



Cross-Regional Forum
October 13-15, 2023

Youth in ACTION

BUILDING
SOLIDARITY FOR
A JUST FUTURE

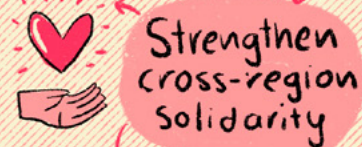
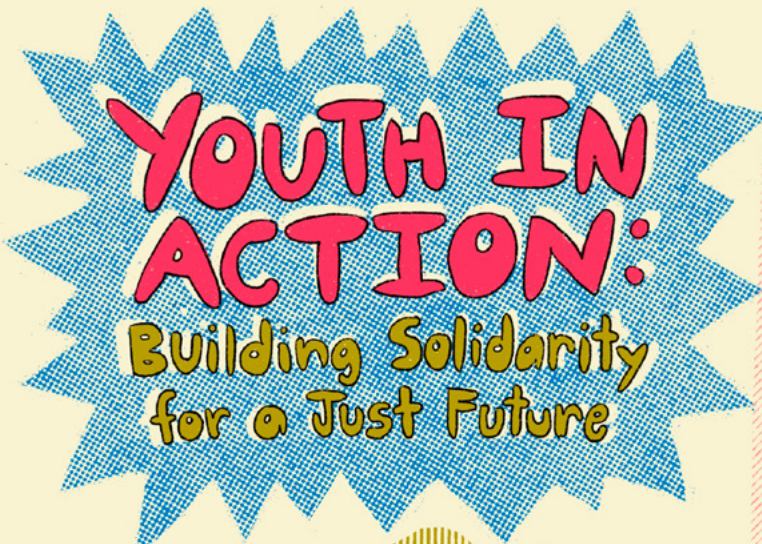


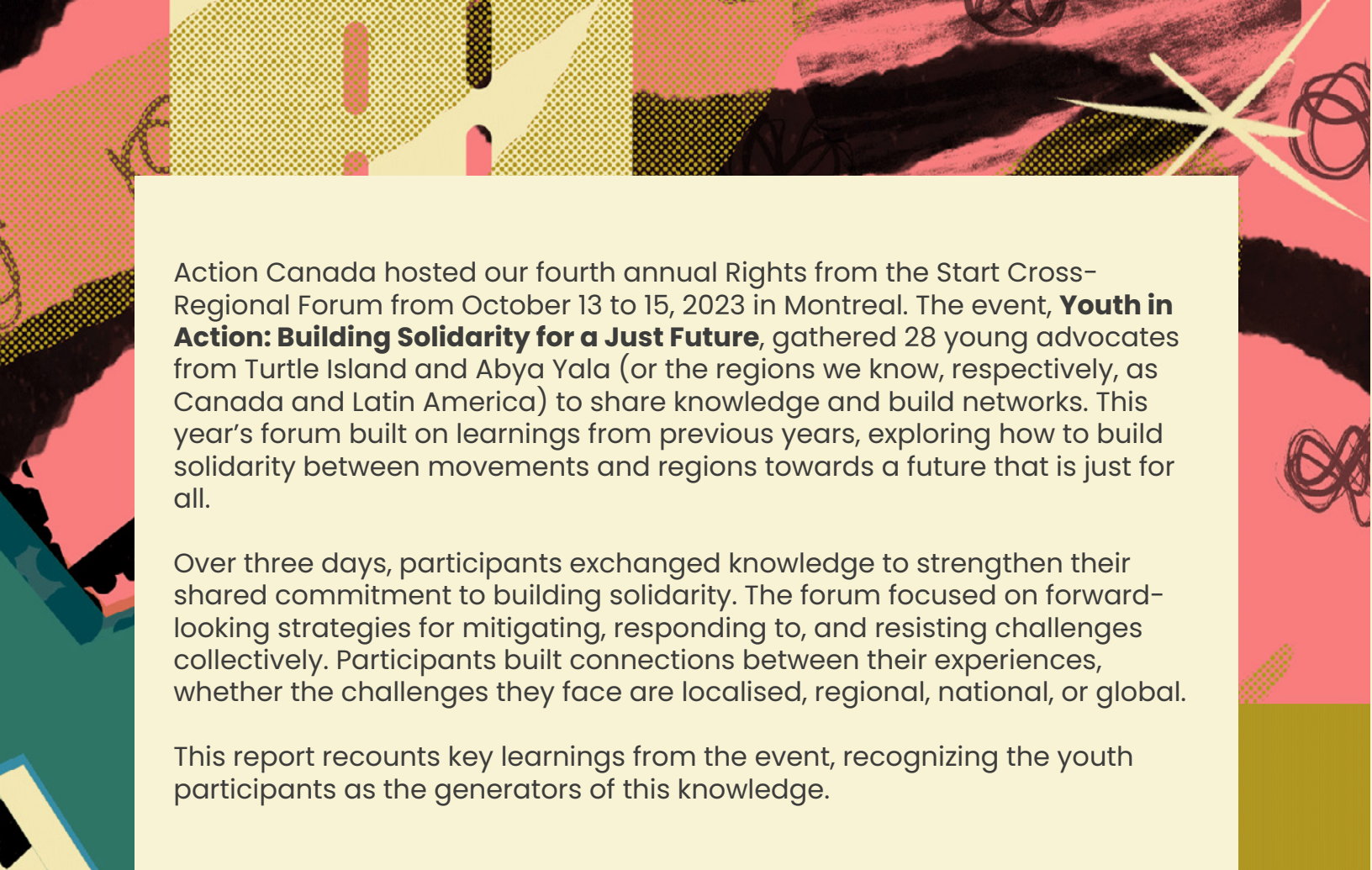
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Overview:

Three days looking towards a just future





Action Canada hosted our fourth annual Rights from the Start Cross-Regional Forum from October 13 to 15, 2023 in Montreal. The event, **Youth in Action: Building Solidarity for a Just Future**, gathered 28 young advocates from Turtle Island and Abya Yala (or the regions we know, respectively, as Canada and Latin America) to share knowledge and build networks. This year's forum built on learnings from previous years, exploring how to build solidarity between movements and regions towards a future that is just for all.

Over three days, participants exchanged knowledge to strengthen their shared commitment to building solidarity. The forum focused on forward-looking strategies for mitigating, responding to, and resisting challenges collectively. Participants built connections between their experiences, whether the challenges they face are localised, regional, national, or global.

This report recounts key learnings from the event, recognizing the youth participants as the generators of this knowledge.

The Forum featured 12 participant-led sessions and activities over three days, focused on creating horizontal and participatory conversations among peers. Action Canada developed broad guidelines for the overarching concept, allowing session leaders to develop the content of each session. This resulted in programming within which each participant could see themselves reflected.

Who was in the room?

Action Canada welcomed 28 young advocates from across Canada and eight countries in Latin America and the Caribbean. The forum situated sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) as central to other rights issues, while welcoming insights and contributions from participants with experience in other movements and spaces, including climate action, drug policy reform, and migrant justice.



Crisis: Addressing the challenges we face



“We face these problems every day, and they are aggravated by colonialist, homophobic, and classist discourses with obvious repercussions on the health of communities.”

- Forum participant

The first day of the forum laid the groundwork for open, **peer-led conversations**. Activities focused on getting to know one another and the objectives of the space, setting expectations, and building trust.

Conceptually, the day revolved around the idea of **coalescing challenges**, recognizing that our advocacy and activism functions to overcome these challenges. Participants spoke of many obstacles to their advocacy, most of which are related to systemic oppression. In particular, participants highlighted the impacts of **racism, classism, and heterosexism on education** and healthcare, recognizing that these inequities are always linked.

What connects all participants is the commitment to contest systems that create and perpetuate harms and work towards a more just and equitable future for all. We spoke of the personal impact of advocacy work, emphasizing that it's important to keep **strategy, solidarity, and sustainability** at the centre of our work. This keeps us focused and motivated and positions us as a united and enduring collective force for change.



Key learning: Our struggles are connected

On the first day of the forum, participants emphasised that **the challenges we face have the same origin**, although the way we experience them sometimes differs. This theme carried through the forum, and we also found **commonalities in our aspirations**. While many rights violations are related to power differentials between countries or regions, a pattern which was identified throughout the forum, this is just one piece of the puzzle. Some participants from Latin America expressed surprise at the issues their colleagues in Canada face, opening avenues to **make connections between marginalizations**. This was especially evident in conversations around the **racialized impact of resource extraction and environmental degradation**. Similarly, participants spoke of similar challenges posed by anti-rights actors, identifying commonalities in their tactics and messaging and in effective ways to counter them.

Workbook

Take a moment to think of three ways in which the crisis in your context impacts your advocacy.

Can you start to identify any commonalities or trends across the group?





