



YES

YOUTH  
ENGAGEMENT  
STRATEGY

2024-2026



CEC

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# General Overview

“Tackling the climate crisis requires both ambition and inclusivity.”<sup>1</sup>

For over 30 years, the Commission for Environmental Cooperation (CEC) has been working to protect the North American environment and promote sustainable development. Over the years, the CEC has recognized that its success relies on the engagement of concerned individuals, local communities and organizations, including youth, as catalysts for change and progress.

Engaging youth “to propel actions toward a sustainable future is also a matter of intergenerational equity.

Young people, especially those who are Indigenous Peoples, Black and people of color, have a disability, are transgender and/or girls, are among the groups most affected by the triple planetary crisis.”<sup>2</sup>

Youth recognize the importance of addressing diverse community challenges by advocating for inclusive and equitable environmental solutions. Youth value intergenerational collaboration, combining the knowledge of older generations with their own innovative perspectives. Their

deep understanding of environmental issues—intertwined with social dimensions like 2SLGBTQIA+ views, human rights, Indigenous perspectives and cultural diversity—positions youth at the forefront to lead and support their communities in advancing environmental justice across North America.

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<sup>1</sup> [Elevating Meaningful Youth Engagement for Climate Action](#), March 2022

<sup>2</sup> [Environmental Justice for 2SLGBTQIA+ Communities: Dimensions on Queering Environmental Policy in North America discussion paper](#), CEC, 2024

## Goals of the CEC Youth Engagement Strategy

Building upon previous CEC youth engagement efforts, the 2024–2026 CEC Youth Engagement Strategy seeks to identify challenges and opportunities for meaningful youth engagement across the CEC—including its cooperative work program, decision-making spaces and existing activities—by fostering more meaningful youth engagement, building community capacity and helping to ensure long-term sustainability of youth engagement approaches.

Youth play a pivotal role in advancing sustainability by embracing a holistic approach.<sup>3</sup> Engaging youth accelerates knowledge-sharing and awareness, supports intergenerational dialogue and action to tackle environmental challenges and provides opportunities for the development of skills.

By embracing diversity and inclusivity, the CEC will benefit from a wide range of perspectives and will keep current on meaningful priorities amongst local communities, thus amplifying the reach and impact of environmental initiatives and facilitating regional collaboration in North America.

Even though the CEC Youth Engagement Strategy is intended to develop meaningful youth engagement in all its activities, the principles and recommendations shared in this strategy should also be applied to youth engaged within the organization.

“Meaningful youth engagement considers youth not as beneficiaries but as collaborators.”

## What is Meaningful Youth Engagement?

There is an absence of consensus on a singular definition of youth engagement.<sup>4</sup> That said, youth engagement “is generally characterized by the agency of young people and their collective action to address issues of public concern and create social change.”<sup>5</sup>

For the CEC, meaningful youth engagement considers youth not as beneficiaries but as collaborators. To work together effectively with youth, the CEC aims to engage with diverse youth, including youth community leaders and knowledge holders. Youth bring and share issues and represent interests or perspectives of civil society, community organizations, public, academic, non-traditional education or the private sector.

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3 [Youth Participation and Leadership, Theory of Change Resource, Oxfam Australia, 2015](#)

4 What is engagement? Broadly, engagement occurs when organizations and institutions allow a determined group to participate in the institutional process and thus direct their work or networks around a common interest (after StatCan, 2022). For the CEC, engagement means actively supporting and promoting active participation, knowledge and opinion sharing, and inclusiveness in CEC's activities, spaces and tools.

5 [Because Youth Perspectives Matter, UNESCO Toolbox for youth policy and programming, UNESCO, 2023](#)



## Youth Definition in North America

### Canada

According to Environment and Climate Change Canada (ECCC), youth are generally defined as those between the ages of 15 to 29. ECCC follows four principles in engaging with youth on environmental and climate issues: avoiding “youth-washing,” recognizing the diverse perspectives of youth based on their identities and experiences, empowering youth and youth organizations to carry out activities aligned with ECCC’s mandate and providing accessible job and training opportunities for youth.<sup>6</sup> In addition, [Canada’s Youth Policy](#) (2019) represents the first whole-of-government approach to involving young people in federal decision-making to improve youth outcomes. Similar frameworks are also being developed at the sub-national level.<sup>7</sup>

