



2024 LEADING MINDS ON CLIMATE ACTION

Emerging Horizons: Youth Insights on Climate Change and Breakthrough Solutions

Background

Children and young people care deeply about the planet and creating a sustainable future. However, they are growing up in a throw-away culture that encourages systematic and persuasive pollution. At the same time, the United Nations Secretary-General has declared the climate crisis an existential threat. What is the message that young people should take from these contradictions?¹

It is no wonder that so many children and young people are increasingly vulnerable to climate anxiety, exacerbated by the feeling of being ignored by adults, and that millions have taken to the streets to protest our inaction. However, protest is not the only strategy they are using to create transformative change. In fact, young people all over the world are increasingly being recognized as negotiators, innovators, inventors, entrepreneurs and agents of change.

As carbon emissions continue to rise, the knowledge we have that can help drive transformational change is not being effectively used and is limited in its capacity to drive action at the rates needed to avoid dangerous climate change. Therefore, new capacities for transformation are needed.² There is a clear demand for platforms that support change, inspire fresh ideas, rethink what is possible, foster dialogue between diverse groups, and offer a feeling of hope and optimism at a time when the size of our problems can seem daunting and debilitating.

That is precisely what [UNICEF Innocenti – Global Office of Research and Foresight](#) seeks to achieve through its youth foresight function, and through strategic interventions like the event that took place at [Youth4Climate](#) in Rome in October 2023, the subject of this report. This global initiative, co-led by Italy and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), was established to identify and financially support youth-led climate breakthroughs. One hundred climate-related projects created by young people from 63 countries were shortlisted, and the young creators were invited to attend the Rome event. Fifty teams across 39 countries ultimately received up to US\$20,000 in financial awards, peer-to-peer networking and learning offers by partner organizations, including UNICEF.

This paper is a synthesis of a participatory foresight workshop, designed and facilitated by UNICEF Innocenti, with these 100 exceptional young people. By using the Three Horizons approach,³ a dialogue was created that delineated the patterns of change young people envisaged, highlighted their shared visions for the future and outlined the high potential innovations they felt could be leveraged to make that future a reality. The dialogue also surfaced critical questions for further research that will be explored by children and young people at the '2024 Leading Minds Conference on Climate Action', to be held at UNICEF Innocenti in May.

In documenting this participatory youth foresight process, our aim is to magnify the multifaceted aspirations, concerns and perspectives of a generation that is passionately committed to mitigating the impacts of climate change and creating a better world. In addition, we aim to identify suitable next steps for children, young people, UNICEF, UNDP and partners.

Why youth foresight?

Children and young people have been a driving force for change throughout history. It makes sense, therefore, that they should also be deeply involved in imagining the future – their future, our future, the future of the planet. Their absence from foresight and decision-making spaces greatly hinders our capacity to anticipate how the world is changing. Moreover, children and young people have the right to be part of any conversation about the future they will inherit, to develop their talents and abilities to the full in order to have agency in a rapidly changing world and to realize the futures they wish for.

Through evidence-based and ethical practices, young people's expertise, experiences, perspectives and needs are valued and integrated into UNICEF Innocenti's work across research, foresight and convening. This leads to high-quality, relevant research and analysis that generates effective platforms for young people to lead global discourse and create positive change in their communities and beyond, while simultaneously ensuring that we are always working towards a better future that is inclusive, just and equitable for everyone, now and in the future, especially for children and young people.

'Strategic foresight' or 'foresight' is a systematic way of examining and exploring possible, probable and preferred 'futures'.⁴ 'Youth foresight' refers to the same systematic way of imagining possible futures and informing decision-making, but with a particular focus on the perspectives and needs of young people. Youth foresight can be used in policymaking, planning and decision-making processes at the local, national and international levels to inform future strategies, programmes and investments that will impact the lives of young people. Moreover, it provides a framework for both UNICEF and young people to address uncertainty and to bring back agency.



