JONGE KLIMAAT-BEWEGING



# THE STORIES OF CLIMATE INJUSTICE TROUGH ADAPTATION

## COP30 STORYBOOK

PREFACE 04

THE STORY OF...

TERENCE 06

DAURA 10

SHAKEELAH & LAURA 14

KAYODE 18

MEINKE 22

COLOPHON 26



# DAAN ZIEREN

# PREFACE

Every year, world leaders, scientists, and diplomats come together at the Conference of Parties (COP) to negotiate ways to limit global warming and reduce the impacts of climate change. From the conference halls somewhere in the host country, decisions are made that deeply shape the lives of young people today and the future of generations yet to come.

The effects of climate change are increasingly visible in our daily lives. We face growing droughts, wildfires, and floods, as well as mounting pressure on our living environment and economy. From the meeting rooms where solutions are discussed, that reality can seem far away. Yet for many young people, it is anything but abstract; they experience the impacts of climate change up close, in their communities, their studies, and their work.

Instead of waiting for world leaders to act, young people are taking matters into their own hands. Across the world, they are working for a livable future for their communities, for themselves, and for the generations that will follow. In this storybook, we highlight young people who, with innovative ideas, local projects, and boundless dedication, are building a sustainable future. They show what becomes possible when young people are given the space to act, to dream, and to lead.

Terrence (Curaçao) and Meike (the Netherlands) show how innovative nature-based solutions can protect both the European and Caribbean parts of the Dutch Kingdom. Shakeelah (South Africa) and Laura (Mexico) connect young people worldwide through dialogue about their shared future. Kayode (Nigeria) demonstrates how climate education engages youth in meaningful ways. Daura (the Netherlands) shows that inclusion in adaptation also means amplifying voices often unheard, such as those of young people with disabilities. Together, these stories reveal how youths use creativity, collaboration, and innovation to strengthen their communities and face a changing climate.

**‘THESE STORIES SHOW WHAT BECOMES POSSIBLE WHEN YOUNG PEOPLE ARE GIVEN THE SPACE TO ACT, TO DREAM, AND TO LEAD.’**

The Jonge Klimaatbeweging (Dutch Youth Climate Movement) believes in the power of young people as drivers of change. We amplify the voices of youth in the Dutch climate debate, ensuring that they can help shape a sustainable society while urging politicians and policymakers to take decisive action to accelerate the climate transition. Together with WAT-GP (We are Tomorrow - Global Partnership) we strive to include many young voices from different countries at the conference.

This storybook is an invitation to listen to young people, to take their voices seriously, and to give them real ownership over their future. The stories collected here, from youths with diverse backgrounds, show that change begins with those who dare to act. Let these stories serve as a source of inspiration, even during negotiations that take place behind closed doors, far from the floods, droughts, and disasters that people face every day.

Our call to action: Ensure that young people and affected communities have a proper seat at the table, and that those who already dedicate their time, energy, and knowledge to building a better world feel supported and heard by their leaders.

**DAAN ZIEREN - CHAIR OF THE DUTCH YOUTH CLIMATE MOVEMENT**



## TERENCE CHING

# “Together we are stronger.”

**Terence has been active in nature conservation since the age of fourteen; first as a ranger, then as a park manager. On the island of Curaçao, there are more than 37 nature parks, many of which lack official status but are maintained by the local community. Terence began his work in these parks and soon realized that environmental management was not merely a job, but a culture of care, in which the island’s residents are an integral part of the ecosystem.**

Traditionally, the upkeep of these parks was carried out by foundations that often worked in a top-down way. Terence saw things differently: he believed in a bottom-up approach, working directly with the people who had cared for these areas all their lives.

This belief led him to establish the Curaçao Outdoor Industry Alliance (COIA) Foundation, a diverse collective of island residents who recognize the value of both nature and community. The foundation follows a clear philosophy: all incoming resources go directly toward project development, while any remaining funds are placed in a trust that supports the participating communities. Individual profit is not the goal; the focus lies on shared environment, shared responsibility, and shared benefits.



**2. MOTIVATION**

*Where does your passion and motivation come from?*

“For me, it all started in 2014. The idea to start the Mangrove Adoption Program actually began two years earlier, after an oil spill in 2012 severely affected an important mangrove area on Curaçao. The damage we found struck me deeply. The pollution was not just an isolated incident; it revealed how fragile the ecosystem had become due to historical ecological disruptions. What was once a fertile and productive wetlands had during colonial times been transformed into commercial saltpans, causing ecological degradation and loss of biodiversity. Areas that, with the help of local residents, have now been given the chance to flourish into parks, recreational areas and biodiversity hot-spots. However, the threat of restrictions and inaccessibility remains, as locals lose to developers and entities in positions of power.”

## ‘NATURE IS NOT SOMETHING THAT BELONGS TO US, WE BORROW IT FROM THOSE WHO COME AFTER US.’

“When I saw how nature, despite everything, had demonstrated its resilience between 1983 and 2013 and how biodiversity had recovered to the point of receiving international recognition, I realized something important: the power of recovery, of life finding its way back despite human mistakes, profoundly inspired me. It gave my team and me hope. If nature itself has the resilience to heal, then we, as people, must support that strength instead of undermining it. That understanding became the driving force behind the foundation: to help restore more areas on the island, together with the community, and to show that restoration is not only possible, but begins with taking responsibility.



