

THE GLOBAL
CITIZENS ISSUE

IN PARTNERSHIP WITH AGA KHAN FOUNDATION CANADA



CANADIAN Geographic

TOOLS FOR CHANGE

INSPIRING A GENERATION

OF GLOBAL CITIZENS IN CLASSROOMS ACROSS CANADA

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

→ 4 Tools for change

How educators across Canada are inspiring a generation of global citizens

→ 8 Where everyone sits in a circle

The Edmonton school giving youth a second chance

→ 12 Sneak peek

Explore the digital map that takes students around the world

→ 14 Common ground

From Canada to the Kyrgyz Republic

→ 16 From Saint John, with love

The New Brunswick teen using empathy to challenge inequality

→ 18 A youth leadership camp changed his life

Now, Ziyaan Virji is opening doors for others

→ 20 Running on hope

As told by Izmir Kassam

→ 22 This travelling exhibition gets Canadians thinking about global citizenship

Our Potential, Our Purpose asks visitors to think beyond our borders and into a future where everyone can thrive

→ 25 We take care of the soil, and the soil takes care of us

Lessons on reciprocity from Uganda

→ 27 From the editor's desk

Global citizenship begins in the classroom

→ 27 About AKFC

NOTEBOOK

CHARTING A SUSTAINABLE FUTURE



CANADIAN GEOGRAPHIC is practically synonymous with cartography. Our beautiful original maps are what set us apart from other magazines and consistently generate the most discussion among our readers.

Of course, being a publication dedicated to making Canada better known, it's not often that we get to expand our map-making horizons beyond our borders. So when the opportunity arose to partner with **Aga Khan Foundation Canada (AKFC)** on an interactive map of the world, well — let's just say we were excited. AKFC partners with government, Canadian institutions and individuals to tackle the root causes of poverty and inequality, working toward a healthy future in which everyone can thrive. The organization works in more than a dozen countries, mobilizing Canadian skills, expertise and funds to help millions of vulnerable people throughout Africa, Asia, and the Middle East.

In these pages, you'll meet inspiring educators from across Canada who are using AKFC resources to help students understand the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals and consider career paths in international development and leadership. You'll also meet young people who have already taken their first steps on those paths through programs like AKFC's **International Youth Fellowship** and **Youth Leadership Academy**.

It's easy to feel overwhelmed by the pace and scale of climatic and geopolitical change in our increasingly interconnected world, but youth need to know that they can be part of the solutions. That's where our project, "*A Sustainable World*," comes in. The interactive map at the heart of the project presents data on complex challenges such as access to clean water and sanitation, literacy, climate risks and women's participation in the workforce in a way that's easy to understand, while a companion infographic for each country allows users to dive deeper into the issues and compare countries across a variety of metrics. While the map can be used for independent study, companion learning resources make this map ideal for classroom discussions about how to create a more equitable, sustainable world.

As a Can Geo subscriber, we are pleased to offer you **early access to the map**. We are eager to learn how students and educators are using this map and associated resources, so if you have thoughts, please get in touch. 🌐

— Alexandra Pope



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TOOLS FOR CHANGE

HOW EDUCATORS ACROSS CANADA ARE INSPIRING A GENERATION OF GLOBAL CITIZENS



From Yukon to Newfoundland and Labrador, global citizenship education is breaking new ground across the country

BY **JACKY HABIB**

EVERY WEDNESDAY when the bell rings to signal the lunch break at F.H. Collins Secondary School in Whitehorse, two dozen students shuffle into a classroom. They don't have a lot of time, but they're determined to make the most of it, taking bites of their food between conversations.

On the agenda this week are a range of action items rallying the group in support of local and global issues. One student makes a pitch about how their peers can take action to protect Canadian wildlife; another student provides an update on a fundraiser in support of Ukrainians impacted by the war.

These lunchtime gatherings — filled with conversations on global issues, advocacy and social action — are a regular occurrence at the high school's social justice club. The club has become a dynamic space for students wanting to make a difference in their community and beyond. Their

guide is Meera Sarin, an educator of almost 20 years who teaches Social Justice, Spanish and Social Studies at F.H. Collins.

"I knew that was the way I was going to connect with young people," says Sarin. "Some people coach sports, some do drama clubs — and for me it was always going to be through social justice."

Sarin's introduction to social justice began in the small town of Dauphin, Man., where she was raised by immigrant parents from India and England. Their social values anchored their family in community.

Sarin's mother, Elizabeth, a public health nurse and feminist leader, spent much of her time on First Nations reserves — often with young Meera in tow — providing immunizations and conducting home visits for new mothers.

In return, community members would gift her with tokens of appreci-

ation. Sometimes it was fish, at other times it was moccasins. Each time, it was a gesture of gratitude, and one that illustrated reciprocity.

"I always say my mom was so ahead of her time because she really learned so much from the Indigenous people," Sarin reflects.

Today, her son Aleix Toews carries that same passion. Throughout high school, Toews was an active member of the social justice club at F.H. Collins, "dragging" his friends along to the weekly lunch meetings — proud that his mother was at the helm of it all. Many of his fondest high school memories revolve around the social justice club, which encouraged him to take action both big and small, he says.

Toews and other students had often noticed discarded fishing lines around their community, which posed danger to wildlife. The students had an idea for a simple fix and approached the



Meera Sarin (second from right) and the social justice club at F.H. Collins Secondary School.

Yukon Fish and Wildlife Enhancement Trust with a pitch. Their boldness was rewarded with funding to put their idea into action, and the next several months were spent organizing a community clean-up day along the Yukon River. They also built fishing line receptacles, which they installed at various fishing spots in Whitehorse so people could responsibly dispose of their discarded lines.

The project was a huge success. Students connected with local groups on the issue, including the Kwanlin Dün First Nation and Yukon Conservation Society, and raised awareness about the harms of discarded fishing gear and were even featured in local and national media. Toews says his involvement in the social justice club was a confidence booster.

Now a university student studying bioresource engineering at McGill University, Toews reflects on how his upbringing shaped his social consciousness. Growing up, he read diverse books and helped his parents cook dishes from around the world for their family dinners.

When he was eight, his parents took sabbaticals and the family of five embarked on a year-long trip around the

world. From Bosnia to Türkiye to India, they traveled to experience culture, understand history, and engage with social issues globally.

“All of those experiences have stuck with me throughout my life and have impacted how I see the world and what my interests are,” Toews says.

While he was a student at F.H. Collins, the school joined the UNESCO Associated Schools Network, connecting with thousands of schools worldwide that all promote innovative, inclusive and sustainable education. The school committed to doing its part to address how the United Nations’ 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) aim to secure peace and prosperity for all people and the planet.

“I think it elevates the consciousness of our school and our ability to be part of a global community [and] a Canadian community that values global work and values our relationships with people outside of our territory,” Sarin says.

