

Movement Memo

Developing Strategic Capacity and
Cultivating Collective Care:
Towards Community Power

By Amanda Harvey-Sánchez



HUB



Acknowledgements

This memo is produced by the Climate Justice Organizing HUB, a project of the Small Change Fund. The author would like to thank the following current and former HUB team members whose brilliant insights made this memo possible and whose feedback helped clarify and sharpen its analysis: Sara Adams, Jacqueline Lee-Tam, Jaouad Laaroussi, Zaël Gourd, Jacob Pirro, Kenzie Harris, Tess Cameron, Mackenzie Burnett, Ayo Ogunremi, Florence Lirimier Dugas, and Tom Liacas. Any and all errors are the author's.

Main Author: Amanda Harvey-Sánchez

Editors: Climate Justice Organizing HUB core team

Report Design: Mackenzie Burnett

Cite as: Harvey-Sánchez, A. (December 2024). Movement Memo - Developing Strategic Capacity and Cultivating Collective Care: Towards Community Power. The Climate Justice Organizing HUB, Montreal, Canada.

About the Author



Amanda Harvey-Sánchez
(she/her) is a Latina organizer,
activist-researcher,
and educator.

The daughter of a climate scientist and a teacher, Amanda was called into the climate justice movement through working on her campus fossil fuel divestment campaign at the University of Toronto in 2015. Since then, she has had the opportunity to take part in community-based and justice-focused campaigns and projects across Canada, the US, India, and France. She is currently completing her PhD at the University of Toronto, on the social and political life of climate justice organizing in Canada. She is the HUB's Principal Coach and Program Development Specialist.



The movement feels stuck.

”

It's a sentiment many of us at the Climate Justice Organizing HUB have expressed in one way or another over the past year, and one we have heard repeatedly from the grassroots organizers we work with across so-called Canada.



In 2023, our team carried out a [needs-assessment process](#) with grassroots organizers across so-called Canada and found that organizers are struggling to intentionally and purposefully interweave organizing practices that can be experienced as a dichotomy between "doing" (articulating and achieving clear goals that bring about material change in the world) and "being" (forging the relationships of trust, care, and collaboration needed to achieve said change).

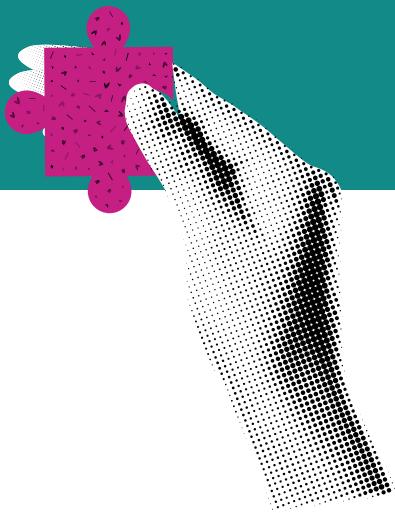
In August 2024, we convened for our annual team retreat to analyze movement challenges in a more intimate setting, and envision, imagine, and assess possible paths forward for supporting grassroots climate justice groups.

This short memo serves as a summary of key themes and insights that emerged during a retreat session on "building deeper and wider". We are sharing these reflections publicly in a spirit of humble reflection and collective and continuous learning. We do so both to make transparent the thoughts, experiences, and analysis informing our programming and in the hopes that our own reflections may spur further critical discussion and action (including in areas we may have missed) to strengthen the climate justice movement.

Our collective discussion led us to the assessment that building long-term power in the climate justice movement requires developing strategic capacity across grassroots groups and cultivating practices of collective care as an integral component of our movement culture.



Strategic Capacity



Organizing in response to [complex and dynamic](#) political challenges such as the climate crisis requires that organizations and organizers develop strategic capacity. The focus on *strategic capacity* rather than *strategy* is meant to highlight that strategizing is a verb, it is an iterative and dynamic process, and it requires a skill set that can only be honed through practice and real-world engagement in social struggle.

