

YOUTH-LED COMMUNITY CLIMATE AWARENESS AND ACTION

Insights from the Frontlines:

Project Impact Report, 2024



PROJECT CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND

Over the past year, with the generous support of the Cisco Foundation, Digital Opportunity Trust (DOT) launched its inaugural climate project, “Mobilizing Young People as Leaders of Climate Awareness and Community Action.” The idea behind this initiative is simple – to harness the energy, creativity, and urgency of young people to build grassroots resilience to climate change in communities across Africa and the Middle East. At the core of this initiative is the Climate Corps program - an experiential learning experience for youth leaders - known as Climate Champions - consisting of a climate curriculum and community placements. Over the long term, the Climate Corps will empower hundreds of youth to work alongside thousands of people living in climate-vulnerable communities, increasing their ability to survive and thrive in a changing climate.

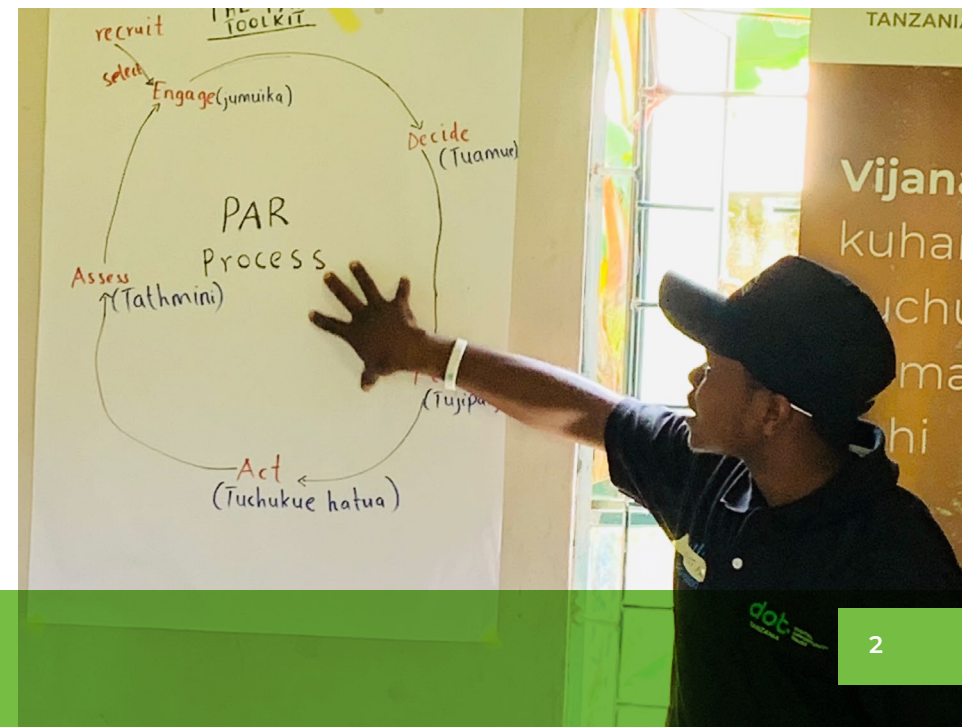
The backbone of the Climate Corps is equipping young people to become leaders in the climate space. To this end, in the program’s first year, DOT worked in partnership with a range of experts to develop an innovative four-week curriculum that blends intensive education on the science of climate change with training in mindfulness, digital skills, climate advocacy, and social innovation. DOT and its partners also created a custom toolkit to enable Climate Champions to guide small-scale climate action projects in their communities, using a process called participatory action research (PAR).

With these materials in hand, the Climate Corps then recruited its first cohort of Climate Champions, 19 recent university graduates from Lebanon and Tanzania. Some were long-time environmental activists, while others joined the project with only a passing knowledge of climate science. What they shared was that they had all grown up feeling the effects of climate change firsthand, and grappled with the question of what they could do to help make life easier for their families and communities.