Session spotlight: SRHR at the centre of coalescing crises

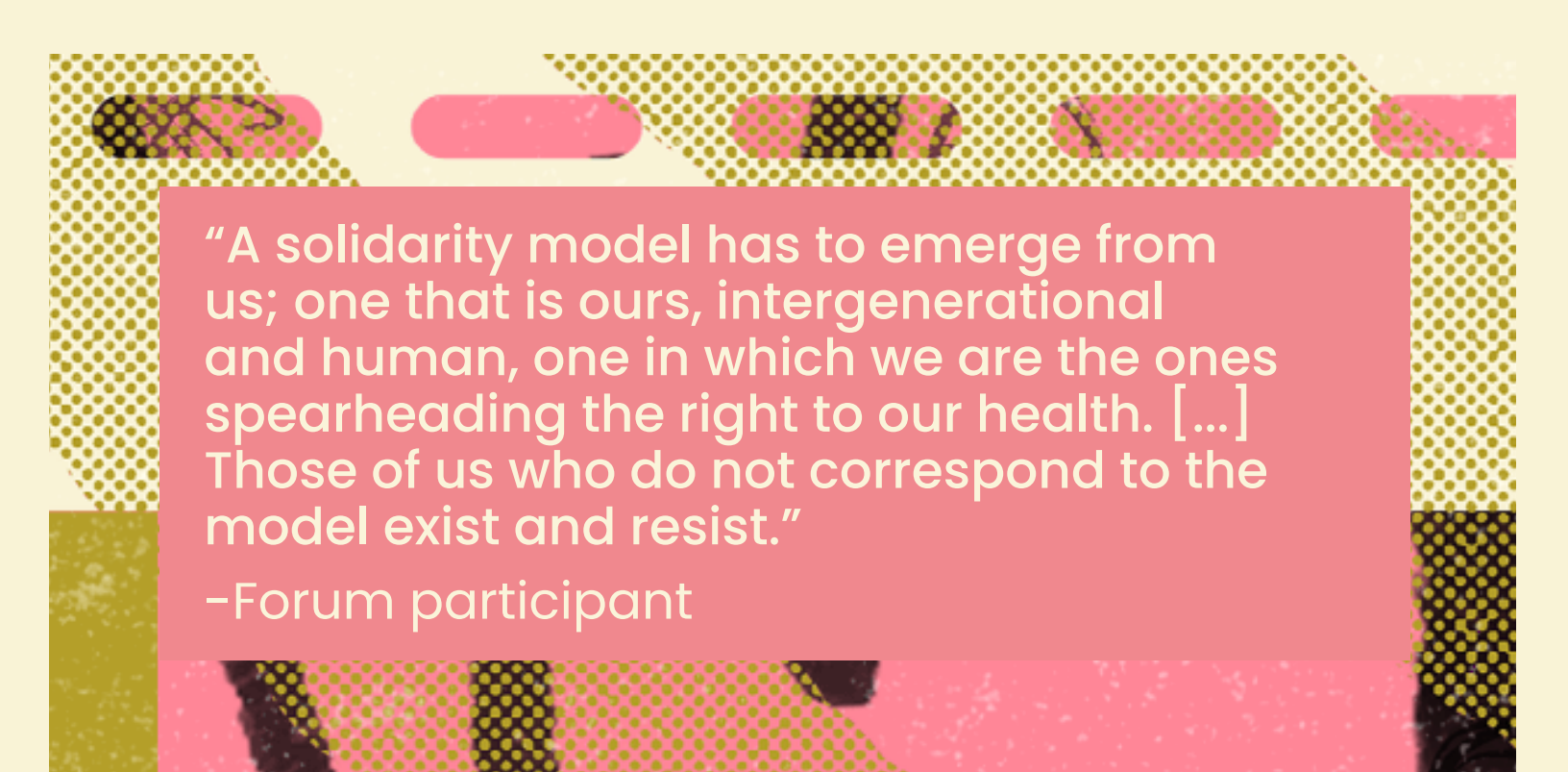
Andrew and Elnathan led a session to guide people through a conversation on how SRHR is connected to, and often a critical piece of, different movements and causes.

Starting from a broad reflection on how SRHR is often under threat, participants shared stories of how sexual health services can be seen as optional during a crisis (e.g., public health departments moving staff from sexual health to COVID units during the early days of the pandemic), or sexual rights being the first attacked by groups looking to control people's bodies (e.g., laws

limiting abortion access or sexual education in schools). By examining SRHR through the lens of the Social Determinants of Health, participants were able to see ways to support other kinds of causes, and in turn be supported by advocates in other spaces. From there we highlighted ways that sexual health movements connect to things like housing, migration status, or environmental justice, amongst others. The session ended with a focus on the importance of building connections across movements, and getting energized by the power of meaningful relationship building.

Action: Strengthening our activism and advocacy



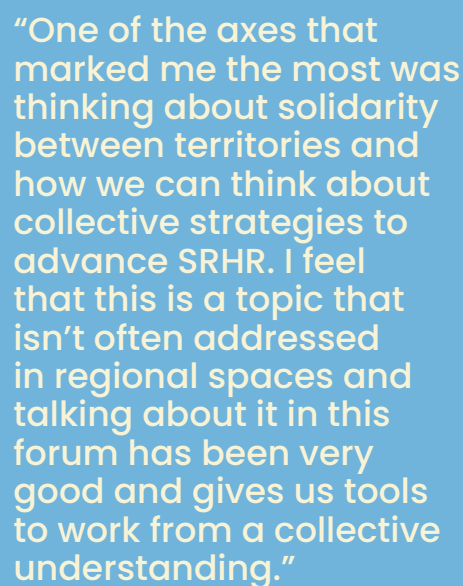


“A solidarity model has to emerge from us; one that is ours, intergenerational and human, one in which we are the ones spearheading the right to our health. [...] Those of us who do not correspond to the model exist and resist.”

-Forum participant

The second day centred around the **actions we take in our advocacy and activism**. In sharing what shapes and drives their advocacy, participants uncovered that despite different backgrounds they share experiences. They found many commonalities as agents of change, and discussed how the first changes occur at the individual level, then at the community level, and then at the structural level.