**3. ABOUT THE PROJECT**

*Can you tell us what the initiative is about?*

“The main project I am working on with my foundation is the Mangrove Adoption Program (MAP). This initiative focuses on restoring and strengthening mangrove ecosystems while involving people in building a future that is both climate-resilient and socially stable. Through MAP, we aim to revitalize degraded areas, build resilient coastal habitats, engage local communities, and create sustainable employment opportunities.”

“What is beautiful about this program is that everyone can participate. Individuals, schools, companies, and even nursing homes take care of young mangrove seedlings until they are strong enough to be planted in the wild. In this way, not only does a tree grow, but also a sense of responsibility and connection to the environment.”

“The program is built on several pillars: raising awareness about the importance of mangroves for coastal protection, biodiversity, and $CO_2$ storage, active restoration through planting, and involving local actors so they can take ownership of environmental management. This approach fully aligns with my belief that conservation should not be organized top-down, but should grow from within and with the community. For me, it is not about “planting trees” as isolated actions, but about building sustainable systems, creating jobs, and inspiring a cultural shift in how we relate to nature.”










*What inspires you?*

“What inspires me most is seeing change, especially when something that was once resisted is eventually embraced. In the beginning, it was not easy. Government bodies and established institutions were not open to our innovative approach; we even received letters telling us to stop. Still, I kept believing in the power of working together with the community and following what felt right. Now I can see that persistence pays off: our work is being recognized by the government and is now part of strategic frameworks, such as the National Biodiversity Plan. Seeing that transformation reminds me that change is possible, and that continues to inspire me to move forward.”

**4. YOUTH AND CLIMATE ACTION**

“In the coming years, I want to use COIA to restore more areas that have suffered ecological damage in the past. My goal is not only to rehabilitate these landscapes but also to create sustainable jobs within the green economy, ensuring that environmental restoration goes hand in hand with social progress. I am also working to anchor the organization’s funding mechanisms to ensure that COIA can continue to exist for generations to come.”

“For me, it is absolutely clear: nature is not something that belongs to us, we borrow it from those who come after us. That understanding lies at the heart of my work. Stewardship and shared responsibility are to me the foundation for a future in which people and nature can grow together, in balance and mutual respect.”

*Do you have a message or tip for other young people who want to take climate action but don’t know where to start?*

“Yes, my main message to young people is: go out there and do it. Do not wait for permission or for the right moment to begin. You do not need to think big right away; small actions can make a huge difference in your own community. Plant a tree, join a cleanup, or start a conversation about what nature and climate mean to you. By starting today, you inspire others to do the same, and that is how real change begins.”

**CONTACT**

**WEBSITE**
**COIA**



## DAURA VAN VUUREN

# “Effective climate action is inclusive climate action.”

**Daura van Vuuren (26) is a Dutch researcher dedicated to exploring the intersection between climate change and disability inclusion. With a Master of Science in Climate Change: Impacts, Mitigation and Adaptation and a Bachelor of Arts in Liberal Arts and Sciences: Global Challenges (majoring in World Politics), she combines insights from both social and natural sciences to address complex sustainability challenges through interdisciplinary approaches.**

In 2024, as a Bevica Main Student Prize recipient, receiving a grant of 42.000 euros, Daura embarked on a global research journey to investigate disability-inclusive climate action. Her personal connection to inclusivity, having grown up with a brother with Down syndrome, continues to shape her perspective on accessibility and justice in climate policy. Her fieldwork has taken her across North America, the Pacific, Asia and Oceania. Collaborating with local disability communities and organizations such as the Harvard Project on Disability, World Institute on Disability and the Disability-Inclusive Climate Action Research Program (DICARP) at McGill University.

Daura currently works at Nordic Sustainability, a small sustainability consultancy based in Copenhagen, where she focuses on building bridges between research, policy, and practice. Through her work, she aims to close the existing research and policy gap that too often leaves people with disabilities out of global climate conversations. Her mission is to foster a more inclusive and resilient climate movement, where every voice is represented and every solution considers both environmental and social sustainability.



**2. MOTIVATION**

*Where does your passion and motivation come from?*

Daura: “I grew up in the Netherlands with two brothers and a sister. Joran, my oldest brother, has Down syndrome and growing up with a family member with a disability gave me personal insight into the importance of inclusion. I grew up in a home where differences were embraced and celebrated, and that has influenced everything I do. In 2021, I moved to Copenhagen to pursue an MSc in Climate Change at the University of Copenhagen. During my studies, I realized that discussions about marginalized groups rarely mentioned disability. This stuck with me especially, given my family context.

The pandemic highlighted how crises disproportionately affect certain groups, particularly people with disabilities. The more I learned about climate change impacts, the more I began thinking about how a climate crisis would affect my brother. He, amongst many others, would experience challenges differently, requiring specific support and accessible services that are often overlooked in emergency planning and structural support. That realization made me question, how can we ensure that climate policies are truly inclusive for everyone, addressing the specific needs of people with disabilities?

I participated in a scholarship program on Universal Design – the human rights principle that products, services, and environments should be accessible to everyone. Although the program mainly targeted architects and designers, I focused on policy measures and was determined to explore how disability inclusion intersects with climate action. I soon discovered a major research gap: disability is almost entirely absent from climate measures and policy discussions.

**‘DISABILITY IS ALMOST ENTIRELY ABSENT FROM CLIMATE MEASURES AND POLICY DISCUSSIONS.’**

**3. ABOUT THE PROJECT DISABILITY-INCLUSIVE CLIMATE ACTION**

*Can you explain what the Disability-Inclusive Climate Action project is all about?*

Daura: “People with disabilities are two to four times more likely to die or be injured during a climate emergency, a shocking statistic that doesn’t even include the slow-onset impacts of climate change. The heightened risks stem from huge knowledge gaps and a major political blind spot.

