

Thematic Research **A Sustainable Planet**

This thematic research paper has been developed to provide inspiration for the discussions taking place in the co-labs during the 20th World Council. Each paper provides a high-level overview of global developments, challenges and opportunities affecting people and communities in each of the Vision 2030 pillars and a few short case studies highlighting programs addressing these developments around the world.

- Securing a sustainable planet is one of the most defining challenges of our time. At the heart of this complex challenge lies the question of how to tackle biodiversity loss, pollution and, last but not least, climate change. All of these environmental problems are directly caused by unsustainable human activity, including overconsumption, the production of waste products, and the burning of fossil fuels.
- According to the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), none of the seventeen United Nations Sustainable Goals are likely to be achieved if human-induced climate change, loss of biodiversity, and pollution are not successfully addressed .
- Securing a sustainable planet is no longer purely a matter of environmental sustainability, but an issue of human well-being and dignity. This could potentially have serious implications for the current and future work of the YMCA movement everywhere as it directly threatens the very mission of the movement.
- The well-being of today's youth and future generations depends on an urgent and tangible break away from the current trends of environmental decline. Most urgently, the continued increase in temperatures has to be reduced.

In a series of UN reports², environmental experts and governmental representatives concluded that limiting global temperature rise to no more than 1.5°C is essential for us to avoid the worst climate impacts and to maintain a livable planet – for our generation and generations to come. Yet, based on current climate plans presented by countries, global warming is still projected to rise far above 1.5 °C by the end of the century. According to the World Bank Group, even if countries fulfill current emission-reduction pledges, our planet's mean temperature could reach as high as 4°C above pre-industrial levels by 2100³. Additionally, these 'climate plans' - so called 'Nationally Determined Contributions' (NDCs) - are based on assumed future action, which still remains to be taken.

Every small increase in temperature matters. For instance, there is a massive difference between the impacts of 1.5°C versus a 2°C warming. The UN reports show that even going from 1.5°C to 2°C warming could mean⁴:

- 1.7 billion more people experience severe heat waves (temperatures above 40°C longer than 3 days) at least once every five years.
- Sea rise – on average – another 10 centimeters (almost 4 inches),
- Up to several hundred million more people become exposed to climate-related risks and poverty.

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- The coral reefs that support marine environments around the world could decline as much as 99 percent.
- Global fishery catches could decline by another 1.5 million tonnes.

Ultimately, going above 1.5°C warming puts millions of more people at risk of potentially life-threatening environmental conditions.

Biodiversity loss and pollution are both contributing to the increase in global temperatures and reducing the resilience of the planet to sustain the changes resulting from the increased temperatures. Biodiversity contributes to and enhances climate mitigation and adaptation while climate change can lead to degradation and loss of biodiversity⁵. Pollution further aggravates the problem. Pollution, such as plastic waste, puts more pressure on biodiversity and contributes to additional warming. In 2019, the production of plastics added approximately 850 million tonnes of greenhouse gases (GHGs) to the atmosphere⁶. The interconnected environmental emergencies of climate change, loss of biodiversity and pollution need to be addressed together.

What does this mean for us and for the YMCA movement?

The global temperatures have already increased by 1.1°C and we are running out of time to meet the crucial 1.5°C goal.

- The most recent projections show that we need to peak global emissions by ideally 2025 and at the latest by 2030⁷.
- The heavy toll of global warming on populations across the globe compels governments, but increasingly also civil society, companies and other stakeholders, to come together and confront this reality head on.
- In November 2021, a United Nations Climate Change Conference, COP26, gathered world leaders in an attempt to push for climate action beyond the historic commitments and timeline of the Paris Accord of 2015 (the 1.5 °C goal).
- With little time left to prevent or limit catastrophic climate change, there is an urgent need to move from words to actions and ultimately, results. The time to act is now, but there are many ways to catalyse positive change and take climate action.

YMCA could play a key role in this process by raising awareness, influencing behaviors, and shrinking its own emissions. With its broad reach spanning diverse engagements, social backgrounds and geographical contexts, YMCA can contribute to creative, low-cost, high-impact solutions – locally and globally. The purpose of this brief is to provide an overview of the ways in which environmental degradation and particularly climate change is impacting youth and the overall work of organizations, as well as some best practices currently being implemented by other actors to potentially inspire and empower the respective national YMCA movements to jointly address this challenge.

