



CAMBIO



Youth Consulting for Climate Change

Recommendations for working with
young people in Cuba

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Introduction



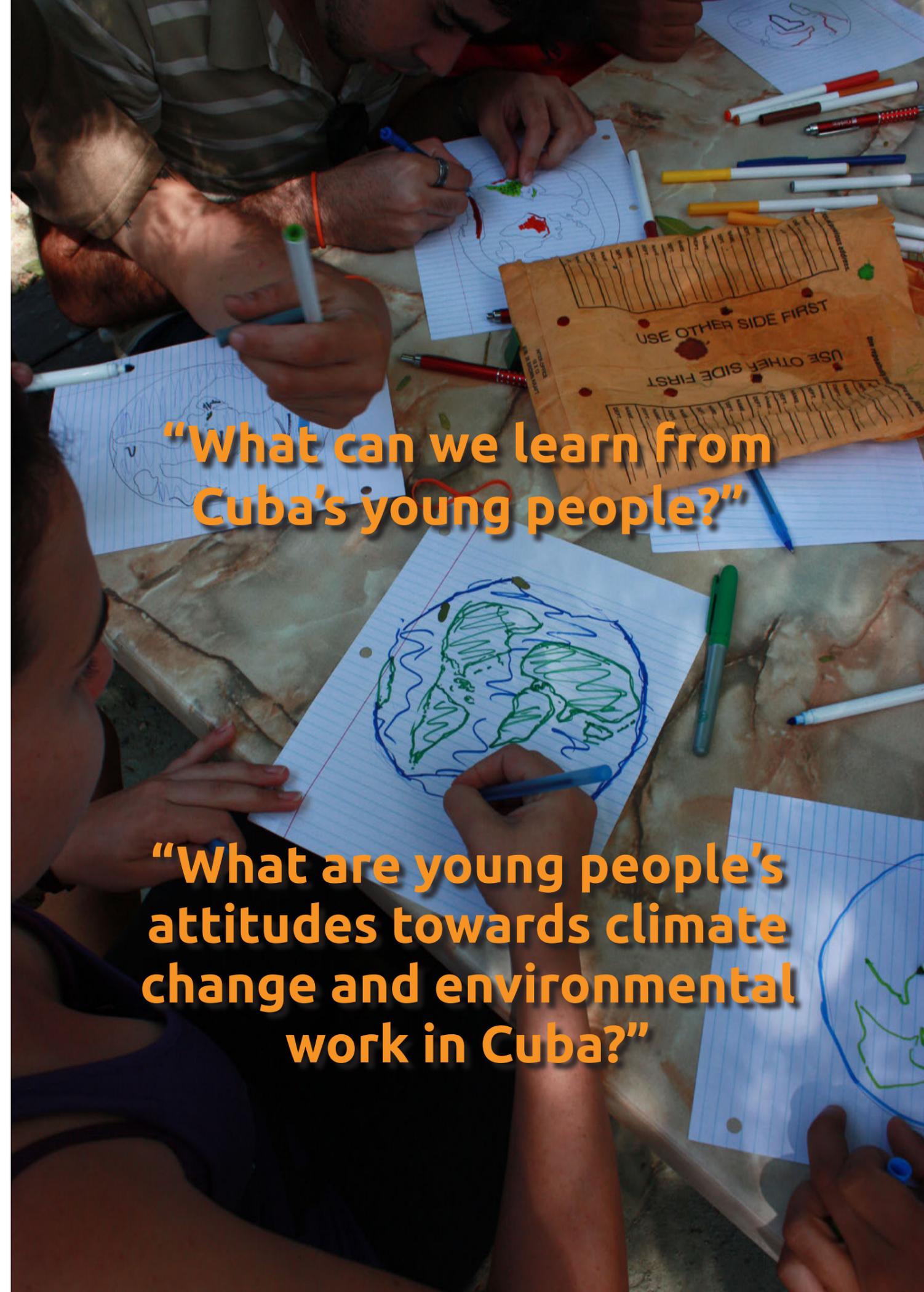
We believe 'development' is about deepening our connection with ourselves, each others and the world around us.