These Climate Champions were recruited with the understanding that their generation is the future of climate advocacy, provided that they are equipped with the necessary knowledge, confidence, and skills to step into that leadership role.

The project provided them that, and in response, the inaugural Climate Champions showed tremendous grit, dedication, and optimism, proving they were more than up to the task in front of them.

After completing the Climate Corps curriculum, these 19 Climate Champions engaged 14 communities across their two countries, reaching over 600 community members. Their work focused on helping community members identify their most pressing environmental needs, and then making plans to act on them. Make no mistake – this was not a simple process. The Climate Champions had to act at various points as coaches, negotiators, teachers, and activists.





I realized we can be an example for the whole world

- Daniel Robert, Tanzania

They faced skepticism, hopelessness, bureaucracy, and socio-political challenges. However in the end, all of the communities they worked with enthusiastically bought into the process, collaboratively finding solutions for their most pressing environmental problems. These included awareness campaigns about plastics and water pollution, projects to plant trees and mangroves, and community clean ups. Each project not only addressed a pressing local challenge, but also served as a reminder for participants that the power to make change was truly in their hands. That, in the end, was the Climate Corps' primary goal: To help communities find their own agency in the climate crisis, and build a more resilient future in the long term.

As the first year of the Climate Corps comes to an end, DOT has already begun scaling this successful work to reach even more young people and their communities across Africa and the Middle East.

The curriculum is being integrated into programmatic elements of DOT's "Going Beyond: Partnering for a Youth-Led Future" project, a five-year initiative with the Mastercard Foundation taking place in Tanzania, Côte d'Ivoire, Zambia, and Malawi. Additionally, DOT plans to extend the Climate Corps to new countries in Africa and the Middle East, taking along members of the first class of Climate Champions as Climate Ambassadors.

"I realized we can be an example for the whole world," says Daniel Robert, a Climate Champion from Tanzania, reflecting on the project's impact. He believes that people who see the Climate Corps' work "will ask themselves: If this small community in Tanzania, led by this small group of young people, can do all this, what can we do? Why can't we change the world too?"



BUILDING GREEN SKILLS

The Climate Curriculum and Toolkit

How do you sound the alarm that humanity is in an existential environmental crisis without causing people to give up hope completely? How do you inspire people to believe their individual environmental climate actions matter, when the problem is global in scale?

When DOT set out to design a curriculum for the Climate Corps, it had to face these and similarly challenging questions head on. The organization knew there was no point in just teaching young people and their communities the causes and dangers of global warming if they weren't also given the tools to act and the confidence to believe change was truly possible.

In that spirit, DOT consulted with a wide range of experts, including local climate activists, global climate policy experts, and leading climate change thinkers. With their input, an innovative curriculum took shape.

It melded introductions to topics like climate science, indigenous environmental wisdom, and climate justice with training on a wide range of “soft” skills such as mindfulness, active listening, and the use of social media. This curriculum was further refined in a co-design process with a select group of young people in the DOT network, who offered valuable feedback on its strengths and weaknesses. The final result of this intensive process was the four-week Climate Champions training.

Among the most crucial aspects of the Climate Corps' curriculum was its focus on building the Climate Champions' confidence in their own ability to lead, teach, and inspire. These aspects draw on DOT's two decades of experience cultivating youth leadership, which have taught the organization, among other things, how important it is for young people to feel they have “permission” to step into leadership roles.

Very often, young people are not taught to believe that their voices matter, or that they have the capacity to make the changes they dream of. This is especially true for young women, who often grow up with a narrow imagination of what they are “allowed” to become. The Climate Corps curriculum pushed them to break out of this limiting mindset, and see themselves as leaders in the climate space and beyond.

Another unique aspect of the training was that it gave the Climate Champions guidance for navigating the inevitable emotional and psychological challenges of trying to change people’s minds, hearts, and actions. Throughout the course, they spent time reflecting on their mindsets, their sources of hope, and their personal reasons to keep fighting for climate justice. They also had the chance to spend multiple days immersed in nature, connecting more deeply to the planet whose survival they were fighting for.