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Developments and Trends

Many nations, private companies and organizations have already begun working on climate solutions and we have many remarkable examples, yet the world remains far behind the 1.5 °C goal⁸.

- In order to mitigate climate change, a rapid societal shift is required on all levels. However, the necessary changes are occurring only quite slowly, and it is unclear whether carbon emissions can be reduced in time to prevent drastic climatic consequences. This section provides a brief overview of the general trends present within climate action taken at large and by specific organizations.

Net-Zero: Carbon or Climate Neutrality

One of the major trends that have emerged in recent years is the so-called ‘Race to Zero’.

- This ‘slogan’ refers to the idea that society at large must make sure that the amount of GHGs released will equal the amount removed from the atmosphere.
- This can be achieved by either reducing carbon emissions or investing in ‘off-setting’ alternatives which draw carbon out of the atmosphere, such as reforestation initiatives.
- Often, this concept is used to equate ‘net-zero carbon emissions’ which refers to reaching Carbon Neutrality (only balancing carbon emission). However, as all GHG emissions play a role in climate change, so the term ‘net-zero emissions’, or Climate Neutral, which means achieving a balance between the production of GHG and how much is removed from the atmosphere⁹. This requires a two-step approach: finding ways to reduce initial GHGs and implementing strategies to remove unavoidable emissions.
- The YMCA movement has agreed on the goal of making steps to become ‘Climate Neutral’ by focusing on all GHG emissions.

Carbon Neutrality or Net Zero CO₂ Emissions

Referring only to carbon emissions. Achieving carbon neutrality means reducing as many carbon dioxide (CO₂) emissions as possible and then balancing those that cannot be eliminated through removals.

Net Zero Emissions

Getting to zero GHG through reduction in one’s own emissions-related activities while removing additional GHGs from the atmosphere to make up any shortfalls, all in alignment with the targets outlined in the Paris Agreement.

Climate Neutrality

Reduction of all GHGs to the point of zero while eliminating all other negative environmental impacts that an organization may cause.

The difference between Carbon Neutrality, Net Zero Emissions and Climate Neutrality. Source : [Energy Tracker](#)
 Many countries have made specific pledges to reach ‘Net Zero’.

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- Even if the concept is often applied to the climate pledges of countries like the United States or China, it is also used by organisations, private companies and movements – and many have already set out such ‘Net Zero’ goals¹⁰.
- Indeed, 137 countries have pledged to achieve Net Zero emissions and three countries have actually reached a Net Zero balance of emissions: Bhutan, Suriname and Panama¹¹. While most have their targets set for 2050, larger developing countries like China and India have set their goals for 2070¹².
- The private sector and non-governmental organizations are also working hard to achieve Net Zero and become climate neutral. Several private sector companies have much faster targets, like Microsoft, which aim to become carbon negative¹³ by 2030¹⁴.

Climate Justice

Another key trend within climate action is that of Climate Justice.

- Climate Justice is a concept that addresses the just division, fair sharing, and equitable distribution of the benefits and burdens of climate change and responsibilities to deal with climate change. Not all climate impacts are created equal, or distributed equally.
- From extreme weather to rising sea levels, the effects of climate change often have disproportionate effects on historically marginalized or underserved communities.
- Advocates for Climate Justice are striving to have these inequities addressed head on through long-term mitigation and adaptation strategies.

To a great extent, the climate crisis is a crisis of global justice. At the global level, injustice especially plays out within the relationship between developed countries and developing countries.

- Industrialised countries, such as Germany or the United States, have contributed to today’s global warming (both historically and often also currently) much more than many countries in the Global South, yet, the latter will bear the brunt of the harshest consequences of global warming. Within the Global South, the most vulnerable groups are the ones that suffer and will suffer the most¹⁵.
- The UN reports have highlighted that some are particularly vulnerable, highlighting children, youth, women (in particular during pregnancy), the elderly, the poor, people with disabilities or specific illnesses, indigenous peoples and ethnic minorities¹⁶. People working in certain sectors, for example farmers, smallholders and artisanal fishermen, were also identified as being particularly vulnerable .

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Similarly, the same communities being affected by marginalization and inequity are also the ones showing a greater propensity to being impacted by poor air quality and other types of pollution¹⁸. This is both the case on a local and global level. For example, a majority of recorded air pollution-linked deaths occur in developing countries and particularly in the big cities of developing countries¹⁹.