As part of their efforts toward achieving the SDGs, students participate in Whitehorse Connects, a food drive organized by the Yukon Anti-Poverty Coalition. With more than one in every six households in the

Yukon facing food insecurity, according to Food Banks Canada, the event is one that hits close to home for many students.

At the food drive — which happens multiple times annually and has become the school’s most popular event — students take turns cooking and serving food to community members, who can also access free services like haircuts and portrait photography.

Toews smiles, remembering how he and his friend Curtis would always be assigned to help in the “dish pit,” washing dishes all day. It didn’t matter to them; the events were core memories of their high school years.

For Sarin, seeing the satisfaction on students’ faces when volunteering is a highlight. “It really lights these students up when they know that they’re doing something helpful,” she says. “It’s not token volunteering. They’re working really hard [and] making connections. They meet health nurses, politicians and other people offering services. As much as it is helpful for people living on the margins, it’s just as helpful for our students to see how a community can come together.”

And it makes a lasting impression. Sarin has heard about students who, after understanding the impact of the food bank in their community, have gone on to volunteer there on their own, even years later.

Sarin’s approach to engaging students in social issues involves “a little bit of local work, a little bit of global work” and, of course, an educational component in the classroom. Over the years, Sarin has consciously curated educational resources for her students. At the top of her list is the



Residents shovel their sidewalk in St. John's on Sunday, Jan. 19, 2020.

“I think we were in our houses three or four days before we could get out with all the snow. The snow was well above my husband's truck — it was just completely buried.”

The blizzard, which was dubbed “Snowmageddon,” had brought much of the tiny province to a halt when nearly 93 centimetres of snow fell on that January day. Highways were closed, boats stopped operating, and grocery store shelves were empty as shipments of goods coming onto the island were halted.

For Rockett, the blizzard was an opportunity to engage her students in learning how a singular event can cause a domino effect with wide-ranging and sometimes catastrophic consequences.

“That [event] always sticks in our students' minds as a starting point when we talk about food insecurities, access to food, and access to clean water,” Rockett shares.

Before teaching high school students, Rockett taught English as a Second Language (ESL) to newcomers. Working closely with recent immigrants and refugees ignited her passion for global citizenship and became a foundation for the teaching work she does today.

“When you're [teaching], there's so many opportunities to bring in global issues with your reading selections, your short stories — it's always been part of my teaching, whether it's been Social Studies or English,” Rockett says.

Rockett focuses heavily on teaching the SDGs to her students; she believes the goals are a catalyst in helping them become global citizens. Four years ago, she began implementing a final project where students create an

Inspiring Global Citizens toolkit. The four-part toolkit, which incorporates a range of resources including lesson plans, activities, discussion guides and handouts, encourages learners to think critically while linking local issues to global issues.

Sarin credits the guide, which was developed by **Aga Khan Foundation Canada**, for helping her students navigate global citizenship.

Laboni Islam, an education consultant who helped shape and write the toolkit, says it was created to support students in identifying their unique gifts and capacities and channeling them to effect change. It was reviewed by educators across the country so that it would be rich in diverse perspectives.

“It was important to engage educators with varied points of view, geographies, and relationships to the material and ask: What's working? What can be done differently? What opportunities do you see? Their collective feedback was invaluable and integrated into the toolkit,” says Islam.

Sarin hopes that lessons on world

issues and social justice spark a lifelong journey of global citizenship for young learners.

“Global education stirs something in these students,” she says. “When they realize that they're a part of something so much bigger than what's happening in their school or their community, it motivates them. It encourages them and it gives them hope — and I think we all need a little bit more hope.”



ON JAN. 17, 2020, heavy snow billowed down on the province of Newfoundland and Labrador. The wind was unrelentingly cold, with temperatures reaching below -20 C. Residents hunkered down at home as they watched the blizzard from their windows — a sea of white piling up on the streets.

Jackie Rockett, a high school social studies teacher and librarian at O'Donel High School in Mount Pearl recalls that week in vivid detail.



Educator Jackie Rockett stands next to a visual representation of the Sustainable Development Goals at O'Donel High School in Mount Pearl, Nfld.

that people from around the world mail him holiday cards. Richardson had an idea: what if students at O'Donel could participate? Rockett wholeheartedly embraced the idea, rallying students for a card-making session so they could help make the boy's last Christmas as special as it possibly could be.

It worked. Thompson's parents said the boy received 400,000 holiday cards in the mail from people around the world, bringing immense joy in his final days.

"That project meant so much to me because I actually got to see how people will come together to support one another, even if that person is across the world," Richardson reflects. "There may be a lot of pain in the world — especially lately — but there is also a lot of good."

Rockett is hopeful that her classroom lessons can inspire students to be part of that good. She says students want to have difficult conversations about society and the world at large, and that educators can have a role in helping them navigate these questions and explore their role as changemakers.

"I really do feel that they are the generation that will start making bigger change," she says.

Rockett doesn't have to look far to realize that her hope is already a reality. With many of her former students, like Richardson, working to make a difference in their community on a daily basis, "bigger change" is within reach.

Access the [Inspiring Global Citizens toolkit here](#). 🌐

action plan around an SDG of their choice and enact it in their community. Students' past projects include creating awareness campaigns for mental health resources and developing an education plan for elementary schools on the importance of recycling.

Like Meera Sarin in Whitehorse, one of Rockett's go-to resources when teaching about the SDGs is the [Inspiring Global Citizens toolkit](#), which she helped review during its development.

"What I love about it the most is that it makes the students have personal connections [with the SDGs, by prompting]: how do you feel when you look at this? What is something that you feel you could do?" says Rockett. "Once they start to get that personal connection, then the empathy piece comes in."

Within the toolkit, one of her favourite resources is the Gapminder, which provides students with a visual representation of global economic disparity. She says these modules, when paired with classroom discussions, play a large role in educating students on global inequalities and encourag-

ing them to take action.

"There are so many different ways of practicing being a global citizen. I think it's one of our key roles [as educators] to encourage all of those different steps which are a part of their journey," Rockett says.

Hunter Richardson, who graduated from O'Donel High School in 2018, says the globally minded curriculum and accompanying classroom conversations paved the way for the social justice work she has done ever since.

"My passion for community really began with our Ethics class, so I can credit Ms. Rockett with my current trajectory," says Richardson, now a social worker at a local women's centre. Without a doubt, she says, Rockett was the teacher who impacted her the most.

Richardson often remembers being moved when she came across the story of Jacob Thompson, a nine-year-old from Portland, Maine, who was hospitalized around the holidays with terminal cancer.