We have no rush or sense that we need to fix the world – instead, we create space to listen to stories and experiences. We believe within us there is lots of wisdom and that a deeper sense of community enriches our experience. To build community, we need to first of all enlarge the collective space to feel, listen and be with each other differently.

Our mission is to ensure that young people are actively involved in the development of their communities. Youth Consulting for Climate Change was a research project designed to learn about how youth in Cuba participate in climate change adaptation activities.

This publication emerges out of a research process that Recrear coordinated between May 2013 and December 2014. During this period we carried out 12 participatory research workshops with about 75 young people, aged 18-35 in the cities of Havana, Santa Clara and Santiago de Cuba. Moreover, 10 Cuban young people were trained as researchers and carried out more than 30 interviews with several experts, institutions and community organizations.

Youth Consulting to Climate Change produced [many short stories](#) and profiled a [number of youth leaders and activists](#) in the environmental field. This photo book is geared to organizations like the Caribbean Youth Environmental Network, UN-Youth Habitat, CARE International and others who intend to engage Cuban youth on environmental programs going forward.



“What can we learn from Cuba’s young people?”

“What are young people’s attitudes towards climate change and environmental work in Cuba?”

Partners

This project was designed and implemented in a partnership between Recrear and the Caribbean Youth Environment Network (CYEN) and made possible thanks to the contribution of the UN-Habitat Youth Fund.



About Recrear

[Recrear](#) is a Canadian charity composed of a network of young professionals from all over the world. We design and implementing participatory youth-led research to create active youth engagement. Our program utilizes creative techniques to understand the perspective and experiences of young people in the community. Based on the results of our research, we support development partners, local institutions and community organizations to design original, youth-friendly programs.

About CYEN

The Caribbean Youth Environment Network is a non-profit organization dedicated to improving the quality of life of Caribbean young people by facilitating their personal development and promoting their full involvement in all matters pertaining to the environment and sustainable development. The organization promotes education and training, Caribbean integration and community empowerment as tools to develop an ethic amongst young people that assists in the conservation and protection of natural resources within the Wider Caribbean.

About the UN-Habitat Youth Fund

The UN-Habitat Youth Fund supports urban youth in developing countries. It aims to advance the achievements of the Millennium Development goals and the Habitat Agenda by providing grants up to USD 25,000 to youth-led projects piloting innovative approaches to employment, good urban governance, shelter and secure tenure.



The Methodology: Youth-led Participatory Action Research

Youth Consulting for Climate Change reflects a research process carried out through the lenses of two teams working together: a team of 3 international researchers and a team of 10 Cuba youth researchers. These diverse perspectives bring something rare and unique to the research. Cuba is a complex, misunderstood, often paradoxical, polarized, and polarizing country. The team of Cuban youth researchers brought an authentic perspective of youth from three provinces as well as checks and balances to the research process. The international team translated Cuba to non-Cubans; using outsider's eyes to observe what is so special and different about this country. In each city Recrear networked with key youth organizations to bring together the most eclectic and representative group of young people and to invite organizations to be invested in the process.

The two teams were trained in two week-long retreats which allowed them to develop a common culture, share knowledge, and connect with young leaders from other provinces. All of this while building good friendships. The co-researching process was just as important as arriving to the findings themselves.

The Cuban team supported the logistics involved in organizing the research workshops, which were facilitated by the Recrear team. Within each province, they took care of mobilizing their networks and expanding them to recruit 25 young people that would be as representative as possible of youth in the province.

Training

12
workshops

Mid-term
review

Internship
(Interviews and
Cuban Team
Research)

Final Review
workshop

Compiling
editing,
translating

The 25 participants were recruited keeping in mind gender balance and diverse levels of engagement with environmental work. Within each group, a third of the participants considered themselves leaders in environmental work, a third had some but not very in-depth involvement, and a third was extremely disengaged from environment related topic. The composition of each group created an atmosphere where distinct knowledge and perspectives could organically be shared and transferred between young people.

Where our research took place:

- Permaculture farms
- Beaches
- Environmental projects
- Universities
- Botanical Gardens
- Churches

To learn more about the research techniques we use, visit our [Research Lab](#).