As a result, environmental degradation on all levels acts as a multiplier of existing injustices, with a tendency to amplify conflicts, and to further undermine fundamental human rights such as the right to food, water, shelter, health, and the right to dignity.

Impacts of Environmental Degradation and Climate Change on Young People

One of the core priorities for the YMCA movement is youth empowerment. There is a strong connection between youth and climate change – one simply cannot empower young people without incorporating climate change. Climate change affects young people in particular for several reasons.

Young People are Especially Vulnerable

First, young people, particularly children, are suffering and will suffer the most from climate change impacts. Indeed, young people will live to see the more extreme consequences of climate change.

- The years 2016 and 2020 are tied as the hottest years since records began in 1880; and 19 of the 20 hottest years ever recorded occurred since the year 2000²⁰.
- Looking ahead, youth populations are already quite large (such as in Asia) or set to increase exponentially until at least 2060 (such as in Africa) in the areas of the world which are most prone to the worst climate change impacts²¹.

Second, young people tend to have little capital, on often quite low incomes, with minimal work experience and few contacts.

- This makes it difficult for young people to remain economically and socially resilient as environmental conditions become more volatile. Economic insecurity leaves young people more exposed to climate hazards as they have few resources to rely on. Both rapid (weather events) and slow onset (desertification) climatic events impact local economies, and young people are particularly sensitive to transformations in the economy as their prospects and ambitions are deeply disrupted²².
- Due to climate change affecting access to a job, or more importantly to a decent job, life-long repercussions may be felt for young people all over the world.

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Catalysts for Change

Yet, youth are at the forefront of taking action to adapt and mitigate climate and environmental change. Many of the leading climate organizations/movements were both founded by youth and are youth-lead. Examples of movements are Fridays for Future, Sunrise movement, Extinction Rebellion among others²³.

- Young people are not only pushing for climate concerns through activism, but many governments and organizations have youth representatives/advisors present in international and national discussions on climate change.
- Young people all over the world have been striking, advocating, and volunteering for climate solutions whether through attending conferences, striking from school and pressuring politicians to listen to scientists, or calling for greater green jobs and by catalyzing their voting power.

In 2020 the United Nations Secretary General launched the **global Youth Advisory Group on Climate Change**, selecting seven members who meet to represent the changes youth are demanding globally. Furthermore, the **UNFCCC has their own Youth Constituency (YOUNGO)** which focuses on bringing youth forward within international climate politics²⁴. YOUNGO consists of many youth-led organizations, groups, delegations, and individuals working in climate change-related fields. Additionally, **UNICEF²⁵ recently announced that they will actively work on climate crises as a child's rights crisis** – clearly indicating that youth and children are at the center of the work on climate.

At the most recent UN climate conference, Stockholm +50, the Youth Policy Paper was mentioned in the official final draft – which is the first time a youth policy paper has been included. There is a massive possibility to use the power and innovation coming from young people to catalyze climate action – something that the YMCA movement is doing both through national YMCAs and on the international level through, for example, its involvement in the [Global Youth Mobilization initiative](#).

Impacts on Organisations and International Actors

Environmental degradation and climate change is beginning to have tangible impacts on the work of numerous organizations across all sectors. This reality is manifesting through the changing relationship that the world's leading humanitarian organizations have with climate change and the environment.

- Until the past year, humanitarian organizations only worked on environmental issues in relation to disaster-management and had no initiatives or programs focusing on preventative action²⁶.
- Yet, the UN reports clearly indicate that climate change is already significantly contributing to humanitarian crises in vulnerable contexts²⁷.

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- Now organizations that traditionally had no connection to climate and the environment are taking a clear stance to incorporate climate adaptation and mitigation programs into their work – meaning that there is a massive opportunity to join forces and accelerate climate action. For example, UNICEF is actively integrating sustainable frameworks into their projects such as using ‘environment-friendly’ WASH techniques when addressing issues of health and sanitation²⁸.

The private sector is also actively integrating environmental sustainability into their business models in many ways.

