

2020-21

Youth Health Policy Lab Reflections and Knowledge Sharing Guide

Prepared by Youth Policy Advocates
Youth Policy-Makers Hub, Ontario Council for
International Cooperation



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Youth Health Policy Lab, executed by Youth Policy Advocates from the Ontario Council for International Cooperation's (OCIC) Youth Policy-Makers Hub (YPH), was a pilot project aiming to meaningfully engage and amplify youth voices in the policy space. This exercise attempts to fill a gap for youth who may not have the opportunity to critically think through policy issues. Through this reflection piece, we hope to walk you through our process and key learnings we gained from this exercise to translate this knowledge and incite similar youth-led action in other spaces.

Background and Project Set-Up

We created a Youth Health Policy Lab to convene youth voices and encourage innovation to address healthcare challenges faced by Black, Indigenous, and Persons of Colour (BIPOC), who identified as women or non-binary in the healthcare system. Policy labs are spaces designed for active participation and discussion around policy topics with the goal of collecting ideas for policy design. While they tend to be catered towards professionals in a specific policy space, we believed in the power of gathering a group of young and innovative thinkers to enrich these discussions.

The creation process began with identifying key healthcare challenges, informed through desktop research and community consultations. This process revealed four emerging themes in the health sphere pertinent to BIPOC who identified as women and non binary: (1) rise in mental health issues; (2) racism in healthcare and healthcare delivery; (3) technology and disaggregated data in public health; and (4) sexual health and reproductive justice. Subsequently, we created and executed a Youth Health Policy Lab event, which consisted of an expert panel and moderated breakout sessions to unpack case studies in the four aforementioned themes. The event was intended to convene youth in Canada who could provide insight and unique solutions to health challenges. We are currently in the amplification phase and are working towards translating the insights we heard into actions that are influential within the policy space.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Through designing and launching this lab, we developed four main skills — objective-setting, policy research, project management and professional development, and strategic use of complementary skill sets. Notably, collaboration and community engagement were driving forces in creating these skills. In the process of creating and executing the Policy Lab, we had our share of successes and areas of improvement. Our biggest victories were the execution of this lab itself and the youth we engaged and learned from. These activities created a strong foundation upon which we can build future youth-led action within the health space. Two identified areas of improvement include refining our lab structure to accommodate for virtual learning and creating a more iterative and concrete amplification strategy.

The experience of constructing this lab was a meaningful exercise in youth empowerment. We openly shared our thoughts and voices on issues that needed to be addressed, and we found ourselves identifying and reimagining how advocacy and policy could look like and be amplified to a vast group of youth. This project gave us space to push, challenge, and imagine the future of policy and the role it plays in our communities. We have identified key actions youth can undertake to create a youth-led Policy Lab:



- Reflect on who you are and what you care about.



- Continuously educate yourself on what is happening in your community and the world.



- Add to the space and amplify existing work.



- Think about the type of space you are creating.



- Recognize your blindspots and limitations.

- Enjoy the process - it is more meaningful than the end result.

For organizations supporting youth-led Policy Labs, we impart some key lessons:

- Create a space that encourages youth leadership.
- Be transparent about the resources and support you can provide.
- Provide mentorship and networking opportunities.
- Compensate youth for their time and efforts.

Message From Our Youth Policy Advocates

We wish to thank a huge community of people who supported us through our journey in putting this Policy Lab together. Our community includes youth and experts we consulted to design this Lab, youth who participated and shared their insights, experts who shared their learnings, and the OCIC. We hope to honour your contributions through this piece and future work.

OCIC's Youth Policy-Makers hub is based in current-day Tkaronto. We acknowledge that OCIC operates on the traditional territory of many nations including the Mississaugas of the Credit, the Anishnabeg, the Chippewa, the Haudenosaunee and the Wendat peoples and is now home to many diverse First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples. We the youth span across various unceded territories of the Indigenous Peoples of Turtle Island in what is known as Ontario.

