## Reach Alliance

# Just and Accountable Futures:
## Developing a Proposed Climate Policy Accountability Approach for the City of Toronto

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YCA
Youth Climate Action in Toronto

UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO

center for inclusive growth

# The Reach Alliance

The Reach Alliance is a consortium of global universities — with partners in Ghana, South Africa, Mexico, Canada, United Kingdom, Australia, and Singapore — developing the leaders we need to solve urgent local challenges of the hard to reach — those underserved for geographic, administrative, or social reasons. Working in interdisciplinary teams, Reach's globally minded students use rigorous research methods to identify innovative solutions to climate, public health, and economic challenges. The UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) provide inspiration and a guiding framework. Research is conducted in collaboration with local communities and with guidance from university faculty members, building capacity and skills among Reach's student researchers.

The Reach Alliance was created in 2015 by the University of Toronto's Munk School of Global Affairs & Public Policy, in partnership with the Mastercard Center for Inclusive Growth.

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*Note*: Authors are listed alphabetically with the faculty mentor listed last.

*Cover photo:* This photo depicts flooding on Centre Island (Toronto Islands), a public park just south of downtown Toronto. (iStock)

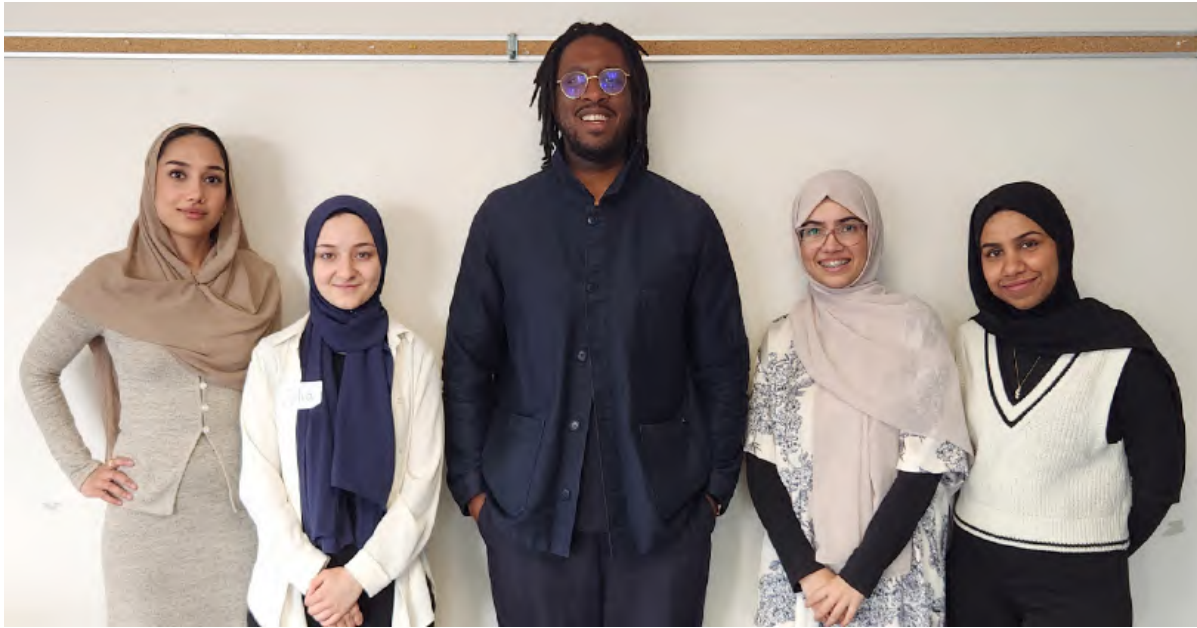# Acknowledgements

Reach Alliance

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**Figure 1.** The research team. Left to right: Ayesha Ali, Zoha Sojoudi, Imara Rolston, Erum Naqvi, and Ibtesaam Moosa

# Executive Summary

In Toronto, Black and racialized youth, particularly those in neighbourhoods designated as Neighbourhood Improvement Areas (NIAs), face disproportionate impacts from climate change. Decades of systemic disinvestment and racial injustice have left these communities vulnerable to environmental hazards such as excessive heat, pollution, and flooding, with limited resources to respond. As the City of Toronto works to advance its climate goals through initiatives such as the TransformTO Net Zero Strategy, a gap remains in ensuring that these communities, particularly the youth, have a role in holding the City accountable for its climate promises.

Existing climate policies and racial justice initiatives, while well-intentioned, do not sufficiently converge to address the needs of Black and racialized youth in NIAs. The relationship gap between these youth and the City has led to a pervasive sense of distrust and skepticism. The absence of an accountability mechanism for these youth places them at risk of being further marginalized in the City's climate

response, potentially exacerbating the very disparities the policies aim to reduce. Our work explores how the City of Toronto can achieve accountability with regard to climate policy, to and with Black and racialized youth in NIAs.

Currently, Black and racialized youth face barriers to engaging in the City's climate action initiatives. These include a lack of awareness about opportunities, inaccessible meeting times and locations, and economic constraints that make unpaid civic participation difficult. Many youth feel their voices are not genuinely considered, leading to a sense of futility and disconnection from the decision-making process.

To address this, we propose an accountability approach for the City of Toronto designed to bridge this gap by centring the voices and experiences of Black and racialized youth in NIAs. The proposed approach summarizes our insights from one-to-one interviews and a focus group with Black and racialized youth, as well as our conversations with City of Toronto policymakers. The approach highlights four key accountability principles, namely being accessible, being representative and relatable,

creating shared understanding, and "walking the talk." Recognizing the importance of repairing existing relationship gaps, we also describe the ideal relationship that should underlie those accountability principles along with two key supporting pillars that work to sustain a strong accountability relationship between the City of Toronto and the communities it serves. Each element of the accountability approach is also accompanied by tangible recommendations to support successful implementation. Black and racialized youth deserve more than a city that simply acknowledges its problems — they deserve a city that stands with them, acts on their behalf, and lets them shape their future.

*"Factors such as unemployment, social marginalization, and inadequate access to green spaces are strongly correlated with higher susceptibility to climate vulnerabilities, exacerbating the challenges these communities face."*

## Context: Black and Racialized Youth and Climate Change Impacts

Low-income neighbourhoods in Toronto, which predominantly consist of Black and racialized individuals, are disproportionately impacted by the adverse effects of climate change such as excessive heat, pollution, and income decline.[1] Decades of disinvestment in vulnerable communities have increasingly forced racialized groups to live in neighbourhoods with little capacity to adapt to the effects of impending disasters.[2] To address historical underinvestment in the social infrastructure of specific neighbourhoods, the City of Toronto (which we call "the City" to refer to the municipal government) designates areas that rank high in indicators such as unemployment, marginalization, premature mortality, and lack of green spaces as Neighbourhood Improvement Areas (NIAs) in need of priority investment.[3] NIA classification is closely related to the heightened risk of being disproportionately affected by climate change. Factors such as unemployment, social marginalization, and inadequate access to green spaces are strongly correlated with higher susceptibility to climate vulnerabilities, exacerbating the challenges these communities face.

The City recognizes that effective climate action requires community-wide participation by engaging youth.[4] In neighbourhoods with more Black and racialized youth, however, historical underinvestment has not only widened the relationship gap between these communities

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1    In alignment with the definitions used by the City of Toronto, the word Black refers to those of African descent or origin, African Black Caribbean, African-Canadian, Canadians of African descent ("Confronting Anti-Black Racism," City of Toronto. 🔗 *Racialized* is defined as "a person or group of people categorized according to ethnic or racial characteristics and subjected to discrimination on that basis" ("IRCC Anti-Racism Strategy 2.0 (2021-2024) – Glossary," Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, 12 July 2022, 🔗 ; Inori Roy, "As Toronto Temperatures Rise, Inequalities Widen," *The Local* no. 15, 21 June 2022 🔗; Olivia Bowden, "From Traffic to Bad Air, Low-income Groups Face the Worst of Climate Change in Toronto: Experts," *CBC News*, June 2023 🔗; "Damage Control," Canadian Climate Institute, September 2022.