I came across the work of the DICARP at McGill University, which analyzed national climate plans and adaptation policies under the Paris Agreement to assess disability inclusion. The findings were striking: very few countries mention disability in their climate policies, and many, including Denmark and the Netherlands, fail to do so entirely. Shocked by this lack of attention



and accountability, I wrote a research proposal on legal accountability, exploring the possibility of a case against the Danish state for failing to protect the rights of persons with disabilities under the Paris Agreement and the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. I jokingly called it my “go big or go home” approach but it landed me the scholarship grant and became the foundation of my project.



the legal case involved investigating how other countries address disability inclusion in climate action, a gap in the Danish state, and the risks its citizens face due to inaction. In collaboration with DICARP, I developed a plan to travel internationally and meet experts and advocacy groups in person to inform legal arguments. Traveling across the US, Canada, Indonesia, Australia, Fiji, and New Zealand-Aotearoa, I documented how climate risks exacerbate structural challenges for people with disabilities and explored initiatives for inclusive, participatory climate action.

The Bevica scholarship enabled me to travel the world and connect with leading researchers and advocates, collecting stories from people with disabilities. I wanted to understand what happens on the ground beyond policy documents and learn from grassroots movements driving real change. Meeting experts and disability advocates revealed from the start that inaction has life-or-death consequences. One San Francisco activist’s words shook me to my core: “In my community, I’ll be the first to die, and I don’t think anyone cares.” This underscored the urgency: people with disabilities are among the most vulnerable to climate impacts, yet most national plans overlook them entirely. That is a reality we need to change.

Since starting this project, I have learned enormously from every conversation. It has become a lifelong mission: expanding the international interdisciplinary network, closing knowledge gaps, and ensuring climate policy is truly inclusive. Amplifying unheard voices so no one is left behind in the transition to a green and sustainable future.”

*What is the connection between your work and nature-based solutions?*

Daura: “A key part of my impact project is applying a Universal Design approach to climate action. It’s a human-centered perspective recognizing that our abilities constantly change. During a heatwave, for example, it’s not only people with disabilities at risk, but also the elderly, young children, pregnant women, and people taking medications that affect their ability to regulate body temperature. Climate adaptation therefore concerns all of society. Inclusive solutions can transform the built environment, integrate nature-based solutions, and expand green spaces. In doing so, we make everyday life more resilient, better prepared for climate impacts, and ultimately improve both safety and quality of life.”

*What do you find the most enjoyable or inspiring about this initiative?*

Daura: “Taking the Universal Design lens, rooted in care and love for others, and applying it to the complex challenge of climate change has shown me how it can shift perspectives. During a trip to Los Angeles, I asked an Uber driver about wildfires: “Have they affected you personally? In your family or community, is there anyone who would need extra support in an emergency?” He shared how wildfires could impact his elderly mother, children, and sick brother. We discussed whether he would want local or national policies to protect his family in light of climate impacts. Before dropping me off, he admitted, “Before today, I never understood why I had to care about climate change, but now I see it’s about taking care of my family.” Moments like that show the power of framing climate action through lived experiences.
Since returning to Copenhagen, I’ve worked to bring this conversation into new spaces, connecting with human rights activists in Denmark, giving presentations, and strategically organizing resources and stakeholders for the legal case. I am also building a platform, compiling the stories I’ve collected into a short book, and exploring a documentary to highlight the real human impact of climate change and inspire inclusive action for all.”



**4. CONTEXT**

*You mentioned earlier that with this project you also want to raise awareness about the gap between policy and practice — can you elaborate on that?*

Daura: “The plan is to create a short information booklet as a compact introduction to disability-inclusive climate action. It will highlight the most urgent risks, show what happens in practice, and convey a key message: climate policy must be inclusive, or the most vulnerable are left behind, facing deadly risks. The topic is highly interdisciplinary, so the booklet aims to provide an accessible yet comprehensive overview of what’s needed to inform a broad audience. Many people still ask, “How are disability and climate connected?” and this booklet addresses exactly that, illustrating how pressing crises like housing shortages, struggling healthcare, inaccessible infrastructure, discrimination, and structural inequalities intersect with climate impacts on people with disabilities. Based on my research travels, I outline these trends to show that intersectional, cross-sectoral approaches are essential when designing innovative and inclusive solutions.”

*How do you envision inclusivity being standard in climate policy?*

Daura: “For me, inclusivity means involving marginalized groups earlier and more effectively in policy design. The green transition is an opportunity to rethink systems, making cities, transport, infrastructure, and everyday life more accessible and socially inclusive. For example, in Auckland I saw a green space project co-developed with the local community, including marginalized groups, designed to be accessible, usable, and meaningful. Anchoring inclusivity in climate policy asks the key question: how can climate adaptation and green transition projects serve everyone, leaving no one behind?”

*What do you think needs to change structurally, and what do you hope to achieve with this project?*

Daura: “I believe one of the most important goals is raising awareness, a legal case is a means to that end, not the end itself. It’s about creating visibility and showing the world the reality people with disabilities face in climate crises. Media attention and public awareness are as crucial as political action to highlight the disproportionate risks of climate change. I hope to continue this work because even a single conversation can open minds and drive change. The scholarship has allowed me to collect stories worldwide and start connecting the dots in this complex context. I’m exploring cross-sector and international collaborations to scale this work. After two years of research, travel, and building an international network, I see many opportunities to make an impact. My ultimate goal is to ensure that disability-inclusive climate action is an integral part of all climate policy, not a niche issue.”