He wanted to celebrate Christmas early, and his family had requested

WHERE EVERYONE

◀◀◀◀ SITS IN A CIRCLE ▶▶▶▶

THE EDMONTON SCHOOL GIVING YOUTH A SECOND CHANCE

How one teacher, one student and a unique inner-city school are using youth leadership to transform lives and futures

BY **JACKY HABIB**

Student Trevon Friesen-Glenn at Aga Khan Foundation Canada's Youth Leadership Academy in Toronto, August 2025.



Trevon Friesen-Glenn participates in a group activity at Aga Khan Foundation Canada's Youth Leadership Academy in Toronto, August 2025.

THREE TIMES A DAY — morning, midday, and late afternoon — the whole of Edmonton's Inner City High School gathers in the angular gymnasium. There are no bells, loudspeakers, or general announcements breaking the quiet. Instead, students ground themselves in a circle on the floor, speaking into the shared space.

A student facilitator, one of their own, guides the gathering, keeping time and holding space. This is how news travels here. It's where school announcements are made, where questions are asked and where conflict is resolved. Rather than authority, at the centre of it all is equality. In sitting together, the students practice something simple and radical.

"We say nobody is above each other so nobody stands — that's how we communicate," explains Trevon Friesen-Glenn, who is completing his Grade 12 courses.

Established more than 30 years ago by the Inner City Youth Development Association, the independent school caters to marginalized and urban youth, mostly Indigenous, who want a second chance at their secondary education. The school's Youth Engagement Program, composed of non-teaching staff, helps students overcome challenges — such as life on the streets — by ensuring their out-of-school needs are met.

It's a second chance for Friesen-Glenn, who enrolled at Inner City

last year. Friesen-Glenn is mixed-race: his father is Black, his mother is white. Like his classmates, Friesen-Glenn has experienced oppression in systems, including justice, healthcare and education.

Friesen-Glenn has dropped out of high school multiple times — most recently, to support his family when his father was diagnosed with cancer. The 20-year-old had "all but given up" and was working at a tire shop when he learned about Inner City. He speaks highly of the social worker who accompanies him across the city to counselling appointments, but there's another person who has had an even greater impact on Friesen-Glenn's life: Natasha Sarkar.



Educator Natasha Sarkar attends the Teachers' Leadership Institute in Toronto, August 2025.

Sarkar has worked with youth since she graduated from secondary school in Edmonton, where she was born a daughter of immigrants.

Although Sarkar enjoyed growing up in Edmonton, once she became a teacher, she witnessed firsthand how some individuals were marginalized. Some of her students were unhoused, struggling with addiction, and still in high school in their 20s. Inner City High School became a good place where she could make a difference in her hometown.

"I see students all the time who are homeless and their family mem-

bers are residential school survivors. There's this generational trauma that's still affecting them, and that's what a lot of the Sustainable Development Goals are designed for — to break those cycles," she says, referring to the 17 goals established by the United Nations to bring peace and prosperity to people globally.

Her daily inspiration comes from youth who have their own ideas for how to make our world a better place. "Global citizenship, to me, helps us create the citizens I want to see in Canada as leaders or influencers in our democracy. If we want to see

change in our cities, it comes from these kids who've experienced some actual barriers."

Friesen-Glenn stood out to Sarkar from the start. Out of the hundreds of students she's taught in the past decade, Sarkar admits he's one of few who she knew was ready for post-secondary education.

As a way to help him prepare for the next step in his education, she nominated him to attend the **Youth Leadership Academy**, a five-day conference on leadership and global citizenship for youth across Canada, hosted by **Aga Khan Foundation Canada (AKFC)**.

Friesen-Glenn was offered a spot in the summer academy, and in August 2025, he and Sarkar travelled to Toronto. It was Friesen's first time flying, and he was anxious about going through security and boarding the flight. Once the flight took off, his nerves calmed. Besides the flight, there was one other thing propelling him forward: self-confidence.

"I guess she [Sarkar] just saw something in me that I always knew I had deep down," he says.

That same week, Sarkar attended **AKFC's Teachers' Leadership Institute**, an opportunity for teachers to develop the skills and knowledge to integrate international development and sustainability into the classroom. Through this paired opportunity, she was also able to be more engaged in Trevon's experience and support him to apply his learning after the week in Toronto.

"For Trevon, I think the Youth Leadership Academy was excellent exposure to [other] kids who want to make a difference," she says.

33

When I was a little kid, I had a huge obsession with superheroes, and I always wanted to be one in real life — but I never knew how to do that until my dad got sick.

On the first day of the academy, Friesen-Glenn was thrown into a sea of strangers, scanning the room for a table to sit at. Hesitant at first, he found a spot among a group of other participants, and was immediately dubbed the group's big brother.

"Many people at the academy were entirely blown away by hearing stories of my upbringing," Friesen-Glenn shares. "I realized there is so much privilege and an astonishing lack of awareness of the challenges faced by people living in poverty and in generational cycles of trauma ... I didn't realize how far a little awareness could go in influencing people."

Strong friendships were solidified in just five days and at the end of week, the youth tearfully bid one another farewell. Friesen-Glenn's biggest takeaway from the academy was digging into the Sustainable Development Goals, and there was one he couldn't stop thinking about: promoting economic growth and productive employment.

In addition to covering the costs of participating in its leadership programs for youth and educators, AKFC offers micro-grants to Youth Leadership Academy participants who want to put their learning and inspiration into action at home. With the support of Sarkar, Friesen-Glenn submitted an application to AKFC for an employment-inspired project.

Friesen-Glenn had noticed that his peers were more likely to engage with potential careers and post-secondary options when they were provided the



opportunity to interact with someone working or studying in a particular field. Through his project, Friesen-Glenn is actively coordinating workshops with people from all walks of life who can give students a behind-the-scenes look at their work. He hopes the interactive learning will result in more Inner City students pursuing meaningful further education.

In addition to believing in his peers, Friesen-Glenn continues to believe in himself. After attending classes at Inner City, he heads to night school, where he is training to be a paramedic.

"When I was a little kid, I had a huge obsession with superheroes, and I always wanted to be one in real life — but I never knew how to do that until my dad got sick," he says.

Following an advanced cancer

Educators from across Canada participate in a group activity at the Teachers' Leadership Institute in Toronto, August 2025.

diagnosis, paramedics would stream into the family's home on a weekly basis to provide medical support to Friesen-Glenn's father. He eventually passed away — the loss was crushing.

"Simply put, my dad was my best friend," Friesen-Glenn reflects.

Amid the grief, one thing became clear: the incredible impact paramedics could have on people during their most vulnerable moments. To Friesen-Glenn, those paramedics, and teachers like Natasha Sarkar, are real-life superheroes, paving the way for him to follow his dreams and build a life where one day, he can be a hero too. 🌟

SNEAK PEEK

EXPLORE THE DIGITAL MAP THAT TAKES STUDENTS AROUND THE WORLD

BY **ALEXANDRA POPE**

IN MANY CLASSROOMS, educators face a practical challenge: development data can be too complex for young learners to grasp, and world maps are often treated solely as geography tools rather than cross-disciplinary resources. *A Sustainable World* was created to help address this gap — offering a way to explore global data that is accurate, age-appropriate, and adaptable across subject areas, from science to the humanities.