1. Be light and play

Cubans are stereotyped as colourful and loud. [Cubans know how to have fun](#); they are gifted with a one-of-a-kind liveliness. So when working in Cuba, don't take yourself too seriously. Even if we are talking about climate change.

For the participants of our research, being the protagonists of theatre skits, treasure hunts, art collages and debates was effortless and exciting. This eagerness to play and learn experientially also meant that discussions, reflections and focus groups could be that much more powerful and insightful. The bar is set high from the get go and, as facilitators, this gave us the opportunity to go deep and push creative boundaries. So we made the most of it.

Example 1: Make the conversations creative and fun

Magic things can come out in workshops with Cuban young people. It is useful to break concepts down so that group and researchers can collectively digest it. Take the statement: 'bureaucracy is an obstacle to youth engagement in Cuba'. We used theater to dig deeper into this statement. By recreating reality, young people were able to [reflect](#) on the experience of young people trying to start a project.



2. Be ready to feel challenged. Challenge yourself. Don't assume you know better.



Don't let ideas of 'good' and the 'bad' shadow the complexities of the Cuban paradoxes.

We are often asked: so what is the verdict on Cuba? The truth is, we have no idea. We dove into Cuba to learn that there is absolutely no black and white.

For us, Cuba was a dark room, where we processed our own set of values. Values we were not even aware of because the fact of the matter is: the Cuban system is very unique. Beyond the debates on the good and bad, is the simple reality that the Cuban way of seeing the world is categorically different from the world most of us operate in.

Be ready to be confronted, amazed and/or puzzled. Whatever it is, don't judge it. Observe the values that clash and those which are in harmony.

Creating a space for a truly transformative exchange is an art.

How can you assimilate this nugget of abstract wisdom into working with Cuban youth? Put on your research cap and begin by getting to know how Cuban youth relate to their day-to-day life, interact with authority figures, plan for the future. These questions are more related than you think. They unearth the values that underwrite the decision making of young people.



Example 1: A young person's 24 hours

One of the simplest yet most telling exercises of our workshops was to ask young people what they did in the course of a day. Sketching out the outline of a clock, young people thought about their 24 hours. Beyond their routines of sleeping and eating, this exercise allows all the essential 'in-betweens' to come out. From the hyperactive law students involved in dizzying number of projects but who still makes time to be with family, to the punk rockers dividing their time between band rehearsals and hanging out. The real value of this information is the reminder that when young people step into a workshop they are never just participants. They are a collection of lifestyles, habits, routines, and values that are very much part of who they are.

3. Be ambitious!

Cuban youth gravitate towards community. Call it a product of a socialist system, an educational curriculum that tends to be community-oriented, or a strong set of family values. It may be all of these things. One thing is for certain: Cubans get what solidarity is about. Live one day like a Cuban and you become aware of just how much they lean on one another to get by.

Cuban youth on the whole are also incredibly well-educated. In Cuba 40% of young people go on to pursue post-secondary education at a public university. A free education is among the features most valued by young Cubans.

AVANCE →

All this is to say, we have interacted with some incredibly talented and capable young people. Among the faces we met were great writers, technicians, young philosophers, not so closeted singers, and charismatic actors. The mosaic of Cuban youth is vibrant. So when working in Cuba, use these ingredients to make something even more flavourful than you imagined. Let them surprise you by giving the floor to them. Take a seat as they show you just how much they've already been playing with arts-based strategies like theater, plastic arts etc. Unlike your typical workshop, you don't need to warm them up - they're ready to go. So turn up the heat!

Cuban youth are well-informed when it comes to the environment and climate change. In our research we found that our participants had no trouble articulating how climate change affect the environment they live in year-after-year. Yet, this does not necessarily lend itself to being environmental champions.

On the contrary, when we asked youth to think about relationships to nature (past, present and future), they admitted that, while the generation of their parents was not aware of climate change as a discourse or phenomenon, they did have a much higher regard for nature. In many ways, their day-to-day lives were inexplicably connected to the well-being of the environment.