### Mexico

In the Mexican Youth Institute’s (IMJUVE) report, “Towards a Youth Perspective: A Conceptual and Operational Proposal” (2020), youth are defined as individuals between 12 and 29 years old.<sup>8</sup> [The Programa Nacional de Juventud 2021–2024](#) (National Program for Youth) is currently responsible for defining, implementing and guiding the developing youth policy. Its priority objectives are to promote the participa-

tion of young people in public affairs to influence the nation’s development; to reduce discrimination against and toward youth to promote their inclusion and equal opportunities; to promote the right of young people to live in peace, free of violence, to enable the full development of their life projects; to promote the exercise of social rights of young people as a condition for achieving their well-being; to facilitate the processes of emancipation and the construction of autonomy of young people to strengthen the continuity of their life course; and to promote the generation of suitable environments for development. Similar frameworks are also being developed at the sub-national level in Mexico.<sup>9</sup>

### United States (US)

The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) established the National Environmental Youth Advisory Council (NEYAC) to provide independent advice and recommendations on increasing EPA’s engagement with environmental issues in communities of young people under 29 years of age.<sup>10</sup> Although the definition of youth includes anyone under 29, NEYAC members specifically range in age from 16 to 29. Similar frameworks are also being developed at the state and municipal level in the US.<sup>11</sup>



- 6 [State of Youth Report](#), Youth engagement at Environment and Climate Change Canada, ECCC, 2021.
- 7 Examples: [The 2030 Québec Youth Policy: Working Together for Current and Future Generations](#), 2015; [British Columbia’s Youth Engagement Toolkit](#), 2013; [Ontario Youth Environmental Council](#), created in 2021; City of Toronto city’s [Youth Engagement Strategy](#), 2015.
- 8 [Towards a Youth Perspective, a Conceptual and Operational Proposal](#), 2020.
- 9 Examples: State of Chihuahua’s [Youth Participation Manual](#), 2024; State of Mexico’s [Sociodemographic Profile of Young People in the State of Mexico](#), 2021; State of Jalisco established the [Youth Parliament for Jalisco](#); City of Mexico’s boasts its own [Youth Institute](#).
- 10 [National Environmental Youth Advisory Council \(NEYAC\) Charter](#), 2023
- 11 Examples: City of Sacramento’s [Youth Engagement Program](#), 2019; City of New York’s [Youth Leadership Council](#), and its [Comprehensive Strategy](#), 2020–2023.

## The CEC's Definition of Youth

Based on the [CEC Youth Engagement Week's](#) recommendations and in alignment with international and regional frameworks on Youth Engagement, the CEC categorizes North American youth as individuals between the ages of 18 and 35 from Canada, Mexico and the United States.