A Sustainable World is a new digital, interactive world map designed for Canadian youth and the educators and adults who support their learning. The map introduces complex global development issues through credible data, visual exploration, and a sound pedagogical approach. Developed by *Canadian Geographic* in partnership with Aga Khan Foundation Canada, with funding from the Government of Canada, *A Sustainable World* is the first interactive global development map of its kind, designed for Canadian classrooms but accessible to all.

When students use the map, they learn to dissect data, question assumptions and understand the interconnections between local and global topics that affect our lives. The experience is designed to deepen young people's understanding of international development and Canada's place in the global context, while reinforcing a shared belief that youth play a crucial and meaningful role in advancing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and building a future where we all thrive together.

Organized around four core SDG themes — education, health, climate, and gender equality — the map helps learners explore these global topics and their interconnectivity. **Designed for use across grades 6 to 12, the map supports learning objectives in geography, social**

A SUSTAINABLE WORLD

2D MAP



3D MAP


TAKE ME ON A
GUIDED TOUR

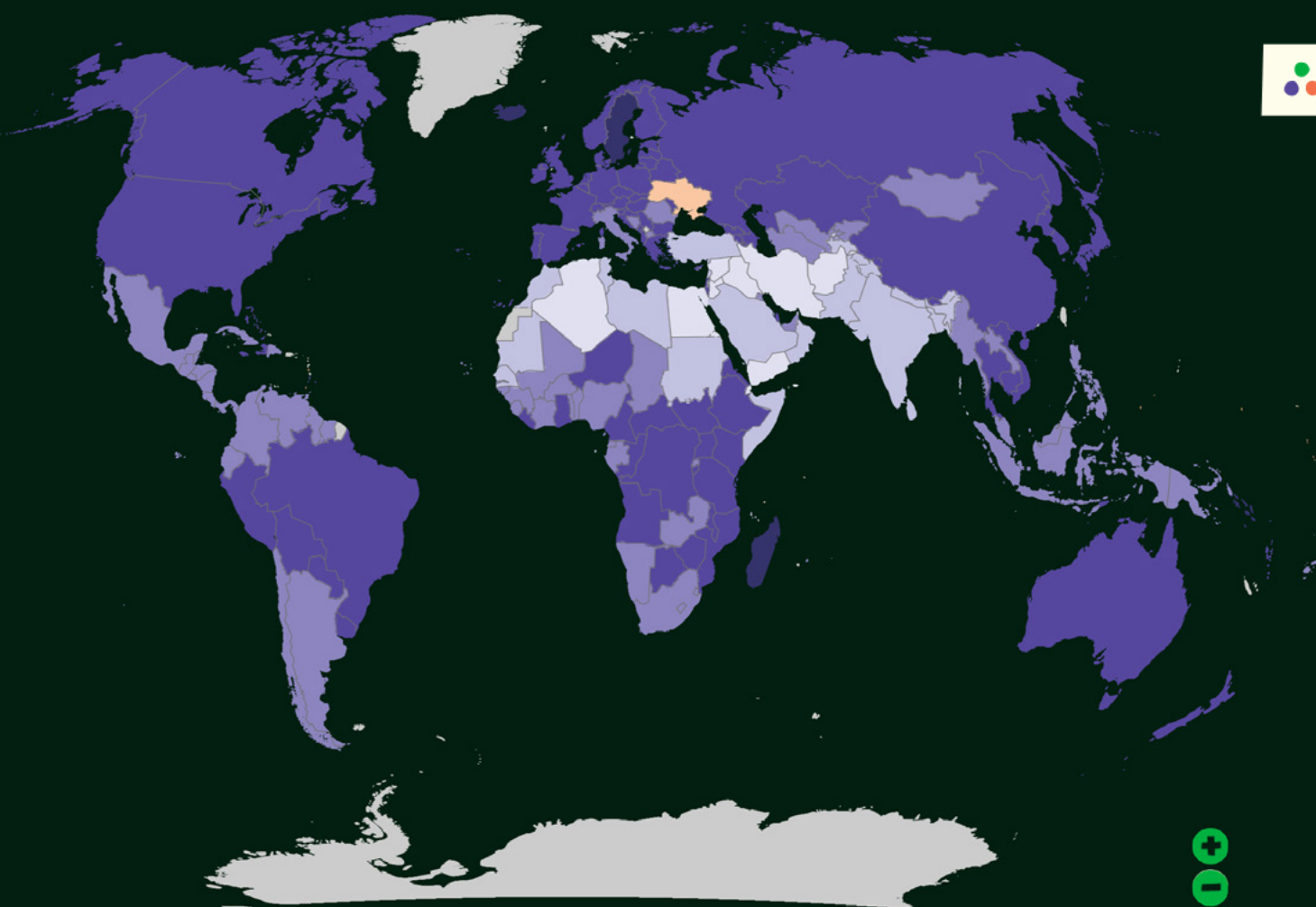
THEMES 

Climate 

Education 

Health 

Gender 



studies, civics, and world history. As students begin to interact with the map, they are encouraged to draw connections between the four themes, reinforcing the complex and interconnected nature of the SDGs.

Farhan Karim, a secondary teacher with the Surrey School District in British Columbia, has used maps and data sets to bring the reality and complexity of the real world into the classroom. Beyond geography, he has used maps as a tool to explore history, migration, culture and

environment change.

"They help students see patterns and connections across disciplines," Karim says. "When mapping is dynamic and data-rich, it moves beyond an image on paper and becomes a window into how the world works, and how we understand our place within it."

The 3D map — which has an optional 2D map interface — includes a range of human geography indicators such as population, life expectancy, urban and rural populations and GDP per capita, alongside theme-specific statistics and multimedia content

that further contextualize learning.

"In a time when information is everywhere, the skill we most want students to develop is discernment," says Natasha Asbury, who led the project. "This map invites youth not just to consume data, but to interpret evidence, understand complexity, and trace how systems connect — which is how global citizenship truly begins."

A *Sustainable World* will launch in the 2026/27 school year. For advance access as a *Canadian Geographic* subscriber, [explore the map](#). 🌐

COMMON GROUND

FROM CANADA TO THE KYRGYZ REPUBLIC

A view of Bishkek, Kyrgyz Republic, at dawn.

BY ANNIE LEE



I'm witnessing the region build the future my family once had to leave to find.

NILOFAR PAIWAND ALI drinks her coffee slowly, standing by a window as the morning light seeps into the city and the sound of traffic fills the air. The striking snowcapped peaks of the famous Kyrgyz mountains are hazy in the distance. For most of Paiwand Ali's life, this landscape only existed in fragments — faint childhood memories and stories told by family members.