When our actions are addressing deep and enduring issues, it's especially important to **envision and enact advocacy in community with others**. This solidarity strengthens our movements and sustains the work that we do. It also helps us identify **shared challenges and opportunities**, build bridges between regions, and ensure that we are not working in isolation from other movements.



“One of the axes that marked me the most was thinking about solidarity between territories and how we can think about collective strategies to advance SRHR. I feel that this is a topic that isn't often addressed in regional spaces and talking about it in this forum has been very good and gives us tools to work from a collective understanding.”

- Forum participant



Key learning: Different ways of doing advocacy

Participants drew from their experience in different spaces to exchange knowledge on strategies for advancing sexual and reproductive health and rights in solidarity with other movements. It became clear that there are many **different ways of doing advocacy** and activism. It's strategically important to use a diversity of tactics and it reflects our different learning styles, strengths, and preferences as advocates. From making and sharing memes to engaging in international human rights mechanisms, participants highlighted that there is a **personal impact to their work**. We all come as people with lived experiences that influences our advocacy and our advocacy also informs how we see and understand the world.



Session spotlight:

The diversity of strategies was illustrated by two of the day's sessions

1. Dissident bodies in the hegemonic medical model: let's talk about intersectionality

Ale P. and Valentinna led a session designed for sexual and reproductive rights activists who seek to incorporate an intersectional perspective into their agenda, as well as for those who, as a result of their experiences with different systems of oppression, necessarily incorporate this framework into their activism.

DISSIDENT BODIES IN THE HEGEMONIC MEDICAL MODEL
LET'S TALK ABOUT INTERSECTIONALITY

This medical model excludes us, puts us at risk, and limits our rights.

Educate health workers

WHAT CAN WE DO?

Build our own language & concepts

Make memes!

Disability

Challenge 'normality'

Gender identity

Race

Dissident Bodies

Who holds valid knowledge about our bodies?

Epistemic violence

Hierarchization & domination through knowledge

RELEVANT CONCEPTS

Androcentrism

Male knowledge that poses as universal

Imposes an idea of health

Medical Model

western, prioritizes normative bodies

THE HISTORY OF MEDICAL VIOLENCE

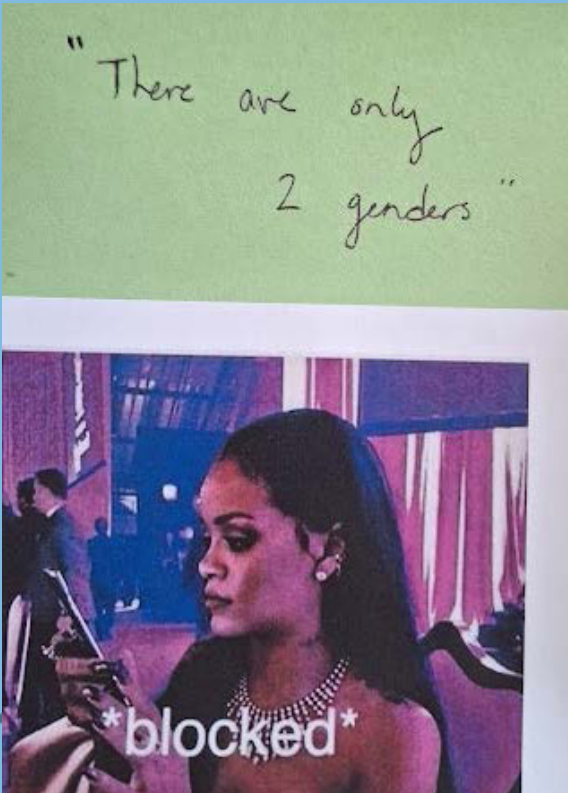
First clinical trial for the contraceptive pill on women in Puerto Rico

