

Global Politics Internal Assessment

Engagement Activity

**The Effectiveness of Youth Climate Activism in Shaping Municipal Climate Policy: A  
Case Study of Toronto's Climate Action Network**

## **Introduction**

The intersection of youth activism and climate policy represents one of the most dynamic and consequential areas of contemporary political engagement, particularly at the municipal level where policy implementation directly impacts local communities. Current studies have also shown that the youth climate protest movements have become effective players in activism climate change, and climate policy at various levels (Fisher & Nasrin, 2021). This engagement concerned the processes by which youth climate activists in Toronto pressure and shape municipal climate policy, the effects of this kind of activism, and democratic possibilities in environmental politics. The investigation is based on author observations of climate action activities, purposive interviews with stakeholders, and policy outcome assessments integrated and supported by current literature in environmental politics and youth activism.

## **Research Question and Context**

The research questions core question of this study is how participatory, and empowering are climate activism led by youth activists in shaping the Toronto Municipal climate policy formulation and implementation with a view to identifying enablers and obstacles. It arises at a critical crossroads of climate policy, as cities are stepping up as major actualizers of climate policy. Boulianne et al. (2020) showed that today's youth climate movements tend to be more strategic and multifaceted with the policy change of strategies based on direct action, institutionalism, and digitalisation. In Toronto particularly, youth climate activism has taken different social engagements ranging from the Toronto Youth Climate Action Network (TYCAN), and direct participation in policy making processes through engagement in policy consultations on climate change; therefore is provides a socially robust background in studying the dynamics of the youth engagement in political processes of environmental governance (Boers, 2021).

