



Learnings from Conversations with Young Changemakers

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This report is a summary of FUEL's learnings to date, informed by ongoing engagement with young changemakers. This research and collaboration informs all of our work and allows us to be intentional in developing programming that truly responds to the needs of youth.

In this report, we provide:

- An introduction to FUEL - our mission and journey to-date
- A summary of our conversations with young changemakers,

Introduction

FUEL is a Canadian non-profit organization working to create an authentic and vibrant community of changemakers, equipped with the skills and support to achieve their goals and create sustainable impact.

Our Audience

Our work supports young founders or leaders (under 30) of community and social change work, who are looking to sustain their work - and themselves in this work.

Our Values

We are driven by youth voice - Everything we do, we do with youth. We aim to bring out the best in all those around us. We succeed together through authenticity, kindness and trust. We embrace the joy of changemaking.

Our Approach

- Engage youth as experts, with meaningful involvement in key decisions
- Provide fair compensation and value their lived experience
- Ensure a space where youth are invited to bring their whole selves
- Encourage rest, fun and time to recharge



FUEL's Story

» Our Why

We work with those who are passionate about making our world a better place. Young changemakers are creating immeasurable impact through their work and have incredible potential for social change.

However, they also experience significant barriers, with negative impacts on the sustainability of their community initiatives and the wellbeing of individual changemakers. Young changemakers often:

- Have limited access to resources and industry connections
- Are unable to cover their necessary income through changemaking, requiring them to juggle multiple other responsibilities
- Are lonely and seek a dedicated community of support
- Do not feel valued for their work, expertise and lived experiences
- Are burned out, or at risk of burnout

FUEL is built on a culture where people feel seen, valued and trusted. Our mission is to foster a vibrant community of young changemakers, equipped with the skills and supports to achieve their goals and create sustainable impact.

» Our Journey Thus Far

Young people are at the core of everything we do. Our programs are developed through co-development with youth changemakers, and young changemakers have been hired on FUEL's core team. To date, our research and development has included:

- **Interviews with 43 young changemakers** in Canada to understand their drivers, successes, challenges and support needs
- **Three co-development sessions** with changemakers to define our offerings
- Extensive secondary research
- Conversations with service organizations and funders across the sector
- Offerings development and partnership conversations
- **Pilot event in June 2023**

The Changemakers

We spoke with 43 young changemakers, aged 21 to 32, across Canada. Their initiatives were at various stages - from idea to start-up to growth. across diverse sectors, including:

- Mental health awareness
- Sexual and reproductive health
- Gender equality (including GBV)
- Poverty, homelessness and food insecurity
- Arts and culture
- Community building and spacemaking
- Equity, inclusion and anti-racism
- Support for BIPOC communities
- Support for 2SLGBTQ+ communities
- Youth education and empowerment
- Climate action
- International development and aid



In their words, success is:

- Tangible and concrete impact on community members
- Renewed funding or a successful long-term funding model
- Ability to pay staff or dedicate themselves to this work full-time
- Organizational growth, such as brand recognition, expanded partnerships and expanded reach
- Sustainability, including a successful transition to new leadership
- Remaining true to their values as the organization grows
- Increased awareness of their cause
- Institutional, government and policy change

» Driving Forces and Personal Attributes of Young Changemakers

- Young changemakers are motivated by their commitment to community and desire to address real problems they see in society. They are highly passionate and inherently driven to do good in the world.
 - They have a deep sense of empathy, often due to lived experiences of personal hardship, injustice, oppression or other barriers.
- They are resourceful and share an uncommon belief that they have both the power and the responsibility to make a difference.
- They bring a strong sense of justice and a deep understanding of systemic social and political inequities in their communities and beyond.
- They show immense self-awareness and openness to learning from others.
- They seek community. They want to support and find support in other like-minded individuals.



» What Skills Support Changemakers to Succeed?

Common trends exist in the personal, educational and on-the-ground experiences that young changemakers employ in their social impact work - or are looking to improve to increase their likelihood of success:

- Ability to create, articulate and deliver on a vision
- Resilience, determination and a willingness to take risks
- Curiosity
- Optimism and an internal locus of control
- Creativity, an innovation mindset and knowledge of entrepreneurial models
- Leadership skills
- Time management*
- Political advocacy
- Networking and partnership building
- Technical skills including: research, grant writing, event planning, project management, marketing and outreach, presentation skills and media experience.
- Resourcefulness (e.g. the ability to develop creative fundraising techniques, or to identify available resources such as grants, programs, networks and communities)



*Changemakers often juggle school, work and other professional responsibilities along with their changemaking work. Some struggle with time management - and setting boundaries or finding the right balance between their personal life and well-being, and the demands of their work.

Challenges and Support Needs

» Individual Challenges

The most common individual challenges experienced by changemakers were mental health struggles and burnout. Perfectionism, imposter syndrome and anxiety all contributed to burnout. Some feel an ongoing need to prove themselves due to their age, or that their actions are never enough. For some, emotional labour is a part of their work, experiencing vicarious trauma or re-traumatization.

Many young people were not paid for their changemaking work, despite their skills, experience and social impact achieved.

Changemaking is lonely work. Many are looking for a community of like-minded people. Some strived to build strong teams to support their work but were hindered by the need to rely on volunteers. They were also challenged by the lack of affordable space.

» Institutional and Systemic Challenges

Systemic barriers also impede changemakers' long-term progress. Current policy processes can be exclusionary, based on age, gender, race or social location. Changemakers were often excluded from decision-making processes, related to their areas of advocacy.

Institutional limitations hindered success with grants and partnerships with larger organizations, such as requirements for standardized evaluations, proof of governance structures and existing partnerships.

Lack of funding is a common struggle within the social services sector. Intense competition and duplicated efforts exacerbate the problem. There is a need for sustainable and "undesignated" funding (funding with minimal spending restrictions), allowing them to cover administrative expenses, staffing and plans for long-term sustainability.

Programs Changemakers Want, Developed through Youth-Centered Design

Youth shared many creative and thoughtful programming recommendations to support their work, including:

- Coaching
- Mentorship
- Community-building programs such as retreats
- Supports for individual growth and well-being
- Business skills training
- Access to business professionals
- Grants and resource guides
- Affordable certification opportunities
- Tailored and interactive offerings



Developing Youth-Centred Services: Recommendations from Youth



Youth also shared important considerations for how to approach and develop programs and services that cater to their needs:

1. Value changemakers as individuals, as human beings, not just their organization or initiative
2. Prioritize well-being - encourage rest, fun and connection; acknowledge the mental and emotional toll of changemaking work
3. Invest time in building relationships with changemakers; give them time to do the same
4. Engage youth as experts, with meaningful involvement in key decisions
5. Provide fair compensation for all work requested of youth and value their lived experience (especially when traditional credentials may pose a barrier)
6. Build youth skills, expertise and networks through sectoral collaboration
7. Offer responsive and transparent programming that keeps participants informed and involved

