

LIFELONG ENVIRONMENTAL AGENCY

**HEALTHY LIVES AND A HEALTHY
PLANET ARE PART OF THE SAME STORY**



**A Junction of two Ashoka purposes:
People & Planet
New Longevity**

2026

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This paper was developed through a collaboration of Ashoka Fellows, Young Changemakers, practitioners, and researchers exploring how environmental agency can be strengthened across all stages of life.

Ashoka is a global network of +4,000 social entrepreneurs across 99 countries working to change systems and build more inclusive and resilient societies. Fellows and Young Changemakers are developing practical innovations that strengthen relationships between people, communities, and the living world.

This paper introduces the concept of Lifelong Environmental Agency – the capacity of people and communities to participate in shaping possible ecological futures throughout their lives. It presents a practical framework to help policymakers, social entrepreneurs, institutions, and funders design intergenerational pro-nature initiatives.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

We are living longer lives on a less stable planet. The conditions for healthy lives and the conditions for a healthy planet are part of the same story.

Climate disruption, biodiversity loss, and environmental inequality are shaping how people live, work, care for one another, and relate to the living world across entire lifetimes. Yet opportunities for environmental stewardship remain fragmented: concentrated in life moments rather than sustained across the full life course.

LIFELONG ENVIRONMENTAL AGENCY (LEA) responds to this challenge. Rather than treating environmental action as a matter of individual awareness or behavior, LEA focuses on the systems that make participation possible. **Agency is fundamentally relational; it emerges through relationships between people and ecosystems, across generations, and within the institutions that structure everyday life.**

It is also embodied: health status, physical capacity, and age shape what participation looks like, who can sustain it, and how we experience the effects of climate change. And it is unevenly distributed: age, territory, gender, race, and economic circumstances shape who can engage, how, and whose contributions are recognized.

Enabling conditions are key. Structural factors, such as secure housing, stable income, access to healthcare, green infrastructure, and reliable public services, determine whether participation is even conceivable. But structures alone are not enough. Trust, belonging, community connection, and the feeling that one's voice matters are equally necessary: the social infrastructure through which environmental agency becomes real and sustained.

Agency is activated through experience. **Not everyone operates within the same range of choices.**

What is possible, affordable, culturally appropriate, or safe varies profoundly across communities and life stages. Where enabling conditions are in place, agency comes to life through access to the living world, through reflection, and through practices of care that feel meaningful. **Access opens the door to reflection; reflection deepens participation; participation strengthens identity and the sense of contribution that sustains agency over time.**

This paper introduces a framework built around four dimensions of environmental participation (life stages, places, forms of agency, and enabling conditions) and three strategic pathways: creating nature entry points, sustaining participation through trusted institutions, and connecting local practice with systemic change.

The framework is grounded in evidence from Ashoka's global network of social entrepreneurs, trailblazers who are already activating

these pathways across multiple continents by engaging children as ecosystem guardians, anchoring environmental action in health systems and faith communities, and translating territorial stewardship into national policy.

Environmental participation is relational, cumulative, and unevenly enabled. So, it must be intentionally designed to grow, circulate, and endure across generations.

This paper is addressed to policymakers, practitioners, funders, and institutions ready to build the systems that make lifelong environmental agency possible.

LIFELONG ENVIRONMENTAL AGENCY KEY LEARNINGS

I. ENVIRONMENTAL AGENCY IS RELATIONAL

Agency does not reside in individuals alone. It emerges through relationships between people and ecosystems, across generations, and within the institutions that structure everyday life.

Designing for environmental participation means designing for connection: between people, between life stages, between local action and broader systems.



II. ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE IS THE STARTING POINT

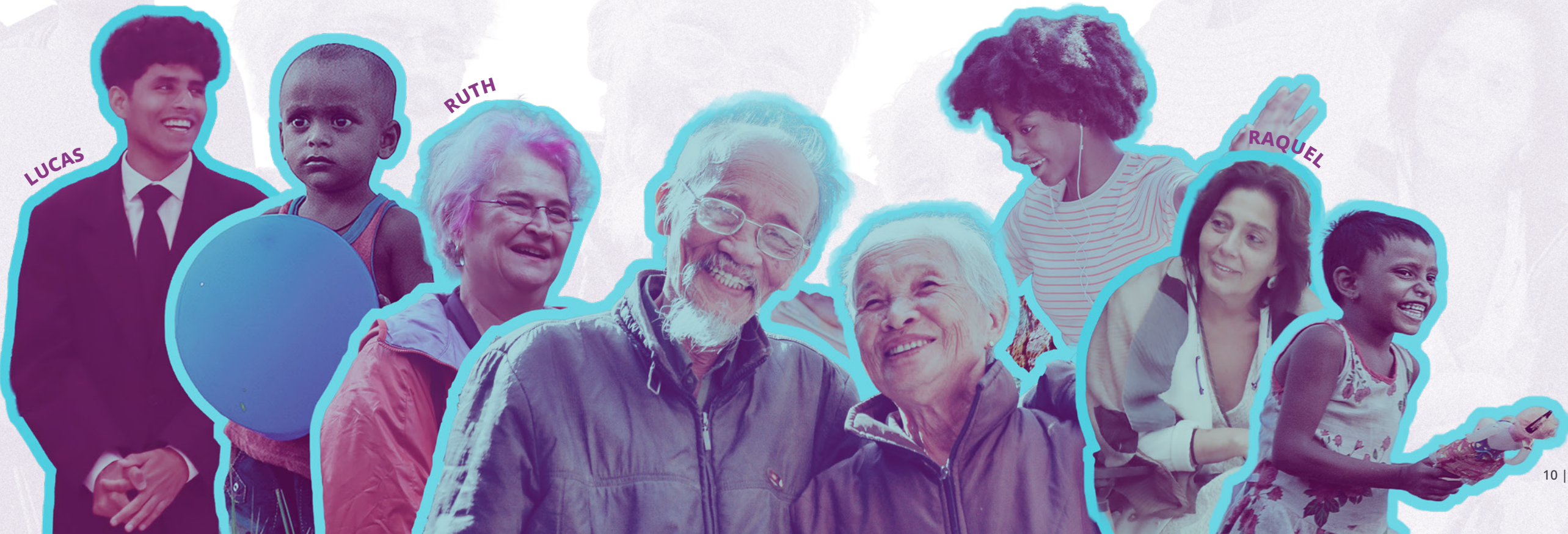
Environmental agency is not equally available. Access to safe environments, green spaces, political voice, institutional support, and time varies profoundly across race, gender, territory, and economic conditions.