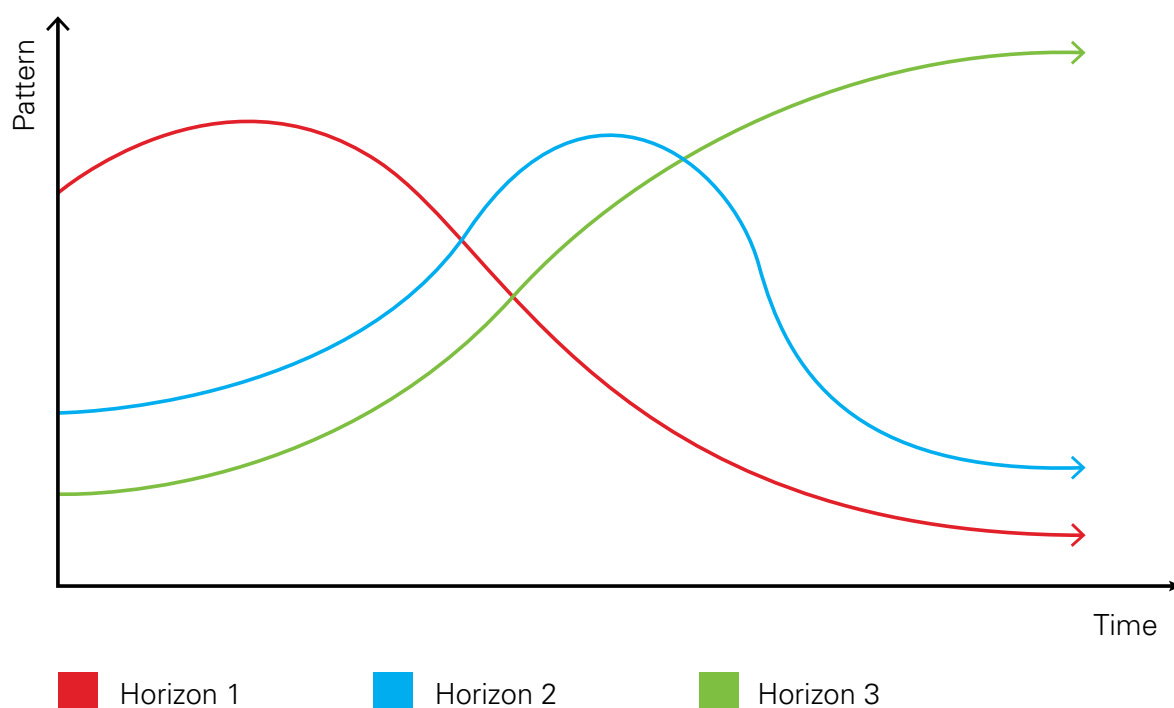
At a strategic foresight workshop, young people from 63 countries collaborated to explore the possibilities for a more sustainable future.

One climate, three horizons

What is the Three Horizons approach? Put simply, it is three lines on a bit of paper. But it is much more than that. It is a proven tool that can help us think about the future in a structured way, bringing back agency in times of uncertainty. This approach helps us to recognize that three horizons exist always in the present moment – the current system that is declining or the pattern being lived right now (Horizon 1), the vision of a better future that is rising (Horizon 3), and the area of innovation and disruption that will either be captured to maintain the old system or harnessed to bring about the new (Horizon 2).⁵

This was the tool that was used in the [Youth4Climate](#) workshops in Rome in 2023. As designed, it allowed the participants to envision three horizons as part of the foresight project. By collectively exploring and mapping out these horizons, the participants were able to articulate preferred future visions, to understand and collaborate with diverse stakeholders, to surface breakthroughs that might emerge as pathways to the future system and to strategize how to ensure breakthroughs are harnessed to drive the future system rather than be captured by the current one. The outcome was a map of transformational potential, which can enable us all to act with more skill, freedom and creativity in the present.

Figure 1. Three Horizons: A tool for constructively thinking about the future



Source: Adapted from h3uni.org/tutorial/three-horizons/

Horizon 1: Business as usual

Horizon 1 encompasses business as usual, the things we do to keep the lights on, even though it is no longer in service of the future we want.

