



Youth in Community Economic Development

# The Environmental Youth Alliance



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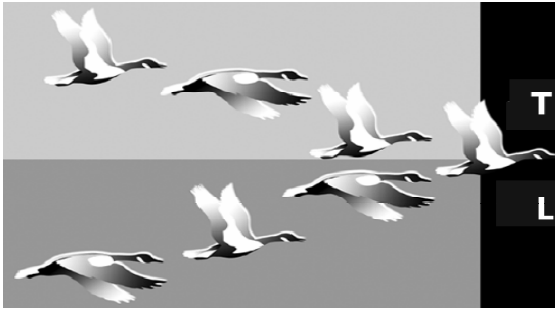
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## **Youth in Community Economic Development**

# **The Environmental Youth Alliance (EYA)**

The Environmental Youth Alliance is more than an environmental organization. Like organizations that take a community economic development (CED) approach in their work, EYA approaches sustainable development in an integrated manner that addresses environmental, social, and economic goals together. EYA is a non-profit, non-governmental charity, "a community development organization dedicated to improving the physical and social environment through hands on community projects that involve, train and employ young people, and to creating sustainable living alternatives that are concretely measurable and attainable."

*This profile is one of fifteen stories examining youth involvement in community economic development (CED). The profiles have been produced as part of the Canadian CED Network's efforts to encourage effective practices in youth leadership and engagement to enhance the social and economic conditions of Canada's communities.*

*This work was supported by Coast Capital Savings Credit Union, the Muttart Foundation, Social Development Canada, and Industry Canada.*

Working in the environmental movement can offer a direct gateway into meaningful work that connects youth with their larger community and a global movement, while still being able to effect change at a local level. With its social/environmental agenda EYA is able to offer a hands on work experience to youth that is genuinely contributing to change, a quality that encourages persons of any age to engage.

### **Context**

EYA was founded in Vancouver, the birthplace of Greenpeace, SPEC and numerous other prominent environmental organizations. Vancouver is also home to the downtown east side, where high levels of poverty and homelessness affect large numbers of young people. It was within this climate of environmental activism and the context of a multitude of urban social problems that EYA emerged.

EYA has an organizational vision of sustainability that includes social, environmental and economic aspects. Young people of diverse communities are active in the organization at all levels, including as Board members, staff, program coordinators and volunteers. From an environmental perspective, EYA "tackles issues that affect and are caused by cities and urban lifestyles. This focus has also meant understanding and trying to influence the social environment that causes people to act in ways that are over-consumptive of natural resources. The direct economic benefit is through giving youth an experience of

meaningful participation in society and increased confidence in themselves, encouraging them to aim for higher career goals, ones that will hopefully add more value for society.” (EYA)

*I find that, when given a choice, a lot of young people are willing to sacrifice the big salaries for the ability to maintain relationships and social connections. Not all obviously, but what does drive a lot of young people is the desire to establish and re-establish relationships.*

— Doug Ragan, EYA

## History

EYA celebrates its fifteenth anniversary this year. As it's grown and changed, the organization has been forced to re-invent itself multiple times, as well as to re-define its understanding and use of the term *youth-driven*. Although this has not been an easy process, it has been full of learning, for members both within and outside the organization, and this organic quality has allowed EYA to survive and keep its relevance and vision throughout.

Doug Ragan recollects the early development of the organization:

“The organization started in 1990. In the beginning EYA was high school based. The organization caught the wave of the environmental movement. We had members across the country and internationally as well. We created eco-clubs, and held tons of conferences and forums. We had seventeen conferences across Canada in 3 years. There were also wilderness and environmental awareness trips internationally in partnership with other youth organizations – it was all very heady! At that time EYA was about youth for youth, but a much younger set of youth then now. It was amazing what high school and elementary youth could do! At one point we had 20,000 members and 150 environmental clubs in high schools across Canada!

