



# A National Virtual Town Hall **COP20**

Canadian Youth Whitepaper on Climate Change



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## Prologue

On Nov 20, 2014, over 300 students from six high schools across Canada, in partnership with The Centre for Global Education, Green Learning Canada and TakingITGlobal, came together to collaborate, through the use of technology, in a Virtual Town Hall to discuss the youths vision for Canada's position going into the United Nations Climate Change conference (COP 20.) From Edmonton to Toronto, Brampton to Laval, the youth of Canada came together to exchange ideas, debate alternatives and ultimately create a document that represents their voice on a sustainable Climate Strategy. The Virtual Town Hall, called an "archetype of grassroots democracy" by Senator Grant Mitchell, was the culmination of over a month of online teamwork, 1500 hours of student collaboration, over 100 hours of teacher facilitation, and a passion by Alberta's youth to engage in a national conversation have their voices heard.

In the month prior to the Virtual Town Hall, student leaders, systematically chosen from each school to represent Canada's diverse geographic and demographic population, met on a weekly basis to exchange ideas, work with and listen to experts, and create a common framework going into COP20. This framework would be the basis upon which their fellow students would be able to identify challenges facing Canada with respect to Climate Change. Concurrently, the students were trained on how to use an arsenal of Web 2.0 tools (YouTube, Twitter, cell phone voting, Google Docs, H.323 Video Conference, discussion boards, blogs, etc.) to collaborate, build consensus and create community regardless of time or location.

Equipped with this knowledge and empowered through 21st-century technology, the student leaders facilitated a full day virtual town hall. In the morning, they led 300 of their peers through a dialogue with local and international experts. In the afternoon, the students worked in breakout groups to address three critical questions:

- 1 What actions should be expected both from the youth of Canada and the government of Canada in order to reduce carbon emissions or to meet targets for international agreements on climate change?**
- 2 Given the challenges Canada has had maintaining the commitments made in past agreements, i.e. Kyoto, should Canada seek to sign on to another multilateral agreement? As youth of Canada/the world, what position should Canada take on such key components as GHG targets, penalties and consequences, potential non-participation by key international players, etc.**
- 3 What obligations do technologically advanced countries, in the fields of clean energy or GHG reduction, have in helping reduce emissions in lesser developed countries, whether it be providing technical expertise, infrastructure, or financial aid? (Extra topic)**

This document, The Canadian Youth White Paper on Climate Change, written by a committee of students, is the direct result of that process. The evolution of the document involved equipping leaders with knowledge and technology, having those leaders facilitate a larger conversation among their peers, taking the data generated to their community at large for feedback and direction, and then synthesizing the results in the student white paper. It represents the voices of hundreds of youth, introduced to the complexity of Climate Change, unified through the power of 21st century technology, and sharing a passion to contribute to the dialogue taking place on the future of Canada and the Climate.

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## **“Today, the youth are 25% of the population. Tomorrow, we are 100% of the future.”**

In the past, Canada’s role in combatting climate change has been insufficient. Our limited attempts at reducing our global impact on the environment have not been satisfactory in aiding global initiatives. Canadian youth believe our country has the moral obligation to become a leader in environmental sustainability. This is within our means, but we have yet to achieve our true potential. For Canada to fulfill our obligation as an international leader, we must take sensible steps to fulfill our responsibility to help fight this crucial battle. We, the youth, have come together to discuss the actions we feel fulfill Canada’s potential. Through international co-operation, national initiatives and official commitment to our goals, we believe environmental sustainability can be achieved through Canada’s leadership.

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## **“Every nation has an obligation to the environment and to the future. Canada is no exception.”**

The youth of Canada see our nation’s potential to be a global leader in the fight against climate change. A good leader never leaves their group to suffer, just as Canada should not leave other nations without the support they need to adapt and mitigate to climate change. Developed nations have an obligation to lend our extensive infrastructural, financial, and intellectual resources to help nations who are unable to independently adjust to our changing environment and reduce emissions.

It is irrefutable that the consequences of global emissions are catastrophic for those in developing countries, which often lack the healthcare, solid infrastructure, and sufficient funds essential to resilience. To deny developing nations the resources they need to deal with the overwhelming effects of climate change, is to deny our role in the creation of the problem. We, as the youth of Canada, support our taking responsibility and initiative by donating to international bodies such as the Green Climate Fund, which “[provides] support to developing countries to limit or reduce their greenhouse gas emissions and to adapt to the impacts of climate change”<sup>1</sup>. Canada’s recent contribution to the GCF was a huge stride, but there is still much further to go. The youth know we can, and should, continue to take measures such as these to establish ourselves as leaders in this global initiative.

The atmosphere knows no borders, and neither should efforts to mitigate greenhouse gas emissions. By helping developing nations work towards sustainable development through the allocation of resources, we are investing in our future as global citizens. Many have asked, ‘Who are we to try and interfere with international affairs when we ourselves are no shining example?’ The youth say, who are we to let impoverished nations bear the weight of global emissions on their shoulders? Who are we to let them suffer for our mistakes? Who are we to oppose the sustainability of our planet’s future by not pursuing international action? Though the youth wholeheartedly believe international action is key, we also recognize the importance of setting high standards in carbon reduction within our own nation as part of fulfilling our global obligation.