To dig into Horizon 1, participants were split into four groups focusing on their areas of expertise – energy, food and agriculture, education and urban sustainability. They were first asked by facilitators what business as usual looks like, what the characteristics of the prevailing system are and why they are no longer fit for purpose.

A recurring theme across energy, food and agriculture, education and urban sustainability is the challenge posed by **traditional governance and policymaking approaches**. Traditional top-down approaches have often led to policies that are reactive rather than proactive. In particular, the energy sector grapples with a notable absence of youth engagement, signifying a missed opportunity to harness their insights and energy. Top-down approaches are exacerbated by bureaucracies – evident, for example, in a lack of comprehensive city planning, which causes delays and a palpable disconnect between ground realities and policy decisions. This means that important sustainability and community infrastructure, such as green spaces and public toilets, is too often overlooked, leading to reduced quality of life. An estimated [68 per cent of the global population is expected to live in cities by 2050](#), meaning that the reduction in the quality of life in urban areas may well worsen and could lead to an increase in eco-anxiety. Lack of planning is also evident in our agricultural activities, which arguably have contributed to soil erosion and land degradation.

Economic motivations and the lure of short-term gains often overshadow the broader vision of sustainability and societal welfare. In agriculture, exaggerated meat and market-driven decisions have arguably contributed to unsustainable farming practices, to issues around uncertified seeds, and more. The energy sector also witnesses a prioritization of company interests over community needs. This is exemplified in Paraguay, one of the world's largest exporters of electricity, where 99.9 per cent of electricity generation has zero carbon dioxide emissions, and yet communities [do not experience the benefits](#). This profit-centric approach also manifests in the form of limited investment in crucial areas, including renewable energy technologies and climate education, particularly in developing countries. Instead, old systems for energy are prioritized.

Knowledge gaps present another significant hurdle. There is **widespread lack of eco-literacy** across all levels of learning, with limited resources and support from decision-makers to support educators to develop and implement effective curricula. There is still shockingly low awareness or outright denial of climate change. This finding correlates with a UNICEF and Gallup poll which found that [only half of young people were able to identify the correct definition of climate change](#). Crucially, climate change knowledge among young people was found to be lowest in lower-middle and low-income countries – those most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. Additionally, in many urban spaces, there is an alarming unpreparedness for climate shocks, revealing a stark gap in awareness and education. Insufficient data and information sharing dramatically further impairs sustainable urban development.

Amid these challenges, **societal disparities** emerge as a pressing concern. The energy sector, for example, reveals a clear division between practices that cater to the affluent versus those that serve underprivileged communities. Similarly, underserved communities often face barriers in accessing quality climate education, particularly those that do not speak English as a primary language. In urban planning, the exclusion of certain groups from decision-making processes, as highlighted earlier, perpetuates existing inequalities.

What do we wish to carry forward?

When asked what they wished to carry forward into the future, the question gave young participants pause.

Innovations within the current system, such as the emphasis on **renewables and energy efficiency**, have undeniably brought progress. Existing energy systems have propelled global development, fostering a world of unparalleled interconnectedness. Sustainability plans and visions that promote a circular economy, green futures and innovations should be carried forward.

Capitalism has spurred economic development and presented a **plethora of life choices**. The current system has provided energy for development across the globe. It has 'powered' a great deal of progress, helping some low-income countries to improve their financial health.

Young people are witnessing a palpable increase in emphasis on community engagement and **leveraging indigenous knowledge**. The active involvement of young people, especially in climate education and action, is creating positive ripples in communities. For example, local community engagement in agriculture promotes organic farming practices, eco-literacy and accessibility.

“In Nepal, traditional methods of agriculture, such as terrace farming and community-based water management systems, have sustained livelihoods for generations, while preserving ecological balance. These traditional practices offer valuable insights into sustainable land use, water conservation and biodiversity conservation, aligning closely with Horizon 3’s vision of sustainability.”