“So that was the first push, and it continued for 4 or 5 years. Then the funding dried up,

after 1993- 94. The organization went through a bit of a re-work, a re-think of the organization and its mission. The organization went from entirely environmentally focused, based in the west-side of Vancouver, with an overall make-up of high achieving young people from the private or alternative school system, to a more diverse membership with a different vision and a locale on the east side...

“There was complete turmoil. We went from being really environmentally focused to looking at social inclusion and justice issues in addition to the environment. The environmental education mandate expanded to effecting positive change in the social and physical environments of our communities. We moved away from the solely environmental mission. We still had a very strong component of youth-led programs, but it began to focus more around youth-at-risk, and more marginalized youth, actively trying to engage other cultures. With changes occurring inside the organization there was also a change of age range within the organization. Funding changed as well, from money raining in from all sides to HRDC as our primary funding source. We still get a lot of funding from HRDC.

“EYA's home base is the Cottonwood community garden. EYA developed a youth-led element, encouraging and supporting youth-run, youth-driven programs. The Youth-Driven Coalition began, with a very specific definition for youth-run organizations, creating a community of youth-run organizations. The major purpose from EYA's perspective behind this was because we kept having youth approach us saying, “I want to start this project” or I have an idea.” From day one we had people coming to us with energy and ideas, but we didn't know what made them tick or want to/ be able to achieve. Youth involvement was really pulled in through the environmental movement.”

## Activities in CED

EYA's activities span a range of programs, that when combined contribute to the holistic and diverse approach to development that CED encourages. "Although EYA has implemented a number of environmental programs, such as community gardens, urban green space and alternative energy programs, programs that focus solely on the social environment have also been implemented. Examples include: a magazine for urban aboriginal youth, a capacity-building program for youth-driven organizations and a program to map community assets."<sup>iii</sup>

### *Community Gardens*

The Gardens had come to full capacity by spring of 1991, and the desire to expand had been brewing for some time. With a few arguments, on December 12th City Council confirmed public access to the area that became Cottonwood Gardens. Strathcona community was also supportive of a Youth Garden and in the spring of 1993, the first areas of the Youth Garden were created with new energy and spirit.

The spring and summer of 1994 saw the development of Stewardship Camps and the involvement of youth in the gardens grew. Wildlife habitat creation was an important part of this new inner city green-space that was being created. Volunteers created "Willow's Drink", a pond which now supports local aquatic and bird species. An urban forest was planted, focussing on re-introducing native tree species and providing a stopover point for the large migrating bird populations. A sign of the increasing health of Cottonwoods was the appearance of a family of Red-tailed hawks in the Cottonwood trees above.

Running in tandem with the Stewardship camps was another program in the gardens entitled Young Women Creating Change. This program involved women from local high schools partnered with women in the village of Mae Sai, Thailand. Both groups worked on projects that

## **Community Gardening**

*Ask someone who works in any community garden what renting or sharing a plot means to them and you are bound to get a great range of responses, often accompanied with a big smile and a willingness to share gardening tips. For some, it is a practical and economical source of providing food for themselves and their families; for others it is a relaxing, meditative way of leaving the pressures of the city behind and being satisfied with the simple acts of transplanting, watering and observing the lives of their plants; for still others it is a way of getting to know and trying to understand the peoples, cultures and beliefs that comprise their community. But for most of the world, in Asia, Africa and Latin America, it means survival. Actually it is all of this and more.*

*The concept of community gardens offers an alternative to the commodity driven, competitive environment that is the commonplace of many cities. They help to create and increase food security, foster self-reliance and support local trade and economics. This involves a collective need and desire to steward the land in a basic and, some say, instinctual fashion; to be able to feel a sense of ownership and responsibility in the city where many people do not and cannot.*

(EYA)

involved learning job skills based on the garden produce. Traditional uses of plants from the gardens were explored to make medicines, salves, shampoos, preserves, weaving and cloth dyeing. Those involved in this project had the opportunity to gain insight and share wisdom around the issues of community economic development, business operation, food and plant use, the health and cosmetic industry

and the socio-political implications involved in these issues.