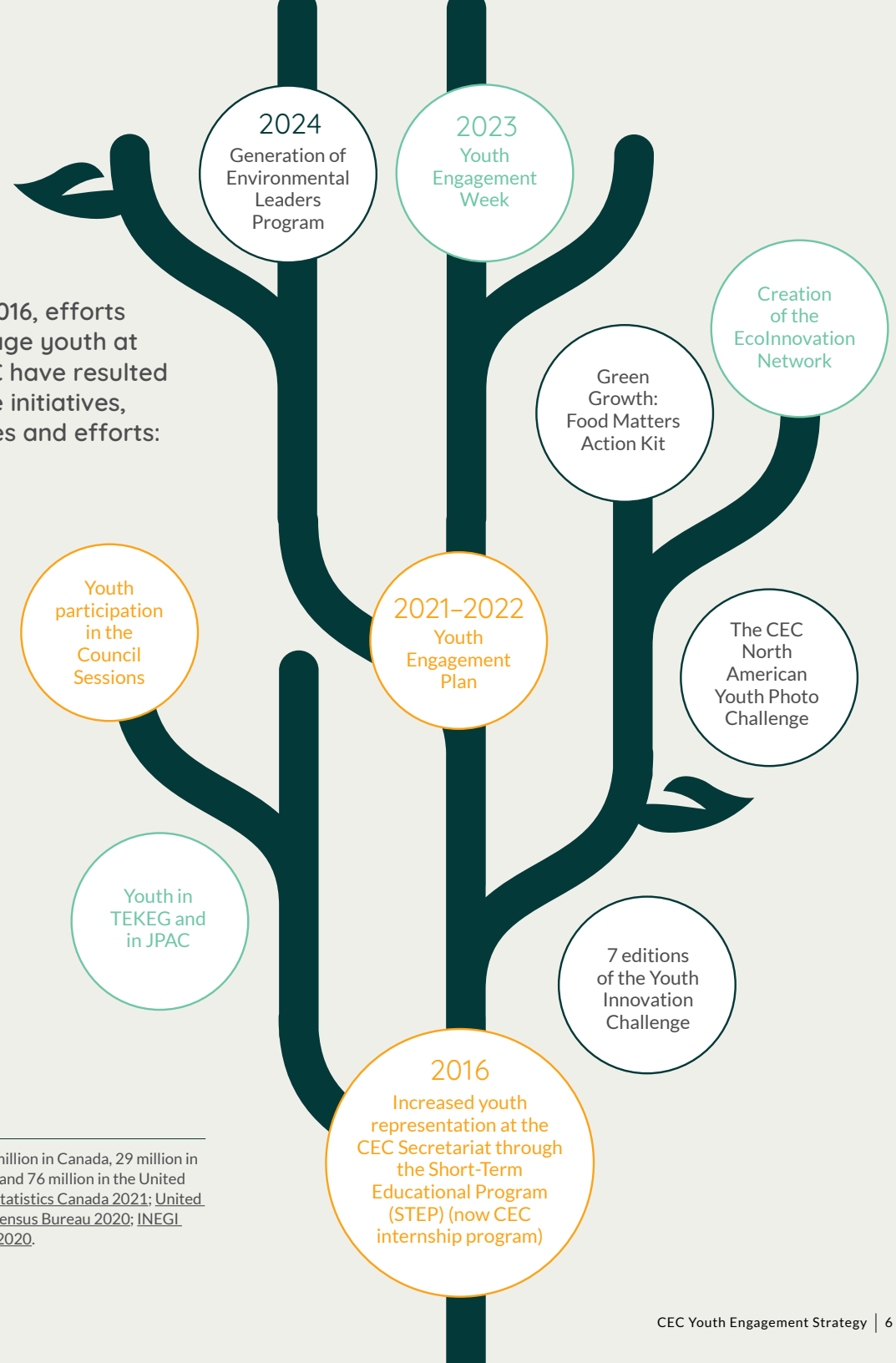
The principles of meaningful youth engagement of the CEC Youth Engagement Strategy emphasize the need to recognize that youth comprise a heterogeneous group diverse in age, ethnicity, gender, religion, spiritual life, socioeconomic status and physical, emotional and cognitive dispositions.

The CEC aims to engage meaningfully and collaborate with youth, defined as diverse active individuals who have their communities' interests at heart and whose interests, challenges and expertise will strengthen CEC's efforts to preserve the North American environment and to find solutions to adapt to climate change on a local, national or regional level.

## Engaging Youth in North America

Regional youth engagement is essential for addressing present and future environmental challenges collaboratively. In North America, there are over 113 million youth aged 18–35, composing more than 23% of the population.<sup>12</sup> Engaging with youth can be a powerful force for positive change. Over the years, the CEC has developed several programs, such as the [Youth Innovation Challenge](#) (YIC), the [EcoInnovation Network](#), the CEC internship program and more recently, the 2023 [Youth Engagement Week](#) (Box 1). Increased youth engagement has also led to a strengthened digital communications effort on social media channels appreciated by youth.

Box 1.  
Since 2016, efforts to engage youth at the CEC have resulted in these initiatives, activities and efforts:



<sup>12</sup> Over 8 million in Canada, 29 million in Mexico, and 76 million in the United States. [Statistics Canada 2021](#); [United States Census Bureau 2020](#); [INEGI Mexico 2020](#).



# Strategies for Youth Engagement

Given the existence of various strategies to meaningfully engage youth in multiple fields of study, it is necessary for the CEC to formulate its own regional CEC Youth Engagement Strategy and further support national efforts in Canada, Mexico and the United States.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> [Meaningful Youth Engagement](#), UNESCO; [Youth Programmes & Initiatives](#), UNEP; [WHO Youth Engagement](#), WHO; [Adolescent and Youth Regional Strategy and Plan of Action](#), PAHO; [Council of Europe youth sector strategy 2030](#), Council of Europe; [Canada's Youth Policy](#), 2020, Minister of Youth; [Environment and Climate Change Canada's 2024-25 Departmental plan](#), ECCC; [Estrategia de Juventud 2030](#), 2022, Instituto de la Juventud, Injuve; [Youth Perspectives on Climate Change](#), 2018, National Environmental Justice Advisory Council, A Federal Advisory Committee to the US. Environmental Protection Agency; [National Environmental Youth Advisory Council \(NEYAC\)](#), EPA



