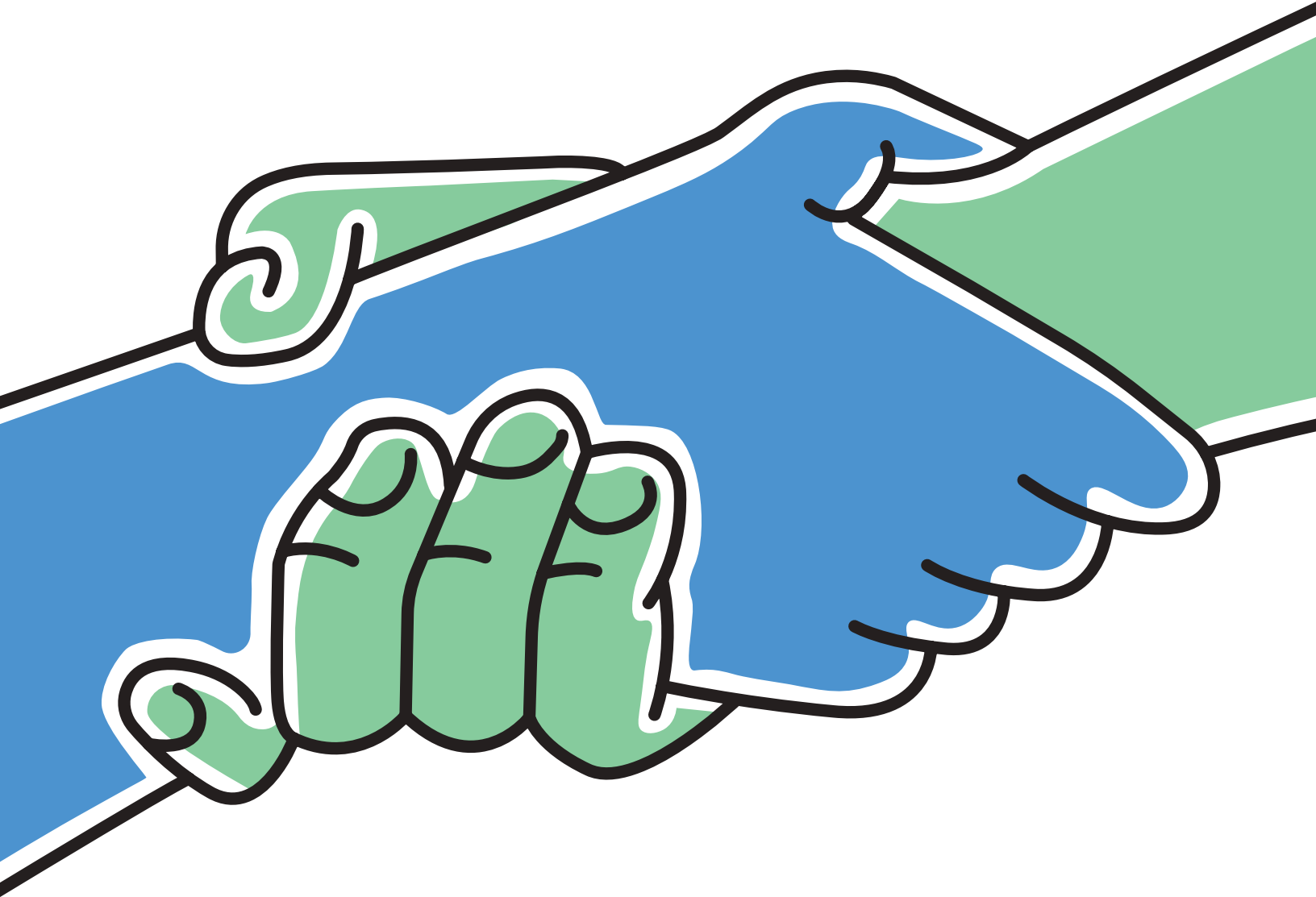




Foundation



THE POWER OF YOUTH: A YOUTH-LED GUIDE TO ENGAGING WITH VOICES OF CHANGE

Created by Plan International Canada's Youth Summit 2020 participants



GENDER
EQUALITY

SHE/HER

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International
Foundation
Canada



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HOW DID WE BUILD THIS RESOURCE?

We, the youth participants in Plan International Canada's Youth Summit 2020: The Power of Youth, came together for two workshops where we had in-depth discussions about:

ABOUT US

Youth aged 14–24 throughout Canada from diverse backgrounds and identities came together to create this resource. However, as we represent a small snapshot of youth in Canada, our viewpoints are not reflective of all youth in Canada.

