

GHANA YOUTH ENVIRONMENTAL MOVEMENT

by sustainovators

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Introduction

Founded in 2012, the Ghana Youth Environmental Movement, GYEM, has established itself as a dynamic and influential force, driven by a core philosophy of environmental justice. Its mission is to mobilize and empower Ghanaians between the ages of 15 and 35, a key demographic in a nation where a third of the population is under 25. GYEM's work is explicitly justice-centered, prioritizing the well-being of frontline communities who disproportionately bear the burdens of climate change, pollution, and resource degradation. This orientation allows the movement to frame environmental issues as matters of social equity and human rights, broadening its base of support and enhancing its political leverage.

The organization's effectiveness is rooted in a sophisticated, multi-pronged strategy that seamlessly integrates three pillars of action: national policy advocacy, grassroots capacity building, and community-driven development projects. This tripartite model creates a virtuous cycle: high-level advocacy campaigns lend credibility to on-the-ground projects; successful community solutions provide tangible evidence to bolster policy demands; and a continuous pipeline of educational programs cultivates the next generation of skilled activists to fuel the entire ecosystem.

Their Guiding Values and Principles

GYEM's operations are guided by a set of clearly articulated values that inform its strategies and tactics. These values are not merely aspirational but are demonstrably embedded in their projects and campaigns.

Innovation & Adaptivity: The movement embraces "creativity, using bold and unconventional strategies to amplify our message and drive change". This is evident in their modern, digitally-savvy approach to mobilization, utilizing graphic design and social media to engage youth around global movements. Crucially, this forward-looking innovation is paired with a commitment to "drawing wisdom from African traditions to solve today's ecological crises". This principle represents a conscious effort to decolonize the environmental narrative, which has often been dominated by perspectives and solutions from the Global North. By grounding their work in local context and traditional ecological knowledge GYEM enhances the authenticity, cultural relevance, and potential efficacy of its interventions.

Non-Violence: A bedrock principle of GYEM's methodology is a firm belief in non-violence in campaigning for change. This commitment to Non-Violent Direct Action is a strategic choice that enhances the movement's legitimacy, broadens its appeal to participants concerned about safety, and maintains a moral high ground in confrontations with state authorities.

Community & Commitment: The organization's philosophy is rooted in collective action built through connections and relationships of trust and respect. This emphasis on community is the basis for their extensive coalition-building efforts. It is coupled with a value of commitment, positioning GYEM as a "dedicated and courageous movement, relentlessly campaigning for environmental justice—no matter the obstacles".

These values and philosophies are operationalized through a formal strategic plan. For the period spanning 2020 to 2025, GYEM's strategy is built on three central pillars:

Empowering grassroots activists: Cultivating local leaders and providing them with the skills and resources to drive change from the bottom up.

Co-developing community-based resilience programs: Working directly with frontline communities to design and implement solutions that address their specific environmental challenges.

Forming strategic alliances: Building collaborative relationships with a diverse range of partners to amplify their impact and diversify the movement

How They Inspire Participation

GYEM's operations are characterized by three distinct levels of engagement: high-level policy advocacy, grassroots education and leadership development, and on-the-ground community projects. This tripartite strategy creates a powerful synergy, where progress in one area reinforces and enables success in the others. This structure allows the movement to be both confrontational in its demands for systemic change and collaborative in its implementation of practical solutions.

A. Influencing Power: National Advocacy and Policy Campaigns

At the highest level, GYEM engages in national advocacy aimed at achieving systemic and policy-level change. Their methodology is a sophisticated blend of evidence-based research, non-violent direct action, strategic coalition building, and sustained media engagement designed to hold decision-makers accountable and shift the political landscape.

HOW #1: #NoCoal2GH (GYEM Against Coal Power) Campaign

The campaign against the introduction of coal-fired power plants into Ghana stands as GYEM's most prominent and definitive policy victory. From 2013 to 2016, the movement spearheaded a coalition to oppose a planned 700MW supercritical coal

plant, which the Government of Ghana was developing in partnership with China's Shenzhen Energy Group. GYEM's campaign was multifaceted and relentless, employing a range of tactics:

Direct Action: Adhering to their principle of non-violence, activists engaged in high-visibility occupations of key government buildings, including the Ministry of Energy and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). These actions served to disrupt "business as usual" and generate significant media attention.

Public Mobilization and Pressure: The campaign extended beyond direct action to broader public engagement. GYEM organized street press conferences, orchestrated mass phone calls to the Volta River Authority (VRA) and the EPA to register public opposition, and conducted online and street protests. A key moment occurred on June 6, 2016, when the movement submitted a petition with 1,000 signatures to the EPA, formally demanding that it halt the issuance of a permit for the plant's construction.