2    Niloofar Mohtat, "Attaining Climate Justice Through the Adaptation of Urban Form to Climate Change: Flood Risks in Toronto," PhD thesis, University of Waterloo, 2022. 🔗

3    "TSNS 2020 Neighbourhood Equity Index Methodological Documentation," City of Toronto, March 2014. 🔗

4    "TransformTO Net Zero Strategy and Climate Actions Backgrounder," City of Toronto. 🔗

and the City of Toronto but has also sidelined their voices in critical decision-making processes. Despite these challenges, these youth remain actively engaged and committed to their communities, leading grassroots initiatives, and advocating for environmental and social justice. To repair this critical relationship and achieve the community-wide participation in decision making needed for climate action, Toronto must establish an enhanced accountability system. Beyond merely recording community perspectives (i.e., public engagement), an accountability approach can better ensure that community input shapes policy.

Although the City has made commendable progress toward racial justice, accountability to marginalized communities, and climate action, these policy areas do not presently converge. Toronto has committed to delivering targeted services and support to equity-seeking groups and made progress toward racial justice and accountability through its Anti-Black Racism Partnership and Accountability Circle.[5] It also has a climate action plan, the TransformTO Net Zero Strategy, and the Toronto Climate Resilience Strategy, which acknowledges the disproportionate impact of climate change on marginalized communities.[6] To further its climate goals, the City established its first Climate Advisory Group (CAG), consisting of 26 members from diverse communities and sectors, including representatives from Indigenous, Black, and racialized communities. While the CAG aims to guide the TransformTO Net Zero Strategy's implementation and champion climate action across the city, there remains a lack of shared spaces, structures, and opportunities specifically for Black and racialized youth, particularly those from NIAs, to hold the government accountable when it comes to climate action.

How can the City of Toronto achieve accountability regarding climate policy, to and with Black and racialized youth in NIAs? Failing to explore this question could threaten the efficacy of the City's climate policy and hinder the fruitful community-wide engagement needed to achieve climate action. It could also exacerbate growing climate disparities as the crisis unfolds. Beyond its local impact, our research also supports the achievement of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs):


**SDG 10 Reduced inequalities** — Aims to reduce inequality within and among countries.


**SDG 3 Good health and well-being** — Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages.


**SDG 13 Climate action** — Aims to combat climate change and its impacts through urgent action and resilience-building efforts.

## Hardest to Reach: Black and Racialized Youth

### Defining Racial Injustice

The disproportionate climate impact that Black and racialized youth face in NIAs is fundamentally rooted in racial injustice and its effects on other forms of structural inequality. Racism is a pervasive issue characterized by discriminatory

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5    "Accountability and Management Framework for the TransformTO Net Zero Strategy," City of Toronto, 8 April 2022. 🔗
6    "TransformTO Net Zero Strategy," City of Toronto. 🔗

beliefs and practices directed toward individuals on the basis of ethnic or racial belonging. Racial injustice specifically refers to the structural and social manifestation of a shared societal rooting in these discriminatory beliefs and practices.[7] The word *racialized* refers to "a person or group of people categorized according to ethnic or racial characteristics and subjected to discrimination on that basis."[8] We acknowledge that this concept of racialization may be limited and accept that other definitions may build on or differ from this understanding.

Stemming from enslavement and ongoing colonization, racial injustice has led to the marginalization of Black and racialized Torontonians across social, economic, and political spheres. In Toronto, Black and racialized individuals face the severe consequences of racial injustice, including employment loss, isolation, violence, and emotional harm. Black youth, for example, experience microaggressions and systemic racism within the Toronto educational system,[9] are disproportionately represented in the child welfare care system,[10] and struggle with social mobility as a result of living in impoverished communities.[11] Black Torontonians' overrepresentation as victims of hate crimes and individuals subjected to carding (i.e., when police stop, question, and document individuals without cause — a practice criticized for displaying

inherent racial bias) underscores the breadth of these challenges.

## From Racial to Climate Injustice

Racial injustice has also determined Black communities' residential patterns, placing them in environmentally vulnerable areas. For instance, the City of Halifax denied Africville, a predominantly Black community, basic amenities such as clean water and sewage. These issues were intensified when the City built many unpleasant establishments in the community, including a dump and an infectious disease hospital, and eventually forced the residents to relocate so that it could further build in the area.[12]

The harmful impact of locating Black residents in areas with high environmental vulnerability is further exacerbated by housing policies primarily focused on high-value real estate.[13] This focus has led to gentrification, displacing families and reducing neighbourhood affordability for long-time residents.[14] Black and racialized youth are often "forced out" of their communities by a "lack of available social and affordable housing,"[15] living in deteriorating buildings prone to infrastructure failures and located in precarious areas such as floodplains and industrial zones with surfaces impervious to rainfall. Compared to alternative housing options, these low-quality,

7       Paula A. Braveman, Elaine Arkin, Dwayne Proctor, Tina Kauh, and Nicole Holm, "Systemic and Structural Racism: Definitions, Examples, Health Damages, and Approaches to Dismantling," *Health Affairs* 41, no. 2 (2022): 171–78. 🔗

8       "IRCC Anti-Racism Strategy 2.0 (2021–2024) — Glossary," Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, 12 July 2022. 🔗

9       Carl E. James, *Colour Essays: Essays on the Experiences, Education, and Pursuits of Black Youth* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2021), 284–93.

10      Deborah Goodman, Nada Johnson, Child Welfare Institute, and CAS Toronto, "Literature Review: Black Youth in Child Welfare Care — The Importance of Developing an Ethnic Identity Rooted in Black Cultural Pride," 4 October 2017. 🔗

11      Marcell Allison McBean, "Black Youth Educational Under-Achievement Problem: How Peer Influence, Social Attitudes, Education Policy, and Family Circumstance Unite to Maintain this Problem in the Ontario Public School System," YorkSpace, 5 June 2018. 🔗

12      Matthew McRae, "The Story of Africville," Canadian Museum for Human Rights, 6 April 2023. 🔗

13      Isabelle Anguelovski, James J.T. Connolly, Hamil Pearsall, et al., "Why Green 'Climate Gentrification' Threatens Poor and Vulnerable Populations," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* — PNAS 116, no. 52 (2019): 26139–43. 🔗

14      Goodman et. al, "Literature Review."

15      Aadil Nathani, "Revisiting Revitalization: How Municipalities Can Positively Impact Gentrification," paper presented at UWill Discover Student Research Conference University of Windsor, 2020. 🔗
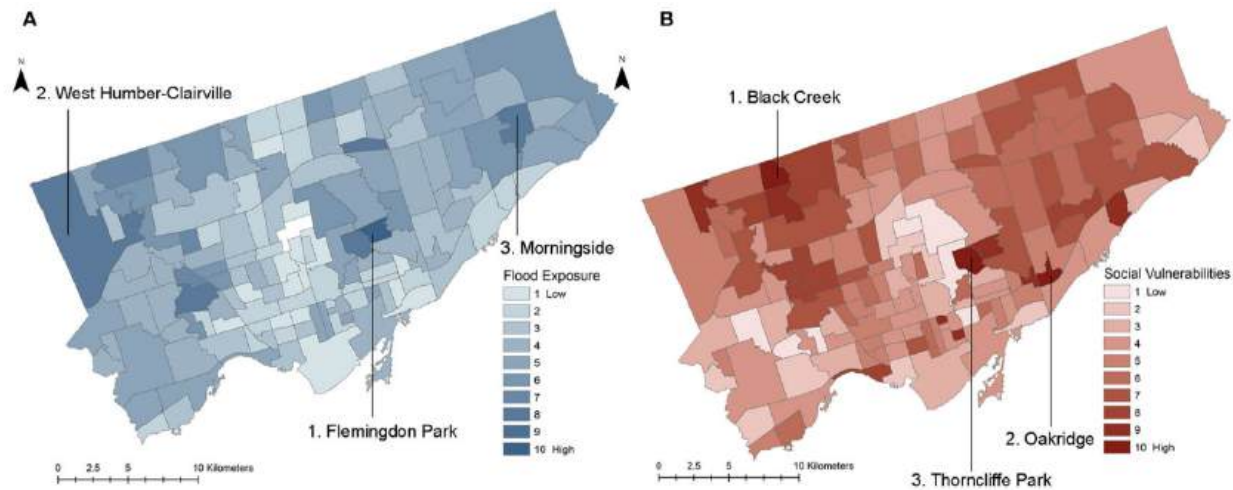
**Figure 2.** The spatial distribution of flood hazard exposures against social vulnerabilities across the neighbourhoods

underserved, and/or undersupported buildings are far less resilient in the face of climate disasters. On top of these challenges, racialized individuals in rental housing face heightened housing insecurity and lack resources to implement climate change mitigation measures such as installing cooling systems, air filtration, and insulation, further increasing their exposure to climate risk.[16]