We encourage you to continue the conversation on meaningful youth engagement with young people in your life and/or with the young people you choose to partner with.

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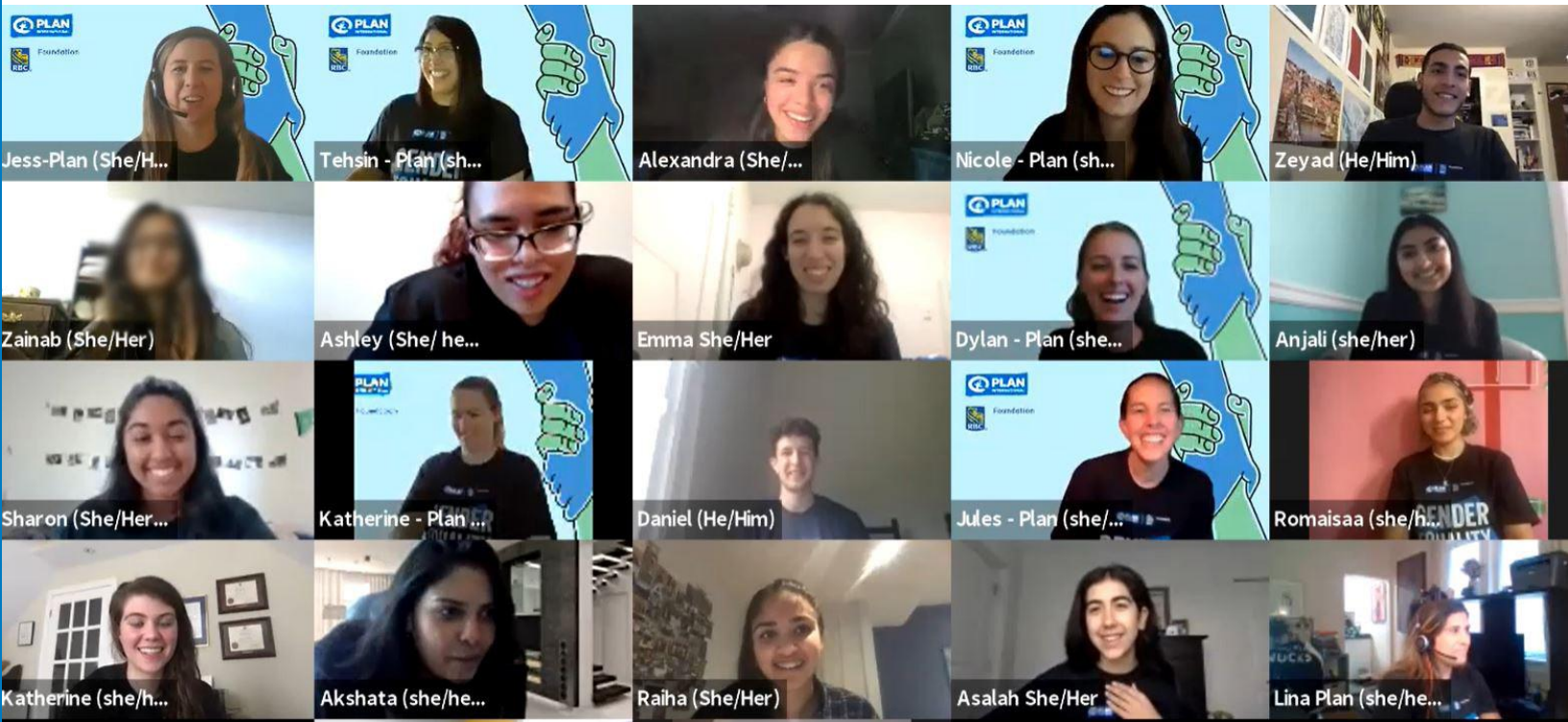
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From there, six “Youth Champions” came together with the support of Plan International Canada staff to:





FOREWARD

Written by Charlotte P. and Sharon J.