*What are you doing now?*

Daura: “I’m currently working in sustainability consulting at Nordic Sustainability in Copenhagen, learning from private and public sector climate initiatives and the diverse perspectives that enrich my research and impact work. It’s both exciting and challenging to explore the private sector’s role in advancing inclusive climate action, especially as political developments scale back climate ambitions while urgency grows. While planning the next steps for my research and the legal case, it’s motivating to collaborate with people and interest groups to shape a strategy for the future. Through both my work and the impact project, I am determined to learn, connect, and make the most meaningful contribution in research and practice.”

**5. YOUTH AND CLIMATE ACTION**

*Do you have a message or tip for other young people who want to take action on climate change but don’t know where to start?*

Daura: “I never expected to start a project like this, it all began as a few thoughts in a Word document. My advice to young people is to take the chance: small funding opportunities exist through studies or the EU, and they can help you act on a cause you care about. Don’t get stuck thinking the problems are too big, find a topic you’re passionate about, submit your idea, and seize opportunities. There’s plenty of work to be done, and funding waiting for young people with energy and good plans.”

**Effective climate action is inclusive climate action. To protect all groups and prevent structural harm to those at highest health and safety risks, inclusivity must be the foundation of every climate policy. This message needs to reach the highest political levels: climate issues shouldn’t be discussed only at disability-focused conferences, and people with disabilities and their representatives deserve a seat at every climate conference.”**

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## SHAKEELAH WILLIAMS
## LAURA HIGUERA SÁNCHEZ

# Small Actions, Global Transformation

*"Every action counts, no matter how small, and by acting collectively, young people can create meaningful change."*

**With this conviction, Laura Higuera Sanchez (27) and Shakeelah Williams (21) lead the We Are Tomorrow Global Partnership (WAT-GP), a youth-driven climate organization founded in 2019 that connects and empowers young changemakers across the globe. For them, climate action isn't reserved for experts or policymakers, it's a collective movement built on everyday acts of awareness, advocacy, and ambition.**

At the heart of WAT-GP lies a simple yet powerful belief: small actions can trigger global transformation. From local clean-up campaigns to international youth dialogues, the organization creates opportunities for young people to learn, collaborate, and take ownership of their role in shaping the planet's future.



### TWO PATHS, ONE PURPOSE

Both Laura and Shakeelah's climate journeys began in high school years before they would meet but their paths share a common thread of purpose. Laura, now a qualified lawyer with a master's degree in transnational governance, first encountered WAT-GP not as a leader, but as a collaborator. At the time, she was a member of a Mexican climate advocacy group partnered with the organization. Her commitment and insight led her to join WAT-GP as Policy Manager, a role through which she helped shape its structure, archives, and strategic direction.

Shakeelah's journey, meanwhile, started within WAT-GP's events department. While completing her bachelor's degree in environmental science, she focused on fostering connection curating an inclusive and holistic environment for members worldwide. Her ability to see both the logistical and emotional needs of young activists helped strengthen the organization's sense of community and purpose.

**'ALMOST EVERY ACTION, NO MATTER HOW MINOR IT SEEMS, CAN HAVE AN IMPACT ON THE CLIMATE.'**

Now, as co-chairs, Laura and Shakeelah have spent the past year leading the organization through a phase of restructuring and renewal. Their shared vision centers on building sustainability not only in climate action but within the organization itself, ensuring that WAT-GP continues to empower youth to act autonomously, inclusively, and confidently.

For both leaders, the message is clear: you don't need to be an expert to make a difference. Every decision, whether it's organizing a local project, attending a global dialogue, or even rethinking daily habits contributes to a larger collective impact. As Laura puts it, "Almost every action, no matter how minor it seems, can have an impact on the climate." And with young leaders like her and Shakeelah guiding the way, WAT-GP is proving that the smallest steps, when taken together, can truly lead to global transformation.

### WHAT DRIVES THEM

When asked what motivates them to remain deeply involved in climate action, both point to experiences that have shaped their understanding of justice, inclusion, and voice.



For Shakeelah, she identifies that her youth qualification, along with being exposed to the ways in which the youth are both undermined, their efforts unrecognised and not acknowledged is a troubling perspective. Where in the day of today we are still heightening power dynamics between the Global North and Global South, at the cost of engaging with youth.

Laura's motivator was born out of her exposure to the realities regarding how exclusionary the decision-making space is for youth alike. Although she does note that there have been advancements that have allowed hope to bloom, there is still a long way to go in the capacity in which we integrate youth into the process as opposed to them being a mere token of representation. Laura makes particular note of the ways in which these realities have curated her interests towards climate education and issues of mobility.

Different though their perspectives may be, both Laura and Shakeelah share a single goal: ensuring that young people are not just included in the process, but that they help define it.

### THE GLOBAL DIALOGUES PROJECT

One of WAT-GP's flagship initiatives, the Global Dialogues Project (GDP), embodies this principle of inclusion and co-creation. Co-led with Youth and Environment Europe (YEE), this 13-month program connects youth-led climate organizations from both the Global South and Global North, creating opportunities for collaboration, learning, and shared advocacy.

"Each year, we select a specific theme," says Shakeelah. "This year, the focus is on Nature-Based Solutions, exploring how communities can protect ecosystems while adapting to the changing climate."

Each edition brings together 8 to 12 youth organizations for co-learning and policy development. The program culminates in youth-led national dialogues and Youth Climate Agendas, with one representative from each group supported to attend the COP conference.