Issues with environmental resilience are most acutely felt in Toronto's NIAs, where communities predominantly consisting of low-income, racialized, and immigrant populations bear the brunt of historic disinvestment. For instance, in Thorncliffe Park, a designated NIA,

only 23 per cent of the neighbourhood surface is covered by green space, 48 per cent is industrial, and another 10 per cent is allocated to transportation.[17] Lack of green space means that surface water cannot penetrate the ground and is forced to run off, increasing flood risk. Other high-flood-risk areas in Toronto are concentrated within high-density tower neighbourhoods with aging infrastructure. This includes Flemingdon Park, Black Creek, and North St. James Town, all designated NIAs or areas that have engaged in advocacy to gain the City's priority investment.[18]  The maps in Figure 2 highlights the spatial distribution of flood hazard exposures against social vulnerabilities

> *Racialized individuals in rental housing face heightened housing insecurity and lack resources to implement climate change mitigation measures such as installing cooling systems, air filtration, and insulation, further increasing their exposure to climate risk.*

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16    Mohtat, "Attaining Climate Justice."

17    Niloofar Mohtat and Luna Khirfan, "Epistemic Justice in Flood-Adaptive Green Infrastructure Planning: The Recognition of Local Experiential Knowledge in Thorncliffe Park, Toronto," *Landscape and Urban Planning* 238 (2023): 104834.

18    Ibid.

across Toronto's neighbourhoods.[19] The maps clearly illustrate that areas with the highest flood exposure overlap significantly with neighbourhoods characterized by high social vulnerabilities.

Given the concentration of flood risk within predominantly Black and racialized neighbourhoods, these groups are more likely to lose their assets to flood damage than other groups are, while also experiencing damaging service disruptions that can have long-term impacts on residents' livelihoods and health.[20] This disproportionate flood risk, in combination with deteriorating housing and the concentration of poverty, demonstrates that low-income and racialized communities, including the youth, are the most climate-vulnerable in Toronto.

## Beyond Geographical Barriers: Social and Institutional Challenges

While Black and racialized youth are not geographically hard to reach by the City of Toronto, histories of disinvestment have created social and institutional barriers between them and the City. From their disproportionate representation within the child welfare system to systemic racism within educational institutions, the inordinate burdens these youth face have made it difficult for them to trust decision-making authorities.[21] This relationship gap is widened by urban planning policies that expose their communities to a higher level of climate risk. The City has made an effort to connect with communities through public consultation, which involves seeking opinions and feedback from the general public on a policy area. However, of these participants, merely 56 per cent perceive that the government considers their feedback.[22] This signals the need for the City to shift from consultation and advisory to alternative accountability systems.

## Toward Accountability and Climate Justice

Moving beyond mere consultation, an accountability approach requires "government actors to justify their actions, act upon criticisms or requirements made of them, and accept responsibility for failure to perform with respect to laws or commitments," thereby better ensuring that the voices of the public are heard and acted upon.[23] Accountability systems can be one-sided with a hierarchy in which the provider of accountability is responsible for prioritizing the demander of accountability's goals/needs. By contrast, reciprocal/mutual accountability involves various parties mutually defining and working toward common goals.[24]

In terms of best practices, a U4 report highlights four common key accountability elements: (1) reduced information asymmetries between the government and the public, (2) spaces for discussion and debate, (3) opportunities for citizens to actively take action, such as through integration into government functions, and (4) government response to the public's needs.[25] Several cities have accountability mechanisms with varying degrees of success. For example,

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19    Niloofar Mohtat and Luna Khirfan, "Distributive Justice and Urban Form Adaptation to Flooding Risks: Spatial Analysis to Identify Toronto's Priority Neighbourhoods," *Frontiers in Sustainable Cities* 4 (2022): 919724. 🔗

20    Mohtat, "Attaining Climate Justice."

21    "Youth Engagement Strategy," City of Toronto, November 2017. 🔗

22    "Municipal Consultation and Engagement," Ipsos, 2017. 🔗

23    "Public Accountability," Open Government Partnership. 🔗

24    "Review of Accountability and Mutual Accountability Frameworks," Institute on Governance, 2017.

25    Inaki Ardigo, "Local Government Accountability Mechanisms," U4 Anti-Corruption Helpdesk, January 2019.

Bulgarian cities have a digital platform where residents can voice their complaints, ask questions, and provide recommendations to City Hall.[26] Although the platform has an accessible, digital format, its quick and one-sided approach fails to achieve a deeper level of relationship-building between cities and their residents. Argentina has a participatory budgeting system through which youth are able to determine neighbourhood priorities and elect youth delegates to develop projects to address them. By going beyond mere consultation, it offers valuable opportunities for youth to make decisions and take action. This mechanism has been highly successful, and has resulted in the introduction of many new facilities and neighbourhood programs for youth in Argentina.[27] However, not all youth have the awareness or training necessary to support priority setting and project development, which may limit their engagement with their city.

While there are several case studies of successful accountability systems, there is no one-size-fits-all approach to achieving meaningful accountability, and many challenges can hinder this objective. Inauthentic communication, inadequate reporting mechanisms, and the absence of explicit standards and consequences for noncompliance have been identified as key barriers.[28]

At the heart of this issue lies climate justice. While climate justice has no single, concrete definition, it is generally understood as recognizing the unequal distribution of climate change effects. It is also intersectional, considering that socioeconomic status, race, and gender impact individuals' experience with climate change. For instance, despite being the most negatively affected by climate change (e.g., less likely to own land or have institutional support or health services), women and racial minorities remain underrepresented in adaptation planning and decision making.[29] In this regard, climate justice involves empowering affected communities to participate in decision making and hold the City accountable to its climate action promises. Thus, we cannot address climate change without also addressing climate justice.

## Youth Climate Action in Toronto (Y-CAT) and Our Field Research

The Youth Climate Action in Toronto (Y-CAT) project is an action research project funded by the University of Toronto and the City of Toronto that aims to develop a city-wide youth climate engagement strategy. Y-CAT has developed a series of youth engagement principles that have been applied to enable effective relationship-building with the youth. To help inform Y-CAT's strategy, we wanted to move beyond cursory forms of "engagement" and "advisory" toward concrete mechanisms for accountability. While the relationship-building benefits of accountability have been well-established, the complexity around its practical implementation calls for further research. To fill this gap, we conducted semi-structured interviews and a focus group with Black and racialized youth

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26    Ibid.

27    "Increasing Youth Participation in Accountability Mechanisms," Government and Social Development Resource Centre (GSDRC).

28    Shelly Tochluk and Cameron Levin, "Powerful Partnerships: Transformative Alliance Building," in *Accountability and White Anti-Racist Organizing: Stories from Our Work*, edited by Lila Cabbil, Margery Freeman, Jeff Hitchcock, and Kimberley Richards (Crandall, Dostie and Douglass Books, 2010)  🔗; "Review of Accountability and Mutual Accountability Frameworks"; Catherine Higham, Alina Averchenkova, Joana Setzer, and Arnaud Koehl. "Accountability Mechanisms in Climate Change Framework Laws," 2021.

29    Amorim-Maia, Ana T., Isabelle Anguelovski, Eric Chu, and James Connolly, "Intersectional Climate Justice: A Conceptual Pathway for Bridging Adaptation Planning, Transformative Action, and Social Equity," *Urban Climate* 41 (2022): 101053-. 🔗

**Figure 3.** Focus group

(ages 16 to 25) in Toronto, particularly those who have been engaged with the City or involved in climate action. We prioritized those connected to Neighbourhood Improvement Areas (NIAs). Our conversations with youth involved understanding their experiences with climate change and their perspectives on accountability. We also interviewed City of Toronto policymakers as part of our field research. We then consolidated insights from our research to form a proposed accountability approach for the City of Toronto.

