

# Youth Action Gathering (YAG) 2017

April 27 – 29, 2017 Winnipeg  
Report

The Youth Action Gathering (YAG) was held from Thursday, April 27 until Saturday, April 29 at the University of Winnipeg’s Richardson College, in Treaty 1 territory on the traditional territory Anishinaabeg, Cree, Oji-Cree, Dakota, and Dene peoples, and the homeland of the Métis Nation. The YAG was organized by the Youth Network (YN) of the Canadian Council for Refugees (CCR) in partnership with the Immigrant and Refugee Community Organization of Manitoba (IRCOM), and was the CCR’s 5<sup>th</sup> YAG to date.

The YAG brought together newcomer youth and allies to learn, share, network and collaborate on actions and strategies to address common challenges. This year, our theme was, ‘A Community by and for you: Creating your space and your place in Canada’. This ties in the purpose a YAG always serves in bringing newcomer youth together, with our Newcomer Civic Engagement (NYCE) project, which the 2017 YAG was a key part of. It allowed all the youth who have been working on the YN’s NYCE local projects across the country to come together with each other and many other newcomer youth to talk about the best ways for newcomer youth to be involved in their communities, and to share their experiences and challenges faced along the way

The organizers worked hard to establish an anti-oppression environment, making the YAG a safe, accepting, empowering and inclusive space for youth. Our slogan, which came from the Edmonton team’s NYCE project was ‘Necomers are lit!’, capturing a sense of the empowerment that the YAG strove to create.

Nearly 200 participants attended coming from coast to coast, representing 8 provinces and 15 communities. 150+ were youth from refugee and immigrant backgrounds, and 40+ were youth workers and allies. The 2017 YAG also had the largest representation of provinces of any YAG to date.



Photo by Ameer Ali

The event was youth-led in both organization and participation. The CCR’s Youth Network Core Group, the NYCE Youth Advisory Council and IRCOM’s Youth Group were instrumental at every step of the YAG.

The members of both youth teams worked to organize the logistics of the conference, to find speakers and facilitators for the sessions, and to act themselves as speakers, facilitators, resource persons and MCs during the YAG.

## PROGRAM

The program consisted of plenary sessions with keynote speakers and workshop sessions for participants to discuss issues, share their stories and experiences, and propose solutions and actions. The participants also had the chance to get to know each other through the various events, as well as at social events on Friday and Saturday night. A recurring theme in the conference was newcomer youth civic engagement.

### Workshop sessions

- Creating positive space for newcomer youth
- My world in a thousand words
- Raise your voice: make it a reality
- The truth about Muslims
- Access to Education: Overcoming barriers at a national level
- Unity in Diversity
- Canada 150: Living on a land that isn't ours
- Life through dance
- Creating diversity in the workplace

“I left that conference so inspired! There was such ENERGY from the youth and such a welcoming atmosphere for all people. Such a desire to advocate and make changes. I left feeling re-inspired to do the same, so THANK you. Plus, we had great laughs and chats along the way, which was fun too.”

- Kathleen, YAG participant, Winnipeg, MB

### What is the YAG?

The Youth Action Gathering (YAG) is the CCR Youth Network's annual conference by and for immigrant and refugee youth across Canada.

### Outcomes

The participation of youth from across Canada led to an engaging, educational and inspiring weekend. The diverse group of participants learned from each other and made friends, animated discussions, and generated ideas and strategies to address challenges. The youth were not only participants here, but were also the primary leaders of the conference on the whole, and especially in determining workshop sessions and the overall content of the weekend. Everyone involved returned home empowered, with more knowledge and fresh motivation to work on key actions.

Throughout the YAG, participants discussed the common issues that affect them and developed strategies and actions to address them. At the end of the conference, they completed an exercise to select priority issues and actions to focus on after the YAG. The following are the most important issues and actions as chosen by the participants:

### Priority Issues

- Refugee Youth
- Cultural Awareness
- Access to Education
- LGBTQ+ Issues
- Indigenous youth perspectives

### Priority Actions

- Develop youth engagement/leadership
- Create dialogue surrounding culture to increase awareness and understanding
- Advocate for recognition of the many issues faced by newcomer youth in education in each province
- Create more inclusive spaces

“My experience at the YAG was magical. Seeing all these young people coming from all across Canada representing their provinces but also their countries and willing to defend the rights of newcomer youth with so much passion and love made me realize how strong we can be if we work all together”

- Hicham Khanafer, YAG Participant, Montreal, QC

## What did participants think of the YAG 2017?



"Unless we raise our voices,  
we will not be heard"

Humaima Asfaque, youth leader  
of the York University NYCE  
project

When participants were asked about their experiences at the YAG, the responses were highly positive.