Innovative though this curriculum was, the Climate Corps did not stop there. As the heart of the Climate Corps is building the long-term resilience of communities, DOT felt it was also essential that the Climate Champions have the best possible resources to tap into local expertise and creativity.

Therefore, as a complement to the Climate Champions’ training, DOT and its team of experts also built a set of tools for the young leaders to use to inspire community members to take action on pressing local environmental issues, captured in a climate action toolkit.

This toolkit employed what is known as “participatory action research,” or PAR. PAR is built on the idea that the people affected by a problem – in this case climate change – have essential and irreplaceable knowledge needed for solving it. PAR’s focus is on democratic and inclusive problem solving, making it perfectly suited to developing homegrown climate actions rooted in real local needs. The Climate Corps’ PAR toolkit guided the Climate Champions on a process of recruiting small groups of committed community members - known as the PAR working group - helping them to identify their biggest environmental challenges, and then brainstorming, designing, and carrying out projects to address them. By the end of the process, communities were inspired to see themselves as the experts on their own problems, a mindset shift that will go far beyond the duration of the project.



TAKING CLIMATE ACTION

Community Projects

When the Climate Champions began their work with communities, many had a lingering fear: What if no one cared?

“At first I thought maybe people would not be interested in solving issues related to climate change,” remembers Neema Walter, a Climate Champion from Tanzania. That was not a judgment. It was simply a reflection of the fact that, in many of the communities to which she and her peers were assigned, people’s daily lives were enormously difficult. “People here live to eat,” says Sara Awik, a Climate Champion who worked in two villages in Akkar, a rural region in northern Lebanon. In that context, she wondered, could anyone really be expected to get excited about a community project to save the environment?

Indeed, some of the Climate Champions were at first met with skepticism. “They said fighting against climate change is a waste of time,” recalls Gallan Emmanuel, who worked in a community on the shores of Lake Victoria in Tanzania. “They said it was an act of God and we should just leave things as they are.” In some communities where the Climate Corps was operating, locals were skeptical of outsiders arriving with big ideas to solve their problems for them, and they thought that Climate Corps was more of the same.

To fight this perception, the Climate Champions sat down with community members and asked them simply to describe the environmental problems they faced. In one village in Lebanon, residents described scorching droughts that shriveled their vegetable crops, cutting off their only source of income. In Makongo Juu, in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, people described how heavy, unpredictable rains washed out roads and marooned them at home, unable to travel to work, school, or the local clinic. In Mwanza, in the country’s north, villagers complained of water sources so polluted they were causing disease outbreaks. In Baakleen, a town near Beirut, Lebanon, community members said they were fed up with piles of plastic rubbish decaying in the streets. On Pemba, an island in Zanzibar, they spoke of coastal erosion that nibbled away at buildings and farmlands.

The Climate Champions heard all of these stories, and then they got down to work. They explained the connections between these local environmental catastrophes and the global problem of climate change, using language and examples calibrated to local education levels and interests. As they imparted this information, many Climate Champions said, they felt the mood in the room began to shift. “I was shocked by how much people wanted to know more, and as soon as they knew more, they wanted to share it with everyone around them,” says William Bittar, a Climate Champion from Lebanon.





It turned out that the problem wasn't apathy at all, but the disempowerment of living under the weight of environmental problems that were incomprehensible – and therefore also unfixable. “The people I speak to have lots of questions – they wonder why their crops didn't grow and they want to know more about climate change,” says Marwa Deeb, a Climate Champion in Lebanon. “You could see that they started out with pretty low knowledge of climate change, but then you give these sessions and you can see the passion growing as the knowledge grows,” echoes Daniel Robert, a Climate Champion from Tanzania.

Soon, people were clamoring to act. Using the PAR toolkit, the Climate Champions formed working groups of about a half dozen people in their communities, and gave them the job of brainstorming ideas for projects that could address some of the challenges they now understood were connected to climate change. Marwa says that as soon as the community she worked with grasped the causes of the problem, “people roll[ed] up their sleeves.”