This reflection piece was prepared by a group of Youth Policy Advocates from the Ontario Council of International Cooperation's 2020-2021 Youth Policy-Makers (YPH) cohort. Collectively, we possess different, intersecting identities and come from various walks of life. Here is a small snapshot of our stories:

Kanishia Mensah is a recent graduate from Waterloo University's Peace and Conflicts Masters program and is also a graduate of the Bachelor of International Development program at Humber College. Kanishia currently works at Sisters in Sync as the Program Coordinator cultivating workshops where women of colour can share their intrinsic knowledge and their lived experiences in safe and welcoming environments.

Erika Dupuis is an incoming Master of Public Health student at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine and is also a graduate of the Master and Bachelor of Social Work programmes at Ryerson University. As a practicing Registered Social Worker and consultant, Erika has supported several youth-led and youth engagement initiatives aimed at advancing youth health equity both domestically and globally.



Harshini Ramesh is a recent graduate from McMaster University's Bachelor of Health Sciences Honors program and currently works as a Research Associate at Smart Prosperity Institute. She is also the Director and Founder of Youth Policy Advocates' Policy Corner. Her work is shaped by a unique multi-sectoral and interdisciplinary lens, gained from engagements spanning across different health and climate spaces. As an avid researcher and policy enthusiast, she looks forward to using her skills and experiences to support communities and transform systems.

Anthony Chen holds a Bachelor of Arts in Health Studies and Psychology from the University of Toronto. He is driven by the quest for greater understanding of worldly phenomena and for problem-solving innovations. His interest in social issues largely began from his university education in health studies. It is during this time, the social-determinants-of-health model fundamentally changed his worldview to make prosocial action an integral part of his mission statement.

Hajar Seiyad is a 4th-year undergraduate student at the University of Toronto Scarborough doing a double major in Mental Health Studies and Political Science. She currently works as a research assistant at Women's College Hospital, is a Youth Policy Advocate with OCIC's Youth Policy-Makers Hub and is the Editorial Staff Coordinator of Youth Policy Advocates' Policy Corner. She is passionate about reducing disparities by creating opportunities for youth advocacy and engagement.

Background and Project Set-Up

The idea to host a Youth Health Policy Lab sprang from a desire to create space for youth to share innovative ideas and solutions to policy problems. Policy Labs are spaces designed for active participation and discussion on policy topics with the goal of collecting insights as well as smart ideas for policy design. While they tend to be targeted towards professionals in a specific policy space, we believed in the power of gathering a group of young and innovative thinkers to enrich policy discussions. In response, we constructed and executed this Policy Lab to: (1) insert youth voices into the health policy space; (2) amplify issues we were concerned about; and (3) create a space for other youth to speak to identified issues.



Youth Led Action



Amplify Issues



Youth Engagement

We focused on healthcare issues impacting BIPOC who identified as women or non-binary (from now on referred to as folks)¹ to gain a better understanding on how COVID-19 has created unique challenges and barriers to access and delivery of healthcare services for BIPOC folks. Young people's voices are paramount to inclusionary and meaningful discussions on BIPOC folks' health issues. While inclusion and analysis were at the forefront of our minds in the creation of the event, our primary goal was to build and foster a platform amongst young people who are interested in contributing to policy and advocacy at a national level.

The Youth Health Policy Lab was a pilot in the meaningful engagement of youth to speak to and amplify issues they recognize in the policy space. This exercise is an attempt to fill a gap for youth who may not have access to traditional policy-making or decision-making spaces or the opportunity to critically think about policy issues. Through this reflection piece, we hope to walk you through our process and the key learnings we gained from this exercise, to translate this knowledge and spark similar youth-led action in other spaces.

¹ We recognize the importance of intersectional experiences and therefore did not limit our characterization of this population group. Instead we recognize diverse experiences of traditionally and historically marginalized communities, such as: BIPOC; female-identifying; 2S and LGBTQIA+; as well as gender, physically, and/or neuro diverse; and migrants, among others.

Phases of Our Work



01. Creating the Lab

Ideation and conceptualization spanned from December 2020 to January 2021, wherein our many team discussions led us to creating a Policy Lab aimed at exploring the disproportionate impacts faced by BIPOC folks navigating the health sphere. Our research process, consisting of desktop research and consultations with youth in the health spaces, identified four emerging theme areas: (1) rise in mental health issues; (2) racism in healthcare and healthcare delivery; (3) technology and disaggregated data in public health; and (4) sexual health and reproductive justice. These four topic areas guided the creation of the Lab event and its accompanying materials.