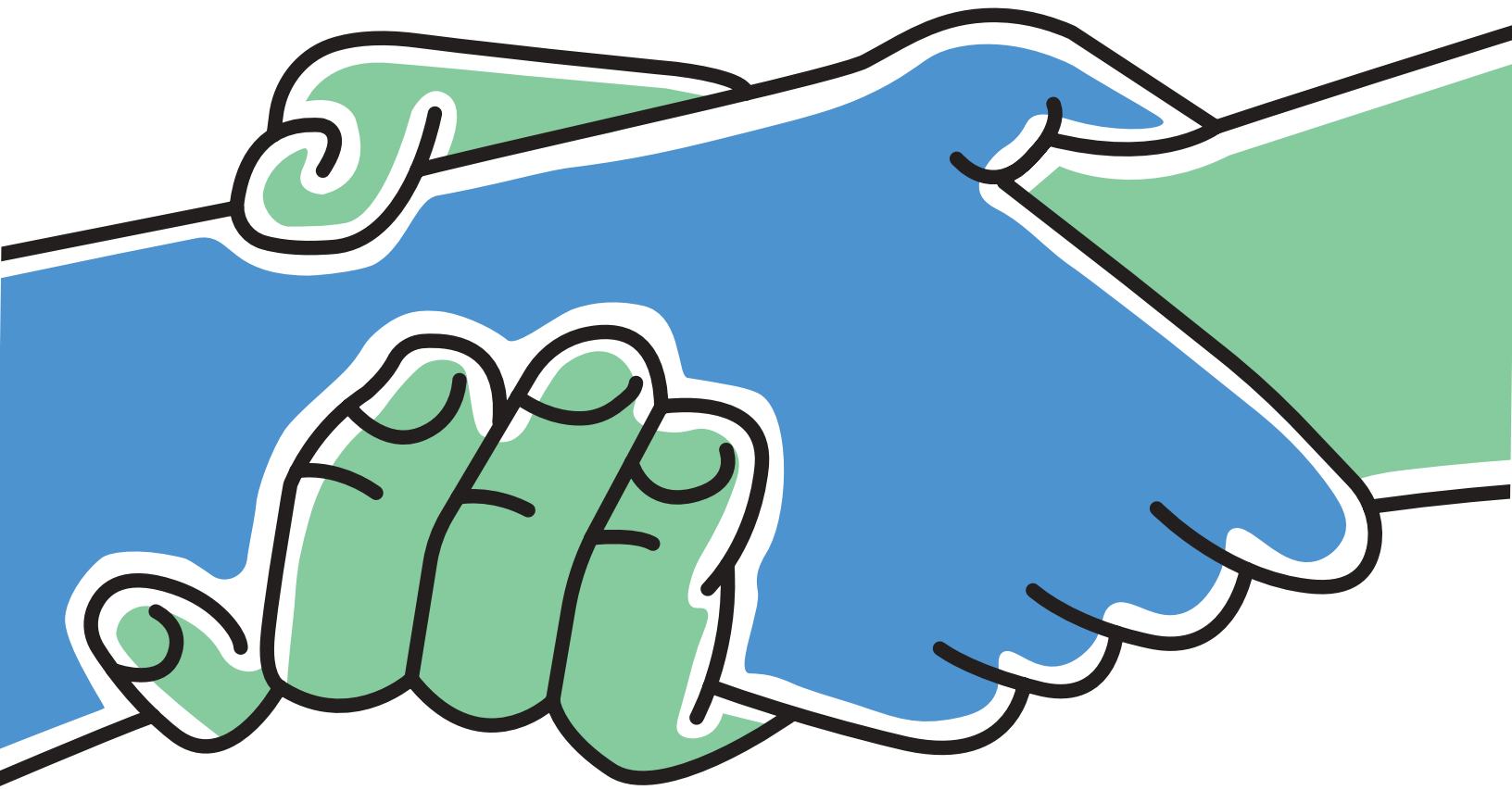
We are youth, and we are powerful. It is time to showcase our potential, share our stories and celebrate our collective successes.

We are driven youth from throughout Canada who are changemakers, ground shakers, and action-takers. We came together to write this resource to inspire the inclusion of youth voice in policy, daily life, and all levels of society. We want this resource to support decision makers in creating safe, equitable, and meaningful experiences for youth and in turn, recognize the benefits of including youth in those spaces.

Authentic, long-lasting change begins with accountable actions. As a result, our resource is centered around the need for youth representation in decision-making spaces that directly affect them. We focus on the risks of tokenism of youth, meaningful ways to engage youth, and a selection of stories and experiences that highlight the power of youth. This resource encourages you to stop, self-reflect and become aware of your own experiences, relationships, and privileges. Real change requires accountability, shifting perspectives and continuous self-education.

We urge you to use this resource as a tool to build and foster equitable, youth-centered dialogues and to properly acknowledge youth in ways that do not exploit their ideas and innovations.

THIS IS OUR CALL TO ACTION.



THE YOUTH VOICE: POWERFUL & PERSISTENT

Written by Lavinia A. and Raphaëlle R.

Resilient. Fearless. Innovative. Bold. Revolutionary.