Since then EYA has continued to co-create a healthy and balanced ecosystem by planting native species, using traditional and modern gardening techniques, and bringing groups of young people to the site to educate and to demonstrate the values of gardening, ecology and community building. Youth from the Raycam Community Centre and from Streetfront Alternative Program have held plots in the garden for several seasons and youth from the Trek Program and the Downtown Eastside Youth Activity Society have played key roles in the development of the Youth Garden with skills in design, carpentry, art and, of course, gardening.” (EYA)

#### *Centre of Excellence – Youth Community Asset Mapping*

“The EYA is a core partner of the Centre of Excellence for Youth Engagement, a five year research project looking at hows and whys of youth involvement. In partnership with researchers and other youth agencies, EYA has undertaken participatory action research projects that put youth in the driver’s seat in looking at their lives and what connects them to their communities. The goal is to strengthen the youth community, and youth driven agencies including EYA, to better work with peers and effect positive change in what is done and how it is achieved.” (EYA)

#### *Youth Health Service Mapping*

EYA staff worked with over 50 youth from diverse backgrounds to create maps answering questions regarding health services such as “what would an ideal health service look like?” This information is intended for use by youth and the health service providers to create better healthier services for youth in Vancouver.

#### *Youth Mapping of Parks*

Children and youth from communities such as Collingwood Renfrew, and China Creek

mapped their local parks. Using the maps as evidence, presentations were made to community centres, city planners, and the local community with the goal of making the parks more child and youth friendly.

#### *International Children’s Conference on the Environment*

Children from over 70 countries came together and used mapping as the tool to create challenges to the world leaders gathered in Johannesburg for the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD). Two children from Canada, supported by EYA interns, went to WSSD and delivered the challenges which were written up in the final political statement of the conference.” (EYA)

#### *Youth in Governance and Research*

“The goal of this division is to facilitate young peoples voices in the process of public decision-making on the local, provincial, national, and international scale. EYA does this by training young people to present their own voices to policy makers in an engaging manner. This includes generating research done by and with the youth themselves.” (EYA)

#### *Promoting Youth Driven and Youth Led Programs*

For 5 years from 1997 – 2003 EYA facilitated a coalition of youth driven agencies. The purpose of this coalition was to come together and collectively increase the capacity of their organizations and groups, and the youth in the community, to effect positive change. In 2001 the Youth Driven coalition came together to create a plan for the youth driven community entitled the Blueprint for Success. This plan had six concrete actions such as the development of a youth magazine, established from 2002-2004 called Ignite, and a Youth Outreach Team, now established within the City of Vancouver Social Planning office. A current action underway is the establishment of a HUB for youth organizations to share space within. To achieve this a new youth agency has

been established, which will be unveiled at the upcoming UN HABITAT World Urban Forum in Vancouver in 2006. As the lead organization for the youth stream of this UN conference, the conference will have a strong focus on youth led development and organizations, profiling agencies from Vancouver to Nairobi.

#### *Growing Kids Workshops - Spring 2006*

“*Growing Kids* aims to educate children on Food Security and Urban Agriculture. This exciting, new, interactive educational workshop directed towards grades 2-3 students enables kids to grow their own food and raises awareness of food issues at the local and global scale.” (EYA)

#### *Inner City Roof Gardens*

“EYA now manages 2 rooftop garden programs. The goal with these projects is to support environmental and social benefits to the inner city. These benefits include increased biomass and biodiversity in the inner city, and green space that can provide much-needed habitat to inner city wildlife and insects. A roof garden can provide a safe sense of pride. Roof gardens also help with urban food production through the community garden plots. The roof gardens are located on inner city housing projects and work with the urban poor to reconnect with plants and nature.” (EYA)

#### **Youth Inclusion in CED**

*Administered and operated through a partnership of youth and adults, EYA is structured around the idea that youth hold power in all aspects of the organization, from program delivery to governance.*

— Doug Ragan, EYA

When discussing youth inclusion EYA reflected on its own organizational history and structural evolution with us. There was an intense process of growth, including the challenges and efforts of the organization to re-define and understand what *youth-driven*, *youth-led* and *youth inclusion* mean

and how those interpretations impacted the vision and actions of the organization overall. This reflection led to tremendous learning within the EYA community about genuine youth inclusion.