Resources for creating policy labs:

- Example of how a policy lab is structured: [The Canada 2020 Policy Lab](#)
- Example of policy lab: [AI Futures Policy Labs](#)
- Policy lab toolkit: [AI Futures Policy Lab Toolkit](#)



02. The Policy Lab Event

The planning process for this event lasted 4 months and resulted in a cumulative event held on May 22, 2021. The event consisted of a panel of experts that featured key thinkers and experts working within the healthcare field who actively advocate for or think about the nexus between BIPOC folks and health. Our event was designed to equip youth with knowledge to solve real, identified challenges. Four moderated breakout sessions were led with three intentions: (1) unpacking case studies pertaining to the four emerging themes; (2) gathering youth insights; and (3) engaging youth to critically think about these challenges. Our event engaged 38 participants across the country to come together and shed light on rethinking the health landscape. These youth were prompted to sign-up through EventBrite, with no cost attached for participation.

Resources for event planning:

- [Case study breakout questions](#)- our event materials

Phases of Our Work



03. Amplification Work

We recognized that youth perspectives were needed to identify the complex landscape for health in Canada and appropriately reflect it in policy design. As such, we set out with the intention to amplify the work we did and the insights we gathered within the policy space. Of interest to us is communicating not only the knowledge shared by youth across Canada but also the process we undertook to put together this initiative. This reflection piece is the first of future projects we hope to showcase from this work.

Tips for amplifying work

- Speak with the community you hope to support to figure out what they need.
- Identify gaps you can fill by connecting with organizations working in the space.
- Work with experts or mentors in the space you want to influence to find what is the best way to share the information you are generating or collecting.



Key Learnings and Knowledge Sharing

Lessons Learned and Skills Gained

Putting together a youth-led Policy Lab will build new skills that help make the project a success. Below is a list of the main skills we gained in the process:



01. Objective-setting.

In the ideation phase, we learned to create clear project objectives and project-manage to meet goals. As well, project ideation taught us to connect and interweave each team member's interest and experiences into the lab.

How to set objectives:

- Do research and understand what the challenges exist in your problem of interest - Who is impacted? How are they impacted? What is being done? What is missing?
- Have scoping discussions with experts to narrow down on a defined set of challenges. Experts can include people working in the field or those with lived experiences.
- Outline what you want to gain for your end product. What is the outcome of your project (e.g. a report, a blog, a discussion with an MP, etc.)? What is the impact of your project (e.g. adds to dialogue, new research evidence, supporting an organizational mandate, etc.)?



02. Policy research skills

While creating the lab event, we refined policy research and stakeholder consultation skills by providing feedback to support the research process and engaging with members of the policy community for guidance. The stakeholder engagement, in particular, shed light on how policy labs play a role in the policy space, shaping the way we constructed the project and designed intended outcomes. Policy labs are spaces designed to think about innovative solutions to policy problems and therefore, different people from diverse backgrounds are invited to provide input. This learning point allowed us to think about who we wanted in the room and how we could structure discussions.

How to gain or apply policy research skills:

- Start by indiscriminately reading the news, reports, and academic research for a problem you are passionate about. Once you identify some issues, you can research more thoroughly. Pursue rabbit holes - they still give you a depth of understanding for your issues of interest.
- Think about who you want to learn from and outline what you specifically want to learn. We recommend creating a one-page summary of your project and your “asks” before reaching out to people.

Key Learnings and Knowledge Sharing



03. Project management and professional development.

Extensive planning was applied to map out key actions, timelines, and the individual responsibility for various tasks. Specific roles were assigned, allowing for members to execute tasks in an organized fashion, while gaining skills necessary for exploring and identifying policy challenges and engaging with youth. For example, roles included liaising and developing partnerships with organizations and speakers in the field, developing Policy Lab materials (like case studies), marketing the event to targeted audiences, and conducting the workshop and briefs. Each one of us is walking away having specialized in a target area, such as developing case studies, and its accompanying skills.

