Building inclusive youth movements

Africa–Europe youth exchange programme
Why inclusive youth movements?

We need everyone to be involved to create systemic change and climate justice!

Young people are a crucial part of that as they bring in new ways of thinking, a new perspective on issues and often have the energy to tackle the big issues we are facing.

We should also be prioritising youth work because the intergenerational nature of these issues means young people and future generations will be hit the hardest by climate impacts. This will disproportionately impact young people in the Global South.

To strengthen our movement we need to prioritise intergenerational learning in order to continue our work into the future. By engaging young people we help strengthen the movement for tomorrow.

Engaging young people in discussions and decision making can strengthen our movement and also develop a critical consciousness in young people which we then take into all aspects of our life and are better equipped to challenge injustices and inequality when we experience it.

We can also provide opportunities for young people outside of formal education system, for those who can’t access formal education and to combat problematic messages dominating our education systems.

Being a young person can mean that you are less able to take up decision making roles and excluded from spaces. It can also mean that you are taken less seriously and this is exacerbated by other aspects of social identity such as being a woman and being a person of colour. This can be exhausting and drain the energy that you want to use for campaigning!
Addressing patriarchy

Patriarchy is very much entrenched in our cultural norms and values and this is passed from generation to generation. We have a saying in Uganda that a tree can easily be bent when it is still young, so I believe if they are empowered, the youth can be champions of dismantling this system where men largely hold power and women are largely excluded from it.

The youth are also good champions of environmental justice because they are exposed to the media and can do research. However, the challenge that we have in Uganda is the Social Media Tax that government recently introduced which is becoming a barrier since it poses a big communication gap. It limits our ability to outreach to some of the youth, especially those that are out of school and have low income.

As NAPE, we have Uganda Community Radio as a platform for women and youth to talk about the issues that impact them and their communities.

Written up by Precious, NAPE, FoE Uganda
YFoEE Summer camps

YFoEE holds annual international summer camps for young people. These week long events are effective in giving young people a chance to engage deeply with key topics, such as intersectionality and climate justice, as well as discussing and sharing with young people from different countries and cultures. The primary aims are to build a well connected international youth movement, and to build the capacity of young people who then go back and share what they have learnt with their national groups. The events are very social and often create strong friendships, which have been crucial in strengthening the YFoEE network.

The organisation of these events are youth and participant-led, with support from YFoEE staff. Similarly, sessions are mostly designed and facilitated by participants. This gives young people experience, ensures that the content is relevant and takes away the restrictive idea that only some people have authority to speak about these issues.

“For us as YFoEE it is important to empower youth to shape the world around them. For our summer camps it means everyone is invited to contribute to the program and everyone’s voice gets heard. We often then see young people going on to lead workshops and campaigns after this experience”

- Andreas Link, YFoEE steering group

Recently, members of Young Friends of the Earth Africa have also been attending the summer camps. Joanne Groome from South Africa attended the 2018 camp in Cyprus:

“The camp was a great learning experience for me. It was very interesting to hear that some of the other participants had similar issues within their countries and that you can accomplish a great deal through working in solidarity. I will take back what I learnt to create awareness within my community and will also use the knowledge I gained in the media and communications workshops in my work at South Durban Community Environmental Alliance.”
At groundWork (FoE South Africa) we have an internship programme to allow young people to be based within the organisation for a period of time (most of the learning happens in the casual discussions so being based in the office is a definite must have). They are given responsibility for a specific task, from organising of a national gathering to oppose gas extraction to the ongoing monitoring and follow up of a hazardous dumpsite which pollutes the nearby communities.

I would say that firstly it has to be an idea that gets buy in from the organisation, fortunately in groundWork we have leaders who see the value of having young people to provide a fresh perspective. The next step is to allow youth a space to engage and show their ability. This is generally done by asking for their opinion or giving them tasks that require their input rather than something that needs to be followed rule by rule.

The purpose of our internship programme isn’t about getting a young person to get the job done or to have them be the action arm of campaigning, it needs to also contribute towards the personal development of young people. Asking for their opinion and trusting them to make decisions is something that empowers a person. Myself, being a young person in the organisation who started as an intern, can definitely say that having people around you who have so much experience in every aspect yet still value what you think or say is something that not only gave me a lot of confidence but also made me feel fearless. I think that is exactly what you want from an activist.