- Countless businesses and industries are now making a genuine effort to positively contribute to supporting environmental sustainability and now see themselves as partners in achieving sustainable development²⁹.
- Increasingly, companies realize that environmental sustainability is essential for the future of their business as environmental degradation is significantly impacting the future profitability of most industries³⁰. For example, climate change leading to extreme weather events such as floods and fires, among others, impact approximately 70% of all economic sectors worldwide³¹.
- Companies with sustainability business models actively work with governments, international institutions, and civil society organizations to attempt to foster sustainable growth³².
- The private sector is a key player in implementing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 17 (partnerships), because in order to reach the goals there is a need that the private sector will contribute with capital investment.
- Examples of sustainability measures currently being taken by companies include: Starbucks announcing it would reduce its carbon emissions by 50% or Mastercard presenting their ‘Priceless Planet Coalition’, which promises to plant 100 million trees over five years³³.

“Sustainability makes good business sense, and we’re all on the same team at the end of the day. That’s the truth about the human condition.”

- Paul Polman,
former Chief Executive Officer
of Unilever in 2018³⁴

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Karolina Lagercrantz is a youth environmental sustainability advocate from Sweden. She has experience working on climate and environmental degradation both within the public sector (in Sweden and Canada), the private sector, as well as activist networks. She is currently the Vice Director for a Swedish youth-led climate organization called PUSH Sweden. Most recently, Karolina attended COP26 as a delegate for a Canadian civil society climate network organization (BCCIC) and Stockholm+50 as a representative of PUSH Sweden. She is currently based in Geneva, Switzerland pursuing a Masters in International Affairs with a focus on Environment and Sustainability at the Geneva Graduate Institute.



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Annex 1: Case Studies

1) Too Good To Go - Creating a sustainable business model that works and makes a difference

Each year, 1/3 of food produced in the world goes to waste, and it is responsible for 8% of all greenhouse gas emissions. Too Good To Go, a certified B-corp social impact company, is on a mission to fight food waste worldwide by tapping into the innovative and entrepreneurial opportunities found in food waste itself.

Designed in Copenhagen in 2016, Too Good To Go is an app that offers users across Europe, the United States, and Canada access to unsold, safe-to-eat food from participating suppliers. The food is heavily discounted at a third of the regular price³⁵. Users can see which restaurants, food markets, or cafés in their neighborhood have surplus food available that day, which they can then pick up right before closing time.

The app seems like a simple idea, but it has had a tangible impact on the number of meals that food providers throw away. For instance, since it launched the app in the United States last September it has saved 572,460 meals³⁶. Globally the app has helped save 85.2 million meals since its creation.

The key success of Too Good To Go's business model is that it makes sense financially for both the consumers and the food providers, while at the same time leveraging the environmental benefit that comes with avoiding food waste. It is a win-win-win situation, as food providers can access a new customer base and customers can buy high-quality food for a lower price. Too Good To Go only charges a small fee for each meal they "save" in order to pay for their own operations³⁷.

Too Good To Go is not only a social impact company, but wants to start a movement at home, at the workplace, and at the governmental level, so that food as a resource is used effectively and distributed equally. For example, Too Good To Go works with local food banks and food providers in order to also donate surplus food at a local level in most of the countries where they operate³⁸. In countries like Germany and France, Too Good To Go works together with governments and policymakers to change regulations that currently cause food waste, such as changing expiration labels. The company also wants to create a general awareness about food waste and does so through an online knowledge hub as well as partnerships with schools³⁹.

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2) Arup Group Limited: Sustainable Building Design

Arup is a leading multi-disciplinary design firm that has played a key role in many of the most iconic and high-profile buildings all over the world, such as for instance the Sydney Opera House⁴⁰. Arup has a wide range of experts (more than 16,000 staff), offices in 30 countries and has participated in projects in over 160 countries⁴¹.

As cities are projected to expand rapidly over the next few decades, the demand for new, sustainable, buildings is growing and particularly in cities of the emerging economies. The rate of growth is massive – it has been estimated that between now and 2060 an area equivalent to the size of Paris will be constructed each week⁴². This means that making sure that buildings are created in a sustainable manner is utterly important.

In June 2019, the Arup Group Board shared their strategy on how the firm would work to contribute to achieving the 17 United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), setting out six principles that would guide future decision-making and investment priorities. Central to Arup's strategy is the need to adopt 'circular economy principles' and regenerate natural systems⁴³. A circular economy is based on the principles of 'designing out waste and pollution', meaning that materials and products are used as long as possible instead of being thrown away as part of the design and economic model⁴⁴.