How to effectively project manage:

- Identify who is on the team and what they will do.
- Plan backwards - start with an end date and then project plan what you will do from your start to end date. We recommend setting big monthly goals and working towards them.
- Create SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic, and defined Time Frame) - creating smaller targets over a period of time make tasks more achievable.
- Revisit your goals periodically and adjust according to where you are in the process and whether it is still achievable. Build in flexibility to account for life events and the capacity of your peers.



04. Strategic use of complementary skills

We were a multidisciplinary team, which gave us access to a roster of different skill sets and allowed us to support team members in different ways. It also enriched our knowledge on how to consider issues and manage differing opinions, while teaching us to navigate contrasting opinions and find common ground.

How to identify and use complementary skills:

- Have a conversation about what your backgrounds, interests, and skill sets are. This will help identify where there is overlap and where individuals might have strengths to use.
- Talk about where each of you would like to gain specific skills and identify who can support them. Pair up with one another and support the development of skills.

Key Learnings and Knowledge Sharing

Successes and Areas for Improvement

Since the launch of our Lab, we have been reflecting on our process to articulate our ideas, thoughts, and opinions on how the event affected us and to map out a path moving forward.

A major success was planning and executing the event itself. We wanted to be intentional with the Lab's purpose and meaningfully involving youth in the policy space, a feat requiring an immense amount of work and forethought. A factor for success was the input, guidance, and mentorship from experts as well as youth to guide the design of both the structure and contents of this Lab. Another positive outcome of our efforts was facilitating knowledge sharing, achieved through our engagements with youth during consultations and the active participation of attendees during our event. A factor for success was the environment we created during the Lab event leading to lively and active breakout room discussions. Youth felt welcomed, safe, and engaged in sharing their opinions and ideas on topics surrounding BIPOC folks in healthcare. This environment was created by being transparent about how the information would be used (aggregated, anonymous, and shared as a bulk in the policy space), using colloquial and accessible language, and not recording discussions sessions. Furthermore, the session was youth-led in an effort to remove hierarchical power-dynamics. This contributed to a successful event and a mutually beneficial learning experience for the youth who were involved.

Two identified areas of improvement are our lab structure and amplification strategy. In terms of a structure, while a 3-hour Zoom session facilitates community building in a short period of time, it can contribute to Zoom/technology fatigue. A future consideration includes splitting the panel and breakout room sessions over the course of two days to provide attendees with a break between the two key components of the event. Furthermore, it provides time to digest the information from the panel and participate in breakout sessions with renewed energy. Another potential area for improvement includes strengthening our amplification plan. This would involve continuously iterating and developing more concrete ideas about how the information we generate or collect will be used and with whom it will be shared. Actions to do this may include seeking mentorship to refine our direction or creating connections in the community to carve out paths for amplification and knowledge sharing.

Key Learnings and Knowledge Sharing

A Meaningful Exercise for Youth Empowerment

The Youth Policy-Makers Hub cultivated a safe working environment for us to pursue this project, making this a truly meaningful project. In sharing our unique lived experiences, passions, and knowledge through the YPH, this working group identified pressing issues that were meaningful to each individual and the collective. Having the opportunity to openly share our thoughts and voices on issues that needed to be addressed, we found ourselves identifying and reimagining how advocacy and policy could look like and be amplified to a vast group of youth. All of us were passionate about the healthcare space and wanted to influence it as youth. From our own experiences, we found it difficult to enter and influence healthcare, without specific credentials which gave one “credibility. Therefore, this project allowed us to make change in a way that was meaningful to us, while contributing to dialogue. The four emerging themes of focus also granted us the opportunity to reflect and support one another as we grew in our findings and learnings. As youth changemakers, we are often told that our ideas are not feasible or too ambitious. This project gave us space to challenge the future of policy and the role it plays in our communities.

As the lab was underway, it became evident that meaningful connections between the youth, the panelists, and the case studies presented were being made. Whether participants were familiar with advocacy and policy frameworks or were interested in learning about the disparities and inequities in Canada’s healthcare system, they all left with different perspectives and shifted the policy space. Overall, youth can make contributions to the policy space by being passionate about social causes and approaching advocacy in ways that engage expert voices, add to existing research, create case studies or share lived experiences. This exercise was meaningful, not only in how it was conducted and who it invited, but also as a testament to how we can make policy more accessible to different communities, especially youth.