Paiwand Ali has been living and working in Bishkek, the capital of the Kyrgyz Republic (Kyrgyzstan), for the past seven months. "When I first came here, it felt familiar but unfamiliar at the same time," she says.

Originally from Afghanistan, Paiwand Ali's family moved to neighbouring Tajikistan due to conflict

and instability when she was four. She was 10 when they moved again, this time to Toronto. But she always dreamed of returning to the region where she spent her earliest years.

"I wanted to come to Central Asia someday," says the now-23-year-old. "I wanted to know the region that my family grew up in, that I grew up in."

Through the [International Youth Fellowship](#), she found an opportunity.

Less than a year ago, Paiwand Ali was completing her bachelor's degree in business management at Toronto Metropolitan University. Now, she's one of nine young Canadians currently working abroad as part of the International Youth Fellowship.

The Fellowship is a longstanding initiative of [Aga Khan Foundation](#)

[Canada](#), connecting recent graduates and young professionals in Canada with international opportunities.

"I learned about the program in first year, but you need to have a bachelor's degree to apply," laughs Paiwand Ali. "I waited three years!" Paiwand Ali's application was successful, and she was offered a fellowship placement in the Kyrgyz Republic. Here, she supports entrepreneurs, startups, and small businesses through Accelerate Prosperity, a local incubator that helps businesses grow.

Her roommate, Kayla Mudaliar, is a 27-year-old from Cloverdale, B.C. With a bachelor's and master's degree in international development and international



(TOP) Nilofar Paiwand Ali reacts to a bird landing on her hand while hiking in Ala-Archa National Park, Kyrgyz Republic.

(BOTTOM) Kayla Mudaliar visits the children's wing of the Ak-sy District Hospital in Kerben, Kyrgyz Republic.



with me and take with me later on [through] the level of kindness and hospitality I show to others.”

For both Mudaliar and Paiwand Ali, the Fellowship experience has been a reminder of the importance of looking beyond the borders of Canada to engage more deeply with the world.

“There’s so much to see, so many people to learn from. Come explore, share your knowledge, learn about different issues, and apply it to your context. There’s still a lot more work that needs to be done for everyone to live a more prosperous life,” says Paiwand Ali.

While leaving the familiarity of Canada to start her next chapter brings up mixed feelings for Mudaliar, she wholeheartedly recommends the experience to other young people. “If you are nervous, then you should still do it anyway,” she says.

Through experiences like this, the [International Youth Fellowship](#) aims to foster global citizens who will carry these experiences forward — into their careers, communities, and conversations back home in Canada.

For Paiwand Ali, her experience feels like coming full circle. “It feels amazing to be part of the journey of witnessing these local entrepreneurs contribute to their region’s economic sustainability. In a way, I’m witnessing the region build the future my family once had to leave to find.”

To stay up to date on the International Youth Fellowship, including opportunities to apply, [subscribe to our newsletter](#). 🌐

relations, Mudaliar has previously interned in Kenya and Tanzania. Her Fellowship placement is located at [Aga Khan Foundation Kyrgyz Republic](#), where she helps with writing proposals and developing partnerships for projects that span a variety of areas, including education, health, and climate resilience.

Mudaliar, who is Fijian-Canadian and grew up in a multicultural environment, says her background sparked her curiosity and openness. “It made me more inclined to learn about different cultures ... One of the things that made me interested in the field of development was that you could learn about the culture,

politics, sociology, economics of all these different countries and how they interplay at the global level.”

Landlocked and mountainous, the Kyrgyz Republic is known for its natural beauty, nomadic traditions, and a rich history that spans numerous cultures and empires. It is also a place defined by hospitality, kindness, and community — features that have helped both the Fellows settle in.

“The everyday hospitality and kindness has been overwhelming, and something I really enjoy about the culture,” says Mudaliar, who is in Central Asia for the first time. “I hope that’s something I can keep



FROM SAINT JOHN, WITH LOVE

THE NEW BRUNSWICK TEEN USING EMPATHY TO CHALLENGE INEQUALITY

BY **CARO ROLANDO**

ELLA CUSACK HAS A SUPERPOWER, but it's not the type you would see in a Marvel film.

"I've always been quite shy," the 18-year-old Bachelor of Health student says. "And along with that comes with me being really, really sensitive."

Cusack's sensitivity made her aware of inequality from the time she was in elementary school. Raised in Saint John, New Brunswick, she remembers noticing kids

who didn't have anyone to hang out with at recess, and others who came to school without having had breakfast.

"I remember seeing people feeling left out or sad, and I would really empathize," she recalls.

By the time she was in middle school, Cusack realized that what she saw on the playground was tied to bigger issues that exist all over the world — like food insecurity, access to education, and mental

(TOP) Ella Cusack from the Youth Advisory Committee attends a convening in Ottawa, August 2024.

health. Instead of despairing, she realized that "change can actually occur if you care enough."

Since then, Cusack has been working tirelessly to reduce inequality both locally and globally. Here are just a few of the ways she uses her superpower for good.



Ella Cusack and her peers from the Youth Advisory Committee attend a meeting in Ottawa, August 2024.

it would make a difference. Her research on cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) in schools led to conversations with the Heart and Stroke Foundation and the Department of Education in New Brunswick. “It was super cool to see my work talked about by [the people] who can actually do something about it,” she says. Cusack has also conducted research on domestic partner violence during the COVID-19 epidemic, invasive species in the Great Lakes region, and providing economic opportunities for women with disabilities.

Joining a Youth Advisory Committee

Cusack is among the 16 young people who make up [Aga Khan Foundation Canada’s Youth Advisory Committee](#). The group ensures that youth perspectives are integrated throughout the organization’s programs in Canada. For Cusack, the experience has been transformative. “To engage and collaborate with like-minded youth for tangible change is everything to me,” she says. “I am eager to pursue a career that lends me to a broader range of knowledge and diversity, and helps create youth-focused policies that advance the Sustainable Development Goals.”

Encouraging empathy

For Cusack, empathy is the root of social action. “I feel there is a little bit of a lack of empathy that is really, really problematic right now in our community or just in the world in general that needs to be amended,” she shares. Her solution? Take the time to get to know members of your community. This helps reduce stigma, challenges your lens, builds empathy, and ultimately, is critical to making a difference. 🌱

Supporting people who are unhoused

Last summer, Cusack worked at Coverdale Centre for Women — a non-profit organization that supports women and families experiencing domestic violence, housing insecurity, or substance use issues. Cusack supported the centre by helping staff with communications, and by accompanying women to medical appointments, errands, and the food bank. “To just be around [them] was just proof to me that it was what I want to do with my life,” Cusack says, adding that

she admired the friendships the women had built with one another. “The women there were lovely. They were hilarious. I think they really appreciated having someone younger who showed interest in them and also stayed.”