Gunjan, a workshop participant from Nepal

The integration of indigenous insights, which offer more holistic and nature-based perspectives that prioritize people and planet, must be carried forward. Extension services and continued research on drought-tolerant/pest-resistant varieties are supporting adaptation to changing climate conditions.



A strategic foresight workshop of about 100 young people in Rome aimed to identify and support youth-led climate breakthroughs.

Horizon 3: Visions of the future

Before addressing Horizon 2 – the innovations needed now to achieve the desired future – the workshop participants turned their minds to the future they would like to create; they focused on Horizon 3.

The third horizon involves visionary thinking about the future and what might be possible. When asked what future they would want to bring about, and what it would look like and feel like to be there, the air across all groups changed to one of hope and optimism.

In envisioning Horizon 3, a future landscape emerged that accentuated **sustainability and eco-friendliness**. The workshop participants envisioned an energy sector that harnesses a diverse mix of renewable sources, emphasising not just solar but a comprehensive array of options. In their vision, recycling, particularly of solar panels, and the development of efficient systems are paramount. Climate education integrates indigenous knowledge, ensuring the curricula is diverse, inclusive and emotionally considerate. Urban areas are visualised with reduced environmental footprints, championing sustainable practices from waste management to green energy sources. Agriculture, too, leans into eco-friendly, sustainable and adaptable methodologies.

A thread of **equitability and justice** weaves through the visions. In agriculture, equitable market systems are everywhere, and land ownership for women is the norm. Cities of the future prioritize equitable development, ensuring all residents benefit from advancements. The energy domain speaks of justice for communities impacted by energy policies, informing policy level decision-making. From energy solutions that encourage widespread participation to free and universally accessible climate education, the focus is clear.

Innovation and technology stand out as pivotal in the preferred future. The energy sector foresees the digitalization of systems and the rise of smarter grids through technological innovations. Urban environments anticipate technology transfers to bolster sustainable initiatives, while agriculture looks forward to institutes producing modified seeds, tailored for diverse environments, that do not pose a risk to people or indeed the diversity of indigenous crops. Technology could further transform climate education to be personalised for all learners, support life-long learning and be developed in ways that better account for local contexts.

A strong emphasis on **community engagement and local initiatives** arises. Energy projects driven by communities, local-level grids and community-driven climate education are envisioned. Urban sustainability emphasises local food, goods and sustainable fashion, underscoring the importance of community-centric approaches.

Economic considerations also play a crucial role. The energy sector foresees tax incentives promoting renewable energies and new energy systems. Urban areas hope for job opportunities rooted in conservation and sustainability, while agriculture aspires for improved livelihoods through farming, as opposed to survival. Together, these youthful visions for Horizon 3 paint a comprehensive picture of hope and aspiration for the future.

The process of co-creating a collective preferred vision for the future was impactful for many. One participant shared this insight:

“As part of our project, most of our actions are focused on reforestation. The social and economic parts are also important, but for us the most urgent mission is to make Madagascar green again. But after this workshop, we realised that if we don't have the same vision, if the whole population and the leaders don't understand the importance of this fight, if many people don't understand the reason why we're committed to protecting the environment, it won't work. Trees may grow, but people who don't see a better future through those trees won't stop continuing their activities that are harmful to the planet.”

Andriamarovavy, a workshop participant from Madagascar

Horizon 2: Innovation and disruption

With a vision for the future established in Horizon 3, the participants turned to Horizon 2 – the realm of innovations and disruptions. At this point, the workshop participants were asked what they see as disruptive that could be harnessed to bring about Horizon 3 or captured to maintain Horizon 1.

Across all groups, young people saw a fascinating interplay between traditional practices and modernity. They observed trends in which people returned to modes of transportation such as bicycles and trains, embraced reusable goods and integrated indigenous insights into farming practices, energy use and education about the climate.