Strategic Focus, Collaboration, and Scale: Many groups in the climate justice movement are struggling with finding their [strategic focus](#) or niche within the broader movement, leading to disorganized or chaotic attempts at social change that lack a coherent theory of change and power. In some instances, difficulties with aligning on a shared project or campaign have resulted in groups fizzling out entirely. There are also issues with fragmentation, with more and more small groups forming that are not intentionally building a broad base of people [that can function at scale](#).

Relatedly, collaborations across groups, including between grassroots groups and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), are rare. NGOs typically lack the skills and knowledge to be able to effectively work with the grassroots and there is a notable absence of mediators or “middle groups” that can navigate both worlds, meaning that we are missing opportunities to leverage the power and resources of larger organizations towards more radical social change.

Sometimes, competition between groups or attempts to appear more politically virtuous can also inhibit fruitful collaboration, and groups frequently lack a nuanced understanding of how different tactics and strategies can complement one another and form part of a broader [movement ecology](#). These challenges are also at times influenced by broader attitudes of moral absolutism. Finally, solidarity efforts can sometimes be shallow or superficial, lacking the foundations of long-term relationship building and material support.

Ambition, Creativity, and Imagination: Many of the strategic difficulties noted above are underpinned by broader challenges pertaining to ambition, creativity, and imagination. Many groups lack what our francophone colleagues call “les moyens de nos ambitions”, namely [picking battles](#) that are [big enough to matter and small enough to win](#).



This is compounded by the fact that for many of us, we lack real-world examples and a deep understanding of how winning happens in practice, including factors such as power analysis and finding points of leverage against an opponent. While there is often a tacit understanding of what groups do not want to do (e.g. pure advocacy, lobbying) and a broad desire to build “people power”, without an explicit understanding of the specific mechanisms involved many groups get trapped into not knowing where to start, sometimes with paralyzing consequences.

Relatedly, there is frequently a timidness in the movement when attempting to devise campaigns, and many groups struggle to find the confidence to step into their roles as worthy protagonists in the climate justice movement. Many groups also struggle to move beyond a defensive posture towards offensive agenda-setting campaigns. Finally, there can often be a broad feeling in the movement that we have “[tried everything](#)” and still failed, leading to disillusionment and a lack of creativity and imagination when experimenting with new tactics and strategies.

“Big Enough to Matter, Small Enough to Win” - Case Studies

Driver's Licenses for All, Movimiento Cosecha, New Jersey

Movimiento Cosecha is a national immigrant rights organization in the United States seeking permanent protection, dignity, and respect for all 11 million undocumented immigrants in the country. In 2018, building off the work of other organizations, Cosecha's New Jersey chapter launched a Driver's Licenses For All campaign. Their campaign culminated in the successful passing of legislation in 2019 enabling undocumented people in the state to apply for driver's licenses.

For Movimiento Cosecha, driver's licenses were an example of a battle that is “big enough to matter and small enough to win” as it was a winnable campaign whose victory would make a real difference in the lives of undocumented people, and an important [rallying cry for immigrants](#) with the power to inspire and galvanize a new constituency of older immigrant workers towards further action across the country. In their own words, [“licenses today, permanent protection tomorrow”](#).



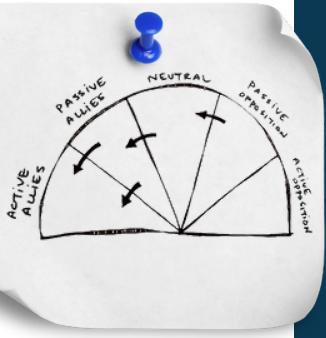
Photo Credit: Walter Hergt



"Big Enough to Matter, Small Enough to Win" - Case Studies

Fossil Fuel Divestment Campaigns, Canada

When university fossil fuel divestment campaigns emerged in the early 2010s they were a novel way to organize a new constituency of youth and students on the problem of global anthropogenic climate change. Building off the legacy of campaigns for divestment from South African Apartheid and tobacco, fossil fuel divestment campaigns enabled students to take immediate action within institutions to which they belong while moving beyond generalized "awareness raising" or individual consumer-choice responses to the climate crisis. Fossil fuel divestment campaigns were about building student power against a then-newly-defined enemy in the fossil fuel industry and reclaiming universities as institutions for the public good.



