

YOUTH-LED CLIMATE ACTION FELLOWSHIP 2024

LEARNINGS & REFLECTIONS



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INTRODUCTION

The world is on the brink of a global catastrophe. Today, humanity faces threats such as displacement, mass migration, infrastructural damage, resource scarcity, and conflict—issues all stemming from the climate change crisis. This crisis disproportionately impacts those who have contributed the least to it. Marginalised communities—such as waste workers, daily wage laborers, gig workers, residents of slums, and the homeless—are confronted with life-threatening challenges. Yet, their voices remain largely unheard in climate discussions, which are often dominated by top-down narratives.

Recognising this gap, PRIA had launched the Youth-led Climate Action Fellowship, a three-month initiative designed to empower young people to engage in participatory research and amplify local climate change impacts and adaptation strategies.

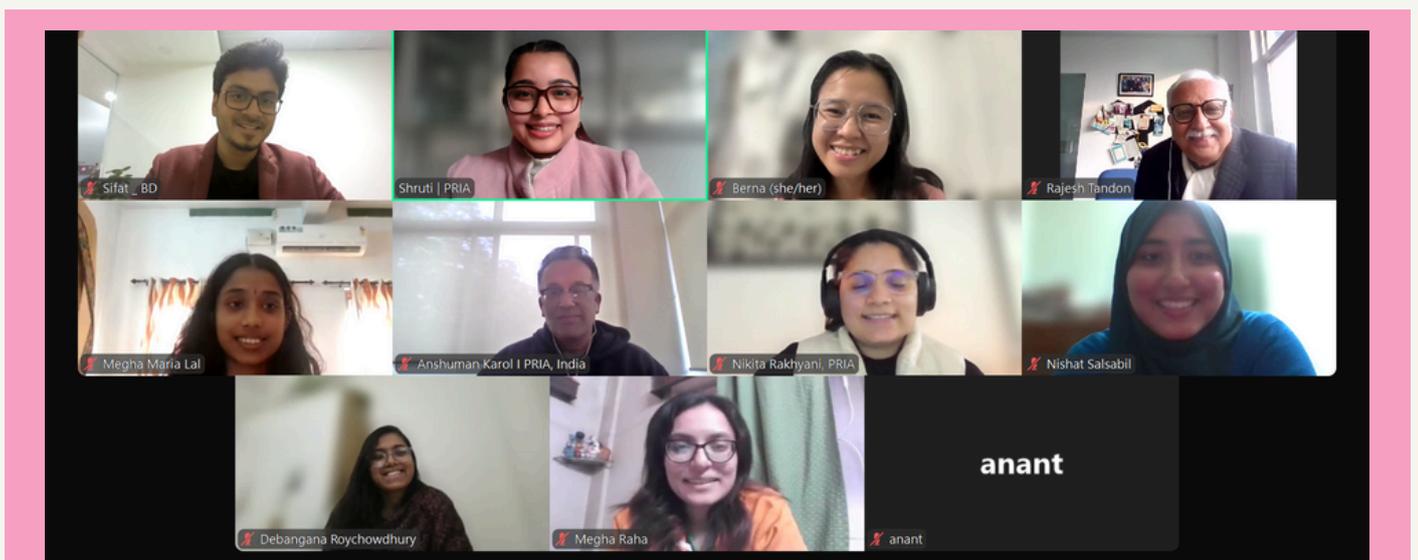
For forty-two years, Participatory Research in Asia, a civil society organisation based in Delhi, has worked to empower citizens through information and mobilisation. Our goal is to sensitise government agencies to citizen needs and bridge the gap between the two to ensure that government efforts reach the right people at the right time. We strive to work with young people to cultivate active citizens who are not only aware of the social realities they live in but also of their social responsibilities.

This program was PRIA's effort to shed light on community-led actions and the undocumented practices of climate adaptation strategies employed by vulnerable and underserved communities in different regions of the Global South, with support from youth. By engaging young people in climate action, we empower them to contribute meaningfully to solutions and advocate for their own futures.

OUR APPROACH

Engaging young people in climate-related interventions is not just an investment in the future but a necessity for the present. The fellowship brought together 12 brilliant young individuals from India, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and the Philippines, who documented the struggles and resilience of waste workers, jute mill labourers, informal settlement residents and riverside communities. Through weekly online sessions these young people were informed about the nuances of climate science, global south perspective related to climate change, global policies related to climate change, gender and climate change impact, and were capacitated in Participatory Research. We equipped them with the tools and let them lead and design their own research projects.