Considering past activities and an identified need to meaningfully engage youth, considering all aspects of engagement, this Strategy will focus on:

## Tailoring Engagement Efforts to Diverse Communities

Aligning with the cross-cutting approaches of the CEC's 2021–2025 Strategic Plan, tailoring youth engagement efforts to diverse communities is of importance for fostering inclusive engagement and impactful initiatives.<sup>14</sup>

Implementing meaningful youth engagement involves implementing a multifaceted approach to understanding the unique needs and perspectives of youth within various communities by:

- Identifying key youth groups, organizations and community leaders within these diverse groups, allowing for targeted and meaningful interactions.
- Building relationships with youth-led groups and organizations to bridge gaps, establish trust, ensure security (physical, mental health and intellectual property) and assure that engagement efforts are culturally sensitive and resonant.
- Collaborating with established youth organizations to amplify the reach and effectiveness of engagement strategies, tapping into existing networks and expertise.
- Maximizing diversity and intersectionality, including inviting recommendations from diverse groups, such as but not limited to Indigenous Peoples, 2SLGBTQIA+ communities, visible minority communities, people with disabilities, and incorporating Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK), to ensure that engagement efforts are comprehensive and respectful of different contexts, and for youth to be part of forums and activities.
- Tailoring support, building inter-cultural and mentorship programs which will contribute to youth personal and professional development within diverse communities.
- Inviting youth to be part of decision-making processes and spaces to include their perspectives, expertise and knowledge in daily work.
- Sharing accessible resources to make information and opportunities widely available, promoting equal access for groups.



<sup>14</sup> CEC Strategic Plan 2021–2025



## Enabling Environments for Youth

Enabling neutral and inclusive environments is crucial to establishing a relationship of trust with youth, youth-led groups and organizations which also allows them to express themselves freely and have their contributions valued.<sup>15</sup> Enabling environments hold particular importance for youth, considering the challenges they face (see below), to tackle institutional skepticism and the distrust in science. Additionally, many youth experience climate anxiety and negative emotions about climate change and engaging with older generations in formal settings can be intimidating. Enabling environments serve as platforms for sharing knowledge and experiences, fostering intergenerational dialogues that bridge the gap between different age groups and people with diverse backgrounds.

To build an enabling environment, the CEC must:

- Ensure transparency, accessibility and inclusiveness, creating an atmosphere of trust and setting realistic expectations upfront.
- Provide physical and emotional security, safeguarding the mental health of engaged youth, based on their lived experiences.<sup>16</sup>
- Offer necessary resources for meaningful engagement, clarifying the context, scope and influence youth can have.<sup>17</sup>
- Maintain consistent funding for youth-led environmental initiatives and support best practices, addressing systemic inequities and fostering personal and professional growth through fair compensation.

## Tracking and Evaluating Progress

Another component the CEC will develop to ensure meaningful youth engagement is tracking and evaluating the progress of its youth engagement efforts to ensure their effectiveness and impact, as well as to identify opportunity areas.

The CEC must:

- Determine whether and how its initiatives and activities resonate with North American youth.
- Identify quantitative and qualitative Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) that align with youth needs and aspirations, such as feedback tools.
- Use KPIs to gain a nuanced understanding of engagement depth and quality, focusing on qualitative metrics to capture the significance of interactions and contributions.
- Conduct regional consultations and assess past and ongoing youth efforts to create a baseline for measuring successes.
- Adapt and refine strategies over time, based on evolving needs and feedback from engaged youth.

<sup>15</sup> [Youth Participation and Leadership – Theory of Change Resource](#), Oxfam Australia, 2015

<sup>16</sup> [Because Youth Perspectives Matter](#), UNESCO, 2023

<sup>17</sup> Youth Engagement Framework, ECCC, 2024 (internal document)



# Challenges of Youth Participation and Engagement within and beyond the CEC

Engaging with young people comes with a set of challenges that can greatly affect the effectiveness and inclusivity of such efforts. Identifying these challenges can help the CEC (or any organization) to understand the complex dynamics that either facilitate or hinder the meaningful engagement of youth. This can shed light on the difficulties of creating a genuinely inclusive environment and fostering a strong mutual commitment.