Campuses that have won their initial campaigns for fossil fuel divestment in their university endowments have leveraged the power and momentum of these victories towards new related campaigns for divesting university pension funds, eliminating fossil fuel funding from climate-related research, and kicking fossil fuel funding banks off university campuses. Moreover, many fossil fuel divestment organizers are now working in collaboration with campaigns for divestment from weapons manufacturers complicit in the ongoing genocide in Gaza, leveraging institutional and intergenerational organizing knowledge towards cross-issue solidarity for collective liberation.

Collective Care



The term *collective care* is used to highlight the importance of moving beyond individualism and towards relational, holistic, and collaborative approaches to integrating care into our movement culture. While collective care does not discount the importance of self-care, the focus is on the norms, assumptions, and rituals enacted at a group and movement level that encourage (or discourage) healthy and accessible organizing practices for all, while also recognizing our interdependence as foundational to the success of our movement.

Relational Skills: Many groups struggle with relational skills both internally within their own groups and when seeking to work with other groups. While there is a broad discourse in the climate justice movement around the importance of [building cultures of care](#), the way that this manifests in practice can sometimes be superficial or individualistic in nature. This is unfortunate given that there are real and pervasive issues of accessibility in the climate movement that are not being effectively addressed when the concept of care becomes more about "feeling good" than creating truly accessible, inclusive, and empowering spaces for the most marginalized.

As with strategic challenges noted above, part of the difficulty stems from lack of experience. We are steeped in a broader culture of overwork, hyperproductivity, and individualism, meaning that for so many of us, we do not even know what [alternative modes of structuring our work look and feel like](#). Finally, fear and suspicion within the climate justice movement contributes in many instances to a culture of silence and avoidance rather than open discussion and honest engagement with difficult topics, posing challenges to relationship building, trust, and healthy [conflict transformation](#).

Awareness that these relational skills are lacking without [clear avenues](#) to build them also means that organizers sometimes resort to gossiping and infighting (destructive conflict) rather than generative conflict and repair.

Photo Credit: Elizabeth Pinault





Disability and Access - Case Study

"Most spaces continue to make access and care an afterthought, lack of thought, or a 'thing we'll get to when we have time.' Unfortunately, for those of us with chronic access needs (e.g. working multiple jobs, chronic health issues, caretakers etc.), it means you'll continue to shut us out. Often, access requests are treated like 'special privileges', and we end up feeling like a burden for not 'pushing through' our suffering or figuring out our own solution in a world not designed to accommodate differences."

The first time I joined a space for disabled organizers, I immediately felt the difference. We moved slower. We checked in to ensure everyone was moving with us. We made commitments to check in on one another outside of the space, and had accountability measures to make sure this happened. We humbly acknowledged when we learned something new about ableism and disability. When multiple access needs were raised, we creatively problem-solved together on the best possible compromise, which informed how we continued our work." - HUB team member





Burnout and Emotional Challenges: Burnout is a pervasive issue in social movements, including the climate justice movement, but there is often a lack of understanding of [what contributes to burnout](#). Burnout is usually seen as an individual problem that can be addressed through small changes by the person experiencing it, rather than an indication (and invitation) to [change collective work practices, structures, and norms](#) to the benefit of everyone in the organization.

A culture of urgency, prevalent in both broader society and in some climate campaigns emphasizing the "end of the world", can pose challenges to slowing down enough to make the necessary changes for sustainable and resilient organizing practices to flourish. In some cases, negative experiences with burnout (such as during the 2019 climate strikes) without viable strategies to address them have led to fear and paralysis when engaging in organizing.