They felt that the YAG was rich, informative, inclusive and a safe space for immigrant and refugee youth. They enjoyed learning from each other, discussing important issues, and most of all meeting new people. They were inspired and motivated to use what they learned at the YAG by engaging their communities, planning advocacy initiatives, educating others, and working in solidarity with indigenous peoples.

In terms of improving the YAG, several participants shared that in future YAGs there should be more time to discuss and bridge the issues they face in their home communities.

The YAG focused on access to education, debunking assumptions about Islam and culture, creating inclusive spaces, indigenous perspectives, sharing strategies to increase newcomer youth civic engagement and art based approaches to let youth voices be heard. Next YAG we would like to tackle mental health issues and access to those services for newcomer youth, problems specific to refugee youth and having more dialogue around cultural awareness while continuing to address the LGBTQ+ youth and Indigenous youth perspectives.

### YAG 2017 Survey Responses Averages:



8 of 10 Canadian provinces were represented

-  **92% gained knowledge of new issues**
-  **81% learned new skills**
-  **94% broadened their network at the YAG**
-  **89% feel their broadened network will support their efforts in their communities**
-  **88% better understand Canadian institutions**
-  **98% thought YAG 2017 was a success**

## Summary of YAG 2017 Workshop Sessions

### A) Creating Positive Spaces for Newcomer youth

Developed by the Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants (OCASI), the Positive Spaces Initiative is a workshop that engages with people in order to create positive spaces that are inclusive for LGBT+ newcomer youth.

What is a positive space?

- A place where you feel welcome and comfortable – no judgement
- A place where all people have rights – and with this, all have respect
- A place that is label free; you just have to be yourself
- A place where each person checks their privilege to make it open for all

What are the experiences of LGBTQIA youth coming to Canada? What were the hopes of these youth before their arrival? What are the realities and how can we work to be the open-minded society Canada is often envisioned to be?

Key issues:

- Privilege: a special right, advantage or immunity for certain groups
  - How can we get outside of it? How can we create an open society?
- Equality vs. Equity: the same treatment vs. the same result
  - How can we achieve an equitable society?
- Acceptance & Tolerance: accepting who we are vs. accepting what is put on us by others
  - How can we do more than tolerate one another? What is the path to acceptance?

Key goals:

- Look beyond what is easily knowable about another person
- Support, accept and listen to others
- Educate yourself

### B) My world in a thousand words

Youth worked on learning form of a spoken word and then writing their own spoken word as an avenue for their voices to be heard and as a tool of activism and social justice.

What is a Spoken Word?

- Written and then performed live; a creative way to express and give voice

Key Goal

- Learn to channel expression through art as a tool of social justice
- Communicate ideas in a way that will speak to people to have more effect
- Participants used their own personal experience to write a spoken word

### C) Raise your Voice: Make it a reality

Youth leaders talk about different ways to connect to their community so that the audience can learn new strategies to do the same. Youth leaders discuss what advocating for a change means and how to make it a reality. Facilitated by youth with a series of presentation from the newcomer civic engagement youth leaders.

- Youth Team, Montreal, QC
  - The Montreal team connected with refugee and immigrant youth to try and understand a larger breadth of issues faced by newcomer youth

- They conducted person to person interviews and then brought their results to different political institutions to present the challenges to stakeholders
- Issues identified: School orientations, English-French barrier, problems with foreign credential recognition
- Identifying these issues with political leaders allowed for innovative solutions
- Youth Team, Joliette, QC
  - The youth in Joliette worked on a proposal for a youth centre to address key issues they identified in their community through the Lanaudiere Regional Committee for International Development and Education
  - Worked with youth from 10-20 and went to secondary schools to discuss issues newcomer youth face in Canada, and about the positives they experienced when they came
  - Key issues: access to education, language barriers, finding employment and navigating public transport
  - Key actions: orientation for newcomers by community organizations to help with integration and knowledge of local norms
  - The mayor agreed to help with financial issues
- Youth Team, Windsor, ON
  - Created a video based on barriers that newcomers are faced with so as to create solidarity and to bring awareness to the key issues newcomers face
  - As well, the video was able to capture a depth other mediums cannot and so aimed to show and promote 'newcomer' as more than just a label
- Youth Team, Toronto, ON
  - The Toronto team looked at the challenges newcomers face when trying to get into school, and then afterwards when trying to pursue post secondary education as a refugee
  - In response, the team painted a large tree based on the idea of overcoming and tearing down walls that trap them in
  - They gathered stakeholders in the community during a professional development day for teachers in order to explain the issues they identified and to present their art form
  - They also aimed to show the many ways one can let one's voice be heard
- Youth Team, Winnipeg, MB
  - Collaboratively with an after school program for newcomers, the youth worked to get at the specific issues that exist in Winnipeg
  - Key issues: Sports access, education access, housing, mental health and the specific challenges that female newcomer youth face
- Youth Team, Ottawa, ON
  - Aimed to create space newcomer youth can come to for help and identified three key barriers to getting this help in the process
- Youth Team, Edmonton, AB
  - With a team of 6-8 youth leaders they created a space as multicultural health brokers
  - They created a safe space for students to interact and to share what had been learned and ways to better integrate as both newcomers and allies attended
  - Relationships/network/community
  - Video/awareness/youth led initiatives