Doing research that supports community well-being

Cusack was first introduced to the power of research when she took an advanced placement seminar at school. It was there that she developed a passion for research, hoping

A YOUTH LEADERSHIP CAMP CHANGED HIS LIFE

NOW, ZIYAAN VIRJI IS OPENING DOORS FOR OTHERS

The young entrepreneur gets real about finding his passion, dealing with burnout, and making his teenage self proud

BY **CARO ROLANDO**

ZIYAAN VIRJI USED TO THINK of himself as an average kid. He loved sports, podcasts, and hanging out with his friends. Schoolwork? Maybe not so much.

“I was that student who never used to submit his math homework on time,” the Torontonians recalls with a chuckle. “I was just trying to be the cool kid in class.”

Raised in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, Virji moved to Mombasa, Kenya in 2016 to attend high school. It’s there that his outlook on life — and himself — changed forever.

The following year, when Virji was 15, he was hospitalized for dengue fever, a mosquito-borne virus that in severe cases can lead to life-threatening organ damage. While ill, Virji lost his memory for three weeks. He says the experience led him to “think about all these existential questions, like what is my purpose, and how do I want to be remembered? I knew I wanted to do something bigger than myself,” he reflects.

We sat down with Virji to learn how this pivotal moment led him to entrepreneurship through the creation of **Leaders of Today**, a digital youth-focused opportunities platform.



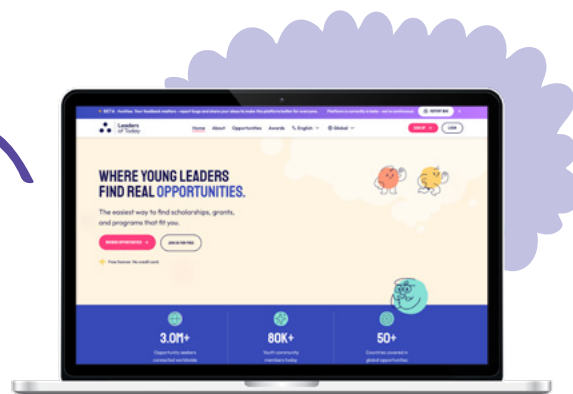
On the moment that sparked inspiration

At school, I was required to do a personal project about anything I wanted. I was scrambling for ideas until I watched a documentary called *Menstrual Man*, about period poverty [in India]. As a 15-year-old boy, I didn’t fully understand, so I asked my mom, who told me that when she was younger, she didn’t always have access to menstrual products. I was inspired to do more research, and I found out that in Kenya, up to

Ziyaan Virji, at age 15, in his dorm room sewing his first ever menstrual product.

65 per cent of menstruators don’t have access to menstrual products. I thought, “I have to do something about this.”

So, I created an organization called For the Menstruator. By the time I graduated high school, we were providing menstrual products to 25,000 people in several countries.



24-year-old entrepreneur Ziyaan Virji points to his digital youth opportunities platform, Leaders of Today, on his phone.

posted it on LinkedIn, and it reached three million people. That led me to start a newsletter, and eventually, to found **Leaders of Today**, which is an AI-powered platform that inspires young Canadians to be leaders and global citizens. The website lists tons of opportunities for youth, including grants, fellowships, conferences, and mentorship programs.

On making his younger self proud

I think my 15-year-old self would have gratitude for my 24-year-old self. Looking back, I had my first major opportunity when someone I knew shared an application with me to attend a youth leadership program that changed my life. I spent a week in New York with 36 other young people who were all passionate about making an impact. I remember being surrounded by them and thinking, “Whoa, there’s a whole world of things I could do.” Attending that program opened so many doors for me and if I could do that — even for one other young person — then that’s success right there.

Explore the [Leaders of Today database](#). 

On challenges he’s faced

When I was starting out, there were so many times where I would try to fundraise money for our nonprofit. We would apply to all these different things, and never meet the age criteria, or reach out to investors and funders and a lot of them would just laugh at me and say, “Why can’t you just be a regular student?” Eventually, I moved to Vancouver for university. I was tired from all of my non-profit work, but instead of taking things a little slower, I went even harder. I only realized

how burnt out I was when I failed my first course in university and almost lost my scholarship. So, I decided to take a step back to prioritize my well-being a bit more.

On recalibrating after burnout

I went to business school. I always had this entrepreneurial bug, and I was trying a bunch of random ideas as they came, and most of them failed. Eventually, I asked myself: “What would my 15-year-old self want?” So, I started a Google sheet of youth-focused opportunities and

Izmir Kassam and his father, Shamez Kassam at the World Partnership Walk event in Calgary, on June 2, 2024.



I'M IZMIR and I just turned 13 years old. My parents named me after a place that I've only heard stories about — the city of İzmir, in Türkiye, which most people know as Turkey. When two big earthquakes struck Türkiye and Syria on my 10th birthday, I decided that I needed to do something about it.

The first thing I thought about was running. My parents say I started running as soon as I could walk. I like to challenge and push myself to my limits, so I decided to combine that passion with my passion for helping people. In 2023, I did ten 10-kilometre runs to raise money for the Humanitarian Coalition which was helping people who were impacted by the earthquake. I raised \$18,000!

After that, I kept running in my spare time. I train four times a week — mostly indoors, because Calgary is cold — but I try to run outside

on weekends, and in the summer. I love seeing the world pass by with every step.

In 2024, I gave myself a new challenge: to run a total of 40 kilometres and raise \$40,000 for the **World Partnership Walk**. It's the largest event in Canada in support of international development, and my Aunt Mary was one of the women who organized the first one, over 40 years ago.

I wanted to help because I think everyone should have access to clean water, food, and education. I can't imagine walking five kilometres every day just to get water, and I don't think anyone else should have to either, especially kids. I also don't think it's fair that millions of girls in Afghanistan can't go to school.

I finished running the 40 kilometres on the morning of June 2, 2024, right before hundreds of people started the Walk at Prince's

Island Park. My dad was following me on a bike the whole time. He kept shouting words of encouragement, like, "You got this!" and "5K to go!" So many other people were cheering me on too, and my friend Jaden came to watch me. It was really cool, especially because I reached my fundraising goal.

The experience made me realize that no matter how old you are, age is not a limit. Anyone can make a difference. You can just try your best, and your best is always amazing.

When I grow up, I want to be an architect, because I've always had a passion for drawing and building structures. For now, I'll continue to build awareness on global issues through running. It's how I'm making a difference in the world.

The 2026 **World Partnership Walk** is on May 31 in selected cities across Canada. 🌍

THIS TRAVELLING EXHIBITION GETS CANADIANS THINKING ABOUT GLOBAL CITIZENSHIP

OUR POTENTIAL, OUR PURPOSE ASKS VISITORS TO THINK BEYOND OUR BORDERS AND INTO A FUTURE WHERE EVERYONE CAN THRIVE

BY CARO ROLANDO



NATIONWIDE, ACROSS MUSEUMS, conference spaces, youth centres and festivals, *Our Potential, Our Purpose* has been igniting conversations about global development since it began touring Canada in August 2025.