Burnout in Action - Case Studies

"In the group I am in, I often feel that we fail to address the fact that we are engaged in too many projects simultaneously, leading to collective burnout. Some members say that we individually need to put our limits on the number of projects we are in, instead of acknowledging that it is a collective problem and the majority of the group feels overwhelmed. [...] We need to learn how to choose and prioritize projects not only because they are good ideas, but mostly because we have the capacity to achieve them and because they motivate us." - HUB team member

"A group I was a part of ended up having a major falling out about group structure, which culminated in intense burnout for all involved parties and many experienced and dedicated organizers leaving the group. While on the surface the conflict was about structure, at a deeper level it became obvious that many people did not feel appreciated or respected and that there were issues with top-down leadership practices that required relational shifts in how we worked together beyond what kind of structure we adopted on paper. There was also an unspoken assumption in our group that retaining members required being engaged in constant action, which meant that we never allowed ourselves to pause and reassess or make collective decisions in a way that allowed folks to meaningfully participate in the process - a decision that ultimately lost us more members and resulted in a lot of unnecessary pain and burnout." - HUB team member

Finally, [grief, anxiety, and other heavy emotions](#) are pervasive amidst the multiple overlapping crises we are living through (not only the climate crisis), but the climate justice movement has not yet found effective ways to attend to them collectively. Creating space for organizers to collectively process these emotions is important for relationship building, trust and mutual support, uncovering shared values, exploring new ideas for action, and learning about resources within activist groups that could be leveraged in new ways towards building collective power.



Still, some organizers have found that groups and spaces that grapple with heavy emotions amidst the climate crisis may do so in ways that fail to harness the full potential of sharing deep feelings in a group setting. For instance, some of these venues wind up directing people towards strategies for individually coping with feelings that "we are not going to win" rather than channeling shared experiences of grief, anger, and despair towards collective action and building campaigns that *can win*. This is especially unfortunate given that many far-right groups are effectively channeling anxiety about the state of the world towards hate, xenophobia, and racism.



Photo Credit: Adapted from "[saskatoon vigil](#)" by Council of Canadians / [CC BY-NC-SA 2.0](#)



Leveraging Heavy Feelings Towards Collective Action - Case Studies

Anger and Rage as Motivating New Stories of Climate Action, Quebec

In September 2023, a group of activists in Quebec organized a week of “Climate Rage” as a means to recenter rage and anger as motivators for radical and systemic action on the climate crisis. This event emerged in response to a constellation of events and factors, including: 1) anti-COP15 protests in Montreal the previous December, which took place during the United Nations Biodiversity Conference (COP15) and critiqued governments for failing to address systemic drivers of biodiversity loss such as corporate exploitation and colonial land management practices, 2) burgeoning coalition-building during the recent mobilizations for Earth Day/land defense day, 3) growing discontent with the homogenizing and deradicalizing influence of some national environmental NGOs, and 4) frustration with individualized coping strategies promoted in the mainstream climate emotion discourse in the region.

The purpose of the week of Climate Rage was to bring together student, union, and community groups in a week of workshops, demonstrations, and popular education that would shift the prevailing narrative on climate action in the region away from false solutions that uphold corporate greed and towards alternative visions of an anti-colonial, anti-capitalist, and anti-oppressive Earth system. Moreover, organizers sought to channel collective anger and rage about the climate crisis towards an expanded imagination of what kinds of tactics and strategies are considered “acceptable”. While the long-term impacts of this event are still unfolding, participants observed that the mobilization reignited a spark amongst a new cohort of youth activists that had come of age politically amidst the COVID-19 pandemic and had not yet found a productive outlet for their anger, frustration, and rage about the climate crisis and the broader state of the world.