They wanted to “start making a difference right here and right now.” As one community member from Zanzibar, Tanzania noted, “before the Climate Champions came, we only heard about climate change and did not know the causes... When DOT came, we learnt that cutting down trees might be a major cause of our challenges here.”

Climate Champion Gallan Emmanuel experienced the same thing in the community where he worked in Tanzania's Nyamagana district, on the shores of Lake Victoria. “It felt more like guiding them because they are the ones who are experiencing climate change in their communities,” he recalls. “Once they became more aware of the issues, they bought their own ideas and solutions.”

In that particular village, members of the working group described how people were constantly getting sick from drinking and cooking with dirty water. Diseases like cholera, malaria, and typhoid ripped through the community with a ferocity unlike anything older generations had seen before. Meanwhile, villagers had to walk further and further away to find clean sources of water, a burden that fell almost entirely on women and girls, who were sometimes being robbed or assaulted on the journey. In Gallan's PAR working group, community members realized that flooding and poor waste management were the culprits, and they decided to organize a massive community cleanup of the local river and marsh. Twenty people joined, including local government leaders, scooping plastic and other litter from the water. Afterwards, the local government created signs explaining the dangers of dumping waste at the site.

Similar stories of community-led transformation emerged across the 14 communities. In Baakleen, a town near Beirut, Lebanon, the PAR working group developed an idea for a dedicated plastic waste collection system to help stop the problem of heaps of plastic litter being left to rot in public spaces and local garbage dumps. They also came up with an awareness campaign to teach people about the environmental dangers of plastic, as well as how to sort it from their regular garbage.



On Pemba, the smaller of Zanzibar's two major islands, a coastal community decided to plant mangroves to help stop the erosion gnawing away at their coastline. In Oldonyosambu, a village 50 miles from Mount Kilimanjaro in Tanzania, the local PAR working group decided that beekeeping would be an effective way to both promote biodiversity and also help local people make a living. With the help of the Climate Champions, they connected with an organization called the Elimu Foundation, which donated hives to kickstart the project. And at Lebanese University in Beirut, a PAR working group made up of students developed an idea for an environmental app called "iSeaTree" that could track urban trees and calculate their CO2 benefits, turning citizens into scientists to preserve the city's canopies.

Across these widely varied projects, the PAR toolkit proved a remarkably flexible and effective tool, allowing Climate Champions to connect efficiently and effectively to both local problems and local solutions. Once people understood the root causes of their problems, "they were...ready to act so fast," says Neema Walter, the Climate Champion from Tanzania who had at first been skeptical that her community would be interested in the Climate Corps initiative.

This proved true across the communities in the project. In total, 78% of the 624 community members who participated in the project in Lebanon and Tanzania indicated a greater sense of motivation to take action on climate issues following their work with DOT. "The topic of climate change is really important. Our generation should take actions to solve this problem instead of becoming one of the problems," explains a young woman who was part of one of the communities in Lebanon. "Because of the PAR process, and my engagement with Climate

Champions, I know a lot of detailed information and real examples of how [climate change] shows up in my community."

The effects of the community projects also rippled out beyond the participants. "All the information I gained from the PAR sessions, I told my family and friends and it was shocking to them," recalls a community member in Lebanon. "But I explained the information in a way that they are now motivated to also help raise awareness around climate change and our community's challenges." As eloquently stated by Wissam Al Ahmadiyah, a Climate Champion from Lebanon, the Climate Champions had acted as "knowledge multipliers," creating a domino effect across their communities and beyond.



CREATING IMPACT

Summary of Key Results

By the end of its first year, the Climate Corps had touched the lives of 624 people (365 women, 259 men) in 14 communities across Lebanon and Tanzania. This work was anchored by the leadership of the first 19 Climate Champions (9 women, 10 men), who sparked action and shifted mindsets in ways that have endured well beyond the end of the project.