Stigmatization of people living with HIV

Creation of modern gynecology by experimenting on enslaved black women

Tuskegee Syphilis experiment

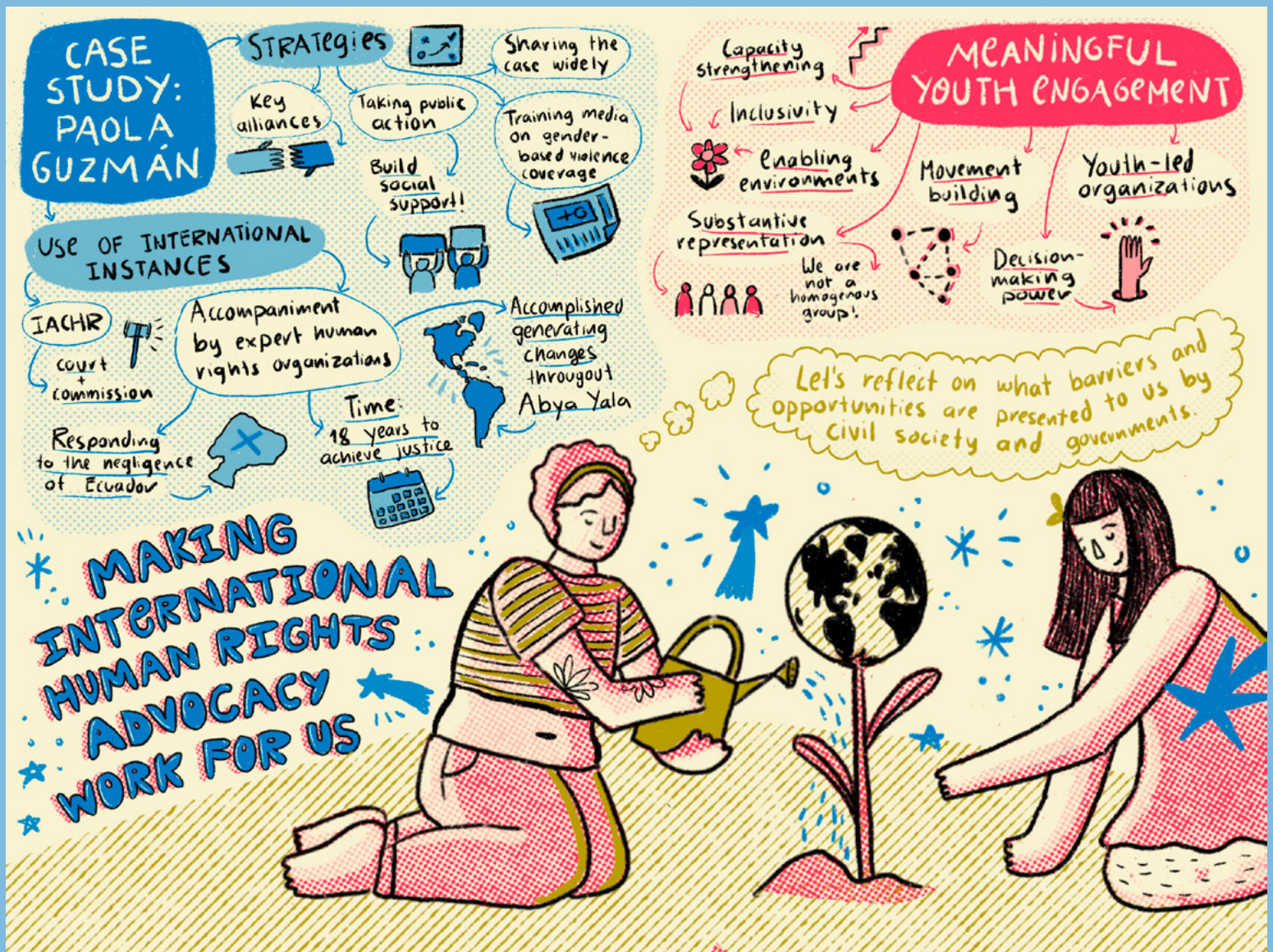
Forced sterilization



The session looked at how a hegemonic medical model creates barriers and risks that limit the fulfilment of rights. It traced how throughout history certain bodies and identities have been excluded, marginalised, or pathologized. The session leaders invited their peers to question the normalisation of a singular idea of what it means to be healthy and the hierarchical understanding of knowledge and who holds it. They introduced the concept of 'dissident bodies,' those that don't align with binary and normative understandings because of race, sexual and gender identity, and disability. In tackling this, they invited participants to be creative in how we can challenge and expand understanding of what is 'normal.' Part of this work involves the generation of concepts beyond those that have been imposed upon us. The session closed with a meme-making workshop where participants used humour to do this.

Workbook:

What types of 'corporalities' (bodies, existences, identities) are represented in the medical model?



2. Making international human rights advocacy work for us

Sophie and Adela co-lead a session aimed at **demystifying engagement with international human rights mechanisms**. Through the workbook, they shared information about useful instruments and the key human rights that intersect with sexual and reproductive health and rights that participants could keep with them as a resource. Collectively, they

held a conversation about what makes participating in international human rights advocacy work seem challenging or daunting, seeking to break down some of these barriers. The participants highlighted that many of the challenges they face can in fact serve as opportunities, giving us **room to push back against narrow ideas and improve accountability**.

Sophie shared principles for meaningful youth engagement, giving examples of what has facilitated or hindered her participation in these spaces. Some of these principles included building partnerships with youth-led organisations and ceding substantive decision-making power to youth, contributing to movement-building initiatives, strengthening capacity, and contributing to enabling environments for sustained participation. A key reflection was that youth are as diverse as any other group of people and this **breadth of knowledge and experience should be reflected in engagement.**

Adela shared learnings from her research and advocacy work with CEPAM-Guayaquil on the case of **Paola Guzmán Albarracín v. Ecuador**, where the Inter-American Court of Human Rights held Ecuador responsible for violations to human rights including the rights to life, education, and freedom from gender violence and discrimination. Adela outlined the advocacy strategies that led to and came out of the case, including public-facing actions and dissemination of information, the building of strong alliances, and training media on coverage of gender-based violence.