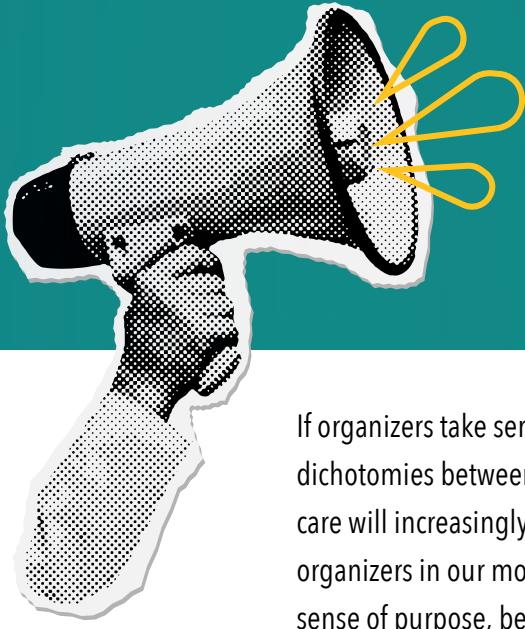
Leveraging Heavy Feelings Towards Collective Action - Case Studies

Collective Grief and Anxiety as Impetus for Legal Action, Saskatchewan

Some organizers in Saskatchewan have found that having spaces to collectively grieve in community are necessary precursors to aligning on shared purpose and action. A HUB team member notes that deliberate and intentional group facilitation is especially important in these contexts, in order to create a container where many voices can be heard, true listening and dialogue are encouraged, and people develop enough trust to feel comfortable being vulnerable with one another. Once this foundation is in place, skilled facilitation is also needed to move a group towards collective action based on shared values, rather than simply stagnating or dispersing.

An example of this is a collective citizen-led legal action against the provincial government in Saskatchewan and SaskPower for their expansion of gas-fired electricity generation in the province. This legal action emerged out of the coming together of a group of lawyers in Saskatchewan interested in pursuing strategic climate litigation in the province and a local ecostress group supporting residents and activists navigating ecoanxiety and climate emotions. The connections, stories, and relationships formed between lawyers, residents, and activists in this group opened new pathways to spotlight growing ecoanxiety in long standing efforts at strategic climate litigation in the province. Efforts to bolster support surrounding this case are ongoing.





Moving Forward

If organizers take seriously the implications of the adage that our *power* comes from *people*, dichotomies between “doing” and “being”, or developing strategic capacity and cultivating collective care will increasingly disintegrate. In order to build the power to win material action on climate justice, organizers in our movement need to be building organizations, campaigns, and projects that foster a sense of purpose, belonging, and empowerment. In mainstream Western society, the skills of working effectively as a collective unit are not broadly understood or practiced, and so developing these capacities in an organizing context requires intention, practice, and a willingness to “fail forward”.

Addressing the above challenges in the climate justice movement will require continued efforts in skill development, mutually beneficial collaboration, and emotional resilience. Developing strategic capacity and cultivating collective care requires gaining practice in strategic thinking, building collaborative team and work practices that can function at scale, and fostering genuine solidarity across groups in the broader movement ecosystem, all while building a strong relational and emotional fabric to sustain long-term organizing efforts. While it is beyond the scope of the Climate Justice Organizing HUB to meet all of these challenges, some considerations and recommendations that may be useful to the HUB and other movement partners follow below.

Recommendations for Organizers, Leaders, and Movement Support Structures

- Reimagining organizing training
 - Multicomponent packages: Just as climate justice organizers increasingly seek to frame the climate crisis as a multi-dimensional problem requiring holistic and systemic solutions, organizing trainers should also work to offer trainings that treat organizing skills not as discrete but rather as interdependent and forming a complex whole. For instance, maintaining a sound team structure is only possible with strong relationships, developing strong relationships requires a willingness to explore personal stories, and exploring personal stories can often lead to more creative and innovative strategizing. Organizing trainings would benefit from multicomponent packages that illustrate both interdependence and holism.
 - Experiential learning: Learning to organize requires actually organizing! Organizing is an ambiguous and creative art more than a precise and rigid science, and no training, manual, or guidebook will ever offer all the solutions. There is no substitute for the experience of working, struggling, failing, improving, and iterating on the go. Experienced organizers, leaders, and support structures should take care to lovingly remind newer organizers of this point.