In urban settings, too, more people are going back to their roots and trying to understand how we got here, repurposing old, ageing infrastructure to create new urban settings. This is a trend that holds tremendous potential to bring about a preferred sustainable future. But without investment in the necessary infrastructure and education, it cannot scale. Gunjan, a workshop participant from Nepal, highlighted geodesic dome structures as high potential innovations that represent a blend of traditional architectural principles with modern materials and design techniques, offering numerous benefits for sustainable agriculture, including optimised climate control, reduced water consumption and enhanced crop yields.

The overarching environmental ethos leans towards **renewable energy and sustainable practices**, driven by factors like community initiatives, peer-to-peer energy trading and breakthroughs in energy storage. Blockchain and artificial intelligence (AI)-enabled energy trading could provide the decentralising forces required. Adebayo from Togo highlighted the rise in giant solar farms and organic farming among small farmers, through the use of organic fertilisers and the practice of agroforestry as critical disruptions and innovations that hold promise. However, while these disruptors have the potential to significantly reshape established norms, if they are not designed with equity in mind, they could be captured to maintain Horizon 1 worlds.

Innovations in digitalization, the Internet of Things and AI are opening up avenues to transform energy systems and urban planning. Green technology is emerging as a promising frontier, and concepts like [i-Farms](#) in agriculture symbolise the harmonious fusion of time-tested methods with cutting-edge technology. Peace from Nigeria highlighted the transformative potential of digital twin models for clean energy infrastructure to help in creating simulations of scenarios for a number of clean energy technologies before pilot testing. However, concerns around the increased reliance on technology were voiced – not only suggesting that this would require investment to mitigate harmful effects like mental health issues and social isolation, but also that without the sufficient transitioning towards renewable energy sources this reliance may exacerbate the climate crisis.

One of the most potent forces in this transitional space is **community engagement**. Peer-to-peer initiatives are burgeoning as platforms for exchanging diverse ideas. The surge in community-driven projects, such as [seed banking](#) and farmer connectivity, underscores the transformative potential communities hold when they come together. The amplified voice of youth in decision-making processes is acting as a catalyst, driving change from the ground up. Youth funds and partnerships with governments, civil society organizations and private investors hold transformative potential, but tokenistic engagements that are non-transformative by design will lead to youth disengagement. This will be increasingly called out.

Economically, the landscape is characterised by its fluidity. There are compelling incentives promoting efficiency in the energy sector, but these coexist with the myriad challenges urban areas face. The concept of a circular economy, combined with the appeal of localised distribution, offers the prospect of reshaping our consumption and production dynamics. A circular economy is a model of production and consumption which involves sharing, leasing, reusing, repairing, refurbishing and recycling existing materials and products as long as possible. [Europe's Circular Economy Action Plan](#) is a signal of what is possible when economic blocs make sustainability the norm and focus on the sectors that use most resources.

Tension points: Key areas for further research

Research area 1: Transformation of governance and policymaking through community-centric approaches

The traditional top-down governance model in sectors like energy, agriculture, urban planning and climate education is increasingly misaligned with the contemporary needs for sustainable and proactive policies. A lack of youth engagement and bureaucratic processes hinder the effective implementation of policies that address the realities of climate change and community needs. Research questions included:

- How can new forms of bottom-up, community-centred governance transform the efficacy of policymaking and decision-making in urban sustainability, energy and agriculture?
- In what ways can the integration of youth perspectives and digital tools in policy formulation enhance the responsiveness and effectiveness of governance models in addressing climate change?
- What role do local community engagements and indigenous knowledge play in reshaping governance approaches?

Research area 2: Embedding equity in economic models for renewable energy transition

The transition to renewable energy and sustainable practices is often impeded by economic models that prioritize short-term gains and corporate interests over long-term societal welfare and environmental sustainability. Research questions included:

- How can economic thinking be reoriented to embed equity in the transition to renewable energy, ensuring faster and more equitable outcomes globally?
- What strategies can be employed to balance traditional economic motivations with the need for sustainability and societal welfare?
- How can equitable market systems and land ownership, especially for marginalised groups like women, be promoted to foster a more inclusive transition to sustainable energy and agricultural practices?