Workbook

What barriers are youth confronted with? Let's talk about funding, power imbalance, capacity building, and laws/policies impeding on accessibility.

As part of the exercise, it may be helpful to draft a map of how the government intersects with civil society, multilateral, and philanthropic actors.

The key learning from this case study was that although human rights mechanisms can seem complex and distanced from our everyday lives, they have concrete impacts on the way we live. The standards of the judgement, which obliged Ecuador to take action to prevent sexual violence in schools, represented the first time the court established as legally-binding the right to sexual education. These standards are now part of the Inter-American System of Human Rights and are thus applicable throughout the region.

Day 2 ended with a party! This responded to the need for joy in solidarity and the value of bringing fun to our advocacy.

“Climate change has burned our skin, dried our throats, the same drought that kills our land and our nourishment, the same drought that makes our bellies sick with mercury pollution, the earth is us and it is our future. The time to act is now!”

- Forum Participant

The third and final day of the forum centred around our **collective visions for a just future.** The pace of the final day was more relaxed in recognition of the need for intentional reflection. Outside of the plenary sessions, time was allotted for individual reflections in the workbook, group discussions, and a ‘walk and talk,’ where participants could get some fresh air in pairs and talk through their ideas.



MAPPING THE BODY AND TERRITORY TO BUILD FUTURES: CLIMATE JUSTICE AND THE BODY-TERRITORY

CLIMATE CRISIS

"If we take care of the land we take care of ourselves."

HOW DO WE EXPERIENCE IT?

In our bodies



In the collective body



In our territories

Inequality is a major issue



NOT EVERYONE IS EQUALLY RESPONSIBLE

NOT EVERYONE IS EQUALLY AFFECTED

CLIMATE JUSTICE

Repercussions are stronger in the global south

Abya Yala



Fragile governments

CARING FOR OURSELVES & CARING FOR THE PLANET

FOOD AND COOKING

Togetherness & resistance



CLOTHING

Expression & culture



WATER



Adapting to climate change



Menstrual products



CARING FOR AND DEMANDING GREEN SPACES IN OUR CITIES

Connecting with our environment



Showers, Hygiene



Session spotlight: Mapping the body and territory to build futures: Climate justice and the body-territory

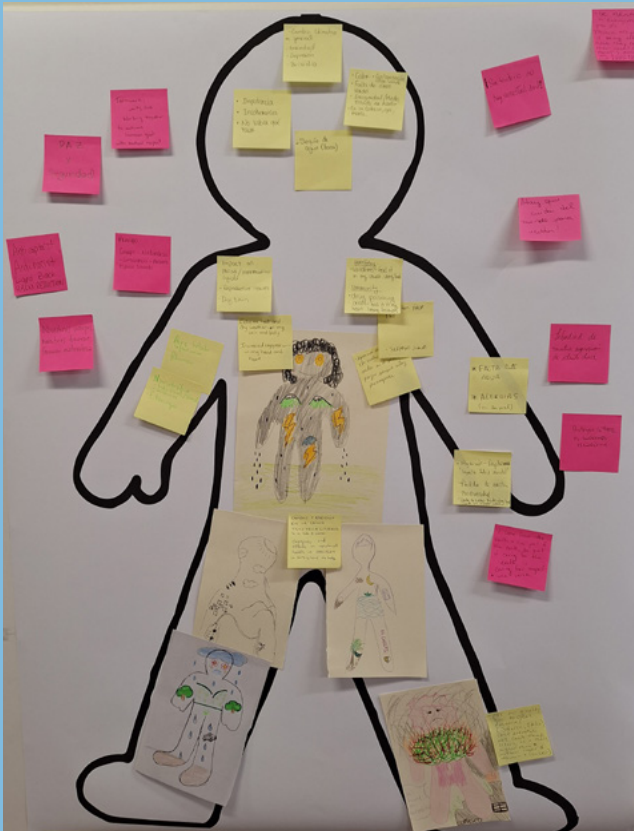
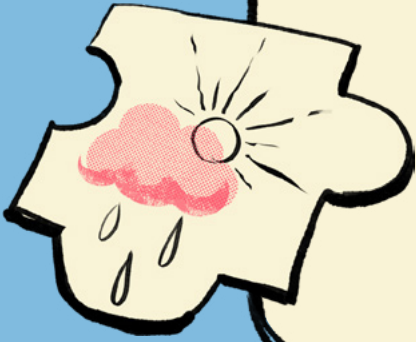
Sara and Mitzy led an interactive session to reflect on the **link between the body, the community, and the places we inhabit**. They shared with participants the concept of the body-territory: the body is a central place to inhabit and perceive our territories, and our individual and collective bodies are connected to the earth.

Participants were asked to map the climate crisis, identifying how it is felt both in our individual and social bodies and in our territories. The activity sought to create

a collective diagnosis of how the climate crisis is experienced from an intersectional perspective. This expanded our understanding of how **deeply intertwined our bodies are with the land**. The land affects the food that nourishes us and how we cook and share meals, our social spaces, the clothes we wear to protect our bodies and express ourselves, the water that sustains us and cleans us. A major learning was the degree to which the impacts of the climate crisis are not felt equally, but that our experience of them bonds us.