## How Climate Policy Fits with Accountability

Integrating climate policy with accountability is crucial for effective climate action. Throughout our interviews, both youth and policymakers emphasized the need for comprehensive changes at both individual and systemic levels. However, youth also pointed out that such efforts should be designed in a way that does not disproportionately burden marginalized communities. For example, promoting active transportation such as cycling should be

accompanied by improved infrastructure to make these options viable and accessible for everyone. This could mean creating protected bike lanes, expanding off-road bike paths, and ensuring pedestrian-friendly streets with wider sidewalks. Additionally, installing secure bike parking at key locations, and integrating cycling with public transit options, will make these transportation methods more attractive.

Systemic accountability, which youth participants emphasized as vital, focuses on the responsibilities of institutions, governments, and large organizations in implementing and enforcing climate policies. Policymakers acknowledged the need for stringent regulations on major polluters and industries, and highlighted ongoing efforts to integrate equity into climate strategies. They recognized that effective policy must address the broader socioeconomic factors that influence climate vulnerability. Youth also echoed the importance of systemic accountability, advocating for mechanisms to ensure that governments and corporations are held accountable for their environmental impact. These mechanisms include transparent reporting, regular monitoring, and

mechanisms for community feedback to ensure that policies are not only implemented, but adapted based on community needs.

## Climate Policy at the City of Toronto

Toronto's climate policies, including the TransformTO Net Zero Strategy and the Toronto Climate Resilience Strategy, reflect a commitment to reducing emissions and enhancing resilience. Policymakers described these initiatives as plans involving collaboration across various divisions. These policies acknowledge the intersectional nature of climate change.

Despite these efforts, youth highlighted the need for more targeted actions that address marginalized communities' vulnerabilities. For example, while promoting electric vehicles (EVs) is a key component for reducing emissions, youth highlighted their high cost and limited accessibility. Instead, they emphasized active transportation options such as public transit and cycling, and ensuring these are accessible to all.

Policies promoting green infrastructure and public transportation also must be designed to ensure that low-income and racialized communities have equitable access to these resources. This involves not only increasing the availability of green spaces and public transit, but also addressing barriers such as affordability and connectivity. Youth highlighted that certain communities do not have equitable access to green spaces and tree canopy cover, resulting in more significant issues with the urban heat island effect — a phenomenon where areas become significantly warmer as a result of heat absorption by materials like asphalt, concrete, and closely packed buildings, which trap and retain heat. The disparity in the distribution of green spaces affects people's mental and physical health. Wealthier neighbourhoods tend to have more parks and green spaces, which help

mitigate climate impacts, while poorer, racialized communities lack these resources.

Another critical aspect of the policy context is the need for enhanced community engagement and representation. Youth stressed that their voices and those of other marginalized groups should be front and centre in climate policy discussions. Policymakers highlighted efforts to engage with diverse communities through initiatives such as the Climate Advisory Group (CAG). However, they acknowledged that reaching a truly representative cross-section of Toronto's diverse population is challenging. Policymakers also noted that asking the wrong questions (such as focusing purely on technical aspects of climate change) during community engagement could lead to data that do not accurately support policy decisions. While Toronto's climate policies demonstrate a strong commitment to reducing emissions and enhancing resilience, there is a clear need to integrate equity and justice more deeply into policy implementation.

## Gaps in Youth Engagement: Evaluating Toronto's Accountability Mechanisms

The City of Toronto employs several mechanisms, including public consultations, annual reporting, and the CAG, intended to ensure transparency in climate policy. While policymakers emphasize the importance of these mechanisms, particularly public consultations, many youth participants stated that they are unaware of these consultations or do not see themselves being able to attend. The CAG, made up of various community members, provides insights and feedback on numerous initiatives. Policymakers noted that it is instrumental in holding the City accountable by regularly reviewing and advising on climate policies. Despite this, youth participants felt that the CAG's influence was limited, and its efforts were not always reflected in policy changes.

While there is activist representation in advisory groups, the local government is still exploring how to bridge their advisory work to specific communities. In the interim, a handful of activists may represent entire communities without feeling qualified to do so. Youth participants questioned the tendency to form small advisory groups, youth councils, and other bodies, emphasizing that representatives who are unfamiliar to community members cannot adequately represent the people they claim to work for. They also perceive that public consultation has not been meaningful because community members are brought in at the eleventh hour to provide their opinion(s) once the City has already drafted a plan.

Even when no plan is in place youth are expected to contribute with little training on the matter. Consultation also feels less meaningful because the city has a final say in the decision regardless of the feedback they receive. In the event that community members spearhead climate initiatives, they must shoebox creative ideas back into the municipal framework to ensure that they are meeting strategic goals, leaving activists feeling like the project's purpose has been defeated. Interviewees also described how community engagement feels stiff when city officials don't belong to the communities they are consulting with.

Annual reporting is another key accountability mechanism. While policymakers described reports as essential for tracking progress and ensuring transparency, youth expressed skepticism about their accessibility and comprehensibility. From a policymaker perspective, the city often operates at a different level of understanding than the public. It can be challenging to translate the important work being done into climate literacy for laypeople. Additionally, there is a vast amount of programs, services, and resources such as newsletters available to the public which often

go unused. Residents say that while information has been made available, it can be challenging to find the right information online and formats like reports from City Council may be inaccessible because of jargon. Thus, it remains unclear what actions the City is taking and can be held accountable for. Even when aware of avenues

> While policymakers described reports as essential for tracking progress and ensuring transparency, youth expressed skepticism about their accessibility and comprehensibility.

for advocacy, racialized communities tend to be preoccupied with issues they perceive as more pressing such as housing, creating not only an information gap but also a priority gap with the city. Many communities carry trauma from past experiences, especially newcomers' emigrations to Canada if they were forced to emigrate. There is little capacity to support climate action in the face of such existing issues.

One youth shared their perception that secondary schools and the local community are more involved in climate action than the government is. For instance, community clean-ups are organized to address litter instead of the local government taking the initiative to keep the environment clean. A lack of communication about actions that the government is taking to protect the environment presents a barrier to collaboration with the community. It also raises questions about how the city disseminates information regarding its work. For example, are reports the most useful and accessible format for young people?

We also heard about logistical barriers to youth participation. Those from underrepresented backgrounds need opportunities to build professional skills such as communication, networking, and public speaking. Civic engagement is a learned activity, and youth need support to learn how to engage with the government. Events' timing and location also affect opportunities for youth participation. Meetings held during work or school hours limit participation, and being invited to a boardroom at City Hall can feel intimidating. Additionally, many Black and racialized youth we interviewed felt that policing was a barrier to their activism. There were concerns about escalating police response and surveillance on climate organizing in addition to the policing of green spaces. Given a historically fraught relationship with the police, Black, racialized, and Indigenous youth do not have the same safety and comfort as white youth do in taking strong actions for the climate cause.

Other key barriers involved funding and capacity issues. Environmental grants are perceived as slow to disseminate and minimal City staff are dedicated to community engagement. Funding for the environment also tends to be project-based rather than being incorporated in a cyclical manner within the municipal budget. Interviewees told us there is also a discrepancy in funding made available within the downtown core compared to peripheral areas in Toronto. More resources are required for sustainability initiatives, community engagement, and youth spaces such as youth hubs to promote mental health and well-being, especially given the level of climate anxiety among young people.

Youth were aware of various community feedback mechanisms, such as surveys and public comment periods. However, their recurring concern was that these mechanisms feel performative, with little evidence that the feedback is genuinely considered or will lead to substantial changes. Policymakers acknowledged some of these

challenges, such as funding concerns or jargon-filled reports, and emphasized the need for improvements. They recognized the need to create more structured opportunities for continuous feedback loops, where community input can directly influence policy adjustments. Policymakers also highlighted the need to compensate community members, particularly youth, for their time and contributions to ensure meaningful participation. Interviewees echoed this, stressing the importance of honoraria or recognition for youth contributions, since the ability to forgo time and income to attend meetings or volunteer is a privilege. Although the City of Toronto has several accountability mechanisms, significant gaps in awareness, trust, and effectiveness remain.