Outcome: The sustained pressure proved effective. By the end of 2016, the Ghanaian government invited GYEM and its partner organizations for a high-level dialogue, a significant recognition of their legitimacy and influence. Following these discussions, the government officially halted the proposed coal power project. This outcome represents a clear, measurable, and highly impactful policy victory that has had lasting implications for Ghana's energy trajectory.

HOW #2: Ban Single-Use Plastics Campaign

In contrast to the finite #NoCoal2GH campaign, GYEM's effort to ban single-use plastics (SUPs) exemplifies a long-term, multi-stage advocacy strategy. The campaign calls for a national ban on ten specific types of SUPs and employs a broader, more collaborative approach to build momentum over time. Key elements of this strategy include:

Coalition Building: GYEM has actively built alliances with a wide range of stakeholders, including other civil society organizations (CSOs), media outlets, and, crucially, private sector businesses that are creating sustainable alternatives, such as Reusable Bag Gh and Soko Bags Gh. This creates an ecosystem of support and demonstrates that viable alternatives to SUPs exist.

Awareness Creation and Research: The campaign is underpinned by public education. GYEM produced a documentary showcasing eco-friendly alternatives to SUPs, featuring interviews with local entrepreneurs. This not only raises consumer awareness but also promotes the business case for a circular economy.

Policy Influencing: The movement engages directly with the policy process by organizing multi-stakeholder roundtables and issuing press statements and policy briefs that outline a clear "roadmap to ban single-use plastics in Ghana". This positions them as a constructive partner with concrete proposals, not just a protest group.

B. Cultivating Capacity: Education and Grassroots Leadership

The second pillar of GYEM's strategy focuses on building a sustainable and resilient movement by empowering individuals with the necessary skills, knowledge, and leadership capabilities. This work is fundamental to their mission of creating a self-perpetuating pipeline of young environmental leaders who can drive change in their own communities and at the national level.

HOW #3: Green Clubs in Schools (GCS)

The GCS project is a cornerstone of GYEM's youth engagement strategy, targeting secondary school students through after-school programs. The project is structured around a multi-stakeholder validated GCS curriculum, which is used to train

teachers who then facilitate the clubs. The program's goals are twofold: first, to educate students on context-specific environmental challenges relevant to their daily lives, and second, to empower them with entrepreneurial skills to initiate and lead their own practical, field-based projects. By making the curriculum available for public download, GYEM employs an open-source model that encourages wider adoption and scalability beyond their direct reach.

HOW #3: Ghana Young Environmentalist Programme (GYEP)

Launched in August 2020, the GYEP is a more intensive, year-long program designed to train the next generation of environmental activists and leaders. The program is national in scope, accepting applicants from all 16 regions of Ghana. Its structure includes virtual training sessions led by resource persons, dedicated support for participants to design and implement their own local initiatives, and ongoing mentorship in environmental leadership. The GYEP functions as a national leadership incubator, creating a networked cohort of skilled young people capable of spearheading environmental action across the country.

HOW #4: Activist Training & Summits

GYEM provides direct training to its members and the broader youth community, equipping them with the practical skills needed for effective campaigning, particularly in the principles and techniques of Non-Violent Direct Action (NVDA). The movement's annual flagship event, "Power Shift," serves as the largest youth-led environmental and climate summit in Ghana. This summit convenes young people from across the nation to deliberate on a pressing environmental issue—such as plastic pollution, waste management, or renewable energy—and collaboratively strategize on effective responses. It is a critical platform for networking, knowledge sharing, and movement-wide strategic alignment.

C. Implementing Solutions: Community-Centric Projects

The third pillar of GYEM's strategy involves the design and implementation of tangible, on-the-ground projects. This work demonstrates their commitment to co-developing sustainable solutions directly with and for frontline communities. These projects serve multiple strategic purposes: they address immediate and critical needs, build immense credibility and trust at the grassroots level, and function as proof-of-concept models that can be used to advocate for broader policy changes. This integrated approach creates a virtuous cycle: advocacy provides the political space and legitimacy for community work, while successful community projects provide the evidence and moral authority to strengthen advocacy demands.

HOW #5: The Kyensu Project (Water Security)

The Kyensu Project, whose name translates from Akan as "Share Water," is a powerful example of GYEM's community-centric approach. Launched in October 2020, the project was a direct response to acute water inequality in Treba, a low-income, peri-urban community in the Ga West Municipality, a situation that was severely exacerbated by the heightened need for sanitation during the COVID-19 pandemic. In collaboration with the Treba Youth Association and with support from international partners like the International Secretariat for Water, GYEM constructed a community water kiosk. This facility now provides residents with access to affordable and clean drinking water, directly addressing the UN Sustainable Development Goal 6 (Clean Water and Sanitation). Critically, the project was implemented with a commitment to local empowerment; all labor for the construction, including masons and plumbers, was sourced from within the Treba community, ensuring that the project delivered local economic benefits alongside its primary health and social outcomes.