Research area 3: Advancing eco-literacy as a catalyst for transformative change

A significant gap in eco-literacy across various levels of society hampers the ability to effectively respond to and prepare for climate-related challenges. Research questions included:

- How can eco-literacy be enhanced across all levels of society to drive transformative change in addressing environmental challenges?
- In what ways can the integration of indigenous insights and digital tools in educational curricula foster a more comprehensive and accessible approach to eco-literacy?
- What role does community engagement in sectors like agriculture and energy play in promoting eco-literacy and sustainable practices?

Conclusion

This youth foresight process, which involved 100 leading young climate innovators, has revealed a transformative landscape in which community-centred governance, equitable economic frameworks and enhanced eco-literacy are not just ideals but necessities for our shared future. It underscored the importance of integrating these elements into a cohesive strategy that responds to our rapidly changing world.

As we delve deeper into the three main research areas, it becomes imperative to integrate additional key trends and factors that intersect with and influence these domains. This includes recognizing the influence of climate solutions on cultural and social practices, an aspect that enriches our understanding of the broader impact of these interventions. Health implications of climate change, such as increased disease vectors and malnutrition, emerge as critical areas that intersect with our core research themes, warranting a more in-depth exploration to identify emerging and potential climate breakthroughs to address them. Furthermore, understanding human behaviour and psychological responses is essential for contextualising public reactions to climate solutions within our research framework. We must go beyond awareness raising, particularly when it comes to eco-literacy, to understand the barriers that prevent people with and without the requisite knowledge from taking action. Moreover, while our initial discussions hint at displacement due to mineral acquisition, expanding our scope to encompass broader phenomena like climate-induced migration and the exacerbation of existing inequities will provide a more holistic view of the climate crisis. With climate change creating anywhere between 44 to 216 million climate migrants by 2050, [according to the International Organization for Migration \(IOM\)](#), breakthroughs will be needed not just for prevention but for adaptation. Acknowledging all these elements is crucial, especially considering their significant implications for children and young people.

Additionally, in light of the evolving future of democracy, it is vital to consider shrinking civic spaces and backsliding democracies. These political shifts could profoundly affect the ability of young people to engage in policy and decision-making, making it an essential aspect to integrate into our research. By incorporating these trends, we aim to ensure a comprehensive and inclusive approach to climate breakthroughs, enhancing the relevance and depth of our research in these three main areas.

A pivotal aspect of this strategy must be the continued active engagement of young people in policy and decision-making. Youth foresight can support this by empowering the younger generation with the tools and opportunities they need to envision and shape the future, creating a dynamic where innovation, sustainability and equity can converge. Young minds bring fresh perspectives, unbridled enthusiasm and a deep stake in the future, making them invaluable in crafting solutions that are both forward-thinking and grounded in the realities of our environmental and social challenges.

The feedback from participants was overwhelmingly positive, centred on the Three Horizons approaches potential for risk management and anxiety reduction. For example, two participants shared these observations:

“The three scenarios provide tools that helped us, at the time of the workshop, to assess what could go wrong or right. Anticipation of that could help us mitigate a lot of the anxiety with planning for our individual actions. I think the workshop provided the tool to combat that for a lot of the participants.”

Gunjan, the workshop participant from Nepal

“[The workshop] made me realize that through enriching exchanges with young people engaged in the same battle, multitudes of solutions can emerge and that, thanks to these innovative ideas, we can hope that we still have much hope of saving our planet.”

Andriamorovavy, the workshop participant from Madagascar

Next steps: Leading Minds Conference 2024

The research questions that emerged from the workshop have helped inform the programme of the Leading Minds Fellowship on Climate and the topics for the ‘2024 Leading Minds Conference on Climate Action’. Leading Minds is hosted and organized by UNICEF Innocenti – Global Office of Research and Foresight. The 2024 edition will focus on climate and what is necessary for children and young people to overcome the barriers to solve the climate crisis.