## Challenges of Youth Participation

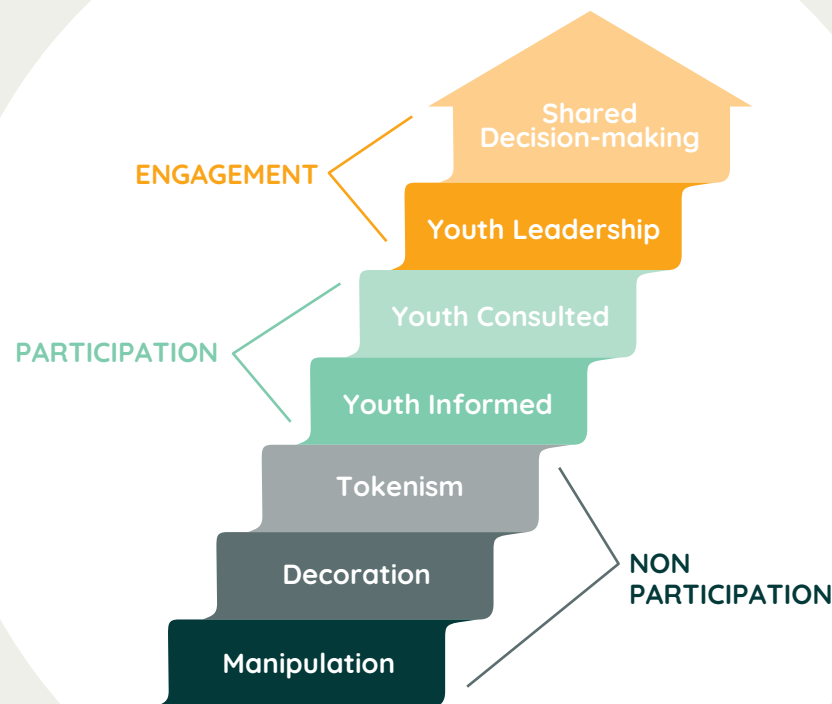
Youth, like other people, have a variety of intrinsic characteristics—sex, gender, race, ethnicity, religion, age, immigration status, culture, income level and mental or physical disability—that influence their perspectives, points of view, experiences, knowledge and ability to participate and engage in decision making and capacity-building processes.<sup>18</sup> However, it is necessary to consider that youth participation cannot be discussed without power relations and the struggle for equal rights. In addition, all young people must have the opportunity to learn to “participate in programs which directly affect their lives.”<sup>19</sup>

Ensuring a meaningful participation of youth in any organization should consider key steps included in the ladder of youth participation<sup>20</sup> (Box 2).

Challenges for youth participation are multifaceted and include:

- Access to information
- Access to funding and enabling support<sup>21</sup>
- Recognizing mental health challenges among youth
- Creating safe and supportive spaces
- Addressing adult centrisim, tokenism and *youthwashing*<sup>22, 23</sup>
- Providing meaningful opportunities

Box 2.



18 [Overview of policy issues and background — Employment Equity Act review](#), Government of Canada, 2022

19 [Children's participation, From tokenism to citizenship](#), Hart, Roger A.; International Child Development Centre, United Nations Digital Library, 1992

20 [Hart's Ladder of Participation](#), Cornell University; [A 'Meditation' on Meaningful Participation](#), Ricardo Ramirez, University of Guelph and University of Waterloo; [Climbing the "Ladder of Participation": Engaging Experiential Youth in a Participatory Research Project](#), Canadian Journal of Public Health, 2012; [Participation, Planning and Sustainability: Case Studies from Hinton and Wood Buffalo, AB](#), Nusrat Jahan Dipa, University of Alberta, 2014; [Citizenship and](#)

[Participation, Manual for Human Rights Education with Young People](#), Council of Europe

21 [State of Youth Report](#), Patrimoine Canada, 2021

22 [The Ethics of Adultcentrism in the Context of COVID-19: Whose Voice Matters?](#) Sydney Campbell, National Library of Medicine, 2021.

23 [What is tokenism and how to avoid it](#), Institute on Disability, University of New Hampshire, 2021; Eduarda Zoghbi, [Beyond 'Youthwashing': How to Make Youth Representation at COP Meetings More Impactful](#), State of the Planet, Columbia Climate School, 2021



## Challenges for Youth Engagement

While the CEC is proud of the progress it has made, engaging diverse youth in North America, there is a challenge to ensure that youth are engaged overtime. The long-term engagement is probably related to institutional skepticism<sup>24</sup> and trust in science.<sup>25</sup> These phenomena represent knowledge opportunities for the CEC to better support youth. Further challenges will need to address opportunities to identify and engage with systematically underrepresented, vulnerable and marginalized communities including, for example, youth in mobility.