Based on their own accessibility, awareness, curiosity, prior intervention these young people identified communities and group they would like to work with and by using Participatory Research tools they developed an understanding of local environmental issues that are often overlooked in mainstream climate discussions. They mapped the vulnerabilities faced by marginalized groups, documented innovative coping mechanisms, and working along with the communities proposed actionable recommendations for policymakers. Their work was instrumental in shedding light on the intersection of climate change and social inequity, offering tangible insights into grassroots impact and adaptation strategies.



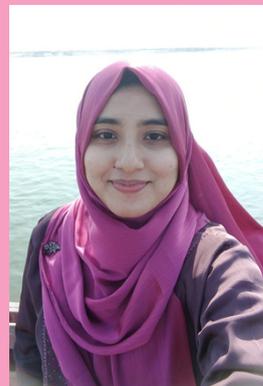
ABOUT OUR FELLOWS

1



Countries

India
Bangladesh
Sri Lanka
Phillipines



2

Profession

Public Health
Journalism
Development sector professional
Entrepreneurs
Academics
Lawyers
Students

3

Age

23-35 years

METHODOLOGY

The Youth-led Climate Action Fellowship was rooted in the belief that young people are not just passive recipients of the impacts of climate change, but powerful agents of change. To harness this potential, we adopted a participatory research (PR) approach—placing youth at the center of inquiry, action, and reflection.

The methodology employed by PRIA for this fellowship program followed a structured yet flexible framework

1. Capacity Building

At the outset, selected fellows underwent intensive training sessions led by experts. These sessions introduced them to the nuances of climate science, explored the intersection of gender and climate, unpacked policy frameworks in the Global South, and built a strong foundation in participatory research methods. The aim was to equip fellows with the theoretical grounding and practical tools necessary for community-based research.

Session	Speakers
Demystifying Climate Change	Ms. Rashmi Gopal, Climate Change Expert Mr. Siraj Hirani, Mahila Housing Trust
Gender and Climate change	Mamta Borgoyary, Executive Director- She Changes Climate
Global Climate Change Policies: Success and Failures	Dr. Abdur Rahaman, Director-Center for People and Environment (Bangladesh).
Community Based Participatory Research	Dr. Kaustuv Kanti Bandyopadhyay, Director PRIA

2. Community-Centric Research Design:

The fellows had already identified a climate-related issue affecting their region and selected a local community—such as slum dwellers, informal workers, or urban poor—experiencing the brunt of climate change, especially extreme heat events. After being capacitated in the nuances of Participatory Research and tools, fellows designed their own research plans, selected tools, and timelines in consultation with mentors at PRIA, ensuring the work remained relevant, grounded, and responsive to community needs.

3. Field Engagement & Co-Production of Knowledge:

Fellows engaged directly with their selected communities, mapping lived experiences, coping mechanisms, and indigenous knowledge systems related to climate adaptation. By using participatory tools such as community mapping, interviews, focus group discussions, and observations, fellows co-produced knowledge alongside the communities rather than researching them from a distance.

4. Knowledge Synthesis & Stakeholder Engagement:

The research culminated in the synthesis of key findings and localised, context-specific solutions. These insights were shared in a knowledge-sharing events with civil society actors. This was an effort to help bridge the gap between grassroots voices and interventions by the civil society groups.



Case study 1

Impact of climate change on waste workers of Thane, Maharashtra

Waste workers in Thane, Maharashtra, are among the most vulnerable to climate change. These workers, primarily women, engage in waste collection, sorting, and processing. Their health is directly affected by infections and injuries due to the absence of proper waste disposal mechanism. Their work is physically demanding and takes place under extreme weather conditions, especially during intense heat waves.

Key Challenges:

- Exposure to extreme temperatures exceeding 42°C during peak summer.
- Health issues such as dehydration, heatstroke, and infections due to inadequate sanitation.
- Poor living conditions, with makeshift homes doubling as workspaces.
- Lack of social recognition and economic security.

Intervention and Adaptation Strategies:

- Establishment of the Project Revitalization Centre for waste sorting and processing.
- Provision of water stations and medical check-ups for workers.
- Introduction of electric rickshaws and bicycles for waste collection.
- Development of the Thane Municipal Corporation's Heat Action Plan (HAP) to address heat risks.