These are the words that were uttered when youth at Plan International Canada's 2020 Youth Summit were asked to describe what the "Power of Youth" meant to them. Youth exemplify all of them. From the Greensboro Sit-Ins in 1960, to the Global Climate Strike of 2020, youth of the past and present are often the primary catalysts for change.

Whether it be leading the charge in the fight against the climate crisis, advocating for girls' rights, organizing marches for racial justice or developing the latest accessible technology, young people continue to lead our communities into a brighter and more equitable future. Maryam and Nivaal Rehman, Autumn Peltier, Malala Yousafzai, Isra Hirsi and Zyahna Bryant are just a few leaders in a generation galvanized to change the status quo. Don't know them? **It's time you did.**



Youth have been at the center of every major social movement in history. We experience the world in a different way than the adults who are leading it. We have unique insight as youth growing up in a world affected by climate change, COVID-19, systemic anti-Black racism, and many other social forces. We have the greatest stake in the future and we are unafraid to fight for it. The youth voice provides perspective and context to issues that may have been previously ignored, marginalized or simply unknown. When we are a part of the conversation we bring unique and yet-unimagined solutions to big problems. The potential for change and growth that stems from genuinely engaging and partnering with young people is limitless.

It is not enough for youth to simply be invited to sit at the table, as this implies the table itself is owned by those power, and those invited can be uninvited whenever their participation becomes inconvenient or uncomfortable. It's about creating a collective space where long-term, sustainable relationships with youth can be fostered.

Equally important is intersectional representation of young people, diversifying the perspectives brought forward and ensures that the decisions made are inclusive of all people.

“
Young employees add to the bottom line by bringing new and innovative ways of thinking about challenges and opportunities, connections to new markets and ease with which these digital natives adopt and use new technologies.
”

*Meaningful Youth Engagement:
Sharing Power, Advancing Progress, Driving Change.*

Women Deliver, 2019

Carmen tells a story of when she embraced her power as a youth:

There was a girl in my class who was constantly being bullied by her peers. I didn't understand her pain, not at all, yet it was painful to watch her close herself off to others.

However, I didn't do anything to help; I was too afraid to get mocked for standing up for what was right. I felt selfish and powerless for not stopping the hurt, but most of all, I felt like I was one of them. I felt like one of the bullies because I didn't stop them, and instead, watched them say hateful comments. I did try defending her whenever my friends mentioned her, but it didn't feel enough - it was so little compared to her hurt. So I talked to her, made her laugh - which made me happy to see her smile - and genuinely enjoyed being around her.

Fortunately, the bullying stopped after she left my class, but she's happier now. **I'm glad that she has people who she can trust and support her in whatever ways my class and I didn't do.**



LET'S TALK ABOUT TOKENISM

Recognizing the barriers youth face is key to valuable youth engagement. Acknowledging that certain youth have privileges that allow them access to opportunities (such as gender, socio-economics, location, race, etc.) is an important step to bridging the inequality gap and diversifying the youth voice. Remember that one person, especially those who benefit from privilege, does not speak for all. The youth voice is not a monolith. When advocating for a gender equal world, we must always recognize the importance of intersectionality of youth's identities and how they play a role in the way we understand the youth voice.

Tokenism happens when youth are put in formal and informal positions without any substance, purpose or power simply for the sake of representation. In many cases the context within these positions do not allow youth to meaningfully and genuinely engage. Unfortunately, it is very easy for adult-led organizations to tokenize youth, and although it may not always be intentional, it is certainly harmful and can have a lasting impact. Tokenism breeds cynicism and a toxic cycle where youth are less likely to engage in the future. Too often, organizations assume young people have little expertise or knowledge that will allow them to have valuable opinions or discussions.

We are calling on organizations and those who work with youth directly to recognize the harm in tokenizing youth. Firstly, youth must be viewed as powerful agents of change. Youth can and must hold spaces in which they are changemakers, decision makers and leaders. The key to supporting young people is to create a space that empowers them as equals in decision making and leadership.

“
In our research, we find that the quality of the relationships between youth and adults are intertwined with the nature of the work in which the younger members are engaged. Through the relationship with their adult partners, and through development of mutual trust and respect, youth engage in the real work of the group and develop a sense of belonging and of being a valued part of the organization.”

*Lessons from the Field:
Engaging Youth and Adults as Partners in
Organizational Governance*

Shepherd Zeldin and Carole MacNeil, 2006

“
Young members bring their own needs and interests to the table, along with other key qualities, such as creativity, openness, and comfort with risk-taking. Adults...often bring expertise in decision-making processes and evaluation techniques...The combination of these divergent strengths and qualities brings about the potential for better decisions than either group alone could expect.”