24 Institutional Skepticism: While it is generally accepted that youth are skeptical and pessimistic about government, politics and other institutions (in relation to environmental protection and climate change), current analyses introduce a few nuances. A growing body of research suggests that young people have a strong interest in 'cause-oriented' political and social movements, including environmental protection work, Ref. [The Deloitte Global Millennial Survey 2019](#), 2019; Makenzie MacKay, Brenda Parlee, and Carrie Karsgaard, [Youth Engagement in Climate Change Action: Case Study on Indigenous Youth at COP24](#), Sustainability 12, no. 16 (May 2020): p. 6299

25 Trust in Science: Research on the connection shared between feelings of trust and action on climate change is vast and still developing. Still, some have noted the emphasis youth place on trust in science and experts as important motivators for youth engagement in environmental matters. Lynne Zummo, Emma Gargroetzi, and Antero Garcia, ["Youth Voice on Climate Change: Using Factor Analysis to Understand the Intersection of Science, Politics, and Emotion,"](#) Environmental Education Research 26, no. 8 (April 2020): pp. 1207-1226, [link](#); CEC Youth Engagement Plan 2021-2022 (CEC internal document); Maria Ojala, ["To Trust or Not to Trust? Young People's Trust in Climate Change Science and Implications for Climate Change Engagement,"](#) Children's Geographies, 2020, pp. 1-7, DOI: [link](#)







# Conclusion

## Overview of CEC's Youth Engagement Plan

As youth engagement efforts continue to be developed/implemented, the above strategy will be guiding principles for the upcoming **2024-2026 Youth Engagement Implementation Plan**. The following framework will allow for the implementation and institutionalization of youth engagement across the CEC, including projects and initiatives, decision-making and participation in advisory bodies.



## Reaching Youth in North America

### How to reach youth?

Effectively reach diverse youth at the center of environmental action by:

- Defining youth engagement and CEC target youth audiences.
- Assessing youth perception of the CEC and incorporating youth as an official target group in CEC official strategies and official documents.
- Carrying out an evaluation of current regional youth engagement to map regional variances and build comprehensive research and needs assessment to identify gaps in existing CEC initiatives and projects.
- Identifying how to communicate with diverse youth, youth-led groups and organizations who represent underrepresented North American communities through observation, analysis and consultations.
- Exploring partnerships with NGOs, youth-led organizations, youth-led businesses, community partners and academic institutions to share resources.
- Addressing youth knowledge gaps by producing youth-inclusive and accessible content, such as artistic and nature-based content and storytelling, to share knowledge on CEC's initiatives and projects, some of which featuring youth's impact on their communities.
- Actively inviting youth to engage and participate in CEC activities in an enabling environment.



## Foster Engagement

**How do we build youth capacity and accompany the CEC to create an enabling environment?**

Offer holistic support to youth by:

- Creating and sharing a meaningful youth engagement framework/strategy.
- Identifying youths' needs via regional consultations.
- Providing compensated leadership roles to youth within the organization.
- Conducting youth-inclusive, youth-focused and youth-led workshops, training, webinars and knowledge-sharing sessions within CEC initiatives and projects.
- Supporting youth-led initiatives and activities through funding and various resources.
- Strengthening a paid internship program along with a recommended Human Resources policy on intern support to bring youth perspectives to daily CEC operations and projects.





## Create an Intergenerational Network

### How do we create a North American network?

Enhance collaboration between diverse youth, organizations and intergenerational communities of practice to create a network by:

- Enhancing youth capacity in communication and outreach within CEC activities and by collaborating with partner organizations.
- Including youth perspectives in all CEC activities, units and directorates of the CEC Secretariat.
- Supporting and granting youth access to decision-making spaces and outreach regional and international activities, as well as providing financial support and accreditations when needed.
- Fostering intergenerational communities for dialogue and knowledge sharing.
- Mapping youths' successes to showcase their pivotal role in environmental action.



Overall, monitoring of the CEC's efforts and results in meaningfully reaching, engaging and showcasing youth initiatives.



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[cec.org/youth](http://cec.org/youth)