## Climate Justice

Youth leaders in climate and civic advocacy were motivated by a desire for climate justice. They emphasized that climate justice means justice in all forms — acknowledging the interconnected nature of the climate crisis with broader issues such as housing, public transit, health outcomes, and the availability of green spaces. They also emphasized that climate change is a symptom of systemic factors such as capitalism so the onus for change should not lie solely with individuals.

There were four recurring considerations in how young people defined climate justice. First, and fundamentally, everyone — regardless of their socioeconomic status or ethnic background — has the right to live a secure and healthy life. In other words, equitable access to necessities like housing, clean water, food, education, energy, etc., are paramount to climate justice. Such consideration for life acknowledges that our current actions will impact future generations, including those who are not at fault for the climate crisis in the first place. That human-centric approach prioritizes life over profit, and

the desire to hold ourselves accountable for how current actions affect the future.

Second, interventions should consider how the climate crisis affects communities differently. For instance, someone living in a dense tower community lacking retrofits or access to green space is more prone to experiencing urban heat island effects compared to an individual residing in an affluent community with abundant parks and walkable areas. Justice for every group will look different since they experience the impact of the climate crisis differently.

Third, communities should be empowered to make decisions for themselves with some degree of self-determination rather than merely following mandates. Climate justice must also be decolonial, considering the political and historic nature of our interaction with land — how we use it, what we grow on it, and who owns it. As such, it is important that Indigenous people are always meaningfully involved in the conversation.

Last, to achieve climate justice, the climate crisis must be tackled from every intersection. For example, a lack of access to housing means that unhoused people are dealing with increasingly erratic temperatures without appropriate shelter. A lack of affordable public transit or other transportation modes in certain areas creates disadvantages due to inaccessibility. More bike-share stations or express buses to reduce wait times can produce eco-friendly options and make public transit a more attractive option. In defining climate justice, the youth insisted that the issue of climate change is greater than just the environment.

## Disproportionate Impacts in NIAs: Stigma and Underdevelopment

Youth participants from Neighbourhood Improvement Areas (NIAs) expressed concerns about limited access to resources and facilities. For example, one participant from the Jane and Finch area (a high density, low-income neighbourhood) recounted an experience when their grant application was rejected because the funding organization expressed concerns about investing in the neighbourhood. Another participant who briefly lived in the Mount Dennis and Weston area highlighted a lack of essential community services, such as food banks and shelters. These experiences represent a broader pattern of stigmatization and underinvestment in NIAs that not only perpetuates resource gaps in these communities but also undermines residents' potential. The persistent stigmatization and neglect of these areas contribute to a cycle of underdevelopment, exacerbating existing challenges and limiting opportunities for residents.

Housing units that lack central air conditioning are most often found in NIAs and are typically inhabited by vulnerable populations. They are ill-equipped for extreme heat conditions. This is particularly concerning given that Toronto's number of days with temperatures above 30°C have more than doubled since the 1950s.[30] Even worse, as a policymaker who once lived in an older building shared, the inside of a unit can sometimes feel hotter than the temperature outside. Consequently, residents are forced to either seek relief in cooling rooms that may be offered in their buildings, or in air-conditioned public or commercial spaces. As a Black undergraduate student residing in Victoria Village mentioned, the city can feel divided by home

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30    Ben Spurr, "'Clean Air Spaces,' Popsicles for Zoo Animals, Rogers Centre Evacuation: How Toronto Plans to Beat the Rising Heat," *Toronto Star*, 16 June 2024. 🔗

ownership, with homeowners having access to backyards where they can cool down, while those in local buildings lack similar access to green space. As a racialized, female resident of Regent Park explained, many in her area do not have access to balconies and they are in lack of central air conditioning. And those with disabilities can find it difficult to leave their homes to reap the benefits of open space and fresh air.

A policymaker suggested that even if buildings were adequately equipped and the City paid for air-conditioning units, affordability remains a barrier. An initiative that explored this option found that the main impediment for community members came from paying larger energy bills associated with running these units rather than the units themselves. These extra costs make such an intervention ineffectual for the community.

NIAs also face disproportionate climate-related impacts such as pollution, while also having insufficient tree canopy cover to help with urban heat. The youth participant from Victoria Village noted that this NIA is next to a major highway and railroad tracks, placing the community at increased risk of exposure to pollutants. Another participant from Scarborough mentioned the lack of access to adequate public transit as a concern for the community, which multiple NIA-based participants also highlighted. Consequently, residents rely on car ownership to commute, further intensifying pollution in an already high pollution zone. The participant also mentioned experiencing more difficulty walking on Main Street, a high-capacity road in the area, compared to leafier side streets that provide shade and cooler conditions. This was echoed by another participant with connections to both Victoria Village and Flemingdon Park who shared that concrete absorbs heat, making inadequately covered urban areas feel even hotter. Those in

the area experience intensified heat and urban pollution, exacerbating health risks.

Certain NIAs face greater risk and more extreme consequences of flooding. As the Toronto and Region Conservation Authority (TRCA) highlights, both Jane-Wilson and Rockcliffe-Smythe neighbourhoods are vulnerable to flooding.[31] In a single day in July 2024, Toronto was hit with a heavy downpour totalling nearly 100 millimetres — more than its expected rainfall for a given month — which caused major flooding throughout the city. At the time of writing, residents of community housing units in Regent Park continue to face flooding complications following the initial storm, contributing to unsafe living conditions due to poor infrastructure, risk of property damage, and increased health risks from exposure to water-resilient pollutants.

Even well-intentioned projects and initiatives that have sought to tackle some of these concerns have fallen short and sometimes exacerbated existing issues. Despite green spaces being more available in Regent Park than in other NIAs, our Regent Park-based participant criticized these spaces as being "manufactured parks." Residents must go out of their way to access these spaces rather than finding them naturally on daily routes. These spaces also tend to be under police surveillance which can further discourage community members from using park amenities, given precarious relationships with law enforcement.

Additionally, a female, high-school-aged participant from the Victoria Village area shared that violence is a key concern in her community, with parents wary of enrolling their children in schools where shootings have occurred. When families have similar safety concerns extending over an area that encompasses a public green space (as our participant from Regent Park shared is sometimes the case for families there), this can

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31    "Residents Living in TRCA's Flood Vulnerable Neighbourhoods," Toronto and Region Conservation Authority (TRCA), 9 July 2024. 🔗

further restrict access to available green space. Another participant mentioned increased access to federal funding contributing to more available green space in Flemingdon Park, but this change has also resulted in a loss of affordable housing due to demolitions of old buildings and increased gentrification. Long-time residents can face increased living costs and possible displacement to less-affluent NIAs which experience even worse climate impacts. The most vulnerable may not benefit from current rejuvenation projects happening in certain NIAs and instead, feel even worse off.

# Our Proposed Accountability Approach

Thorough analysis of our conversations with youth participants  and policymakers culminated in the development of a proposed accountability approach for the City of Toronto, tailored toward Black and racialized youth. It is mostly reciprocal, but it places a greater accountability burden on the government and combines both formal and informal approaches to accountability.