*Building Youth-Adult Partnerships for Community
Change: Lessons from the Youth Leadership Institute*

*Margaret Libby, Matt Rosen
and Maureen Sedonaen, 2005*

It is also essential to compensate the youth you work with, whether it be monetarily or through long-term engagement. Youth contributions must not be minimized and/or taken for granted. Our voices cannot be dismissed as another item on a checklist and must be valued on equal terms. Lastly, be open and receptive to criticism – it demonstrates you are actively listening and learning from youth. These are ways organizations can help harness and amplify the youth voice, particularly in this historic moment. Failing to do this results in youth feeling tokenized and undervalued.


Here are few ways organizations can avoid tokenizing young people:

- Carve out time and space for youth to share their voices – it can be intimidating for a young person to speak up without being invited to do so.
- Avoid speaking on a young person's behalf. They are able to speak for themselves.
- Expand spaces beyond representation; invite youth to contribute as much as possible.
- Avoid narrow roles that keep youth stagnant. For example, if you're inviting a young person to attend a conference, explore how they can be actively involved in that conference rather than just an attendee.
- Consider the diversity represented in your space and empower diverse voices of youth who can represent marginalized groups.
- Value youth's work and contributions by compensating them for their time and efforts.

Meaningful youth partnership

In considering both the thoughts and opinions of our youth participants and the research available on community development principles, we have come to value the essential difference between consultation and meaningful participation. Often, organizations ask to consult with youth to get their voice and perspective on initiatives they will be affected by. While this practice is a step in the right direction, we want to encourage organizations to move beyond this simplistic practice and instead involve youth in a meaningful way, where both parties will benefit from their full participation. Though doing this requires a significantly greater investment, we are confident that this investment will have tangible and lasting gains for both parties.





Article 12 of the Convention [on the Rights of the Child] emphasizes that young people are entitled to be active agents in their own lives. It specifically states that all children are capable of expressing a view, and have the right to:

- (a) articulate their views and express their views freely,
- (b) be heard in all matters affecting them, including policy matters,
- and (c) have their views taken seriously in accordance with their age and maturity.

Toward an understanding of youth in community governance: Policy priorities and research directions

Shepherd Zeldin, Linda Camino & Matthew Calvert

CASE STUDY: Engage youth meaningfully in participatory action

To highlight this key difference, we will be drawing on an example from Plan International Canada. With the support of Global Affairs Canada, Plan International Canada launched innovative programming in developing countries centered around advancing Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights. As they launched the public engagement aspects of this campaign, they had the option to involve youth participants. Not only did they ask for their opinions on how it should run, they also involved youth directly in the process of public engagement, and the Youth Advocates program was born. The Youth Advocates program enabled and empowered youth to mobilize their peers to become involved with international issues. Youth were responsible for helping rally Canadians to raise their voices and show their support by collecting signatures from individuals throughout Canada endorsing this important work. Along the way the youth advocates developed their speaking skills and global development knowledge. As a result of this program, youth have been invited to speak at the Commission on the Status of Women at the UN, the Canadian Partnership for Women and Children's Health Expo, Women Deliver 2019 and many other important events where they have once again proven that youth are critical to these discussions.

Not all organizations need or have capacity to launch an entire program in order to engage youth in participatory action meaningfully. However, there are several ways you can start to bring youth into your decision-making spaces. Creating the right environment for meaningful participation is critical.

“
Any organization looking to support child- and youth-led groups or associations should take the time to understand the needs of that group, what enables their organizing and what do they need to be able to continue their work.
”

*Engaging Girls, Boys and Youth as Active Citizens
Plan International Position Paper, March 2020*

Sharon writes a poem about what the power of youth means to her:

*The energy flowing from
my feet through
my fist hitting the dense
air is electrifying.*

My presence is power.

My voice is valiant.

My cry is commanding.

My thoughts matter.

*They are the bridge connecting
each bleeding
heart to our cause.*

*Here, I am not one in
a million.*

I am the million.

*Our speech screams out
in unison...*

“We are one”



HERE ARE SOME THINGS TO CONSIDER AS YOU FURTHER YOUR ENGAGEMENT WITH YOUNG PEOPLE:

Empathize

Asking youth to share their thoughts or opinions in a room full of decision makers can be daunting. Put yourself in their situation and ask yourself what could make them more comfortable with sharing honest feedback, ideas, and innovations. Active and continuous listening is required in order to validate and encourage youth's participation.