Fostering youth-led action in other spaces

This youth-led lab is one example of countless others in the realm of youth engagement pushing to expand the policy space. Through our reflections, we would like to share some parting lessons that can inform similar actions or spark innovation in other youth. While these are lessons learned from the Policy Lab, these lessons are transferable to other youth-led initiatives.

Key Learnings and Knowledge Sharing

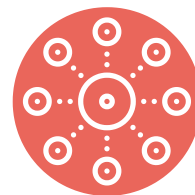
For youth looking to put together a Policy Lab project:



- **Reflect on who you are and what you care about.** If you want to drive change but are unsure as to where to start, think about your values, life experiences, and the activities you are engaged in. This is a good first step towards identifying starting points. Your lived experiences are a great guiding force in recognizing gaps or areas for improvement.



- **Continuously educate yourself on what is happening in your community and the world.** Once you identify what you care about, educate yourself on key issues and look for resources. Familiarize yourself with what is happening in the world and in community spaces. What are people talking about? What gaps can you fill? What can you improve as a young person?



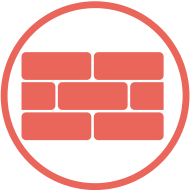
- **Add to the space and amplify existing work.** Understand who is already addressing issues you are passionate about and see how you can support their initiative. This can include brainstorming ways to assist organizations in adapting youth knowledge, skills, or expertise to their activities or volunteering to support existing initiatives. More often than not, people are open and willing to engage.



- **Think about the type of space you are creating.** If you come up with an initiative or project, connect your objectives to the structure of your project. For the Youth Health Policy Lab, we designed breakout sessions with case studies so that youth could deconstruct a specific problem and provide targeted solutions. Thinking through who should be in the room, how the room is constructed (e.g., whether it is a big group session or smaller, intimate groups), and how the session is conducted (e.g., facilitated, open-roundtable) will give you vastly different outcomes.

Key Learnings and Knowledge Sharing

For youth looking to put together a Policy Lab project:



- **Recognize your blindspots and limitations.** You, as a unique individual, come with a set of important lived experiences, expertise, and knowledge. However, it cannot possibly reflect all the experiences and intersections of identities that exist in the world. Identify where you are unable to comment on things and invite other youth to share and engage. Go the extra mile and step back to create space for other folks to take charge and lead. There is great value in stitching together a tapestry of voices and perspectives.



- **Enjoy the process - it is more meaningful than the end result.** Be intentional with the work you want to do. Advocacy and amplification work is iterative and there are times where you will hit a wall. Draw on your community and support system, and keep going. You are absolutely making a difference.

For youth-facing organizations looking to support a youth-led Policy Lab exercise

- **Create a space that encourages youth leadership.** Advertise a space that is present for developing youth leadership. Once youth are in the space, ensure the programming is not too prescriptive, which could detract from developing creativity. Provide guidance when invited or specifically requested by the youth community.
- **Be transparent about the resources and support you can provide.** Youth-led projects will require resources like funding, physical space, or other materials. Be upfront from the get-go about what you are able to provide and where they may have to fill in the gaps. As much as possible, provide the necessary resources or at least support youth in seeking out resources.
- **Provide mentorship and networking opportunities.** Youth will need guidance in initiating, implementing or scaling up initiatives. Having mentors or connections in the community which offer mentorship and networking opportunities is vital for growth. For example, the Youth Policy-Makers Hub has an ally community which we tapped into to grow our project.
- **Compensate youth for their time and efforts.** Youth deserved to be paid and receive recognition for their hard work. Prepare honoraria or other in-kind contributions in partnership with the youth involved.

Final Thoughts

Through this experience, we added to our own professional and personal experiences and tested the limits of perseverance and passion. As we created connections within and beyond our own lived experiences, we were able to and continue to work towards making meaningful and innovative contributions to the policy space. We hope this piece adds to your learning and sparks innovation in you or any youth you know.

Please reach out if you would like to learn more about our journey or process. Thank you for reading!



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