Written up by Niven Reddy, groundWork
Youth work at Environmental Rights Action/FoE Nigeria

Environmental Rights Action/Friends of the Earth Nigeria has been engaging young people since 1998 under the platform of the Students Environmental Assembly Nigeria (SEAN). SEAN is an affiliate group with its primary focus to empower students to become the ultimate champions for environmental justice.

SEAN had presence in 21 different institutions in Nigeria and each unit has their own leadership structure. Each chapter of the group focused their actions on the following program areas of ERA/FoEN– Forest & Biodiversity, Food Sovereignty, Energy and Extractive, Democracy Outreach Program (Corporate Accountability), Climate Justice and Oil and Gas. The groups are supported by the relevant ERA Program Officers.

The groups use weekly meetings around thematic topics, monthly seminars aimed at the wider public and an annual national summit where chapters collectively plan for the upcoming year. Leaders of SEAN are invited to ERA’s National Environmental Consultation with policy makers and usually hold a side event at the Consultation to engage directly with key actors. Leaders and new members are given opportunities to participate in field trips to understand environmental injustice more deeply and gain practical experience.

Written up by Ubrei-Joe, Nigeria
Building inclusive youth movements
Principles and tips

● Create space.
  ○ Put on events where young people can discuss what they care about and the issues that impact them.
  ○ If you want young people to be involved in a campaign or action, involve them at the planning stage so they can have a say in what it looks like and feel ownership over the project.
  ○ Giving young people space to explore what they care about will help ensure projects are relevant to their experiences. This may differ from the campaigns run by the FoE group but is much more likely to keep them involved.
  ○ Create space in decision making spaces in your organisation so that young people can contribute to shaping what you work on.
  ○ Allow youth spaces and groups to be youth led where possible.

● Build capacity. For most people, their education does not include campaigning skills or how to approach the media. In some areas, it may not include practical skills like growing your own food.
  ○ Provide training opportunities for young people to empower them and skill them up to take action on issues they care about.
  ○ Give them skills that they can spread through their networks. Young people are usually great multipliers!

● Provide resources. Youth groups are often volunteer led and operate on lower budgets than campaigning NGOs. However, that doesn’t mean we can run on thin air.
  ○ Is it possible to hire a paid coordinator to do the administrative and time consuming work?
  ○ Link young people up with campaigners and experts when they ask for it.

● Respect the work of volunteers. Volunteering culture varies in different parts of the world, but wherever you are, if someone is giving up their time and resources to support your campaign, they should be encouraged and respected in every way.
  ○ Include them in decision making when possible.
  ○ Is it possible to provide them with training and personal development opportunities?
  ○ Can you help that person find a job but writing references, providing certificates from trainings and volunteer programmes?
  ○ Remember not everyone is able to volunteer due to circumstances in their lives. People’s circumstances can change quickly so allow volunteers to come in and out if they need to.

● Be aspirational! Messages and framing that boldly imagines a better world is more likely to engage young people in your movement.
○ Young people understand the world we live in and so make sure your communication is honest and not misleading.

● Build relationships. A crucial thing that keeps young people involved in our movement is when they have space to develop friendships.
  ○ This also contributes to a movement becoming part of someone’s identity, making them more likely to stay involved.

● Accessibility. Use language and terminology that young people are going to understand even if they are new to the movement. Avoid jargon and acronyms.

● Trusted messengers. Young people are more likely to take on messages from their peers.
  ○ Enable peer-peer discussions and exchanges. It may sometimes be more effective than bringing in an external speaker on an issue.

● Participation. Young people are less likely to come into a meeting or event space and have all the answers than someone who has been in that environment for years. However, that doesn’t mean they do not have important contributions to make.
  ○ Facilitate spaces so that young people have opportunities to speak and be listened to.
  ○ Approach topics from different angles so that they make to diverse range of life experiences.
  ○ Consult young people about ways they could participate in existing work and structures. This may require changes to way of working, such as the time of meetings.

● Be where young people are. Whether physically or online, consider where young people are likely to see your messages. This might mean using newer forms of social media, putting posters up in youth clubs or getting students to do shout-outs in university lectures.