These impacts were captured in pre- and post-project assessments with Climate Champions and community members, which recorded considerable shifts in both understanding and action over the course of the pilot year. At a fundamental level, the Climate Corps vastly increased knowledge of climate change among both the Climate Champions and community members. For instance, at the start of the project, less than two thirds of the Climate Champions felt they could confidently describe the causes of climate change, compared to every single one of them by the time they finished. Similarly, the percentage of community members who felt they knew enough to take climate action in their communities rose by nearly 20% across the course of the project, from 69% (71% women, 67% men) at the start to 86% (94% women, 76% men) at the end.

Overwhelmingly, the first class of Climate Champions found the Climate Corps curriculum effective and inspiring. After completing the training, 89% (89% women; 89% men) of Climate Champions indicated they were highly satisfied with the delivery of the program. As one Climate Champion from Lebanon noted, “the peer learning environment allowed us to create friendships and learn from one another. That is something that a university can’t give us, and we need more of these workshops.” The survey also bore witness to the mindset shifts the Climate Champions underwent while completing their training. Before the project started, less than a quarter of the Climate Champions agreed that they could “inspire those around me to act through exhibiting an attitude of stubborn optimism.” By the end of their time with the Climate Corps, more than three quarters had become persistent optimists, unwilling to be limited by the challenges in their paths.



SPEAKING IMPACT

Reflections from Youth

In the past year, the first 19 Climate Champions have gone on a powerful journey of personal empowerment, becoming climate leaders and changemakers in their communities. Here is the story of that transformation, told in their own words:

Long before the project began, the Climate Champions experienced the impacts of climate change firsthand. From the mountains of Lebanon to the mangroves of Zanzibar, these young people were raised in places that have already been deeply affected by our rapidly warming planet. As children, they watched their parents hunch over fields of drought-shriveled corn, wondering how they would pay the next month's bills. They saw the roads that took people from their village to school and work wash away in storms, and the fuzzy stripe of brown smog growing thicker and thicker over their cities. "Growing up, I didn't fully understand the science behind what was happening to us, but I knew something wasn't right," says Marwa Deeb, a Climate Champion from Lebanon. She and other Climate Champions described how, from a young age, they yearned to do something to address these crises. "Witnessing the struggle of my family and neighbors, I felt a strong desire to lighten their hardship," says Gallan Emmanuel, who grew up in a farming and fishing village on the shores of Lake Victoria in northern Tanzania.

Before they joined the Climate Corps, however, these young people didn't always connect their personal experiences to a global environmental crisis. As a result, they often felt helpless in the face of the suffering they saw. The crisis felt unknowable and unsolvable. "This is God punishing the world for its sins," Gallan remembers his neighbors telling him.

"People had a sense that this is just how things are and how they'll always be," he says. Other Climate Champions described being aware of global warming, but seeing it as a distant catastrophe far removed from their daily lives. Or else they viewed it as a problem that only "important" people could solve. "I imagined that this was something that couldn't be dealt with unless you had huge time and resources," says Dina Mollel, also from Tanzania. "I couldn't imagine that small actions could make any difference."

By contrast, the knowledge the Climate Champions gained in their training gave them a sense of agency over the crisis. This, in turn, empowered them to act. In their training, the Climate Champions learned the science behind global warming, which many described as a kind of epiphany. "These were the answers I was asking for all along," Marwa from Lebanon says. "Suddenly the abstract idea of climate change became concrete." This knowledge in and of itself served as a call to action. "I realized then that I need to take responsibility for what is happening in the world around me," says Justin Maile from Tanzania, who admits he joined the Climate Corps with a vague understanding of global warming as "something happening far from me." But when he saw how enmeshed it was with his own life, "I pulled up my socks, and I studied hard."





The one-month training not only equipped young people with scientific knowledge, it also furnished them with the skills to share it. They learned to present complex technical information in a lively and engaging way to diverse audiences with a wide range of educational backgrounds, as well as how to facilitate discussions. “We might think we know how to listen already because we’ve done it our whole lives,” says Sara Awik in Lebanon. “But this was a particular kind of listening to really understand what people need.”