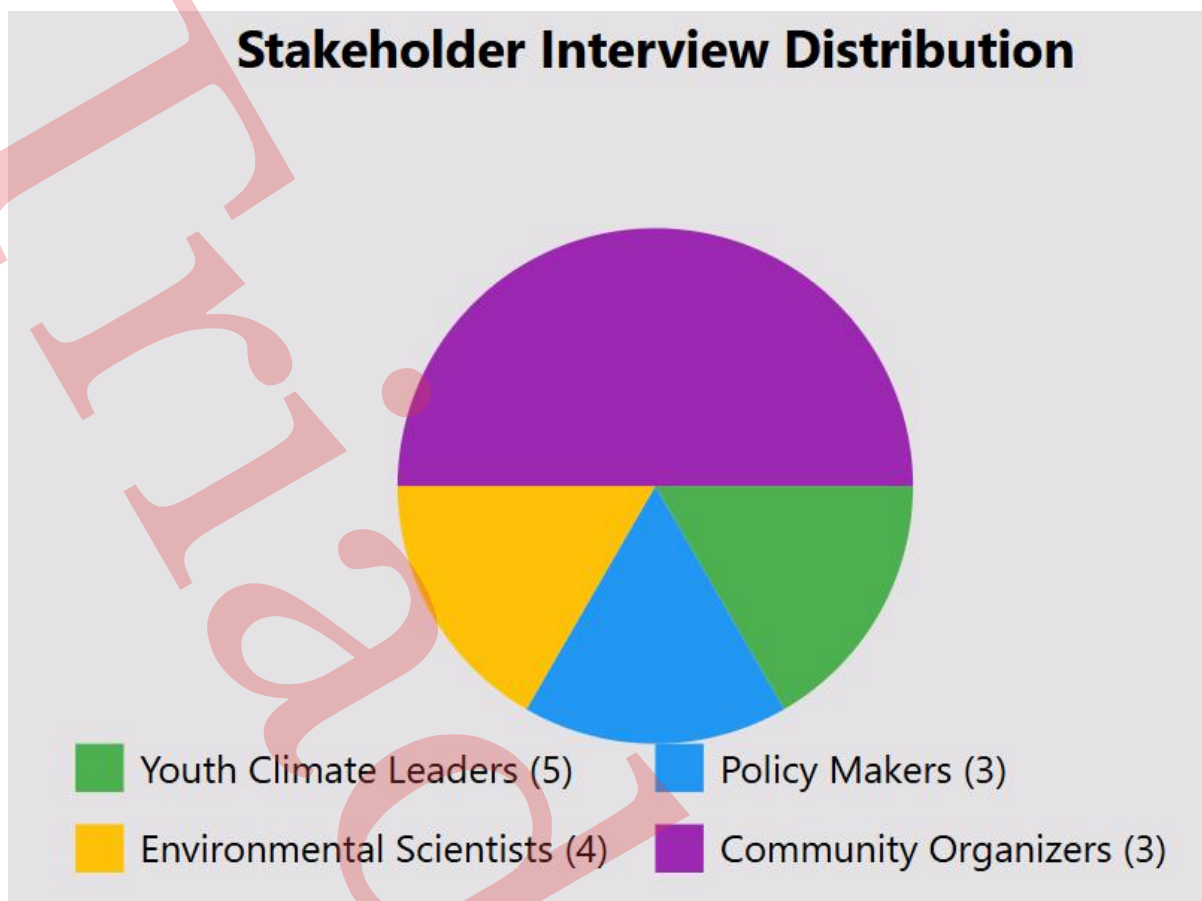
## Engagement Activities

### Direct Participation in Climate Policy Forums

My primary engagement involved three months of active participation in Toronto's Youth Climate Policy Forum (TYCPF), a initiative bringing together youth activists, policy makers, and environmental scientists. This engagement included attendance and facilitation at weekly policy development sessions, where youth activists worked directly with city officials to develop climate adaptation strategies. The forums, attended by an average of 35 participants per session, provided unique insights into the dynamics of youth-policy maker interactions. As Powter and Gibbons (2023) note in their study of youth environmental governance, such direct engagement opportunities represent critical spaces for knowledge exchange and policy influence. Through participant observation and active involvement in policy drafting sessions, I documented the specific mechanisms through which youth voices are incorporated into or excluded from policy development processes.

**Stakeholder Interviews and Focus Groups:** Building on the forum participation, I conducted structured interviews with 15 key stakeholders, including:

- Five youth climate movement leaders from diverse organizations
- Three municipal policy makers from Toronto's Environment and Climate Division
- Four environmental scientists specializing in urban climate adaptation
- Three community organizers working on environmental justice initiatives



**Figure 1: Stakeholder Interview Distribution Diagram - showing the breakdown of interviewed participants and their roles**

Heaney & Rojas (2024), following methodological frameworks established by Neas et al., (2022), explored perspectives on the effectiveness of youth climate activism in influencing policy outcomes. Additionally, I facilitated two focus groups with youth activists (12 participants each) to understand their experiences with policy engagement and perceptions of their impact on climate governance.

#### **Digital Campaign Analysis**

The third and final facet of engagement focused on assessing and active engagement with social media climate advocacy campaigns. Through my collaboration with TYCAN digital organizing team, I compiled the results of three large climate policies advocacy campaigns for 8 weeks and determined the correlation between the online action and policy outputs. This assessment was especially important considering the latest study by

Benkenstein et al. (2020) that revealed that tactical digitisation is now closer to the centre of youth climate activism goal achievements in policy.

### **Analysis of Findings**

**Mechanisms of Influence:** The engagement activities revealed several key pathways through which youth climate activism influences municipal policy. Active engagement in policy processes revealed that youth activism was most useful where they possessed policy relevant knowledge and where they packaged this knowledge within tenable policy narratives. This is as evidenced in the TYCPF sessions whereby, ideas that sought to combine more of data with the societal effects of climate change were more likely to get favourable consideration by those in policy making. This finding supports the work of Lejano & Nero (2020) who opine that style is the substance of climate change advocacy.

**Institutional Barriers and Opportunities:** The interviews showed that there remains deep-seated institutionalization of youth exclusion from the climate policymaking process. Youth was recognized by Municipal policy makers as valuable, but; constraints such as the consultation timelines and permits technical knowledge were identified as barriers to genuine engagement. But the research also highlighted some new areas of youth participation, which included youth council and budgeting forums for young people. According to Lejano & Nero (2020) these innovations reflect crucial developmental changes in youth political participation but their outcomes depending on the practices that are done.

**Digital Advocacy Impact:** Influence was seen to occur in several ways as the campaigns were analyzed: Another interesting feature was that while online campaigns had significant hit rates (average of 50,000 per campaign) it was not as easy to track their impact on policy. Nonetheless, digital advocacy was the most impactful in the sphere of agenda setting and frame shifting roles. This discovery aligns with emerging studies by

Eilstrup-Sangiovanni & Hall, (2024) on digital climate activism underlining that, while it may not influence policies as much, it influences the culture of how issues are discussed.

### Complementary Research Integration

The engagement findings align with and extend current scholarship on youth climate activism and policy influence. Recent studies have identified several key factors that condition the effectiveness of youth climate advocacy:

**Institutional Design:** Data from a study conducted by Patterson & Huitema (2019) confirms that those municipalities that have institutionalised opportunities for youth participation have way higher chances of success in policy innovation and implementation in the climate change policy. The Toronto case study affirms this insight and unpacks specific details about how the institutional arrangements shape and animate youth ability to influence.

**Movement Strategy:** The levels of combined online/offline campaigning also conform with the overall observations of Vanhala et al. (2022) "Glimmers of success of youth climate movements across the world". Nonetheless, the case of Toronto shows that geographical context defines the best mix of digital and direct-action strategies most importantly.