## D) Canada 150 anniversary: Living on land that isn't ours

KAIROs used blankets to represent the land of Canada and spread them out on the floor. The workshop participants, representing the First Peoples, were guided through the history of Canada as experienced by the First Peoples. The exercises told stories using human representation, depicting history through acting and showing how history evolved through movement. With this, the Blanket Exercise allowed participants to move from lack of awareness into knowing, then into feeling and acting for Indigenous Justice.

The Blanket Exercise:

- In First Nations communities, respect for the land is fundamental
- With land, nature, water and spirituality are intertwined and of the utmost value
- As each participant walked on the blankets, they were asked to think about this relationship
- As the participants continued to walk they were asked to start folding the blankets side by side to represent how the First Nations people started to have their land taken
- This offered a very clear representation of the loss they faced, as the participants could see that as the blankets were folded, eventually there was not enough blanket left to stand on with everyone

Key issues:

- Understanding through emotion – participants shared feelings of trouble, shock, isolation, disappointment, depression and horror after the exercise as they were made aware of aspects of the history of Canada's First Peoples
- Understanding the importance of being educated on this history so it can be shared and so connections can be made, and communities built
- Each of us has a responsibility to teach and pass along this knowledge

Key goals:

- Realization that we all need to work together on this because it is a Canadian issue
- The job is to create partnership and accept responsibility on all ends
- Advocate for indigenous studies programs in schools
- Take action, educate yourself, and raise awareness however you can

## E) Life through Dance

This creative workshop allows the youth to connect to each other and understand different cultures through music and dance.

Dance as expression:

- Dance as a tool of expression allows its users to create their own system: this system means dancers are not constrained to any set of rules and can move in any way to relay what is going on inside
- In order to express oneself fully through dance, learning a few basic models to build upon is very helpful, and what François aimed to do
- The workshop started off with an action heavy warm up dance to include everyone, make everyone feel comfortable, and make dance accessible off the bat
- Afterwards, the pace changed to stretches which allow you to be in tune with your body and understand what feels right, and the ways your body can move
- Each participant was then asked to offer encouraging words to the person next to them, so that each person could feel good, which is essential to feel free to express
- Next, free form dancing through different music took place, followed by teaching steps to various styles of dance

Key issues:

- Expression through a sense of ease that allows one to free themselves and be in a moment

- Connection through embodying movements as you feel them
- A space that feels comfortable and accessible

Key goals:

- A reminder of ways to deal with frustrations and anger that sometimes occur through expression and art
- A way to feel part of a community or larger collective
- The importance of taking space and time for oneself to reflect

## F) Creating Diversity in the Workplace

The facilitators took participants through the process of intercultural relations in a workplace. Audience and panelists shared experiences and tips for navigating the world of work. Facilitated youth with two guest speakers:

- **Gololcha Buru**, IRCOM, MB
  - IRCOM received funding to start a program to help educate youth on employment and work on developing those skills
  - He helps youth experience various types of jobs through this program
  - There is an issue of discrimination often in workplaces, and as well due to certain factors newcomer youth have a much harder time getting jobs, so the program aims to help them cultivate certain skills, understand jobs interviews, CVs, how to navigate discrimination when it happens so that they will be more able to succeed
  - It is also important for newcomers to create relationships at the workshop and with employers to develop a sense of community and commitment
  - IRCOM also offers newcomers extra activities such as soccer and dance, which are vital to allow for a break from pressures and problems
- **Juliana Cortes Lugo**, Edmonton, AB
  - Does work in three different high schools
  - The importance of addressing the issue of discrimination as it often alienates and isolates students, eventually leading some to drop out altogether
  - The youth program in Edmonton helps with volunteer hours and volunteer positions, but currently has does not help youth get set up with work
  - This elucidates many other issues such as holes in the health care and settlement systems which make paid work vital for these youth, as well as the issue of the recognition of credentials from elsewhere, and the volunteer experience needed to get a job in Canada which is not always easy for newcomer youth to do

Key issues:

- Address the issue of discrimination because it underlies much of what newcomers face in the workplace
- Explain various ways one can help youth take action in the workplace and set themselves up to succeed in such a setting

Key goals:

- Look at the many factors that culminate in workplace problems and run programs to help them be addressed – such as credential transfer, volunteering opportunities, workshops on job interviews and CVs, as well as recognition of the other disadvantages newcomer youth face

## G) The truth about Muslims

The facilitators worked to debunk common myths about Islam and gain insight into its true teachings. This served to make clear to participants the discrepancies between what is assumed and what is true, aiming to speak to the challenges Muslim youth face in combatting these assumptions, and the repercussions of them on their day to day lives. Facilitated by youth with guest speakers: [Shahina Siddiqui](#) and [Nilufer Rahman](#)

What comes to mind when you think of 'Muslim' or 'Islam'?