Established by UNICEF in 2019, Leading Minds is a future-informed conference series and premier platform for global thought leadership, co-created by and co-driven with young people. Leading Minds Conferences explore ideas, find solutions and spur action. The collaborative and intergenerational approach of the annual gathering celebrates innovative thinking and transformative ideas, making it a truly pioneering event that can help shape a future fit for all children.

The Leading Minds Fellowship on Climate is a six-month-long programme for young people working in the climate breakthroughs space to engage through dialogue, workshops and engagements with climate research institutes, policymakers and thought leaders. The fellowship offers a unique journey which, based on UNICEF Innocenti’s principles of meaningful youth engagement in research, foresight and convening, facilitates youth-centred processes that aim to inform the agenda and format of the ‘2024 Leading Minds Conference on Climate Action’.

Endnotes

- 1 Gidley, Jennifer 'Global Youth Culture: A transdisciplinary perspective', ch 1, in *Youth Futures: Comparative research and transformative visions*, edited by Jennifer Gidley and Sohail Inayatullah, Praeger Publishers, Westport, 2002, pp. 3–18.
- 2 Sharpe, Bill, et al., 'Three Horizons: A pathways practice for transformation', *Ecology and Society*, vol. 21, no.2, 2016, < <http://dx.doi.org/10.5751/ES-08388-210247>>.
- 3 Sharpe, et al., Three Horizons.
- 4 Conway, Maree, *Foresight: An introduction*, Thinking Futures, Melbourne, 2015, p. 2.
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Acknowledgements

Emerging Horizons: Youth insights on climate change and breakthrough solutions was produced by UNICEF Innocenti – Global Office of Research and Foresight, under the guidance of Bo Viktor Nylund and Shai Naides. The paper was written by Adam Sharpe, Shai Naides, Yoonie Choi, Fisayo Oyewale, Ijun Kim (UNICEF) and Roxani Roushas (UNDP). The UNICEF Innocenti Youth Engagement and Strategy team designed and facilitated the youth foresight workshop and led the authoring of this paper.

The collaborative efforts of UNDP and the Italian Government were also vital. Their co-leadership of the Youth4Climate programme and their role in assembling a network of young climate advocates in Rome enabled this research and the important discussions on climate futures that followed.

A special mention is due to the participants – 100 young leaders from 63 countries – whose insights and dedication to sustainable futures are central to this synthesis. We also want to thank the young people who reviewed this paper and provided feedback, additional analysis and quotes. Their proactive role in driving climate breakthroughs in their communities and their willingness to tackle the complexities of the climate crisis and the creation of sustainable futures with the United Nations has been truly inspiring. We have learned so much from all of you.

About us

UNICEF works in the world's toughest places to reach the most disadvantaged children and adolescents — and to protect the rights of every child, everywhere. Across 190 countries and territories, we do whatever it takes to help children survive, thrive and fulfill their potential, from early childhood through adolescence. And we never give up.

UNICEF Innocenti – Global Office of Research and Foresight tackles the questions of greatest importance for children, both current and emerging. It drives change through research and foresight on a wide range of child rights issues, sparking global discourse and actively engaging young people in its work.

UNICEF Innocenti equips thought leaders and decision-makers with the evidence they need to build a better, safer world for children. The office undertakes research on unresolved and emerging issues, using primary and secondary data that represents the voices of children and families themselves. It uses foresight to set the agenda for children, including horizon scanning, trends analysis and scenario development. The office produces a diverse and dynamic library of high-level reports, analyses and policy papers, and provides a platform for debate and advocacy on a wide range of child rights issues.

UNICEF Innocenti provides, for every child, answers to their most pressing concerns.

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Published by

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Suggested citation

UNICEF Innocenti – Global Office of Research and Foresight and United Nations Development Programme, *Emerging Horizons: Youth Insights on Climate Change and Breakthrough Solutions*, UNICEF Innocenti and UNDP, Florence and Rome, May 2024.

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