Conclusion:

The case highlights the need for better urban planning and worker protection policies to ensure safer working conditions for informal waste workers.

From the field, Thane-
Maharashtra, India



Case study 2

Heatwave Impact on Jute Mill Workers of Kolkata

Jute mill workers in the Bugbug area of Kolkata face extreme heat waves due to rising urban temperatures and industrial emissions. With temperatures soaring up to 50°C, their working conditions have become unbearable, leading to severe health risks and job losses.

Key Challenges:

- Heat exposure leading to dehydration, fatigue, and reduced work efficiency.
- Poor ventilation and inadequate cooling systems in jute mills.
- Financial instability as workers are forced to quit due to health issues.
- Lack of medical facilities and economic safety nets

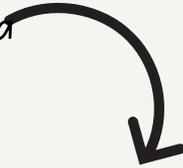
Proposed Solutions:

- Implementation of cool pavements and green roofs in work areas.
- Provision of shaded rest areas and increased airflow in mills.
- Revision of work schedules to avoid peak heat hours.
- Enhanced medical support, including health insurance and first-aid facilities.

Conclusion:

Urgent policy interventions and infrastructural improvements are needed to mitigate heat-related health risks among jute mill workers.

From the field Kolkata, India



Case study 3

Climate Vulnerability in Korail Slum, Dhaka

Korail Slum, one of Dhaka's largest informal settlements, faces severe climate threats, including heatwaves and urban flooding. These extreme weather events disrupt livelihoods and pose significant health risks.

Key Challenges:

- Poor housing materials leading to extreme indoor temperatures.
- Frequent flooding causing sanitation crises and disease outbreaks.
- Economic instability due to disrupted work and education.
- Limited access to healthcare and emergency aid.

Community Responses:

- Use of temporary cooling techniques such as water sprinkling on roofs.
- Raising beds and storing valuables in elevated places during floods.
- Informal community support systems for emergency relief.

Conclusion:

Sustainable solutions, such as improved drainage, climate-resilient housing, and formal economic opportunities, are necessary to reduce vulnerability in Korail Slum.

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From the field Dhaka,
Bangladesh

Case study 4

Environmental Degradation of Muvattupuzha River, Kerala

The Muvattupuzha River in Kerala is facing environmental threats due to pollution, climate change, and encroachments. The river plays a crucial role in supporting local livelihoods, agriculture, and biodiversity.

Key Challenges:

- Deforestation and clay deposits leading to reduced water flow.
- Industrial and household waste dumping degrading water quality.
- Riverbank erosion increasing flood risks.
- Loss of biodiversity impacting fishing and agriculture.

Proposed Interventions:

- Strengthening community-led conservation efforts.
- Implementation of strict waste management policies.
- Riverbank stabilization projects to prevent erosion.
- Awareness campaigns to promote sustainable river use.

Conclusion:

Multi-stakeholder collaboration is essential to restore the Muvattupuzha River's ecological balance and ensure water security for local communities.



From the field Kerala, India

Case study 5

Extreme Weather and WASH Challenges Among Dhaka's Urban Youth

Youth in Dhaka's Korail Slum face severe water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) challenges due to extreme weather events such as floods, droughts, and heatwaves.

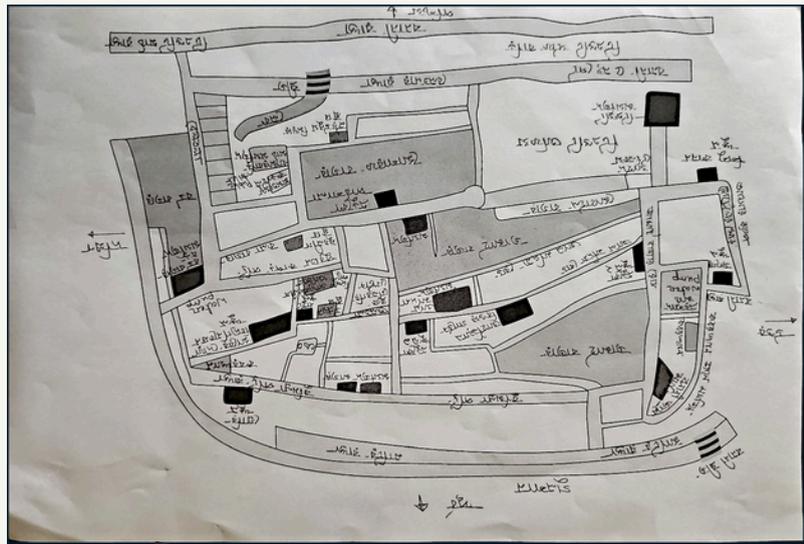
Key Challenges:

- Waterlogging during heavy rains disrupting sanitation facilities.
- Heatwaves making indoor spaces unlivable and affecting health.
- Poor waste management leading to increased disease risk.
- Fire hazards from unsafe gas line installations.