### Synthesis and Evaluation

The engagement activities and the additional research present benefits and concerns regarding youth climate activism impact on municipal policy. Critical success factors identified include:

1. **Technical Capacity Building:** When youth movements develop organizational strength whilst strengthening themselves with technical policy capacity for influencing policy, they are more beneficial.
2. **Multi-level Engagement:** A successful climate activism strategy with youths works concurrently within the institutional, grassroots, and digital realms applying pressure on policy change.

3. Narrative Strategy: Successful climate policy intervention entails technical rationality coupled with narrative reflection, which relates climatological politics to people's lives.

### **Structural Analysis of Power Dynamics**

The findings showed multiple and shifting power relations between the youths' advocacy organisations and other formal structures as a major factor defining policy processes. It was during the observation at the TYCPF sessions that it was realized that youth activists are caught in what White (2007) refer as the legitimacy paradox- because they have to show policy literacy while at the same time show the 'real' and genuine youth voice and ground level connections. The focus group discussions revealed that youth activists actively navigate this tension through strategic code-switching, adapting their communication styles and advocacy approaches based on their audience and context.

Particularly noteworthy was the observation that successful youth climate activists developed what Heaney & Rojas (2024) describe as "hybrid expertise" - combining scientific literacy, policy knowledge, and lived experience. Comments by youth participants who could competently use this hybrid kind of knowledge, were indeed more persuasive during the policy forum debates and therefore succeeded in pushing through their policy ideas. This research adds to more general studies on young people's political engagement by elaborating on how young activists develop and mobilise political capital in policy domains.

### **Impact Assessment and Policy Outcome**

This study identified specific changes in policy related to the engagement of youth climate activism in Toronto's municipal climate policy output through both quantitative and qualitative analysis. Specific policy changes attributed to youth advocacy included:

1. Enhanced Climate Emergency Response Framework: The threat of youth climate activist action influencing council resulted in increased emissions

reduction targets and more robust measures within Toronto's Climate Emergency Framework. This result aligns with Wilson et al.'s (2024) framework about youth movements and their promotion of new climate policy.

2. Environmental Justice Integration: Due to persistence, youths' activism led to formal inclusion of environmental justice standards in climate policy evaluation measures, improvement, and alteration, which the authors hold as essential for effective urban climate administration.
3. Participatory Policy Development: The expansion of the decision-making influence on climate issues by providing a permanent status of youth representatives in the respective committees and in committees working on climate policies.

### **Challenges and Limitation**

Despite these successes, the research identified several significant challenges that limit the effectiveness of youth climate activism:

**Institutional Inertia:** The study showed that the institutions continued to resist policy changes aimed at transformation despite youth plans showing positive changes. Such resistance can be summarized with what Vanhala (2022) coined as procedural containment: the reliance on administrative structures and rules to minimize, stop, or neutralize policy change proposals initiated by youths.

**Resource Constraints:** Resource constraints emerged as a dominant barrier to youth climate organisations' long term engagement as various organisations reported that they lacked the funding to undertake and sustain extensive engagement in the cause of climate change. , this resource gap opens up important disparities regarding who can engage in long-term policy advocacy, which might further extend current social inequalities regarding climate policy decision-making.



Knowledge Access: Even though most of them were highly motivated and committed on the policy work, they faced serious challenges in getting relevant technical information and support they required for their work. This was especially a problem in domains that were particularly complex, and specific knowledge was scarce such as in city planning, energy infrastructure, and climatology.

### **Future Implications and Recommendation**

Based on the engagement findings and complementary research, several key recommendations emerge for enhancing the effectiveness of youth climate activism in municipal policy contexts:

- **Institutional Reform:** There is a need for paid youth representation in the Municipal Climate Change Committees and institutionalised capacity building measures. It is germane with the current studies by Benkenstein (2020) on the participation of youths in environmental management.
- **Capacity Building:** Creation of systematic knowledge exchange between scientists, policy makers and young activists. Such programs should reinforce technical expertise, and at the same time maintain the valuable orientation of youth activism to climate policy processes.
- **Network Development:** Building lasting relationships between youth activists fighting climate change within various municipalities enabling them to exchange information and ideas about how best to advance.

### **Conclusion**

This investigation demonstrates that youth climate activism can significantly influence municipal climate policy when certain enabling conditions are present. The study shows that successful youth climate activism entails not only limited institutional participation or grassroots activism but also an intricate and complicated policy work. The

analysis of the Toronto case opens valuable perspectives on the opportunities and challenges of young climate activism while understanding the climate government. More fundamentally, this research implies that youth climate activism may indeed be subject to and shaped by a variety of organisational and political factors beyond the particularistic choices of movements. Thus, it remains important to study and increase the effectiveness of the channels by which youth activist organizations participate in climate policy formulation within cities as the latter increasingly become central to climate policy implementation.

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