Fast forward to the present moment and climate change is a serious problem for Cuba. As a result, there has been a lot of intentionality in pushing environmental education. At one level, this means Cubans are conscious of climate change as a discourse, unlike the generation of their parents. On another plane, environmental education has also encouraged young people to develop a better relationship to the environment. Learning circles, known as 'circuitos de interes' are one of the most known ways to engage young people with the environment.

These after-school groups are mandatory for primary and secondary students in Cuba. Within these small groups, young people are encouraged to physically explore the environment in order to build a relationship with it.

We noticed that all those Cubans who had a strong commitment to the environment were characterised by having developed their own personal relationship to nature. It might sound silly, but by spending time in nature and learning to appreciate its value, they developed an intimate relationship to the environment. They don't tell themselves to protect the environment, but rather it has become instinct and their moral duty.

Don't come expecting to teach environmental education, come ready to intimately explore your own connection to the environment and encourage them to do the same. That's much more sustainable.



4. Environmental education is successful when people feel truly connected to nature

Example 1: 'Uno definiendo lo que siente'

One of the phrases that continues to ring in our heads is 'uno definiendo lo que siente', i.e you defend what you feel.

We learned this lesson best when we also put it into practice by organizing treasure hunts out in nature: permaculture farms, remote beaches, environmental projects, you name it. This exercise brought together a collection of youth, from the environmental activist to the indifferent punk rocker, to collectively feel their connection to the environment.

The treasure hunt also allowed for any countryside-city differences to become apparent before they came tumbling down. The shy young farmer of the workshop became the unexpected and empowered consultant. The shiny-shoes city dwellers eventually abandoned their footwear all together to join the others in feeling the earth underneath their feet.



Example 2: Arts-based strategies

Cubans are incredibly creative when it comes to the arts. So many creative musicians, artists, poets and actors that make cultural spaces at every corner come to life. It's not just their joie-de-vivre that makes them thrive, it's that the Cuban state recognizes the importance of arts as well.

We met interesting non-governmental projects like Loveln - a cultural festival that brings artists of every kind together to create exciting ways for the public to engage with big social issues: the ecology, peace, water, etc. Groups like Ojos are no more than a group of young artists self-organizing to bring development theater and participatory painting to their communities.



5. Be aware: Cuba is not all the same

6. We know how to navigate the political minefield



In talking about 'Cuba' it's easy to forget that it's made of some very diverse regions - each bringing different opportunities and challenges. We saw these differences manifest as we engaged with young people across three major cities.

Havana, for example, has long attracted community organizations and their projects. As a result, youth in Havana are far more exposed to creative and interactive activities. Two examples of interesting Havana-based projects are 'Lovein', a youth-led music-art-theater festival to engage youth on environmental debates, and 'ProNaturaleza', an environmental youth networks.

Other regions and major cities of Cuba are not as vibrant. Santa Clara, for example, can only boast a handful of groups working actively with young people. Even then, the efforts of these organizations tend toward a younger bracket of 'youth', leaving young adults with far fewer options. Turn to Santiago de Cuba and it's a different situation altogether. There are an incredible number of youth groups springing to life at every corner, but there seems to be a glass-ceiling to their movement. As one of the leaders of a young theater troupe shared, 'the opportunities to host larger-scale activities get locked up in Havana'.

Of course, no discussion on youth engagement in Cuba is complete without recognizing the role that the political system plays. Although this was never an explicit goal of the project, it is impossible to talk about Cuba without somehow making reference to the socialist fabric.

With an intention to learn about youth best-practices in adaptation to climate change work, we've also had to come face-to-face with the intricacies of the Cuban socialist mosaic. The landscape for nonprofits wishing to work in Cuba poses its bureaucratic challenges. This usually manifests in organizations doing all sorts of dances to carefully adhere to themes deemed of interest by Cuban government.

However to say that navigating the political minefield only refers to the state of politics in Cuba is misleading. Until recently, the United States, has made access to Cuba challenging. As a Canadian charity, we felt this first hand when our funds were frozen by US headquartered crowdfunding platform Indiegogo.

In the wake of a transforming US-Cuba relationship, we expect the landscape for funding to change drastically.

Do you have any questions?

**Would you like to chat with us
about our work in Cuba?**

Contact us!