HOW #6: ACRE (Agroforestry in Communities for Restoration and Empowerment)

The ACRE project, initiated in August 2023 in the Asuogyaman District, targets the interconnected challenges of climate change, ecosystem degradation, and food insecurity. The core of the project is a one-acre agroforestry demonstration farm established on degraded land. This farm serves as a living laboratory and educational hub with multiple objectives.

In a significant display of organizational adaptivity, GYEM has since transformed the ACRE project into an innovative social enterprise. The farm now produces vegetables and other crops, with the proceeds being reinvested into the farm's operations and used to support GYEM's core advocacy work. This model not only ensures the project's long-term financial sustainability but also embodies the movement's commitment to creating self-reliant, empowering solutions.

HOW #7: Climate Awareness and Peace Education (CAPE) Project

The CAPE project, launched in early 2024, demonstrates GYEM's sophisticated understanding of political timing and the intersectionality of social issues. The project was strategically designed to address the nexus of climate change and peacebuilding in the run-up to Ghana's 2024 national elections, a period of heightened political discourse. By linking environmental issues like resource conflict and climate-induced displacement to national security and peace, GYEM effectively inserted climate action into the election agenda. The project's activities were targeted and measurable, including a "Climate4Peace Campaign" in Bolgatanga designed to reach 500 youth, a Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) training workshop in the flood-prone community of Mepe for 200 youth, and a national arts and photography competition to engage a wider audience.

How They Measure Impact

1. Policy and Systemic Change:

At the highest level, GYEM measures success by achieving tangible policy victories, such as stopping the proposed 700MW coal plant through the #NoCoal2GH campaign. For ongoing campaigns like the ban on single-use plastics, progress is tracked through public awareness, behavioral shifts, stakeholder engagement, and political will, showing momentum toward systemic change.

2. Project-Level Outputs and Outcomes:

For community and educational projects, GYEM evaluates both quantitative results (e.g., over 10,000 youth empowered, water kiosks built, demonstration farms created) and qualitative outcomes such as empowerment, improved livelihoods, and behavioral change. Programs like the Green Clubs in Schools, GYEP, and Kyensu projects strengthen skills, resilience, and local well-being.

3. Movement Building and Ecosystem Growth:

At a broader level, GYEM measures its success through the growth of its network (over 500 members and regional representation), strong partnerships with local and international organizations, and leadership in the youth climate space. Its evolution into a regional influencer, financial innovation through social enterprises, and sustainable operations reflect its long-term resilience and maturity.

Instagram Post:





WHAT IS G.Y.E.M

Ghana Youth Environmental Movement (GYEM), is a national youth-led environmental group in Ghana established in 2012, by a group of young activists led by Gideon Commey, that empowers young people to engage in a sustainable environment and address climate issues through advocacy campaigns and community activities.

Initiatives:

Power Shift is the **largest** youth-led climate and environmental initiative and gathering in **Ghana**. It is GYEM's largest initiative which occurs **annually**, environmental challenge of the time. The idea is to unite as many young people as possible around an extremely important issue and share ideas about addressing it collectively as a Movement.

Campaigns:

#SaveAtewa **#SayNoToSingle**
#FridaysForFuture **UsePlastics**

OPERATIONAL FLOWCHART

FOUNDATIONAL INPUTS

Core Philosophy: Justice-Centered, Non-Violent, Community-Focused.

Context: Pressing environmental challenges in Ghana (pollution, deforestation, climate change)

PHASE 1: AWARENESS & ENGAGEMENT

Educating and mobilizing Ghanaian youth through:

Education: Green Clubs in Schools, Ghana Young Environmentalist Programme (GYEP).

Public Outreach: Media Campaigns, Power Shift Summits

PHASE 2: TRIPARTITE STRATEGY

Channeling awareness into concrete, multi-level actions:

National Advocacy: Non-Violent Direct Action, Petitions, Policy Lobbying

Grassroots Capacity Building: Activist Training, Leadership Development

PHASE 3: MEASURABLE IMPACT

Achieving tangible results across different scales:

Macro-Impact: Government halts 700MW coal plant.

Meso-Impact: Clean water access, sustainable farming models, trained youth leaders.

Meta-Impact: Expanded network of activists, strengthened coalitions, increased regional influence.