- Peaceful, love, friendly, religious, belief, faith, terrorist

What is Islamophobia and where do the myths exist?

- Fear of Islam based in stereotypes (e.g. 'terrorist'), from which hatred develops
- Creates fear of others towards Muslims but also for Muslims towards others
- The Quran specifies that man and woman are created from the same soul, and that 'the best of you is the one who is best to his wife' – men and women are valued equally
- As well, hijab is not a tool of oppression – it represents modesty, and men have to be modest too
- The oppression and dehumanization of Muslim people only serves to profit the already powerful

Key issues:

- Misperceptions and stereotyping which lead to discrimination

Key goals:

- Create dialogue to debunk the myths surrounding Islam

## H) Access to Education: Overcoming barriers at a national level

Youth leaders discussed the various barriers to education newcomer youth encounter. To start, they shared experiences navigating the Canadian education system, particularly with regards to integration and settling in schools, and then possible solutions. Facilitated by the FCJYN and the CCR NYCE project youth leaders.

Key Issues/Barriers:

- Age gaps
  - Pierre shared his story, detailing the difficulties in entering and being placed with younger students but then later being forced to skip grades – the transition took two years before skipping forward, but that's two years in isolation/alienation
  - Post secondary then becomes problematic as well because of the irregular schooling and difficulty of achieving good grades in those conditions
- Credentials
  - Credentials are often tested but not actually recognized, and so all work done before ceases to count – redoing programs and tests can be very expensive
- Unfamiliar system
  - The Canadian education system is complex and based provincially making navigating it even trickier. There needs to be more done to make education accessible in terms of laying out how it works, and opportunities and option available within it
- Language
  - Language barriers often prevent newcomers from succeeding in classes, not because they don't know the material, but because they don't know it in French/English – also relates to the issues of credential recognition
- Mental health
  - The difficulties of accessing education can prove to be alienating, causing isolation for the individual
  - Often newcomers have been through various difficulties and there is not a system in place to address mental health problems

Key goals:

- Create further dialogue surrounding the barriers newcomers face when accessing education, work with local schools to create proposals for how changes can happen and what they would look like

## I) Unity in Diversity

Addressing the power of expressing unity through art – the facilitators of this workshop used graffiti art to teach youth how to create change. Through exploring artistic expression and the multitude of possibilities for doing this, both the individuality and similarities between participants became clear. Through creating a story from the past aiming towards the future, the common struggles newcomer youth face and the variety of ways to address them were shared..

What is ‘Unity in Diversity’?

- Facilitators started by touching on the topics of stereotypes; exploring those that distinguish (e.g. ‘Syrian refugee’ or ‘African’), and those that lump together (e.g. ‘immigrant’) – highlighting what is put upon us by others, and how these are tools that can either unite or divide
- The group then broke into smaller groups to work on skits – with such a diverse room of people, the group work and presentations of the skits showed the unity that exists in people who have come from all over Canada, and before that from all over the world – despite vast differences we can come together to confront the problems that face our country, and our world
- Explored how small stereotypes about people can hurt, and divide people unnecessarily

Key issues:

- Stereotypes that lead other people to appear as separate from us
- The problems that come with viewing ourselves as separate/distinct/other

Key goals:

- Explore all that unites us instead of what divides us – acknowledge and celebrate our differences rather than letting them be things that build up walls between us
- Open dialogue and communication

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## Want to get involved with the CCR Youth Network?



The CCR Youth Network is always looking for new members.

Join the YN to connect with other refugee and immigrant youth, participate in the YN’s decision-making process, and be involved in activities such as the YAG, and an exciting new campaign to promote refugees in Canada.

Here is how to get involved:

- Sign up to the **CCRYOUTH listserv** to stay informed of the YN’s activities
- Connect via email: [yn@ccrweb.ca](mailto:yn@ccrweb.ca)
- Like the YN on Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/ccryouth>
- Follow on Instagram and Twitter: **ccryouthnetwork**
- Consult the YN page on the CCR website: [ccrweb.ca/en/youth/welcome](http://ccrweb.ca/en/youth/welcome)

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thank you to the wonderful speakers, facilitators, and MCs for bringing your knowledge and inspiring the participants. Finally, enormous thanks to every participant who attended the YAG for your contributions to the discussion and for bringing so much energy and ideas to the event. We hope you have been empowered and inspired, and to see you at next year’s YAG!

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