According to Laura the project began two years ago as an experiment. “It started as a pilot, almost a test drive,” she recalls. “When preparing for COP28, we began collaborating with YEE and WWF’s Voices for Climate Action program to promote knowledge exchange between Global North and Global South countries.”

The pilot paired Global South and Global North organizations in reciprocal exchanges. “One person from each organization visited the other’s country and joined their youth dialogues,” Laura explains. “That experience helped us refine the model for the following year.” Since then, the GDP has evolved into a hub for advanced collaboration, where youth organisations strengthen their advocacy through workshops and expert mentorship, continuing long after the program ends.

To meet the project’s growing scope, WAT-GP restructured its internal operations. “Engaging more Global North partners has allowed us to be more intentional in how we design workshops and communication spaces,” says Shakeelah. The first six months now focus on capacity-building in policy engagement, climate finance, and advocacy strategy.

A defining value, she emphasizes, is autonomy. “We provide the structure and resources, but every organization defines its own mission and message. Our role is to amplify their voice, not reshape it.” The project also provides connection in an often-isolating space. “It can feel lonely as a youth-led organisation,” Shakeelah admits. “But this network bridges that gap.”

Today, WAT-GP’s network links over 30 youth climate organizations worldwide. “Participants in Pakistan are collaborating with youth in Argentina and South Korea on a COP-focused event about climate anxiety,” says Shakeelah. “It shows that climate issues, and the drive to solve them, are truly universal.”

This year’s Global Dialogues Project also reflects that shared purpose through its theme: Nature-Based Solutions. When asked how WAT-GP integrates this focus into its work, Shakeelah explains that each year the program builds on a new area of climate action. “Each year, we aim to strengthen youth-led climate work globally,” she says. “This year, we’re helping eight organizations deepen their knowledge of nature-based solutions, offering technical support for youth dialogues, and guiding their advocacy strategies to implement what they learn.”

## CHALLENGES AND CHANGE

Laura noted a concerning decline in global support for youth-led organizations. “Political and economic instability is making it harder for youth to access decision-making spaces,” she said. “We’ve seen a reduction in COP badges, fewer invitations, and shrinking budgets. A few years ago, participation felt more open, now it’s narrowing.”

She stressed that continued support is vital. “Today’s decisions shape tomorrow’s world. Without sustained investment in youth participation, we risk losing a generation of climate leaders.”

For Shakeelah, the greatest need is acknowledgement. “Recognition goes a long way,” she said. “Even small gestures from ministries, negotiators, or donors can have a huge impact. Youth organizations are doing meaningful, results-driven work. Visibility helps sustain that momentum.”

## A GLOBAL NETWORK

In just two years, WAT-GP’s network has grown to include over 30 youth climate organizations from across the world, from Nigeria and Nepal to Portugal and Chile. Each group contributes to a growing web of shared learning and solidarity.

While the network continues to expand, Laura acknowledged that the Asia and Pacific Island regions remain underrepresented. “It’s an area we’re working to strengthen,” she said. “We believe in ensuring that voices from every region are part of the conversation.”

What makes the project unique, both co-chairs agree, is its long-term impact. Many participants continue collaborating long after their program ends, often with the same experts who trained them. “That continuity is what makes the network so strong,” said Shakeelah. “It’s not just a one-year project; it’s the foundation for lasting global cooperation.”

## LOOKING AHEAD

If given the opportunity to speak directly to climate negotiators or the Dutch delegation, Laura said she would first like to express the support that WAT-GP and the Global Dialogues Project have already received from the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs. This has been helpful in positioning their organisation.

However, she also noted that continued, and expanded, investment is crucial. “A major challenge we’re seeing globally is a decline in overall support for youth-led organizations. Political and economic conditions in many parts of the world are increasingly difficult, which impacts budgets, funding opportunities, and access to decision-making spaces.





For Shakeelah, the message is clear: “recognizing the efforts, dedication, and tangible achievements of youth organizations is incredibly important. Since the surge of youth-led organisations around 2019, there is a risk that their work becomes over-generalized or overlooked.”

## MESSAGE TO THE NEXT GENERATION

The chairs conclude their experiences in noting that there is no such thing as a good place, or time to start advocacy work. Every single effort is valuable in the pursuit of a better Earth for future generations to inherit. Often the perspective and dynamism of youth go unrecognised, but it is crucial for youth to engage in active communication and action to participate in the discussion for the exchange of a world that is livable, healthy, and resilient. One does not need to be a technical genius to begin, but rather that it is encouraged to start where you are, get involved where you can, feed into your strengths and curiosities, and let it bloom from there.

When asked what message they would give to young people who want to take climate action but don’t know where to start, both co-chairs agreed: there’s no perfect moment to begin.

Laura said that waiting for the right opportunity can mean missing the chance to make an impact. “Start where you are,” she advised. “Join a local group, initiate a project, have conversations. Every small effort contributes to something bigger.”

Shakeelah echoed that sentiment. “You don’t need technical training or years of experience. What matters is the willingness to act, to learn, and to connect with others doing the same.”

Their belief, that small actions lead to global transformation, continues to guide their work and inspire those around them.

**For Laura and Shakeelah, the story of the We Are Tomorrow Global Partnership is not just about an organization; it’s about a movement. One built by young people who refuse to wait for permission to make change, and who remind the world that transformation begins not in policy rooms or conference halls, but in the everyday choices and courageous acts of individuals.**

**Because every action counts. And together, those actions can change the world.**

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## KAYODE OGUNLEYE

# “The time is now for youth to take action or Youth, act now, don’t wait!”

**Kayode Ogunleye (30) is the co-founder and team lead of the ECO Learn Nigeria initiative. He studied in Lagos and is a lawyer, as well as the Director of Programs and Operations at the Youth Sustainable Development Network (YSDN).**

For over a decade, Kayode has been active in the social impact space. He began his career in an employment-based role while studying, later shifting toward volunteerism and community impact.