Through multimedia and user interactive experiences, the exhibition prompts audiences to reflect on how they can improve quality of life in their communities — particularly when it comes to health, education, climate, economic empowerment and gender equality.

While that question may feel daunting on an individual level, the exhibition reminds visitors that they don't need to face it alone.

"Lasting change is rarely individ-

ual," says Christine McGuire, who manages the exhibition. "It's built together, and it's built over time."

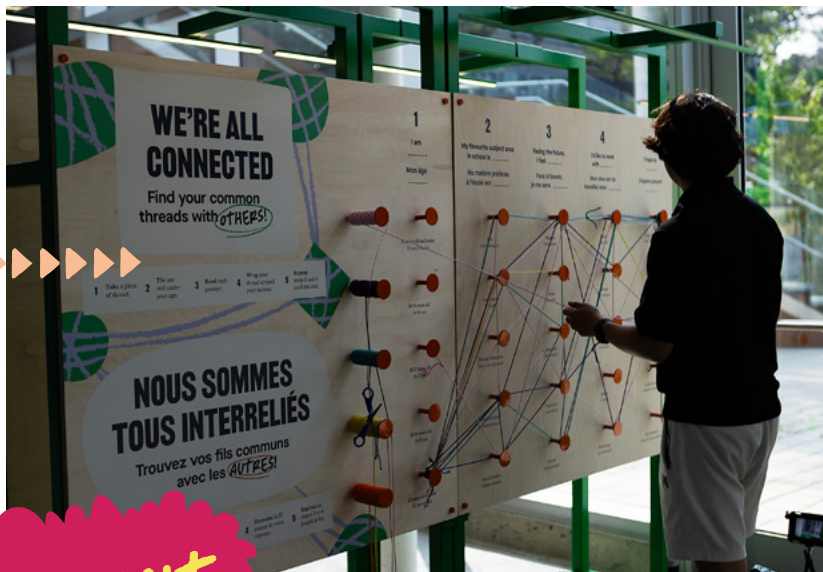
McGuire's sentiment is bolstered by the stories of people featured in the exhibition. For example, Nadia Iqbal, an entrepreneur in Pakistan, provides web development training to women in the country's male-dominated tech industry, launching their careers in user experience and user interface design, graphic design, and online marketing. Olga Albino, also featured in the exhibition, was inspired by her grandfather to become a nurse, and now cares for women and their newborns in Mozambique. It's the collective actions by these

women and other local leaders that transform their communities.

Beyond borders, changemakers like Albino and Iqbal are inspiring people across Canada, who are learning about them as the exhibit tours the country. For McGuire, this is one of the most rewarding parts of the whole exhibition experience.

"There is a pretty big ripple effect in all of our actions," McGuire reflects. "Seeing visitors walk through the space and having that spark — that small spark on what they can do both locally and globally — that's what really sticks with me."

Our Potential, Our Purpose will continue to tour Canada throughout 2026 and 2027.



VIBRANT

(TOP) A student visits the *Our Potential, Our Purpose* exhibition in Toronto, August 2025.

(MIDDLE) Visitors watch a film at the *Our Potential, Our Purpose* exhibition in Windsor, Ont., in January.

(BOTTOM) A bird's eye view of *Our Potential, Our Purpose* at the North American Model United Nations 2026 in Toronto.



◀ EXHIBITION SPOTLIGHT ▶

MWINYI MOHAMED'S STORY

BY ANNIE LEE

SOME OF MWINYI MOHAMED'S first core memories include sitting cross-legged in a circle alongside other pre-schoolers, listening attentively to his favourite teacher, Bahati Suleiman. As he sat in the colourfully decorated classroom located in the Kenyan coastal town of Kwale, **Mwinyi began learning**, as all children do — first his numbers, colours, alphabet and, eventually, how to project his voice and communicate with others.

Mohamed recalls Suleiman using colourful learning aids to make lessons more interactive and engaging, including seashells and rocks painted by the children's parents and community members.

"I loved my experience in school," he emphasizes. "Teachers were very



IMMERSIVE

TOP PHOTO: DELLA ROLLINS/AKFC, MIDDLE AND BOTTOM PHOTO: FRANCOIS GRENIER/ANFC



Mwinyi Mohamed, right, sits next to his former pre-school teacher, Bahati Suleiman, in her classroom in Kwale, Kenya, June 2023.



Most of my community, once they finish high school or primary school, it's hard for them to move onto the next level.

supportive, so [us students would] learn quicker.”

Mohamed, now 21, reminisces about those formative years. Like many families in their community, Mohamed’s parents worked long hours — his dad as a construction worker, and his mom as a street vendor selling beans and chapati (a flat-bread common in the region) — and resources were limited.

Mohamed, alongside his three other siblings, had attended a local preschool that provided affordable, quality learning so that children could develop foundational skills for primary school.


When Mohamed finished pre-school, his teachers nominated him for a full scholarship at a private school two hours away in the city of Mombasa. It wasn’t long before he was packing his bags.

As expected, Mohamed thrived at the school, completing his primary and secondary school education there, and graduating with an International Baccalaureate diploma. This led him to become the first in his family to go to university.

“Most of my community, once they finish high school or primary school, it’s hard for them to move onto the next level,” Mohamed says. “They

may have their own problems back home, and most families don’t have enough money to support them.”

In Kenya, more than two million children are out of school, according to UNICEF. Globally, that figure stands at an alarming 272 million children out of school due to factors including conflict, poverty and gender inequality.

“Education is important because it gives you a key to open many doors,” says Mohamed. He hopes those doors will lead to opportunities for him to give back to his community. “My dream is to be a person who can help my society and push it forward.” 



WE TAKE CARE OF THE SOIL, AND THE SOIL TAKES CARE OF US

LESSONS ON RECIPROCITY FROM UGANDA

BY **CARO ROLANDO**

HENRY SSENDAGIRE'S PARENTS wanted him to be a doctor — and in a way, he is.

Ssendagire is a Climate Resilience Coordinator at [Aga Khan Foundation Uganda](#) in Kampala, where he supports small scale farmers and their families in building sustainable livelihoods. With a masters in crop science, Ssendagire began his career in commercial agricultural production. Since then, his approach to farming has undergone a 180, with extensive training in regenerative agriculture. It's farming that focuses on conservation and rehabilitation, through reviving soil health, recycling water, and increasing biodiversity.

"You're kind of like a doctor, but not to people — to soil," says Lorenzo Luis Peñate Lara with a smile. "A soil doctor."