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<sup>1</sup> Background. (n.d.). Retrieved November 23, 2014, from <http://www.gcfund.org/about/the-fund.html>

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**“The youth of Canada believe that a sustainable future is our only future, and that future needs a viable plan of action to become reality.”**

The fundamental means by which our planet can achieve environmental sustainability will be for nations to formulate courses of action towards carbon neutrality. Ultimately, the youth feel that the goal of Canada's nation-wide initiatives must be the decarbonization of our energy sector, and a reduced reliance upon fossil fuels as we begin our transition from high-emission energy sources to zero emission sources.

### **CONSUMER CHOICE IN ENERGY MARKET**

To encourage this transition, the federal government must provide subsidization. Canada's governing body can provide resources to those wishing to devise new, environmentally sustainable technologies and innovate upon current ones. Monetary incentive could also be provided through tax cuts for industries that produce eco-friendly products, and reimbursements for those who invest in sustainable products. It is essential that these green technologies are practical, affordable, and accessible to members of the general public if Canadians are to turn to green energy as a viable alternative to conventional power sources.

As a result, the demand for zero emission energy will rise and effectively reduce reliance on carbon based energy.

Canadians may think they face a choice between their economy or their environment. However, the youth believe that this does not have to be the case. As decarbonization of the energy sector occurs and we reduce our reliance on fossil fuels, the development of green energy infrastructure will provide the opportunity for employees in the conventional energy sector to apply their skills to new industries.

### **NATIONAL ENERGY STRATEGY**

In the interim, the youth of Canada are unanimous that a carbon pricing policy must be implemented, and we are not the first to do so. British Columbia's revenue-neutral carbon tax is a perfect example of a carbon pricing policy already in place. However, the youth envision two possible solutions in executing such policies; carbon taxes and carbon capping. Both alternatives provide incentive to industry and individuals to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, supporting the decarbonization of energy, and the reduction of Canada's overall environmental impact.

In order for a successful transition from a century of burning fossil fuels to new sustainable energy sources, it is crucial to advertise and motivate active, informed consumerism. The youth acknowledge that we have a role to play, and in this modern age of social media we know we have much to offer. Through advertising and social media campaigns, we can help make our nation as a whole more aware about the impacts climate change has upon every citizen of the world, and the global obligation each individual has to take action. When Canadians are empowered to make informed decisions, and consciously choose to employ sustainable energy, we, as a nation, can be enabled to lead by example on the world stage and encourage sustainability on a global scale.

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## “Canada needs to demonstrate our commitment to a sustainable future.”

Achieving a sustainable future is no easy feat. In order to accomplish this, we must be practical, innovative, and dedicated. Multilateral agreements play a crucial role in holding nations accountable for their contribution to climate change, and can position states as global leaders in addressing this critical issue. Such agreements allow countries to stand in solidarity as they combat climate change. With clearly-defined binding targets, signatory nations can be united in their commitment to regulating their emissions.

Canada has not always been supportive of the actions proposed by prior multilateral agreements. We neglected our obligations to the global community by abandoning our responsibilities under Kyoto and weakening the agreements of other countries in Copenhagen. We, as a nation, have failed before — but this does not prevent us from achieving further targets. We no longer have excuses to neglect our responsibilities. China has set caps on future carbon emissions, and the United States is going above and beyond its goals set out in Copenhagen; objectives identical to our own. The world is progressing, and it is time for us to rise to the occasion.

Now is the time for Canada to emerge as a global leader by taking the initiative in leading the way to a greener tomorrow — for ourselves and the rest of the world. By committing to a multilateral agreement, we would be obligated to stand by a national carbon reduction strategy on the road to decarbonizing energy. This time we have a responsibility to fulfill our obligation to the world and if we strive to broker an agreement that all parties will be committed and determined to fulfill, Canadian youth are confident this obligation will be met. This agreement needs to be pursued with clear binding targets, and measures to ensure we are held accountable to our promises. This requires transparency and honesty with citizens of Canada and the world alike, as well as setting specific milestones that prove progress is being made. To meet such a multilateral agreement's goals of sufficient emission reductions, Canada needs to focus on solid solutions such as alternative energy sources and increased efficiency.

Agreeing to sign to multilateral agreements is beneficial (nationally and) globally. In this way we are showing our responsibility to climate change and carbon reductions while fostering international cooperation. Climate change is a global issue and should be handled accordingly.

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Canada must step up and become an integral part of battling climate change. It is important that we, as a nation, show that we are ready for this commitment. The aforementioned actions are the recommendations of Canadian youth in regards to the role Canada must play in order to ensure all citizens, present and future, can inherit a sustainable, prosperous planet.

- **Assume a role as a leader**
- **Commit to international goals that reflect our own ambitions**
- **Decarbonize our energy sector**
- **Regulate carbon emissions through implementing a Carbon Pricing Strategy**
- **Encourage transition to sustainable products**
- **Provide resources to developing nations in order to help them adapt and mitigate to Climate Change**
- **Raise consumer awareness**

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## COPu20 Writing Committee

### Student Writers

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### Lead National Schools

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