Community-Led Solutions:

- Community mapping to identify WASH problem areas.
- Youth-driven sanitation improvement initiatives.
- Installation of additional water pumps to address shortages.
- Advocacy for permanent drainage and sewage systems.

Conclusion: Investing in climate-resilient infrastructure and empowering youth as change agents are crucial for ensuring sustainable WASH services in Dhaka's urban slums.



From the field Dhaka, Bangladesh



Lessons drawn

The Youth-Led Climate Action Fellowship was designed with the belief that young people are critical stakeholders in climate action. However, we recognised early on that while youth are increasingly present in climate movements, their engagement is often limited to online advocacy or academic discourse—frequently removed from the lived realities of the most affected communities.

While we recognised the immense potential of young people in driving climate action and bridging the gap between policy and practice, the fellowship experience taught us that the process of youth engagement in climate action presents its own set of challenges both for the organisation and the young people involved.

From Top-Down Perspectives to Ground Realities

At the beginning of the fellowship, many participants approached the issue of climate change through a top-down lens, framing research questions and objectives based on their personal understanding or secondary sources, without meaningful input from the communities most impacted. There was a tendency to focus on abstract, policy-oriented narratives while bypassing local knowledge and on-the-ground realities. Several fellows initially hesitated to step their foot into the communities, proposing they would “extract data” from NGOs or online data collection methods.

However, although a lot of research can happen behind computer screens, Participatory Research, an integral part of the fellowship requires active field engagement and firsthand interaction with affected communities.

Community collaboration and co-creation of knowledge was something the fellows had to learn.

The fellowship began with a series of expert-led online courses, introducing the participants to the foundations of participatory research, climate science, gender-climate intersections, and Global South perspectives. These sessions not only provided technical knowledge but also challenged participants to reflect on power dynamics, representation, and the importance of grassroots voices in climate discourse.

As we progressed in the fellowship journey, we could sense some hesitation in the fellows to immerse themselves in community research. Initially, many fellows in the program sought shortcuts to avoid direct community engagement, preferring to extract data from NGOs rather than working directly with the people most affected by climate extremes. Therefore, after these informational session, we encouraged the fellows to conduct a field recce—an initial round of conversations with community members. This proved to be a turning point.

Once fellows began listening to waste workers, gig workers, slum residents, and informal labourers speak about their daily struggles with extreme heat, water shortages, flooding, and unsafe housing conditions, their perspectives began to shift. They realised the huge gap in their own understanding of the problem, from numbers they began seeing stories of people facing the worst impacts of climate change but had the least visibility in the current narrative

Challenges in Ground Engagement

Transitioning from desk-based research to community engagement was not without its challenges. Many fellows expressed discomfort or uncertainty about entering unfamiliar localities or initiating dialogue with community members. The non-remunerative nature of the fellowship added another layer of difficulty—without financial support, building sustained trust and rapport with vulnerable groups was a challenge. Community members were also understandably hesitant to invest their time in research activities that offered no immediate benefit.

Despite these hurdles, with sustained mentoring and peer learning, fellows gradually built confidence and relationships in their chosen field sites.