When the Climate Champions returned to their communities to teach what they had learned, they found people hungry to learn and take action. The young leaders used a tool called “participatory action research,” or PAR, in which they acted as facilitators for small groups of community members to learn about how climate change was shaping their lives, and to guide them as they developed tangible solutions. Many Climate Champions admitted they were nervous about this process. Through their training, they themselves had become passionate about environmental justice, but in places where daily life was a series of constant struggles, would anyone care? “At first I thought, maybe people are not really interested in what climate change is doing to their environment, and that’s why they don’t try to solve the issue,” says Neema Walter from Tanzania. As it turned out, there was little reason for concern. “This experience completely changed my mindset,” she says. “I became aware that all that was missing was the knowledge.”

Again and again, Climate Champions described the runaway enthusiasm of the community members in their PAR groups as they learned to connect their own experiences to climate science.

“You could see the passion growing as the knowledge grew,” says Daniel Robert from Tanzania. The Climate Champions quickly saw that they were not the only experts in the room. Their collaborators had the wisdom and creativity of their own lived experiences in a changing environment. “These communities have a lot of problems, but equally a lot of ideas for solving them,” says Zainab Shokor from Lebanon.

By the end of the pilot project, the Climate Champions and their community collaborators had begun work on a wide range of environmental projects. These projects were designed and carried out by the communities themselves, with the Climate Champions acting as facilitators and guides. The spectrum of projects was as diverse as the participants themselves, who ranged from fishermen and farmers to university students. Some groups developed environmental awareness campaigns—for instance about how to recycle plastic waste, or about how to avoid contaminating sources of drinking water. Some communities planted trees, tall grasses, or mangroves to stop erosion. Others organized cleanups of informal dumping sites, brainstormed ways to protect local bee hives, or began converting their organic waste into compost and fertilizer for local farms. At the end of the pilot year, many of these ideas were still percolating, but one thing was absolutely clear: communities had bought in, and not just for the duration of the Climate Champions’ work.

The community project in one town near Lake Victoria in Tanzania illustrates this vividly. There, Climate Champions helped community members plant trees at a local school, which then decided to give each tree the name of one of their students. “That gave the students ownership,” explains Gallan Emmanuel, who worked on this project. Now, he says, the students have pledged to continue taking care of “their” trees in the years to come.

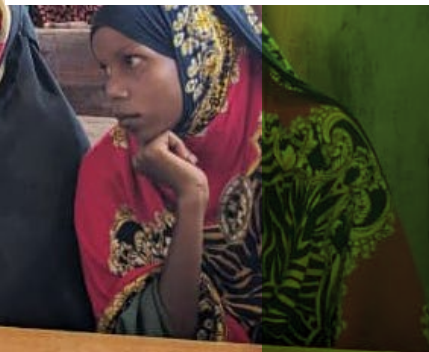
This experience solidified my belief in the power of local solutions and youth-led initiatives

- Wissam Al Ahmadiyah, Lebanon

Beyond the direct impact on communities where the Climate Champions worked, the project also had many other ripple effects.

For the Climate Champions themselves, the work served as proof positive that they could be leaders – both in the climate space and beyond. “This experience solidified my belief in the power of local solutions and youth-led initiatives,” says Wissam Al Ahmadiyah from Lebanon. He and others described growing to understand how empowering people with knowledge could be a catalyst for broader change, and seeing firsthand the value of working intergenerationally to tackle pressing social issues. Justin Maile from Tanzania recalls that one of his major concerns when his climate champion journey began was how he would convince elders and local authorities to listen to him – a recent university graduate – and take his project seriously. By the time he finished, however, he saw clearly that the energy of youth and the wisdom of older people could together be an engine for lasting change. “The elders shared the climate journey they’ve been through over the course of their lives,” he says, inspiring young people like himself to protect the planet for the next generation.