Being "reciprocal" entails responsibilities on both the government and residents themselves. However, there is also a one-sided element because the approach places the primary burden of building trust-based relationships and creating appropriate (accessible, representative, etc.) community engagement spaces on the City as opposed to the community. These obligations are prerequisites to the fulfillment of community responsibilities. Throughout our interviews, Black and racialized youth participants expressed significant levels of distrust and skepticism toward the City who they felt had let them down. Given this relationship challenge, the City first needs to achieve one-sided accountability to rebuild trust and repair its relationship with these youth, after which a more reciprocal, community-involved approach can be implemented.
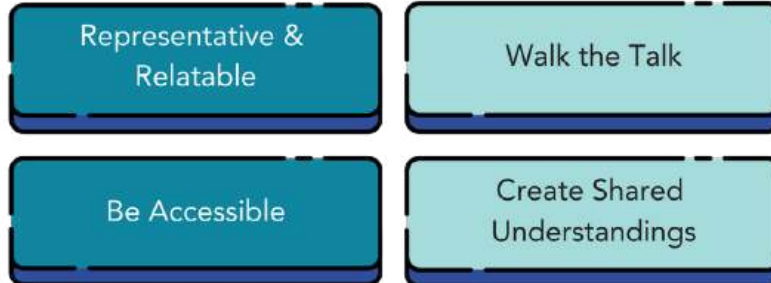
Our proposed accountability approach is divided into "relationship principles" and "accountability principles." Together, these two components cover both formal and informal accountability approaches to optimally capture our youth stakeholders' recommendations. The "relationship principles" outline the foundational relationship required to achieve effective accountability. These principles relate to a general City–community relationship as opposed to dealing with formalized engagement structures. Given the youth's overwhelming sentiments of skepticism and distrust, rebuilding the City's relationship with communities is foundational to effective accountability. Even the most theoretically sound accountability mechanism would collapse and potentially backfire without a strong underlying relationship. The second part of our approach defines "accountability principles." These versatile principles are more specific to the concept of accountability, moving beyond general relationship principles. They can be applied to both formal and informal accountability mechanisms, allowing both to be adequately captured.

## Foundational Relationship

**Integrated within the community.** The ideal City of Toronto/resident relationship effectively integrates the City within the communities it serves. The lines between City and community should be somewhat blurred such that City staff and leaders feel like trustworthy and empathetic neighbours as opposed to inaccessible decision-making authorities. Such a relationship makes it far more likely to achieve successful community engagement.

*Recommendations:* The youth we interviewed suggested that this integration can be achieved by improving the ease of reaching City staff/leaders, in addition to enhanced responsiveness. Response times to community members' inquiries should be improved through increased frequency of meetings or with dedicated efforts by

# Accountability Principles

| Representative & Relatable | Walk the Talk |
|---|---|
| Be Accessible | Create Shared Understandings |

# Foundational Relationship-Building

Government as a Trusted Supporter of Community-led Efforts

Community at the Core

Integrated within the Community

# Support Pillars

| Go Beyond Band-Aid Solutions | Expand Climate Education |
|---|---|

**Figure 4.** Our proposed accountability mechanism

policymakers to prioritize communications (i.e., calls, emails, etc.) and/or visits from community members. These actions would help strengthen relationships between communities and the City by ensuring community members feel heard. It can also be achieved by taking a less formal approach to engaging with community members, and having more casual interactions with them to minimize hierarchy. Some youth suggested having the City set up casual pop-up booths that community members can visit to ask staff their questions. And given that inaccessible, formal reports were considered an engagement barrier, more casual and accessible forms of communication should be employed to help achieve City–community integration. For instance, several interviewed youth suggested leveraging art and culture when engaging with communities. Not only could this be a more effective and accessible way to communicate with youth in particular, but it could also foster a sense of integration by eliminating excessive professionalism and connecting with the community using modes that they already know and are receptive to.

Another important way for the City to enhance its relationship with communities is to cater its engagement approach to the cultural nuances of communities. For instance, one participant mentioned that the practice of intergenerational care is already integrated within many Asian cultures so these communities may not seek out the City's support because they are already providing a strong support system to one another. Participants also mentioned that climate-friendly practices, such as minimizing waste (e.g., reusing old containers), are already embedded within some cultures even though they are not explicitly classified as "climate action efforts." These cultural nuances should be embedded into the way that the City interacts with communities, to enable a closer integration between the two.

Achieving integration within communities is the one-sided accountability prerequisite to directly addressing  community participation. Once the relationship between the community and the City has been rebuilt, the City can then go on to create spaces for a deeper level of engagement and involvement.

**Community at the core.** A consistent sentiment throughout our conversations with youth was that community members should lead climate action efforts. Specifically, the City should empower and support community leaders and organizations who are already involved in or have expressed interest in climate work, strengthening their efforts. In this way, the City can achieve a community-centric approach without placing excessive responsibility on those who do not have the interest or capacity to engage in climate-related work. Instead it can empower those who have the interest and skills to lead in this space.

When communities lead the work they are more engaged, enabling successful climate action. Each community has its own unique needs, nuances, and ways of working so interventions need to be tailored accordingly. Community members are in the best position to lead climate efforts because they best understand those nuances. This approach helps ensure that climate efforts are actually aligned with community needs, as opposed to being diluted by the City's own structures and understanding.

*Recommendations:* The City should move beyond outreach and explore new ways of integrating community voices. As a major city, Toronto has the opportunity to create and simulate interventions similar to New York's Rebuild by Design competition, which challenged architects to collaborate with flood-vulnerable communities to develop innovative ideas for protecting the New York–New Jersey shoreline. By pursuing the creation of a similar competition, the Environment and Climate Division can follow the lead of other divisions that pursue a bottom-up approach,

# The CABR's City–Community Relationship

In our research, the Confronting Anti-Black Racism (CABR) unit stood out as an exemplary best practice in community relationship building. Its relationship with the community is perfectly aligned with the principles outlined in our proposed framework. The unit is very well integrated within the Black communities that it serves: because City staff working in this unit are also members of those same communities, residents feel more comfortable trusting and interacting with them. This pre-existing connection to the community enables the CABR's successful open-door policy, where residents are comfortable directly communicating with the unit and voicing their complaints. Simply through community integration and accessibility, the CABR has created a relationship of accountability with the communities that it serves, even in the absence of a formalized accountability mechanism.

It also exemplifies the ideal City-community relationship by empowering and supporting community members in leading key initiatives. Through our conversations with a policymaker involved in the CABR unit, we learned that when the group wants to implement an initiative, instead of proposing a well-developed plan to the community and receiving their input near the end, the CABR empowers appropriate organizations to lead those initiatives. The unit supports these organizations by providing collaboration, guidance, and funding, while enabling them to maintain a level of autonomy and leadership that is characteristic of a community-first approach.

The unit's community consultations are led by community leaders themselves, who recruit residents and seek their perspectives using question guides that the City provides. Following consultation, the CABR goes back to the community to confirm correct understanding of their perspectives, and to receive community feedback on their recommendations before taking them to council. In this way, the CABR places the community at the forefront of their consultation approach while supporting and facilitating the process. The CABR's relationship with the community provides an exemplary best practice  that can be leveraged when developing effective approaches to accountability.

with lessons from the Social Development and Finance and Administration Division being instructive. Including communities in planning work from nascent stages would provide ample opportunities to voice their thoughts and to build solutions tailored to the complexities of their community. Consequently, there would be a greater likelihood of the adoption and subsequent sustainability of the intervention. Additionally, a challenge that encourages innovation in a collaborative and engaging manner can better capture the interest of local youth and inspire them to get involved.

**Government as a trusted supporter of community-led efforts.** While many youth emphasized the importance of taking a community-led approach to climate action and accountability, they also stressed that Toronto should serve as a trusted supporter of community leaders. Our conversations revealed that there is a delicate balancing act involved. One participant mentioned that in some advisory groups, participants are given little to no support/training, but are still expected to craft recommendations for the City. On the other hand, she mentioned that these advisory sessions are sometimes dominated by the City sharing its plan with little room for additional input. A "sweet spot" must exist where the community is able to lead the work, but is also well-supported by the City.

*Recommendations*: The most common mode of support that youth participants mentioned was adequate and accessible funding  — one of the biggest challenges facing community-led work. There is also a discrepancy between the funding and support provided to different communities. Minimizing that discrepancy would even the playing field and strengthen communities' trust in the City. Beyond funding, the City should also provide additional support and resources that empower communities to take action. This involves collaborating with and guiding community leaders as they develop and lead

climate action efforts. Further support would involve spreading the word about community-led initiatives and informing residents of how they can effectively contribute to climate action.

## Foundational Principles

Once the City has established a solid relationship with Black and racialized youth, it can more directly address accountability. What follows are four key principles that can be applied in both formal and informal accountability approaches.