Balancing school and work, he gradually found his way into the social and climate action space dedicating himself to creating lasting impact.



### URGENCY AS A DRIVER FOR CHANGE

Coming from Nigeria, Kayode knows well how difficult it can be to remain passionate in a society that is still developing and working to overcome many challenges. “But when you are clear about what you want to achieve, where you want to go, and how your work can make a difference, that awareness keeps you motivated and focused.”

How does he stay motivated in a field that can feel overwhelming? Kayode reminds himself that the long-term goals are far more valuable than the short-term ones. He explains that he is able to overcome the barriers and challenges that could discourage him because of the vision he has for his community and his country.

He emphasises the importance for young people to be involved in climate action given the urgency. “The time to act is now. We as youth are witnessing the adverse effects of climate change and other societal problems firsthand. If we don’t act quickly and collectively, our world may no longer be liveable in the next 10 to 15 years. Climate change is already affecting our lives today, imagine how severe it could become if we remain passive.”

**‘NATURE-BASED SOLUTIONS AREN’T NEW — THEY’VE ALWAYS EXISTED WITHIN OUR COMMUNITIES.’**

He recalls October’s heavy rainfall in Lagos, when flooding disrupted entire neighbourhoods, a vivid reminder of what’s at stake.

“We can’t place the responsibility on older generations alone. We, the youth, must take responsibility, take action, and be involved. If we don’t do it, no one else will do it for us.” He describes how for this reason it is crucial to align goals and work together in order to create a future ‘where society and our planet remain liveable for everyone’.

### ABOUT ECO-LEARN NIGERIA

As the team lead for ECO Learn Nigeria, Kayode’s focus lies in this youth-led organisation. This organisation focuses on ensuring universal access to climate education by 2030 through curriculum integration, advocacy and sustainable community projects.

It began with capacity-building sessions for teachers across Lagos State. There, teachers were trained to become climate education ambassadors. During these sessions, they undergo rigorous training assessment, learning how




to integrate sustainability and climate concepts into their classroom lessons. After the training, these educators bring what they’ve learned directly into their schools, guiding students in projects like school gardens, recycling initiatives, and water conservation campaigns.

To measure the students’ understanding and engagement, they organize competitions and evaluation sessions. These activities encourage students to think critically, act sustainably, and take ownership of their environment. Over the past two years, the results have been remarkable. “We’ve seen teachers become champions of climate education and students taking leadership in sustainability projects within their schools and communities. These success stories inspire us to continue expanding our work, reaching more schools, more teachers, and ultimately, more young people across Nigeria.” Kayode explains.

### INTEGRATING NATURE-BASED SOLUTIONS

The organisation also focuses strongly on nature-based solutions. “Nature-based solutions are not new to us, they’ve always existed within our communities here in Nigeria. Long before the term became popular, people were already engaging in activities like tree planting, upcycling, and using local natural resources to solve everyday challenges. At ECO Learn, we integrate these concepts into our training sessions with teachers and students.” The organisation helps them recognise that the solutions we need are often right around us within our own environment. “By connecting the idea of nature-based solutions to what people already know and practice, it becomes much easier for them to relate to and apply these concepts in real life.”




For instance, when teachers and students plant trees, start small gardens, or reuse materials within their schools, they are actively implementing nature-based solutions without even realizing it. These small, local actions address both environmental and socio-economic challenges, improving food security, creating cleaner spaces, and strengthening community resilience.

In order to engage policymakers in Lagos, they develop position papers and procure policy dialogues to encourage government adoption of more sustainable approaches. “We emphasize that nature-based solutions are affordable, accessible, and effective compared to many capital-intensive projects that are often out of reach for communities. Personally, I’m a strong advocate for nature-based solutions because I believe they are the most practical and inclusive path forward for a developing society like Nigeria. They connect people directly to their environment and show that sustainability doesn’t have to come from outside; it can start right here, within our communities.”

Building on this approach, at a broader level the parent organisation, the Youth Sustainable Development Network, actively engages in policy advocacy. They develop policy recommendations aimed at mitigating activities that negatively impact society. For instance, in the southeast, Kayode explains, rising food prices and scarcity exacerbated by oil spills affecting fisheries have become critical challenges. Through policy advocacy, particularly via position papers and research, they encourage the government to adopt sustainable practices and develop responsible partnerships with oil companies and agricultural bodies. Our goal is to ensure that their operations do not harm local communities. “By leveraging research-driven recommendations, we create guidance that is not only sustainable but also valuable for both the government and the people.”

**‘SUSTAINABILITY DOESN’T HAVE TO COME FROM OUTSIDE; IT CAN START RIGHT HERE, WITHIN OUR COMMUNITIES.’**

Kayode expressed relief that his concerns were understood, emphasizing the strain rising food prices place on local communities. He noted that many lack the resources to confront the harmful effects of oil companies, especially in riverine regions, where water bodies have been severely impacted.

Some companies are even considering leaving Nigeria in search of more favorable environments abroad. “Recent government policies have not provided an enabling environment for businesses to operate sustainably, which pushes organizations to seek opportunities in regions such as the Middle East, Europe, or other parts of the world. This exodus highlights a broader challenge: the lack of a conducive environment in Nigeria for both businesses and local communities to thrive sustainably. As residents of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, this is a pressing concern that directly impacts our socio-economic stability and long-term development.”