- Continuous and just-in-time support
 - Coaching: [Coaching](#) - that is different from consulting, mentoring, or training - is something that all organizers can offer one another to enable learning, problem solving, and growth. Where and when it is desired, organizers can also seek coaching from support structures such as the HUB.
 - Mentorship: Cultivating relationships with movement elders and mentors can help organizers to develop a longer-term understanding of movement history, learn from the experiences of others, and develop emotional resilience.
 - Peer-to-peer communities of practice: Formal or informal communities of practice can be used to discuss and experiment with new strategic interventions and tactics while also offering a supportive community space for organizers.
- Attending to diverse participation in the climate justice movement
 - Care labour: As in broader society, the mental load of attending to care needs in organizing often falls disproportionately on women and especially women of colour. Disrupting these inequitable patterns requires practice, opportunities for feedback, intentionality, and humility. It also requires developing the capacity to *notice* where and when shifts in work practices may be needed.
 - Climate emotions: While emotional responses to the climate crisis may be experienced by all, they are often shaped by differing historical, social, and cultural contexts, leading to varied experiences across racial, ethnic, and cultural groups. Organizers can consider how identity-based caucuses for Black, Indigenous, People of Colour (BIPOC) and other identity-based groups may offer generative spaces to process and discuss the emotional toll of the climate crisis. Organizations with access to funding can also consider options for dedicated funds set aside to support BIPOC members to access culturally competent mental health support.
 - Tailored capacity building: In comparison to the United States, access to organizing training in Canada is limited. Where training, fellowships, and programs do exist, it is typically more privileged groups who gain access first, and it is largely their stories and experiences that are centred. Thus, there is a need to develop capacity-building training tailored to the specific needs of BIPOC, low-income, and other marginalized groups.



Photo Credit: Jacqueline Lee-Tam



Resources

Climate Justice Organizing in Canada

- Harvey-Sánchez, A. (2024). Tools for Change: Understanding the Needs of Climate Justice Organizers in Canada. The Climate Justice Organizing HUB, Montreal, Canada.
<https://www.lehub.ca/media/hubtoolsforchangereport.pdf>

Strategic Capacity

- Cynefin framework. Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cynefin_framework
- Cutting the Issue. Campaign Strategy Workbook. Training for Change.
<https://trainingforchange.notion.site/Cutting-the-Issue-5af591e962e44b16a0b4f715ea436838>
- Smith, R. (October 2021). The problem with focusing on scale. PowerLabs.
<https://powerlabs.io/the-problem-with-focusing-on-scale>
- Movement ecology. HUB wiki. https://en.wiki.lehub.ca/index.php/Movement_ecology
- Case, B. (2018). Social Movement Ecology and Its Implications: Unpacking the Natural Metaphor. *Berkeley Journal of Sociology*. <https://berkeleyjournal.org/2018/01/17/social-movement-ecology-and-its-implications-unpacking-the-natural-metaphor/>
- Ganz, M. (2014). Marshall Ganz 2014 Organizing Course - Week 3: Organizing Project: People, Power, and Change. Leading Change Network. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w8OsCu-Jvoo&list=PL5naSQMdqJZ8jG-m_e-vAdXDOipdINrLD&t=905s&ab_channel=TheLeadingChangeNetwork
- Adorno, C. (April 29 2019). Drivers licenses - a rallying cry for immigrants. Movimiento Cosecha. Medium. <https://movamientocosecha.medium.com/drivers-licenses-a-rallying-cry-for-immigrant-e9961e13d381>
- Beautiful Trouble. Choose Your Target Wisely.
<https://beautifultrouble.org/toolbox/tool/choose-your-target-wisely>

Collective Care

- Building cultures of care. HUB wiki.
https://en.wiki.lehub.ca/index.php/Building_cultures_of_care
- People's Hub. <https://www.peopleshub.org/>