Workbook

- Share two conditions or ailments related to the climate crisis that you perceive, one in your community and the other in your territory. They can be related to changes in weather such as droughts, but also social conflicts or the loss of cultural elements.
- Do you consider that your activism is linked to the care of the body and the territory? What are the alternatives that you are building or want to build to combat these problems?



The workshop closed with participants sharing the actions they are taking to address the care of both their land and bodies, and how this contributes to a just collective future.

Key learning: It's crucial to celebrate our victories, big and small

On the final day of the forum, Andrew and Jorja led a session encouraging everyone to take time to look back on and appreciate their wins in different areas. Both participants and conveners found value in pausing to **reflect on what we've achieved**. The workshop recognized that activism and advocacy work can be exhausting, but celebrating our wins is energising, especially when we do it in community. It's important not to blow past wins on our way to the next challenge, and participants highlighted strategies to **stay energised and find joy along the way**:

- Lean on and support our friends and communities
- Learn to say no to things
- Work on self-love
- Nurture our inner-child and be responsive to what our bodies, minds, and souls are asking for
- Rest is important and productive and should be guilt-free
- Happiness is resistance!

Workbook

What are some successes you've achieved in your work? What are your "Wins"?

Wins can be big (international, national), medium (community, school, workplace), small (family, friends), or even personal (self growth or learning). At the same time, small things can feel big and big things can feel small! They all matter!

WINS CAN BE BIG, MEDIUM, or small. They all matter!! Let's celebrate our accomplishments, share joy, & inspire each other!

ASSESSING OUR WINS



For some of us, supporting ourselves + our families is a challenge and a huge achievement!

We've learned to advocate for ourselves



ACTIVISM + ADVOCACY WORK can be exhausting!

Being here is an achievement!!

STRATEGIES TO REMAIN POSITIVE!

LESSONS LEARNED

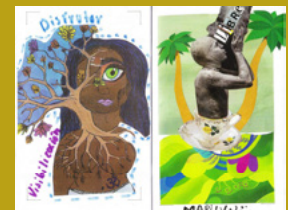
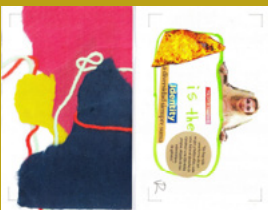
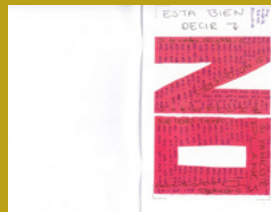
Through activism, we've become more compassionate to ourselves

We've had access to education through fighting a lot of barriers

This has led to us being able to bring activism back to our communities

- Lean on friends + community
- Learn to say NO!
- Work on self-love
- Nurture my inner child
- Rest is important and productive
- Happiness is resistance

Grounded in an understanding of the group as a collective body, the forum closed with a zine-making workshop led by Grace and María, where participants were invited to contribute a page to a zine focused on what a liberated future for all looks like:



KEY TAKEAWAYS FROM THE FORUM

WE HAVE A LOT IN COMMON:

1. We're dealing with pushback on SRHR, in political spaces
2. We are facing the climate crisis
3. As young activists we are struggling for safety & security
4. We inhabit crises contexts that will increase migration + displacement

GAINS IN OTHER MOVEMENTS HELP US ACHIEVE OUR SRHR, THROUGH IMPROVING SOCIAL DETERMINANTS OF HEALTH

It's a positive cycle!!!



* * *
Alliances make us powerful * * *

YOUNG PEOPLE WITH DISSIDENT BODIES EXIST & RESIST EVERY DAY

WE'VE LEARNED:

- * To take care of ourselves by saying 'NO', taking time to rest, being creative, playing music, sharing the workload
- * To empower ourselves, to support each other, to build bridges for our activism + advocacy

We're building ways to liberate ourselves from internal, interpersonal & institutional oppression.

- ### CALLS TO ACTION
- Build bridges through solidarity
 - Make use of international human rights frameworks
 - Challenge the hegemonic medical model

NEITHER OUR BODIES NOR OUR LANDS ARE TERRITORIES OF CONQUEST.

Participants walked away from the forum with both learnings and new questions to bring to their advocacy. A key theme throughout the forum was that **we have a lot in common**, no matter what region, expertise, or movement background we come from :



1. Across the board, we are all dealing with significant **resistance to SRHR** from anti-rights voices in political spaces. This poses a challenge to our advocacy but also **motivates us to push back harder and smarter**.
2. There are many **challenges that affect us all**. The climate crisis is emblematic of this; it **affects the entire globe and is felt by individuals and communities**.
3. At the forefront of our work as young activists is the **demand for safety and security: for ourselves and for all**.
4. We are **inhabitants of a crisis context**. This means that we must channel our energy into **sustainable strategies towards solidarity** to address new challenges as they emerge.