**EXPANSION AND GOVERNMENT COLLABORATION**

On Kayode’s current job at ECO learn and whether he feels support from the Nigerian government he remarks: “ECO Learn Nigeria is currently active in Lagos, but we have plans to expand to other cities and states across the country. We’ve submitted a proposal to the Consulate of the Netherlands in Lagos and are looking forward to their approval. Our goal is to scale our project to about five additional states, primarily in the Southwest and Southeast regions of Nigeria. The idea is to extend the values and impact we’ve demonstrated in Lagos to other regions where there is less awareness and exposure to climate education and sustainable development.” Through expansion, he says they hope to build more partnerships and collaborations that will help us create a strong and effective scaling process.




When it comes to the Nigerian government, he remarks that their involvement is mostly at a surface level. “There’s very little we can do without their approval, so we always ensure they are informed and aware of our activities. This is especially important for safety reasons, having government support helps prevent any form of harassment or obstruction while we carry out our work. While the government does not provide significant financial or material resources due to limited capacity, they are supportive in offering permission, safety, and opportunities to operate in a secure environment. For funding and capacity building, however, we rely largely on our own efforts and partnerships with other organisations.”

**CONTEXT & IMPACT**

Kayode finds joy from ECO Learn through its impact on our community, seeing how individuals are adapting all they’ve learnt or experienced first hand via our initiative in living better and sustainable lives and on the long run positively affecting our society.

**5. YOUTH & CLIMATE ACTION**

**His mantra is simple: “the time to act is now.” There’s no reason to procrastinate anymore. Society has changed dramatically over the past decade, and the challenges we face today are only getting more urgent. Every moment we delay, the adverse effects of climate change and other societal issues deepen, and the uncertainty about the future grows.**

**As young, passionate, and energetic individuals, we have the power to make a difference. It’s crucial that we step forward now, take initiative, and implement sustainable solutions to address the pressing issues around us. Waiting won’t help. The best time to act is today, not tomorrow. This mindset has been what keeps me motivated and focused on climate action.**

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## MEINKE VAN OENEN

# Look at nature, find the future

**At just 21, Meinke van Oenen is pioneering sustainable desalination, transforming seawater into usable fresh water through natural processes. A multi-award-winning innovator and founder, she combines systems engineering and business administration with her passion for nature-based design.**

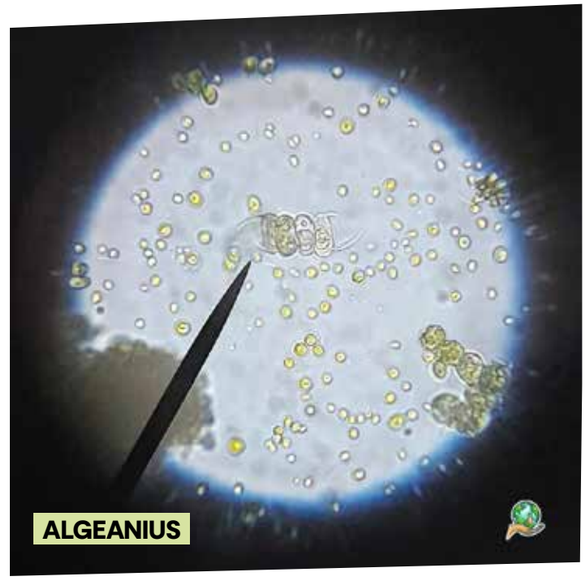
Her company, Algaenius, develops the first (bio)desalination method using halophilic algae. This technology produces water suitable for industrial, mining, and agricultural use while capturing carbon and easing pressure on freshwater sources.

Now completing a minor in Biobased Sciences at Wageningen University, Meinke plans to pursue a master's degree after graduation. Guided by her philosophy, "Look at nature, find the future," she aims to build a business model where ecological and financial sustainability go hand in hand.



### WATER SCARCITY AS A WAKE-UP CALL

"Climate change often feels distant," Meinke says, "but water scarcity is real and accelerating." By 2030, even the Netherlands will face shortages (National Institute for Public Health and the Environment, RIVM), and globally, two-thirds of the population could be affected.
Most current desalination methods rely on filtration and fossil fuels, creating costly, energy-intensive systems that worsen emissions. Meinke's solution emerged from a question: Can we make water accessible while helping the climate, not harming it?
Her answer was algae.




**'I TRULY BELIEVE THAT EFFECTIVE SOLUTIONS MUST WORK WITH, NOT AGAINST, THE ENVIRONMENT.'**

### ALGAENIUS: NATURE'S GENIUS IN ACTION

Algaenius uses specially cultivated algae that absorb 70 to 90% of salt while capturing CO2 and removing nitrogen and other pollutants. "Like tiny Pac-Men in the water," she says. The result is reliable, low-salinity water for industries and farms.

Unlike reverse osmosis, which demands vast energy and releases toxic brine, Algaenius offers a low-cost, circular process. Salt and carbon are locked in the algal biomass, which can then be reused or safely processed.
Currently at Technology Readiness Level (TRL) 4/5, Algaenius seeks pilot projects to scale its solution. Its early success has been recognized by the UN Gamechanger Challenge and Dutch Junior Water Prize, proving that nature-based innovation is viable and necessary.

### LEARNING FROM NATURE'S INTELLIGENCE

When asked what Meinke finds so inspiring about Algaenius, Meinke shares, "is nature itself, its adaptability, its genius. When you look closely, everything in nature collaborates and coexists. We have a responsibility to follow that example."