**1. Accessibility.** Many participants mentioned that community members, especially those who are racialized, are often unaware of the accountability resources available to them. Many youth participants expressed uncertainty about where to go or whom to contact to further their involvement in climate action and engage with the City. One policymaker noted that more white and affluent communities are better aware of the accountability resources at their service such as deputations, or even simpler actions such as the right to advocate for a stop sign. Black and racialized communities are less aware of these tools. Additionally, they may face more immediate challenges, such as securing adequate housing and meeting basic needs, which can make it difficult to prioritize seeking out these opportunities.

*Recommendations:* It is critical to more effectively advertise City engagement/ accountability opportunities, and to make it easier for communities to leverage them. Some youth participants proposed that SMS/ WhatsApp could be used to engage with them. This communication channel could be used to advertise opportunities, more easily reach this demographic, and help ensure that they are aware of the accountability opportunities at their disposal.

Logistical barriers also need to be removed to allow a wider range of community members

to effectively engage with Toronto in an accountability capacity. For instance, the physical space in which youth engage should not be overly formal and intimidating, but should instead be a space that community members are familiar and comfortable with. One youth suggested moving community committee meetings out of City Hall and into community centres. In other words, the City should meet the community where they are. In addition to physical space, the timing of events should accommodate community schedules (e.g., work commitments), so that residents would be less discouraged from attending meetings due to burdens associated with commuting (i.e., time and cost) and competing responsibilities.

Accessibility also involves fair compensation. Community members, especially those from low-income backgrounds (who are disproportionately located in NIAs), may not be able to afford to give up time to engage with the City for free. The Environment and Climate Division should provide an honorarium, stipend, or some form of free or reduced cost for TTC (Toronto Transit Commission — public transit) to compensate youth for their time. Compensation helps ease financial barriers that might keep youth from getting involved in the first place. However, compensation should not only be considered monetary. As a former Reach researcher who experienced living in the Mount Dennis and Weston area explained, facilitating transfer of knowledge in a collaborative fashion is critical so that hyper-local solutions can be built effectively with expertise that may not be readily available in the given community. By facilitating and supporting opportunities for knowledge sharing, community members can experience personal growth through developing new skills and growing their networks, while the community can benefit from newly available expertise. For example, climate action is linked to protecting Indigenous communities' culture/tradition, making it necessary to leverage lived experiences

alongside technical expertise to build effective solutions. Prioritizing funding for community-based NGOs and toward recruitment and training of outreach staff local to the community would also spur greater progress of existing climate work that's currently limited by resource constraints.

**2. Representative and relatable.** A common criticism that interviewees had was that the City often incorrectly expects people in community councils and committees to represent the entire community and speak on their behalf. Input is taken from only a limited audience, but that input is falsely generalized to the entire community of interest.

Engagement spaces with the City can often have hidden and unintentional barriers that compromise adequate representation. For instance, one youth participant pointed out that these spaces are almost always occupied by highly educated individuals, leaving out the perspectives of community members who may not share that level of education or who may not be equipped with the language to advocate for their perspectives. In developing an accountability approach, it is critical for these hidden barriers to be identified and addressed. (See the "Recommendations" section later in this report.)

In addition to quantitative representation, it is also critical that City personnel at the forefront of engaging with communities are people who communities can trust and relate to. For instance, a policymaker mentioned that Black populations are very distrusting of the government, and they need to see Black leaders like themselves in the engagement process to feel a sense of trust and be willing to engage with the City. It is critical to be aware of and address these nuances to achieve effective accountability.

*Recommendations:* To mitigate issues related to limited input, one participant mentioned

that councils and committees (such as Toronto Youth Cabinet (TYC) and CAG) should visit NIA communities and gather input from a larger pool of people on the ground through informal conversations and surveys. This would ensure that the ideas of a more representative sample can be documented and brought forth during council and committee meetings. With this approach, hidden barriers such as differing education levels can also be bypassed. Additionally, achieving racial/cultural representation among City and community leaders can mitigate issues of trust and relatability, making it more likely for Black and racialized communities to comfortably engage with the City.

**3. Create shared understanding.** Information imbalances, highlighted during discussions with youth, create significant barriers to effective community engagement and accountability. To address these challenges, this framework emphasizes not just sharing information, but sharing information in a way that youth can easily understand. It also involves understanding community perspectives and concerns through ongoing dialogue.

*Recommendations:* "Legalese" should be toned down and knowledge translation of information for communities should be readily provided so that people less versed in policy matters can feel more confident in their understanding of City materials and in sharing their thoughts about them. This not only includes using plain language, ensuring key documents are available in translated formats in languages spoken by community members, and designing community engagement activities that all residents can easily understand, but also clearly communicating what the City can and cannot do within its jurisdiction and authority.

Some youth participants also suggested more frequent, localized updates tailored to specific neighbourhoods, providing clear information on what the City is doing, the challenges it

faces, and how residents can stay informed and involved. Given that much of the City's day-to-day activities go unnoticed by those not directly involved, it is critical to enhance visibility and transparency. By clearly outlining municipal scope of authority and what falls under its jurisdiction, residents can better understand the limitations and possibilities of the City's actions. Also, by publicly tracking progress, the City can reinforce accountability and commitment to the public. Improving communication processes, including better follow-ups on complaints and clarifying logistical complexities (particularly for youth) is essential to prevent miscommunication and subsequent frustration.

The Environment and Climate Division should adopt more youth-friendly reporting styles on its climate-related policies, action, and progress. Rather than providing this type of information in report formats only, the division should diversify outputs to include community pop-up events, social media campaigns, or a dedicated website that can communicate Toronto's efforts and progress on climate goals in an approachable format for youth audiences.

**4. Walk the talk.** For the City of Toronto's climate accountability framework to be effective, it must demonstrate a consistent commitment to its promises — what youth referred to as "walking the talk." While the City frequently engages in consultations, these efforts often don't translate into meaningful outcomes, which erodes people's trust. Youth participants have strongly emphasized that accountability cannot be disentangled from action. It's not enough to simply make plans, gather feedback, and share progress — the City must actually follow through (or "get it done!"). It must actively respond to residents' concerns, demonstrating that it not only hears them, but is committed to taking tangible steps. This entails fixing specific issues such as filling a sinkhole in a public area, which was an example one of the youth participants

cited. Toronto needs to move beyond simply listening and show that it is actively responding to residents' concerns in a timely manner.

*Recommendations:* The City should not only articulate ambitious climate goals, but also ensure that these goals are supported by adequate resources — both the financial and human varieties. This means attaching real dollars to well-thought-out climate action plans that entail assigning teams and taking decisive steps based on community input, and ensuring that follow-up actions are taken after consultations.

To build trust, the City must address not only climate-specific concerns, but also key issues such as transit and housing that are top of mind for residents. The TTC's inefficiencies — which include high fares, limited service in racialized and outlying communities, and general unreliability — hinder equitable access and increase CO2 emissions as more residents then rely on personal vehicles or ride-sharing services. Likewise, access to affordable, energy-efficient, and sustainable housing is essential for both social equity and reducing emissions. By focusing on these interconnected issues, the City can demonstrate that it understands and prioritizes the broader context in which climate action occurs, thereby building trust with the communities that it serves and better achieving climate engagement.

## Support Pillars

**Go beyond band-aid solutions.** The youth emphasized that while individual efforts are important, they must be complemented by a broader focus on systemic drivers such as capitalism, colonialism, and excessive individualism. To address this, our proposed framework calls for a shift in Toronto's approach toward prioritizing systemic-level changes that address these root causes. This includes engaging in decolonization efforts, given the understanding that climate action is inherently political and tied to issues of land ownership, use, and colonial history.

*Recommendations:* The framework must move beyond mere land acknowledgments (a practice where individuals recognize the traditional Indigenous territories on which they stand) and actively incorporate decolonization values as a central pillar of climate accountability. This involves centring the perspectives of Indigenous, Black, and racialized communities and recognizing the structural barriers these groups face within systems built on colonial foundations.

It is also important to address and reduce powerful corporate institutions' influence (particularly those with deep ties to the fossil fuel industry) on City policies and agendas. Instead, the City should invite climate and social welfare activist voices organic to NIA communities into beginning and ongoing planning, and work with them to build solutions. By ensuring that community needs take precedence over corporate profits, the City can pursue transparent and equitable climate action. By tackling these systemic challenges head-on, Toronto can move beyond surface-level fixes and implement meaningful, long-lasting changes.