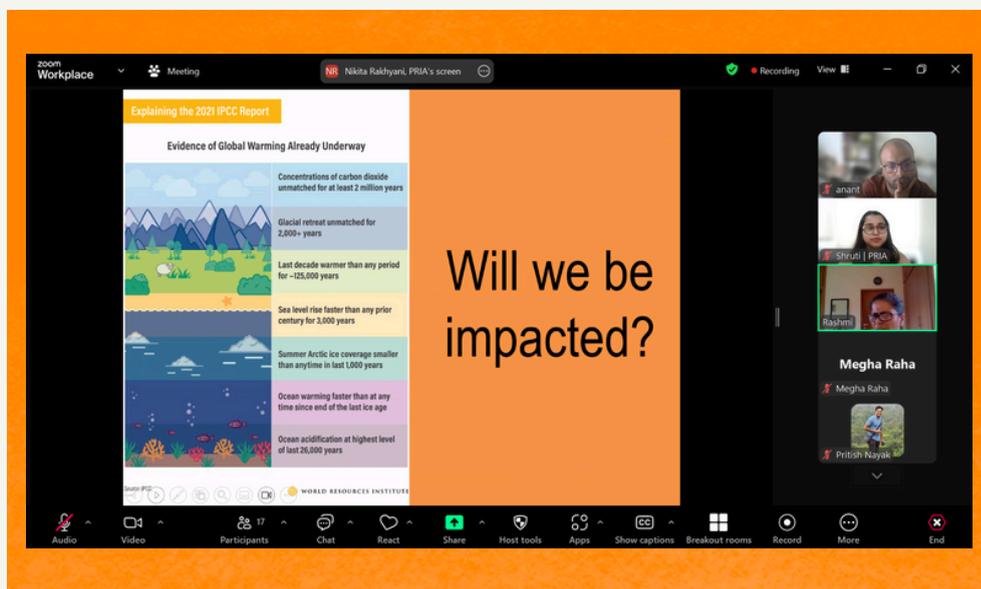
They learned how to listen without judgment, how to ask questions that matter, and how to recognise the community's knowledge as equally—if not more—valuable than technical expertise. For many fellows, this experience was their first deep, immersive engagement with social realities beyond their own

Participatory Research as a Method and Mindset

Through participatory tools like community mapping, focus group discussions, and storytelling, fellows were able to map the impacts of extreme weather events, understand coping mechanisms, and co-produce solutions with the communities themselves. Rather than imposing ideas, they learned to facilitate dialogue and work collaboratively.

Although three months was a relatively short duration for the fellows to conduct an in-depth and exhaustive study that could capture every dimension of the climate challenges faced by the communities, their persistent and sincere engagement on the ground made a significant difference. Through repeated visits, open conversations, and active listening, fellows were gradually able to break the initial barriers of hesitation and unfamiliarity that often exist between researchers and communities.

By showing genuine curiosity and respect for the community's lived experiences, the fellows managed to build rapport and establish trust, which is critical for participatory research. This trust did not come overnight; it required patience, humility, and a willingness to adapt their own assumptions. Over time, community members began to see the fellows not merely as outsiders collecting data, but as allies interested in amplifying their voices and understanding their realities



The fellows' continued involvement and relationship-building efforts ensured that their findings were rooted in authentic, community-informed perspectives rather than abstract assumptions. This process reinforced the importance of approaching research as a collaborative journey rather than a one-time exercise—and demonstrated how even short-term engagements, when done meaningfully, can open doors to deeper dialogue and shared understanding.

Building a New Generation of Climate Leaders

This fellowship demonstrated that when youth are equipped with the right tools and trusted with real responsibility, they can drive meaningful, inclusive, and transformative climate action. By shifting from symbolic participation to genuine community engagement, young people gained critical thinking skills, empathy, and a deeper understanding of systemic challenges. Importantly, this approach reminded us, and the fellows that the goal was not to "fix" communities or produce groundbreaking interventions, but to sensitise oneself, build relationships, and learn from lived experience. It is this grounded, empathetic, and participatory leadership that we believe will shape the future of climate justice in the Global South.

Conclusion

Youth are increasingly at the forefront of global climate movements—but their engagement often remains symbolic or limited to advocacy. This fellowship positioned youth as researchers, facilitators, and advocates, giving them the agency to generate evidence, influence discourse, and advocate for solutions grounded in local realities.

By using participatory research as both a method and a mindset, we enabled young people to not only learn about the impacts of climate change—but also to listen, collaborate, and co-create with the communities most affected. This approach builds critical thinking, empathy, and action-oriented leadership—traits that are essential for the next generation of climate leaders.

The methodology used in this fellowship demonstrated that when youth are trusted with responsibility and equipped with the right tools, they can drive meaningful, inclusive, and transformative climate action from the ground up. Ultimately, this experience reinforced the importance of equipping young researchers with the right skills, resources, and understanding of participatory approaches to truly bridge the gap between advocacy and action in climate resilience.