseminated. For instance, [RecLeb: Recycle the Smart Way](#) was developed by a student to help residents of Lebanon classify their solid waste. Stories like these are inspiring and innovative, and if more student projects like these are supported by the government and businesses, the youth would feel more empowered and encouraged to take on more projects.

### **What role can governments and international organizations play?**

Policy makers are central for supporting youth-led environmental initiatives. Youth involvement in policy making can be increased through organising

conferences that act as a platform for the youth to express their ideas and suggestions for future policies. This can be done at the local, national and international levels. Local governments should involve students in creating action plans for mitigating local environmental issues.

The formation of youth parliaments and youth advisory boards for government activities where the young can get together and ideate will increase awareness among children by initiating regular dialogue and discussion. In Iceland, for instance, young people were involved in the [Constitution Project](#) which seeks to take into account youth's views and opinions during constitutional amendment processes. Youth were educated about human rights, democracy, and the legislative and executive branches of the constitution, following which they discussed policies and ideas, and finally delivered a report to the Chairman of the Constitutional Council. This kind of youth involvement in the political process is essential to creating an educated future generation.

National bodies for the youth that discuss sustainable development goals can also create and engage with a network of motivated youth. For instance in [Canada](#), the Prime Minister's Youth Council, a group of young people, aged 16–24 years, provide non-partisan advice to the Prime Minister and the Government of Canada on issues of importance. Additionally, particularly in cases where the government is implementing policies pertaining to the youth, such as policies on school curriculum changes, such youth councils can be effective by involving the stakeholders.

Virtual conferences organised by institutions such as UNICEF's 'Voices of the Youth' should be extended to reach more and more students from across the globe. Virtual Model United Nations (MUN) can provide students with a basic understanding of the procedures of various organs of the United Nations, committee meetings, drafting resolutions, duties and responsibilities of various bodies of the United Nations, negotiation processes, informal meetings, and process of arriving at a consensus. In addition to MUNs, bodies of the United Nations such as the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change should also hold programs for youth awareness and solicit white papers to seek their inputs in policy making.

## What role can businesses play?

In addition to schools, local businesses can also take steps to increase youth involvement in initiatives. Businesses can offer internship opportunities for students who can help them in reducing the ecological impact of production; in turn, students would gain a deeper understanding of the balance between the economy and the environment. They can also involve students with creative ideas to solve environmental problems in CSR (corporate social responsibility) initiatives. Businesses can organise competitions for students to pitch these ideas, and the most impactful ideas can receive funding.

Businesses can also channel their CSR funding towards increasing educational opportunities amongst the youth. For example, in India, Tata Steel Limited has undertaken the '1000 Schools' project wherein 40,000 children have been helped to overcome their learning deficiency and about 1.5 lakh students were benefitted. Non-governmental organizations should take youth as volunteers to upscale their initiatives to have a larger impact on society.

Businesses can mentor youth for environmental solutions. For example, [Accenture](#) uses artificial intelligence (AI) to match young entrepreneurs with business mentors. Other examples can include virtual town halls involving discussions between businesses and youth on sustainability including the use of technologies such as AI to predict problems and deployment of solutions such as the use of renewable power.

## Concluding discussion

It is evident that our world needs an increase in youth involvement in order to create a difference. A combination of policy changes as well as changes to school curriculums and the introduction of creative programs in businesses and non-governmental organizations to support youth-led initiatives will create ripple effects that will go a long way in solving problems in our society. It is the age for the youth to share responsibility for the global environmental challenges that affects everyone; there is a need to stand united and take combined actions. This paper highlights a few ways in which society can change and embolden the youth; however, the ways in which they can be empowered are endless. All it finally takes is a sense of trust—trust that the youth is capable of taking effective action and bringing about a positive change.

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## **Climate Ambition and Sustainability Action**

The Climate Ambition and Sustainability Action (CASA) series, brought out jointly by the World Sustainable Development Forum (WSDF) and the Protect our Planet (POP) Movement, seeks to highlight a topical issue relevant to the realization of the Sustainable Development Goals and climate actions. Through briefs, discussion papers and articles, the CASA series aims to contribute to the discursive process of sustainability by engaging with civil society organizations, thought leaders and political leaders. Apart from WSDF and POP Movement, CASA in future will also come out with 'partner series' which will seek to also showcase the work of partner organizations of WSDF and POP.

### **About WSDF**

The World Sustainable Development Forum (WSDF) is a not-for-profit organization incorporated separately in Europe, Norway and the U.S. Its North American arm, WSDF-NA, headquartered in Washington, DC carries a 501c3 tax exempt status. WSDF is a global initiative to promote and mobilize global action for effective implementation of both the Paris agreement on climate change and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) adopted by the UN General Assembly. WSDF's relevance and role lies in acting as a facilitator for helping with implementation of actions required under these two sets of agreements.

### **About POP Movement**

Protect our Planet (POP) Movement believes that the impacts of climate change will not affect a single country but the planet, in its entirety. POP has confidence that the power of the youth of the world will unite to address this challenge. POP believes that the time to act is now and that knowledge is the true currency of changing the future.



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