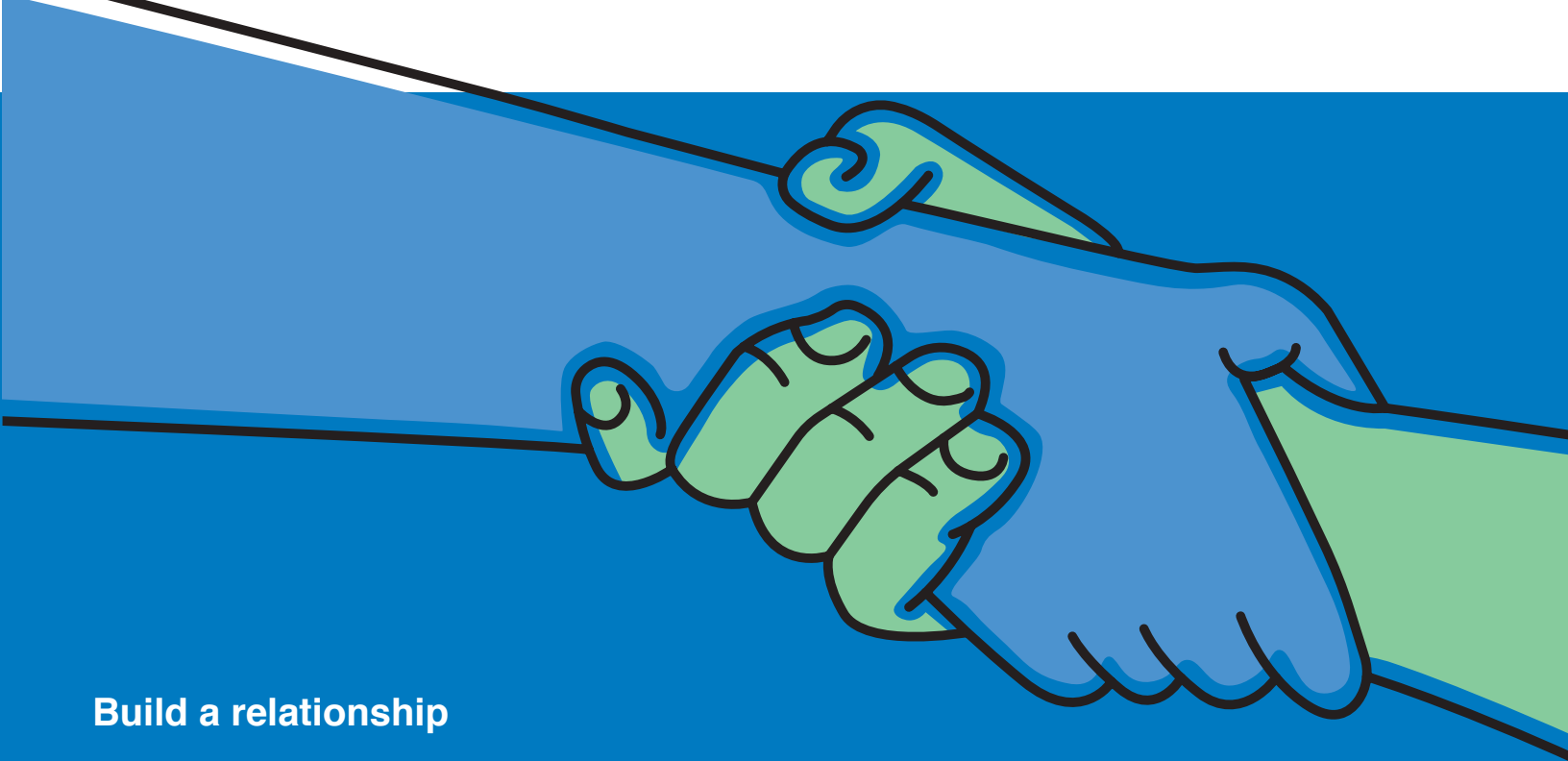
Be transparent

One-off consultations can feel empty and unfinished. If you choose to involve youth voices in your initiative, be mindful of their experience from start to finish. Youth want to know how their voice has impacted the final decisions. How will the information that youth provided be used? How will this affect the organization's decisions moving forward? What are the barriers to implementing these ideas? Youth are more than capable of coming with you on this journey.

Create a safe space

How does the space that you are inviting youth into accommodate them and their needs? Is it intimidating or validating? Are they invited to the table or did they have to fight their way in? Is it a space where they will feel heard, valued, and supported? Are the youth prepared for the conversation they will be participating in? Is the physical space accessible? Are there washrooms available that the youth feel comfortable using? Are the meetings, spaces and technology used accessible to youth? All of these questions are crucial to ensuring you are creating an inclusive and safe space for youth.