Doug Ragan said: “Certainly [the notion that youth-driven organizations can and must be run only by youth] was one of the biggest challenges for EYA to overcome. EYA struggled to maintain a purely youth driven organization, but found that this ended up tokenizing rather than empowering young people. EYA’s search for a new and more authentically “youth-driven” structure would remain the most pressing issue in the organization for most of the remainder of the decade.

“By 1998 the organization had gone through many stages of turmoil, with few issues of leadership and power left un-discussed. A new structure began to emerge which recognized both the role of adults and the importance of diversity to the success of the organization. With the formal recognition of the organization being run by an equitable partnership between adults and youth, issues such as a lack of experience and training in the organization began to be addressed. Adults now had a more defined role, and the focus of the organization became not how to create an organization run totally by youth, but how to create an organization that had adults and youth working equitably and respectfully together.” (Exploration, p16.)

Once the authority and power were unmasked and equitable and respectful relations were established, then a mentorship organizational model could occur in a genuine intergenerational manner. One of the intergenerational opportunities being created is the mentorship dynamic. “The mentorship process is an attempt to combine the chaotic creativity of EYA with the traditional stability of a large organization.

As with its holistic approach to sustainable development, EYA’s approach to youth inclusion through job training encompasses more than just a handover or teaching of

skills. It is a question of supporting young people to become re-engaged with their communities, genuinely including them in the process of community change. The theory is that if young people are able to make positive contributions in the networks within their communities it will begin to break down barriers to cooperation between the generations.

*With job training programs many people consider the participants empty vessels needing to be filled with skills and then they can send them out to get a job. But if you look further, there's a whole function of giving people community networks as part of the larger process of knitting people back into their communities. EYA works with young people doing community service projects, but it's really about developing a relationship between the young person and their community. There is usually a basket-full of reasons why people aren't involved in their community, and without being involved they will be blocked out of certain aspects of that community. This more holistic approach to job training is not very common in the job training world because it's very complicated to achieve."*

— Doug Ragan, EYA

## Outcomes and Evaluation

The outcomes from the organizational learning about creating an equitable environment for youth and adults include a leadership and management structure that is a mixture of the traditional organization and the youth-driven, non-hierarchical organization. The Board of Directors was re-introduced, with a renewed multi-generational membership, along with a more formalized decision-making process in an effort to ensure more organizational transparency.

EYA has also strived to spawn and support organizations like RedWire, an urban Aboriginal youth magazine. The publication is now its own entity, independent of EYA, an asset to its community, and the idea has been replicated again and again. Doug reflects that: "We truly look to find programs like that in what we're doing. It's

## Lessons Learned

*Youth-led agencies need to have some basic supports in the organizational structure but they don't want to have those imposed. Youth naturally tend to create very egalitarian structures, something that organizational analysts generally consider positively. This non-hierarchical structure can be incredibly dynamic as an institution. With a little bit of support the youth organizations can move a lot further.*

*You have to make it about reality, not just a fluffy project.*

*Leaving your networks behind is the last thing you should do. The way to stay sane is to be strategic, to identify when you go and when you hang back. You need to look at the bigger picture – that this activism could be for the next ten or fifteen years. And you can come at it from multiple directions, moving your community forward, while also working at policy."*

*...There are three underlying management issues that make youth-driven organizations vulnerable to poverty-traps:*

- *Lack of connections to people with management experience*
- *Lack of experience and training in programming and administration*
- *A solely youth-driven organizational structure.*

a challenge to do it at times, it took years for RedWire become independent, but now it's spun off. Tons of people in the Aboriginal youth community access it, and the idea has now been replicated multiple times."