> While the City frequently engages in consultations, these efforts often don't translate into meaningful outcomes, which erodes people's trust.

**Invest in integrated climate education.** An informed and engaged public is necessary for effective climate action. However, our research reveals that people lack the depth of knowledge surrounding the issue of climate change. For instance, we discovered that while many youth participants are aware of climate change, their understanding often remains surface-level, focusing on aspects such as emissions without grasping the broader systemic causes and issues such as climate justice. Since many of our participants were youth leaders in the climate space, they often pointed to deeper systemic causes when speaking about climate change. However, when speaking about their peers or about youth in general, they felt that there was a lack of such understanding.

Beyond providing communities with a surface-level understanding of climate, it is critical to support them in understanding the root causes and interrelated issues such as climate justice. One of our participants, who has had involvement within the education system, mentioned that there is a need to move beyond passive sharing of information, and that students should be taught about climate in a way that makes them feel empowered as drivers of change. The educator also shared the importance of informing youth about climate-related jobs, which are unfortunately not as well-advertised as more typical career trajectories.

*Recommendation:* The City should invest in comprehensive climate education programs that are accessible to all residents. These programs should focus on both the science of climate change, and the systemic issues that drive it, including the historical and ongoing impacts of colonialism and capitalism, as well as the collective actions needed to address it. Incorporating Indigenous perspectives and knowledge into these programs is also essential, acknowledging First Nations, Inuit, and Métis people's vital role in environmental stewardship.

This could be achieved by integrating such topics into school curricula, hosting community workshops, and running public awareness campaigns. One participant also suggested that lessons on climate action could be provided through public libraries, which are generally accessible, low-pressure, casual spaces where youth can engage with climate issues.

Instead of passive education, an active approach should blend learning in the classroom and practice within communities and homes. It would entail inviting community leaders to teach modules and ensuring funding for relevant youth-targeted programming, such as forest schools to be made available through community hubs (or public libraries for neighbourhoods that don't have access to a hub yet). By fostering a deeper understanding of climate issues, residents can feel encouraged to take informed action and hold the City accountable for its climate commitments. Additionally, youth can feel more empowered to make change right from their own communities, and they can be better equipped to appropriately advocate and organize based on their understanding of climate issues and experience with climate action. Occupational programs, vacancies, and other career-related opportunities available with private sector and academic partners to the City should be highlighted for youth who are looking to start their journeys in the climate field.

## Conclusion

The journey toward a just and accountable Toronto involves reshaping how the City engages with its Black and racialized youth, particularly those in NIAs. For too long, these communities have borne the brunt of climate impacts while their voices have been marginalized in policy discussions. The proposed accountability approach seeks to reverse this by placing these

youth at the centre of climate action, ensuring their experiences and insights actively shape the City's response to the climate crisis. Ultimately, this is about redefining what climate justice means for Toronto — urging the City to not only walk the talk but to walk it alongside those who have the most at stake.

# Research Team

**Ayesha Ali** is a recent graduate of the Master of Global Affairs program at the Munk School of Global Affairs & Public Policy and holds a bachelor of commerce degree from the University of Toronto (with minors in economics and women and gender studies). She is currently gaining practical experience as part of the Ontario Legislature Internship Programme. Ayesha completed an internship at the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office in London, UK, during her graduate studies while also being an executive producer of *Beyond the Headlines*, a nationally syndicated current affairs radio show and podcast. She is interested in labour justice, women's empowerment, and climate change and the inherent linkages that lie within all three of these areas.

*"Listening to the stories, criticisms, and hopes of Black and racialized youth right here from my hometown and then translating that all into this work which our team hopes to propel change with has been such an immense privilege. My key takeaway is that we need to meaningfully engage communities at every step of the way, so that we can build better approaches, structures, and policies which effectively serve everyone, including the hardest to reach. By doing so, we can finally get started on the well overdue path to a truly inclusive and sustainable world."*

**Erum Naqvi** is a fourth-year undergraduate student studying public policy, international development, and public law. Erum has policymaking experience in the environmental sector as an assistant program advisor (co-op) at the Ministry of Environment, Conservation, and Parks. She has also held research roles examining the political ecology of environmental protest at the University of Toronto Scarborough's Department of Global Development Studies and has conducted primary research on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on small businesses as a research intern at the Scarborough Business Association.

*"My work at the Reach Alliance was truly transformative as a researcher. Learning about how to conduct ethical fieldwork and applying it to the study of climate impacts in the communities near to us challenged my perspective on how urban areas contend with climate change. I am grateful to, and was endlessly inspired by, the youth leaders who I spoke to in the climate and civic advocacy space through the Just and Accountable Futures project. I am leaving with a passion for continuing to work at the intersection of social inequality, climate justice, and government policy."*

**Ibtesaam Moosa** is a public policy professional with a strong background in communications. She holds a master of global affairs degree from the University of Toronto's Munk School of Global Affairs & Public Policy, where she specialized in innovation policy and global security. She also interned with the UK Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office, focusing on research and strategies to address disinformation in the Middle East. Prior to her graduate studies, Ibtesaam served as a communications manager in Doha, Qatar. She has been working as a policy advisor at the Ontario Ministry of Finance, where she contributes to shaping income security and pension policies. She also earned a bachelor of science in communication from Northwestern University.

*"This research was eye opening, revealing that true climate action must be rooted in equity and justice. Hearing the stories of inspiring youth and working alongside dedicated teammates, I learned that impactful policy begins with empathy, transparency, and a genuine commitment to those it serves."*

**Zoha Sojoudi** is a fourth-year undergraduate student in the Rotman Commerce program at the University of Toronto. She is completing a management specialist along with minors in psychology and economics. She has worked as a management consultant at KPMG, and within the innovation team at Manulife, where she was trained as a LUMA-certified practitioner of human-centered design (HCD). Through this certification, Zoha became familiar with several tools and strategies for designing effective stakeholder interviews and focus groups. Beyond her corporate experience, Zoha has also spent over a year working with the Social, Moral, and Political Psychology Lab at the University of Toronto.

*"My conversations with youth climate leaders and learning about their perspectives surrounding climate action were truly transformative. I was able to immerse myself in their world, to feel as they felt. I am so grateful to have received the opportunity to engage in such fulfilling work at the heart of my hometown, and to have reinforced my appreciation for empathy-led and community-centred research."*
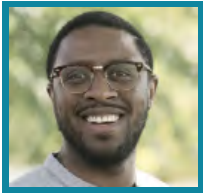
**Imara Ajani Rolston** is a social psychologist, policymaker, and associate professor at the University of Toronto's Dalla Lana School of Public Health. Rolston has contributed to research and publications in the areas of HIV/AIDS, health promotion, and community development and has advanced racial justice and urban responses to climate change with the City of Toronto's Resilient TO Office and the Confronting Anti-Black Racism Unit. He has over 15 years of experience working across Sub-Saharan Africa with organizations including the Stephen Lewis Foundation, Oxfam Canada, and Greenpeace Africa. Rolston earned a BA in political science and a MA in adult education from the University of Toronto. He earned his PhD in social psychology from the London School of Economics and Political Science.

*"The climate crisis will require municipalities to think in new ways about their relationships with neighbourhoods shaped by a history of underinvestment. The research the team is conducting will make important contributions to the way the City of Toronto rethinks its relationship with Black and racialized youth in Neighbourhood Improvement Areas as the climate crisis advances. This is a critical time for this research."*

Youth Climate Action in Toronto encompasses various initiatives designed to engage young people in climate activism and sustainability efforts. Key programs include the Youth Climate Action Grants, which fund student-led projects aimed at reducing greenhouse gas emissions and promoting sustainable practices within schools and communities. These projects involve activities like educational campaigns, workshops, and school ground revitalizations. In addition, the City of Toronto's TransformTO strategy involves youth collaboration with City officials to co-create climate action solutions, helping young leaders develop skills to tackle climate challenges in their communities. **https://youthclimatetoronto.ca**



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