For example, in 2008, the proposed scheme to replace the 50-year-old Forth Road Bridge in Scotland with a larger bridge was challenged by Arup⁴⁵. Instead, a new concept to retain the old bridge for light traffic was proposed, meaning only a smaller new bridge needed to be designed. Arup's approach meant a significant reduction in material and other resources used, as well as a quicker delivery of the project.

3) SportsArt - A Green Gym Technology Company

Traditional gyms are often equipped with electrical machines, which require a lot of energy to be used. Today, there are many ways to improve the environmental sustainability of gyms and fitness centers. Eco-friendly gyms provide people with ways to improve their health while simultaneously helping the environment. There are many business benefits to being an eco-friendly gym or fitness center as green practices not only minimize operational costs, but also often attract an emerging demographic of young consumers and employees⁴⁶.

SportsArt is a company that has committed to leading the fitness industry in eco-friendly action through research, design and education on sustainable business solutions and practices. Their mission is to use 'forward-thinking innovation' in order to create products which are not only socially and environmentally responsible, but also solve problems for facility owners⁴⁷.

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SportsArt is one of the largest single brand gym and fitness machine manufacturers in the world and is sold in over 70 countries worldwide. Instead of grid-run, they produce human-powered exercise machines⁴⁸. The basic premise of this manual, human-powered treadmill is that it generates electricity as you work out instead of using electricity as ordinary treadmills do. Human-powered equipment could help gyms generate their own energy, improve energy efficiency and lower their electricity bills simultaneously.

The company has a whole range of energy-producing gym equipment, such as the Verde Treadmill that can generate up to 200 watts of electricity per hour of use—or the equivalent wattage of the average refrigerator⁴⁹. To put this into perspective, this means that if the Verde treadmill was used an hour a day for 15 days out of the month, massive amounts of energy could not only be saved but generated: 28,800 watts generated per year, 29 kilowatt hours per year, saving 0.02 metric tons of CO₂ per year⁵⁰.

4) IFRC and the ICRC- Embodying Sustainability through Humanitarian work

The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) offer another good example of a movement which is currently actively integrating sustainability into its operations, both on a local and global level.

On June 1st 2022 together with the World Wildlife Foundation (WWF) the IFRC published a flagship report called “Working with Nature to Protect People: How Nature-based Solutions Reduce Climate Change and Weather-Related Disasters” that highlights how nature-based solutions can be used to address humanitarian crises by preventing the humanitarian impacts of weather-related disasters. This report highlights that the IFRC recognizes the need for an anticipatory, preventative approach for the work of their movement, as it can offer more effective solutions for people in crises⁵¹.

Indeed, one of the conceptual examples of how the IFRC and the ICRC are tangibly incorporating sustainability into their work is captured by their ‘Climate and Environment Charter for Humanitarian Organizations’, which intends to encourage and guide collective humanitarian action in response to the impacts of the climate and environmental crises⁵².

The Charter is the product of a broad consultative process across the entire humanitarian sector led by the ICRC and IFRC, bringing together humanitarian, climate and environment experts. Humanitarian professionals and organizations, including many UN agencies, international NGOs, RC National Societies, and local and national organizations were consulted and provided feedback on the Charter⁵⁴.

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The Charter includes seven high-level commitments intended to steer the sector's response to the climate and environmental crises. Among these commitments is to step up the humanitarian response to help people adapt to the growing impacts of environmental crises, to maximize the environmental sustainability of humanitarian programmes and operations, as well as reducing greenhouse gas emissions, while maintaining the ability to provide satisfactory humanitarian assistance⁵⁵.

A practical example of how such commitments translate into practice, can be found when looking at the ICRC's work on ensuring more sustainable access to water in Iraq and the Central African Republic. In Iraq, the ICRC works to alleviate water stress by rehabilitating water pumping and treatment stations, piped networks, and irrigation systems⁵⁶. In order to take sustainability into consideration, the ICRC has made a conscious effort to provide 'demand-side solutions' that involve reducing water losses instead of using more water (i.e. supply-side solutions), which only exacerbates water stress⁵⁷. Additionally, in rural areas of the Central African Republic where shallow wells are increasingly drying up during the dry season due to climate change, the ICRC actively decided to switch to drilling boreholes into deeper aquifers without exceeding their sustainable yield, rather than digging more wells⁵⁸.

Indeed, climate change and environmental degradation is not only changing the fundamental conditions of the work done by organizations, but organizations themselves are also changing to respond to these new challenges.

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