The cycle of solidarity:
Because all rights are interdependent, gains in other areas strengthen SRHR and gains in SRHR also support the fulfilment of other rights.

Key learning: It's important to take care of ourselves and one another

"We need to create collective security, the habit of taking care of ourselves, our body, our mind, taking care of others, creating care systems that serve us all."

-Forum participant

The participants shared that working towards big goals and looking towards uncertain futures can often feel draining. While activism can bring us together, it can also make us feel isolated from others around us. Participants shared ways that they **recognize, address, and overcome feelings of isolation**. A key piece of this involves acknowledging that while the work we do is important, it can never come at the expense of our wellbeing. Taking care of ourselves means **acknowledging our limits, taking time to rest, and baking fun, creativity, and joy into our activism**.

"Something interesting is thinking about more enjoyable ways to think about activism, [and centering] taking care of mental health, moving [our] bodies and understanding that we can enhance what we do in militancy when we take care of ourselves."

-Forum participant

"I feel that in contrast to other spaces of militancy and activism, this was a space of care [...] for the body and mind. [...] I feel that we met our objectives and finished with the desire to continue because of how nice it was. That we had elements to paint and touch while we listened to the workshops added a lot. [After the forum,] I went back to painting, which was something I had forgotten, that I liked, so I feel that it not only contributed to me as an activist, but also helped me incorporate tools for my care."

- Forum participant



Workbook

Think of 1 or 2 emotions that you have felt this month in relation to your work and/or activism and think of a gesture (with your body) that represents that emotion.

- Did you identify with the emotions of the others? What did we all find in common?

Convenor reflections

Action Canada has convened annual cross-regional learning spaces over four years as part of the Rights from the Start project. We believe that access to sexual and reproductive health services, education, and information is a fundamental right of all people, everywhere. We know that advocacy and activism are the driving force of progressive social change and the fulfilment of human rights.

The forums have been fundamental to our commitment to strengthening global advocacy networks and contributing to broader movement building. We are deeply grateful to have been able to act as a bridge between activists in Canada and Latin America, lending space for the generation of feminist

and intersectional strategies for advancing rights. At the same time, this has been an important learning space for us. We have appreciated expanding our understanding of connections between our movements on a global scale, and to how SRHR intersects with other rights issues.

We are hopeful that the ideas generated through the forums and the continued engagement of the participants in their respective advocacy spaces can contribute momentum towards more just futures.

This is what we've learned about what connects us and our movements and why these spaces are important:

Across movements and regions...

- **Our struggles are linked and our liberation is bound**
The injustices that affect us have the same roots and there is no true liberation without total liberation from the structures and systems that inhibit happy and healthy lives.
- **Our activism brings us closer**
We join these spaces as whole people. We bring with us knowledge, questions, hopes, dreams, worries, and care for one another.



Creating open and participatory cross-regional spaces requires:

Thoughtful patience

It was important for us to think through decisions and, when necessary, backtrack or re-envision certain elements. People think and work at different paces and arbitrary or unnecessarily tight deadlines inhibit the best ideas.

Adequate time and resources

Build in more time than you think you need! Working with groups of people with different schedules and across several languages means building in extra time and budgeting for translation.

Tolerance for uncertainty

Planning an international event can be complex. From tight visa processing times to flight delays, it was important for us to let go of the things that we couldn't control.

Co-creating from the ground up

While we were clear about limitations and scope, we built the concept of the forums over several years from what participants expressed they needed, rather than consulting them on already built-out plans.

Different ways of engaging

From the **planning sessions** with the first Youth Steering Committee to our final in-person forum, we found great value in creating different avenues for engagement. Planners could use tech tools, write feedback, talk through ideas, or send a voice note. Our in-person forum made room for participants to take the mic and we also used a workbook with reflection questions.

Strong community guidelines

We found value in **co-creating a set of orientations** that left room for growth and learning while setting clear standards for conduct. This helped us enter the space with collective intentions and expectations for the experience.

Nothing beats spending time together in person

Action Canada held three virtual spaces and one in-person space. What stood out to us was that while it is possible to build real connection into virtual spaces, nothing beats the physicality of an in-person event.

Measures of success look different

It's important to value the experience in itself and recognize that not all successes can be measured in a logic model, and that's okay.



“During conversations with other participants, one of the points that stood out was the freedom we felt during the event. My experience participating in forums with Action Canada is that there has always been a clear focus on care. It struck me that this was not a common feeling in other spaces, where there is a vertical view of who knows what is best for us, how we should behave, what can or cannot be done. I consider this a strength that has been worked on since the first forum and its priority and coherence for the team is evident.”

– Forum participant

“The forum has been one of the friendliest spaces for young people that I have been to, and the ability of attendees to shape the agenda, topics and sessions is something I have not seen before. I had never been in such a bilingual space: it was really noticeable that Action Canada made a huge effort so that English- and Spanish- speaking people could integrate.”

– María León, graphic recorder

Acknowledgements

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