- Interrupting Criminalization. In It Together: A Framework for Conflict Transformation in Movement-Building Groups. <https://www.interruptingcriminalization.com/in-it-together>
- Hassen, Y. (October 15 2024). Tool - Conflict Navigation: A Guide Towards Transformation. Tamarack Institute. <https://shorturl.at/rH5hG>
- Climate Justice Organizing HUB (May 31 2024). Navigating Conflict 1: Avoiding Preventable Conflict & Building Conflict Skills. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mOgQ46BrhQQ&t=2008s&ab_channel=LeHUB
- Climate Justice Organizing HUB (May 31 2024). Navigating Conflict 2: Practical Tools for Conflict Transformation. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=857a0eQsow0&ab_channel=LeHUB
- Maslach, C. (August 22 2016). Burnout from Heroic Action. Hero Round Table. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wus8d9Q_86M&ab_channel=HeroRoundTable
- Zaia, S. (August 2023). Burnout isn't a personal problem, it's an organizational problem. PowerLabs. <https://powerlabs.io/why-burnout-cant-be-fixed-with-self-care-time-off-or-boundary-setting>
- Devich-Cyril, M. (July 28 2021). Grief Belongs in Social Movements. Can We Embrace It? *In These Times*. <https://inthesetimes.com/article/freedom-grief-healing-death-liberation-movements>

Case Studies

- Adorno, C. (April 29 2019). Drivers licenses - a rallying cry for immigrants. Movimiento Cosecha. Medium. <https://movamientocosecha.medium.com/drivers-licenses-a-rallying-cry-for-immigrant-e9961e13d381>
- Movimiento Cosecha. (December 24 2019). How immigrants won driver's licenses in New Jersey. <https://www.lahuelga.com/newjersey-victory>
- Harvey-Sánchez, Amanda. (2022) "U of T Fossil Fuel Divestment Timeline". Working Paper # 9, Discovering University Worlds, University of Toronto. <https://utoronto.scholaris.ca/server/api/core/bitstreams/d57aea4f-3485-4c94-8533-45c2e128b011/content>
- Harvey-Sánchez, A. & DaSilva, J. (2022-2023). "Divestment Generation Mini Series (Intro & Episodes 1-5)". Climate Justice Toronto. <https://www.buzzsprout.com/1730714/episodes>
- Harvey-Sánchez, A. & Lang, S. (May 4 2022). Divestment and beyond. Briarpatch Magazine. <https://briarpatchmagazine.com/articles/view/divestment-and-beyond>
- Climate Justice Uoft (March 6 2024). Divest UPP. Instagram slides. https://www.instagram.com/p/C4LW6DfA94B/?img_index=1

- Fossil Free Research. Campus Climate Network.
<https://www.campusclimatennetwork.org/ffr-campaign>
- Climate Justice Uoft. (January 2024). Bound to Big Oil: The University of Toronto and Its Ties to the Fossil Fuel Industry.
<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1tHaYgQuaLOoE9z6yNcMxASeQJlhEqDX/view>
- Change Course. <https://changecourse.ca/>
- Sano, H. & Osawa, S. (2024). Learning Series on Organizing for Liberation #1: Hope & Solidarity in Global Student Movements for Palestine – Session Write-up. Leading Change Network. https://leadingchanagenetwork.org/resource_center/hope-solidarity-in-global-student-movements-for-palestine-session-write-up/
- Rage Climatique. Climate Rage Week! <https://www.rageclimatique.org/node/172>
- Saskatchewan Coalition for Sustainable Development. Court Action - Saskatchewan Climate Change Litigation. <https://www.sustainablesask.ca/court-action.html>

Moving Forward

- March for Our Lives. (April 4 2023). Coaching Cheat Sheet.
<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1o1LpSEluYvzsjPROIn-IQH2UawL8VWXEh2fQNAxKIFs/edit?tab=t.0>



HUB