The sudden observation makes Ssendagire laugh. He and Peñate Lara met last July when Peñate Lara moved to Kampala, Uganda as part of [Aga Khan Foundation Canada's International Youth Fellowship](#). The nine-month program offers young Canadians the chance to gain practical global experience in international development.

Peñate Lara holds a Bachelor's in Business Administration from York University in Toronto. Following graduation, he worked for a technology startup, where he focused on business development and partnerships. Beyond the boardroom, Peñate Lara describes himself as a human rights defender who advocates for community-led efforts.

At [Aga Khan Foundation Uganda](#), he is a Climate Resilience Fellow,

(ABOVE) Lorenzo Luis Peñate Lara (right) and Henry Ssendagire (left, with hat) lead a nature-based solutions training in Jinja, Uganda.

and Ssendagire is his supervisor. Together, they work on initiatives like the Maendeleo Project, which empowers farmers to adopt nature-based approaches to tending to their crops, like using biospray instead of pesticides.

While their approach is rooted in a technical understanding of agricultural sciences, it is underpinned by a sense of reciprocity that shows how much people can learn from one another when they're open to it.

We sat down with Ssendagire and Peñate Lara to learn more about the experiences that shaped their love



Henry Ssendagire (left) and Lorenzo Luis Peñate Lara at a training session about household biogas systems in Masaka, Uganda.

for the land and the people who depend on it.

On their early experiences

HS: I grew up in the middle of the slums of Kampala. Even in those slums, I always had maize growing somewhere. I didn't learn it from anywhere. I just saw that when you put seeds [in the ground], they start germinating. The beginning of it all was me just doing it myself, with that inquisitive mind. I like the fact that you take care of a plant, and they grow up as you're watching. It's rewarding, and at the end of the day, everyone needs that service. So if you really do it well, you contribute a lot to a lot of people's lives.

LPL: Growing up in Cuba was very formative, even though I left [for Canada] at a young age, because a lot of global solidarity is communicated in Cuba. My grandmother was a big influence because she was a human rights lawyer. Spending most of my time with her really helped me see the world from a social justice lens and that really inspired me to want to do that as well. I spent most of my childhood on trees, at the beach, or

on farms — all our cultural activities and rituals were there.

On understanding climate change

HS: I originally studied agriculture because I got a scholarship. Later, I started getting exposed to climate [change]... like the time there were heavy rains in my community and I woke up with my bed covered in water. I began connecting the dots and then started pursuing opportunities around organic farming. Eventually, I learned about regenerative farming, which takes us back to our native way of producing food. It's all about preserving the soil for multiple generations to come. We take care of the soil, so that the soil takes care of the plants and the animals, and those take care of us.

LPL: Most of my understanding [of climate change] came through my journeys in Latin America and mainly from Indigenous communities who are stewards of the land. They've communicated that mother nature is suffering. When I came to Uganda, I was deeply inspired by Henry because I saw him as what I wanted to become — a climate advocate

who appreciates the environment and works in harmony with it.

On learning from each other

HS: From before he even arrived, you could feel that Lorenzo wasn't someone just moving through the system. He was deeply passionate about everything he dared to do. What I also admire and learn from every day is how he follows through. When Lorenzo connects with someone or something, he sees it all the way to the end. He doesn't just attend a meeting — he goes back, digests it, makes sure there's an update. He captures every moment in writing, in recordings, in photos. Nothing is wasted. And then there's his strategic thinking. I might have the vision but not always know how to break it down. Lorenzo hears one word, writes it down, and suddenly the dots start connecting. He thinks in systems. In a short time, he can map the whole picture. I have also learned a lot about myself through him.

LPL: From Henry, I've learned to become a better listener. The thing that I most admire and try to continuously pick up from him is his natural gift for storytelling, his ability to listen and his natural leadership. He emphasizes viewing the work through the eyes of the farmer, through the eyes of the community — rooting everything we do in understanding how it's going to [make an] impact at that level and always thinking about how we can empower the community. Understanding from him how to build trust, show deep compassion and listening, and always centre and amplify the voices of those on the ground has been incredibly impactful. 🌱

FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK

GLOBAL CITIZENSHIP BEGINS IN THE CLASSROOM

AS I WRITE THIS FROM NAIROBI, Kenya, where I work as an independent journalist, I'm reminded that my journey into global citizenship did not begin abroad. It began in a Canadian classroom.

I grew up in Toronto with a curiosity about social issues — both locally and beyond our borders. Whenever I could choose the topic of a school project, I always gravitated towards social justice. But it wasn't until Grade 11 that something truly shifted when I enrolled in a course called World Issues.

In that class, I learned about sustainable development, climate change, gender equality, poverty, and the systems that shape our world. It felt like a blindfold had been lifted. That course changed how I saw the world and my place within it. I remember walking the halls of my high school thinking, 'I can't believe this is an elective course. Everyone needs to know this.'

In university, I continued to seek courses that expanded my worldview, like one about the United Nations' Millennium Development Goals — the predecessors to today's Sustainable Development Goals — which was taught by Stephen Lewis, one of Can-

ada's most respected humanitarians. Educators like him presented the complexities of development and pushed me to think critically.

Outside the classroom, I volunteered, working to advance food justice, labour rights and more within my own community.


Those collective experiences have brought me to where I am today, reporting on a range of social justice and global development issues across Africa. The perspective I've gained through this work has profoundly shaped me. Yet, none of it started in Kenya. It started at home in Toronto, with educators who made space for difficult conversations about decolonization, solidarity, and justice, within Canada and beyond.

Helping produce this special edition of *Canadian Geographic* has been particularly meaningful because AKFC's **International Youth Fellowship** played an instrumental part in my life trajectory. I received the Fellowship in 2016 and moved to Kenya, not knowing that a decade later, I would still be here with the same fiery commitment to justice I had when I first landed.

My hope is that this issue of *Canadian Geographic* serves as a



catalyst for students encountering these ideas for the first time and for educators who recognize the extraordinary influence they hold. Global citizenship begins in classrooms. When young people are given the tools to understand how the world works and what their role can be within it, there is no limit to where that knowledge can take them — or how this can help shape a more just and sustainable future for us all.

Learn more about **AKFC**. 

— Jacky Habib



AGA KHAN FOUNDATION
CANADA

ABOUT AKFC

Aga Khan Foundation Canada (AKFC) is a global development organization and registered Canadian charity. For over

40 years, AKFC has supported locally led organizations in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East, alongside partner agencies in the **Aga Khan Development Network**, to address the root causes of poverty.

In Canada, AKFC offers a range of opportunities to engage in global development, mobilizes funding and expertise

to support programs overseas, and promotes knowledge exchange. AKFC's work is made possible through longstanding relationships in Canada with individual supporters, the private sector, academic institutions, like-minded organizations, and the government — in particular, **Global Affairs Canada**.



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