Her goal is not only technological success but to inspire others to innovate with nature. "We can all be that small stone in the river that creates ripples."

### SCALING UP, THINKING GLOBALLY

Next, Meinke aims to validate the market and expand internationally. While the Netherlands acknowledges water scarcity, innovation in desalination is slow. Southern Europe, the Dutch Caribbean, and South Africa show greater readiness for testing and scaling.

Algaenius also targets industrial wastewater and brine discharge, a growing global concern. "In Belgium and the Middle East, brine is dumped back into the sea, harming ecosystems. Our method can biologically treat this water while sequestering CO2," she explains.

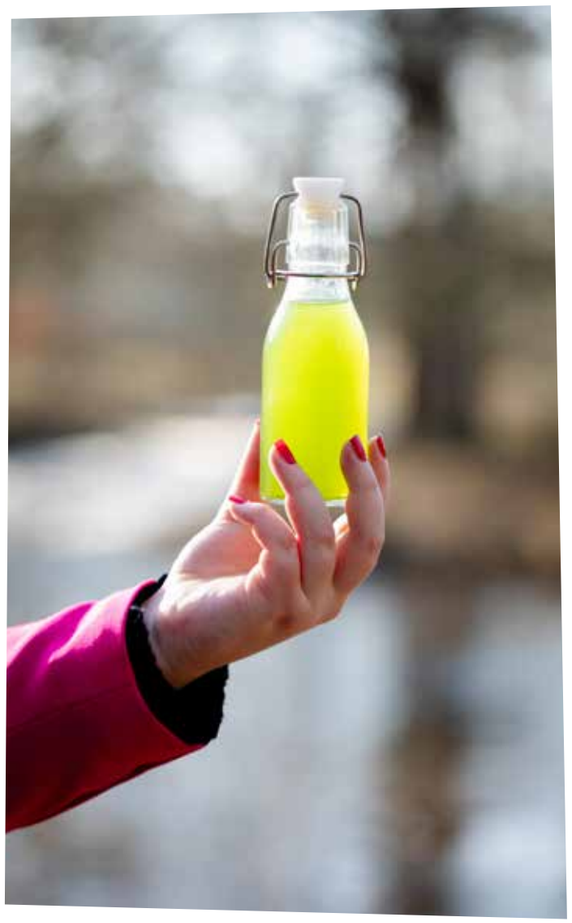
The next step: scalable saline-water treatment using algae, an approach that combines climate mitigation, biodiversity protection, and circular design.

## SCALING A GLOBAL SOLUTION

For now, Meinke focuses on validating her model in the market. Southern Europe, regions like Spain and Italy, has shown greater openness to desalination innovations than the Netherlands. “Other promising markets include the Dutch Caribbean and potentially South Africa,” she explains.

Her vision remains international. During the UN Gamechanger Challenge 2023 in New York, she met a South African engineer who is now a strategic collaborator. Together, they hope to expand Algaenius once funding and pilot opportunities are in place.

“The next steps focus on scalable, nature-based wastewater treatment,” she says. “By harnessing algae’s resilience and efficiency, we aim to provide a technically viable, environmentally friendly, and globally relevant solution.”



**‘WORKING WITH NATURE MIGHT JUST BE THE SMARTEST TECHNOLOGY WE HAVE.’**

## MOTIVATION THROUGH CHALLENGE

What keeps her going, even when things get difficult? “I think it’s partly about switching a mental button, almost like saying, ‘Okay, let’s just do it,’” she says. “A lot of my inspiration comes from nature itself. When you pay attention, it’s incredible to see how everything comes together in symbiosis. That’s what motivates me to keep working on Algaenius every day, even when it’s challenging.”

Message to Decision-Makers and the Next Generation
When asked what she would tell decision-makers and the young people who will shape the future, Meinke offers a clear and grounded reflection.

“The world is on the brink of a water crisis. By the end of 2025, half the global population will live in water-scarce regions. In Europe too, droughts are intensifying. We can’t keep relying on energy-heavy, short-term fixes.
The only scalable, affordable way forward lies in nature-based solutions, they capture $CO_2$, regenerate ecosystems, and restore balance.”

Her message extends beyond policymakers to the next generation ready to act. “The key is to enjoy the process,” Meinke says. “Working toward a big goal isn’t always easy, sometimes it’s exhausting, but those moments of challenge are what shape you.

Rutger Bregman calls it moral ambition: if you have the privilege of opportunity, you also have the responsibility to use it for good. Start where you are, don’t fear failure, and remember that even small steps can create lasting impact.”





## OTHER PROJECTS AND LINKS

Are there any other projects or initiatives you’re currently involved in?

I’m currently an ambassador for Techkwadraat, an initiative by the National Growth Fund that aims to promote high-quality technical education. In addition, I’m a member of the Advisory Board of the Technasium Foundation.

**The world is facing an unprecedented water crisis. By the end of 2025, half of the global population will live in areas affected by water scarcity, and within five years, around 700 million people may be forced to migrate due to lack of water. Europe is not immune. Last summer, several regions experienced severe droughts, and even in the Netherlands, the RIVM predicts a structural drinking water shortage by 2030.**

**As with many other challenges, most proposed solutions focus on symptoms and rely on technologies that consume vast amounts of energy. We need to fundamentally rethink our approach and seek solutions that address root causes, ones that also capture $CO_2$. Otherwise, we risk a vicious cycle of new problems. The only truly scalable and cost-effective way forward lies in nature itself. Nature-based solutions are the future!**

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