Most importantly, ask the youth directly how you can best support them. The needs of youth vary greatly based on their identity and background, and there are many measures that need to be considered in order to provide a safe space where youth can thrive.



Build a relationship

In addition to limiting one-off consultations, validating and supporting youth involves building a relationship over the long term. Our youth identified this practice as critical in some of their most positive experiences of engagement. This takes time, energy, and resources, but the payoff will be youth who are enthusiastically, meaningfully participating rather than providing a one-off consultation.

Make sure there's something in it for the youth

Often, when youth are asked to consult on an initiative, they leave the single conversation without having gained much for themselves. Youth are not obligated to lend their voice without being compensated, monetarily or experientially. As mentioned in the section on tokenism, it is critical that youth are shown that they are valued for their work. In situations where monetary compensation is not available, ensure that there is skill-building, networking, mentorship or just enjoyment as a part of the experience.

Strategize

Don't expect youth to say yes to every invitation. Meaningful engagement means that there will be a plan and a process built out that youth can be involved in. This strategy needs to extend beyond one-off communications, while taking into account the realities and competing demands on youth's time.

These tips are merely a starting point. Building meaningful engagement vs. simple consultation stems from the belief that youth carry wisdom and skills that are relevant to your work. It also embraces the notion that youth are individuals with as much knowledge of their own needs as adults, and that meeting those needs must happen before any engagement can occur.

Meaningful engagement sees youth as catalysts for change and innovation. It sees them as equals, as valuable and as worthy of your time, resources and action. These beliefs are what underlies any actions you may take to ensure meaningful participation.

Charlotte's poem on the power of youth:

Presidency rein

Of one day. Hear me, see me

Head of the table

TEN WAYS TO ENGAGE YOUTH

We asked youth participants to come up with tangible ideas for activities, programs, and initiatives that organizations can do in order to engage youth in meaningful ways. Here's what we came up with:

1

Employ young people on your staff and pay them equitably.

2

Re-think Youth Councils.

Ensure that these opportunities, should they become available, are accessible to a diverse array of youth.

3

Provide tangible ways for youth to access important resources and engagement opportunities – do not assume everyone has access to the internet, transportation or networks.

4

Provide and promote funding opportunities for youth-led and youth-initiated projects.

5

Involve youth at every level of government and decision making (municipal, provincial, federal, organizational, etc.)

6

Implement youth-directed policy initiatives under the advisement of youth themselves.

Give due credit for the youth who influence these initiatives and be transparent about their implementation.

7

Representation matters.

Make a conscious effort to engage diverse youth and ensure they are able to participate safely and meaningfully.

This may require additional resources and finances, so be sure to resource adequately.

8

Make opportunities available to youth regardless of demographic or region.

9

Advocate for the improvement of civic education and enable youth to become involved within this space.

10

Advocate for a lower voting age.

CONCLUSION

We hope that this resource has provided you with new insight on youth engagement and the importance of involving youth in decision-making spaces. In the spirit of staying true to our recommendations, we feel it is important to point out that there is still so much work to be done. While we connected with diverse youth from all around Canada to create this resource, we are not a monolithic voice, and we will continue to hold space for our peers to speak up about the ways that they want to be engaged. As such, this resource will continue to evolve over time.

Engaging youth isn't a simple, straightforward path – it takes commitment, time and intentionality. It requires resources and funds. It requires investment.

We call on you, readers, to consider how youth can support you in bettering your organization, and work alongside youth to create a better future for all. In doing this, we hope you will provide youth with the tools, opportunities and resources to lead the way to that future.



Gurreet recalls a moment she was empowered to continue to make a difference:

On my Women Empowerment trip to rural Ecuador, I learned about the systemic inequalities and barriers girls face in accessing education. Despite the numerous roadblocks that women in Ecuador cope with including social stigma and a lack of education, I was amazed that they created innovative artisan product businesses so that their children could lead a better life than them. Hearing their stories of overcoming adversity, I felt inspired by their resilience. I feel **determined to continue advocating for gender equality** using the resources I am privileged to have.

Raphaelle reflects on her leadership and leadership of youth in creating social change:

Youth are at the front of every social movement. We always have been, and we always will be. When I had the chance to lead a walkout for education in solidarity with students across Ontario, I realized that **my voice, a part of the youth voice, is powerful and it demands to be heard.** I believe that it's an undeniable fact that young people are a force to be reckoned with - so we should be treated and respected as such. When youth are given the power to lead protests, meetings, organizations, etc. we can create powerful and sustainable change in our communities.