Similarly, Climate Champions described the power they found in tapping into local wisdom on climate issues – rather than waiting for change to come from somewhere else. “I loved the diversity of ideas I heard,” says Zainab Shokor from Lebanon. “By teaching community members how to be confident and speak for themselves, it also gave me the same kind of confidence to speak up and be heard too.”





LOOKING FORWARD

Potential for Scale and Replication

The pilot year of Climate Corps put the program through many crucial tests, beginning with its curriculum, which had to be elastic enough to meet the needs of an extraordinarily diverse collection of young leaders. Although they numbered just 19 in total, the first group of Climate Champions – 8 in Tanzania and 11 in Lebanon – came from widely varying personal and academic backgrounds. Some were lifelong environmental activists. Others applied for the Climate Corps because they were interested in building leadership skills and professional networks. They had studied architecture, engineering, and computer science, and worked as English teachers, cover letter writers, and IT technicians. They lived in rural villages and major metropolises. Some thought of themselves as born leaders. Others felt their palms sweating every time they stood up to speak in front of a room full of people.

Remarkably, nearly all of the Climate Champions reported that they benefitted strongly from Climate Corps curriculum, suggesting it could be successfully deployed to teach young climate leaders in a wide range of countries and contexts.

Meanwhile, the pilot year also demonstrated that the Climate Corps' approach to inspiring local climate resilience was effective in many different types of communities, from university students living in a Lebanese city to subsistence farmers in a Zanzibari village.

In Lebanon, the Climate Champions worked under the shadow of tremendous political and economic upheaval in the country. Remarkably, they still managed to develop close relationships with communities and put a variety of environmental projects into motion, suggesting that the Climate Corps model works even in places experiencing tremendous societal uncertainty. Overall, the pilot year demonstrated that the PAR process is reliable, flexible, and ready to be used far more broadly in the years to come.

The next step for DOT is to expand the Climate Corps program into new countries across Africa and the Middle East. To assist this process, Climate Champions from Lebanon and Tanzania will take on a new role as Climate Ambassadors, sharing their wealth of knowledge and experience with the next group of Champions.

At the same time, DOT expects that the scale of the Climate Corps' impact in Lebanon and Tanzania will also continue to grow over time, simply because of the skills and knowledge the project has left behind. For the 14 communities that participated in the pilot year, a sense of hope and agency in the face of the climate crisis are likely to endure long after the Climate Corps is gone.

YOUTH LEADERSHIP

Meet Our Climate Champions from **LEBANON**

A committed group of 11 young leaders, our Climate Champions, worked directly with local communities to co-create solutions that support community resilience to climate change. Without their leadership, the impact presented in this report would not have been possible.



Daniel Emad Rabah



Dina Ghassan Shaya



Hussien Ali Doughman



Nour Francis



Omar samir Ahmadih



Sarah Mohamad



William Bassem Bitar



Ahmed Jammal



Marwa Deeb



Wissam Al Ahmadih



Zeinab Shokor

YOUTH LEADERSHIP

Meet Our Climate Champions from **TANZANIA**

A committed group of 8 young leaders, our Climate Champions, worked directly with local communities to co-create solutions that support community resilience to climate change. Without their leadership, the impact presented in this report would not have been possible.



Daniel Robert



Dina Timotheo



Gallan Emmanuel



Omar Dawa Juma



Husna Khamis Hamad



Justin Maile



Neema Walter



Winnfrida Hope Mgeleka

COMMUNITY MEMBERS

Testimonials From The Frontlines

The power of collective action was illuminated through the formation of small community groups, empowering individuals to effect change collaboratively. This sentiment was echoed by community members who witnessed the efficacy of small group initiatives firsthand.

“The engagement with the community went well because we had government leaders during the presentation. That helped to build trust in the community.”

- PAR Working Group member from Tanzania

“As a member of the community, one of my responsibilities is to know more about climate change and find solutions to better my community. This program has helped me do this.”

- Community Member, Lebanon

“I can not afford to miss these workshops because of the value they will bring to future generations.”

- PAR Working Group member from Tanzania