"In 2003, EYA had 80 youth interns, 150 volunteer hours were facilitated and 10,000



people accessed the website and printed materials. Its programs removed over 20 tonnes of greenhouse gases, saved 150 trees, 12 tonnes of solid waste and over a million litres of water.” (EYA)

### **Success Factors and Lessons Learned**

Relationship building is critical to the success of EYA. Part of their success around including and engaging young people is their focus on combining the social, economic and environmental agenda – effectively seeing them as interdependent integrated approaches.

Another success factor was the recognition that an intergenerational relationship approach to governance supported a more fluid, creative and non-hierarchical structure balanced by a more formal one that ensured transparency in decision-making processes and accountability to their members.

*There is quite a natural ideal by both the youth and adults who wish to support EYA that it can and should be run by young people. As an ideal, this notion is a great motivator for young people, who often are not able to exercise power or effect change within the community. As EYA’s own study of youth-driven organizations showed, this assumption that youth-driven organizations are run only by youth was in fact mistaken. More than half (53%) of the groups surveyed actually existed within adult-run agencies. Only one group in the study was actually solely run by youth – meaning that young people held all the positions of power among the staff and on the board. That particular group was, incidentally, the only group that defined “youth” as including persons up to the age of thirty.”<sup>iii</sup>*

Another success factor of EYA is their adoption of the following core values as essential elements in their work: Transparency, Respectful and Inclusive Dialogue, and Self-responsibility.

“In focusing on **transparency** as a key minimum specification, EYA has made conflict transparent, made tension

permissible and sometimes allowed paradox to exist within the organization. An example of such a paradox is the existence of adults within a youth-driven organization, to the point of a redefinition of youth-driven as being an equitable partnership between adults and youth.

**Respectful and inclusive dialogue** has pushed EYA to develop and utilize many decision-making tools that facilitate broad involvement in the organization, such as a consensus-based approach that incorporates brainstorming and facilitation.

**Self-responsibility** as a minimum specification seeks a balance between personal autonomy and responsibility towards the organization. EYA still cultivates a level of chaos: it is highly decentralized, and there are no official administrators within the organization, other than the accountant.”

(Exploration, p.19)

### **Policy and Future Directions**

When asked about future directions, Doug said: “Youth-led development is getting noticed — not because of one article, but because there are conversations about youth-led development, similar to conversations that are occurring here in Canada, happening all around the world.”

*The top 3 assets that enable EYA’s bridging<sup>iv</sup> capacity are its people, culture, and the Youth Gardens. It’s reported that EYA has an expert ability to: apply its youth empowerment philosophy, manage power relations, adapt to situations and get things done, and apply systematic analysis that addresses community gaps.*

The Book Review –  
Bridging: An Inquiry into Naming the Essence of EYA

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<sup>i</sup> Taken from <http://www.eya.ca/> on January 17<sup>th</sup>, 2006. All references to this website will be identified as (EYA) for the rest of the document.

<sup>ii</sup> Ragan, Doug. Environmental Youth Alliance; An Exploration of Complexity Science. University of McGill, Montreal. May 2005. P. 5. All references to this source will be identified as (Exploration, p.#) for the rest of the document.

<sup>iii</sup> Doug Ragan, Youth Driven Survey (EYA, 1998), 6.

<sup>iv</sup> Bridging: A distinct form of collaboration carried out by an independent organization, occurs when diverse stakeholders who share a common concern, are mobilized to cooperate despite their low willingness, ability or access to collaborate directly. *Bridging: An Inquiry into Naming the Essence of EYA*. P.1.

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