Neha's account of a moment she used her voice to bring light to an important issue:

In 2017, I wrote and directed a play to bring awareness about acid attacks that occur disproportionately against women. I told the story of how one woman navigated this experience and illustrated the implications the acid attack had on her life. I felt like my anger and passion were heard when the play showed my community how this issue persists in society, but is often swept under the rug. I decided to use art as a means to amplify my voice from the perspective of other voices. **I believe that art gave me the power to transform my feeling of helplessness into tangible action.**

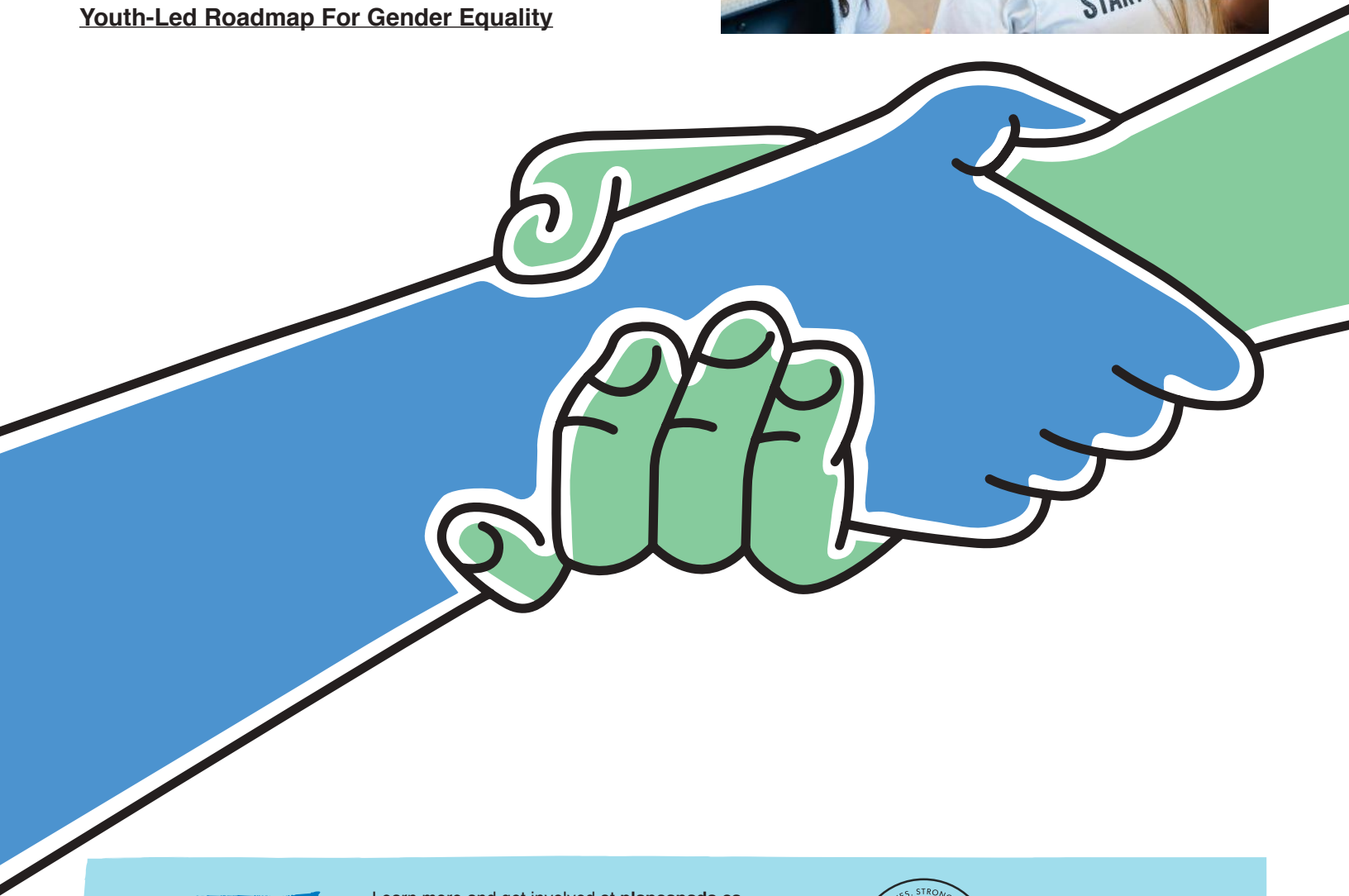
ADDITIONAL READING

Girls 20's Leading Together:
Young Women Building Collective Power in Canada

Women Deliver's Meaningful Youth Engagement:
Sharing Power, Advancing Progress, Driving Change

Hart's Ladder of Participation

Youth-Led Roadmap For Gender Equality



Learn more and get involved at plancanada.ca



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