Designing for lifelong environmental agency means first acknowledging these inequalities and actively working to remove the structural barriers that prevent participation.

III. DIFFERENT BODIES EXPERIENCE CLIMATE CHANGE AND CLIMATE ACTION DIFFERENTLY

Health status, physical capacity, age, and embodied relationships with the living world shape what environmental participation looks like and who can sustain it.

Effective initiatives recognise the diversity of human bodies and the different ways people encounter, sense, and respond to ecological change.



IV. AGENCY DEVELOPS ACROSS THE LIFE COURSE,
AND EVERY STAGE MATTERS

.....

Childhood, adulthood, and later life each present distinct opportunities and constraints. Early encounters with nature can cultivate lasting ecological belonging. Adulthood brings structural pressures that must be addressed, not assumed away. Later life holds place-based

knowledge and intergenerational care that environmental systems rarely mobilise. Knowing the possibilities and challenges of each stage is essential to designing for a lifelong contribution.

V. ENABLING CONDITIONS DETERMINE WHETHER
PARTICIPATION IS POSSIBLE

.....

Policies, institutions, infrastructure, and collective spaces shape who can act and how. A focus on individual awareness or behaviour alone is not enough.

Strengthening environmental agency requires building the systems across education, health, urban planning, and community life that make participation meaningful and sustained.



1

WHY LIFELONG ENVIRONMENTAL AGENCY MATTERS NOW A RESPONSE TO A RELATIONAL CRISIS

The 21st century is defined by two profound shifts: societies are ageing², and environmental crises are intensifying³. Climate disruption, biodiversity loss, and environmental degradation will shape entire life trajectories, influencing how people live, work, and care for one another⁴.

At the heart of this challenge is a simple but often overlooked insight: **environmental action is relational and unevenly enabled**. It emerges through relationships — between people and ecosystems, across generations, and within institutions. And it is uneven because social, economic, and political conditions shape who can act, how participation occurs, and whose contributions are recognized⁵.

Socioenvironmental crises therefore cannot be understood only as ecological or economic

problems. They also reflect how societies organize relationships between humans, living and non-living systems, and one another⁶. **In many contexts, institutional arrangements, urban infrastructures, and economic systems actively distance people from ecological processes and from shared forms of stewardship.** Environmental agency does not disappear under these conditions, but it becomes harder to sustain, coordinate, and scale.

Inequality intensifies this dynamic. **Economic and material conditions intersect with race, territory, gender, and age to shape who bears environmental risk, who has access to safe environments and green spaces, and who can participate in environmental decision-making.** Communities exposed to environmental racism, unsafe territories, precarious labor, or inadequate public services often face structural barriers to environmental participation. Under such conditions, **nature may not be experienced as a space of belonging or regeneration, but as a source of risk, displacement, or loss.**

Opportunities to engage with the living world are also often concentrated in particular moments of life — through education in childhood, or activism within specific movements — rather than sustained across the life course for everyone. When systems fail to support environmental participation across generations, environmental action remains fragmented and temporary. When participation is enabled across life stages, it can accumulate, circulate, and endure, building a sense of shared responsibility and collective capacity to respond to environmental change.

Strengthening environmental agency therefore requires shifting attention away from individual responsibility alone and toward the systemic conditions that enable or constrain participation. This is the challenge that Lifelong Environmental Agency seeks to address by design: **how do we build the conditions for individuals, communities, institutions, and political organizations to be stewards of healthy lives on a healthy planet?**

2 A PRACTICAL FRAMEWORK FOR STRENGTHENING ENVIRONMENTAL AGENCY

If systems shape who can act, when, and with what recognition, the practical question becomes clear:

how do we design systems to enable environmental participation across different stages of life and contexts?

The following framework helps governments, social entrepreneurs, NGOs, and funders design initiatives that strengthen environmental agency over a lifetime. **Rather than focusing only on individual awareness or isolated programs, it helps practitioners consider that environmental agency emerges**

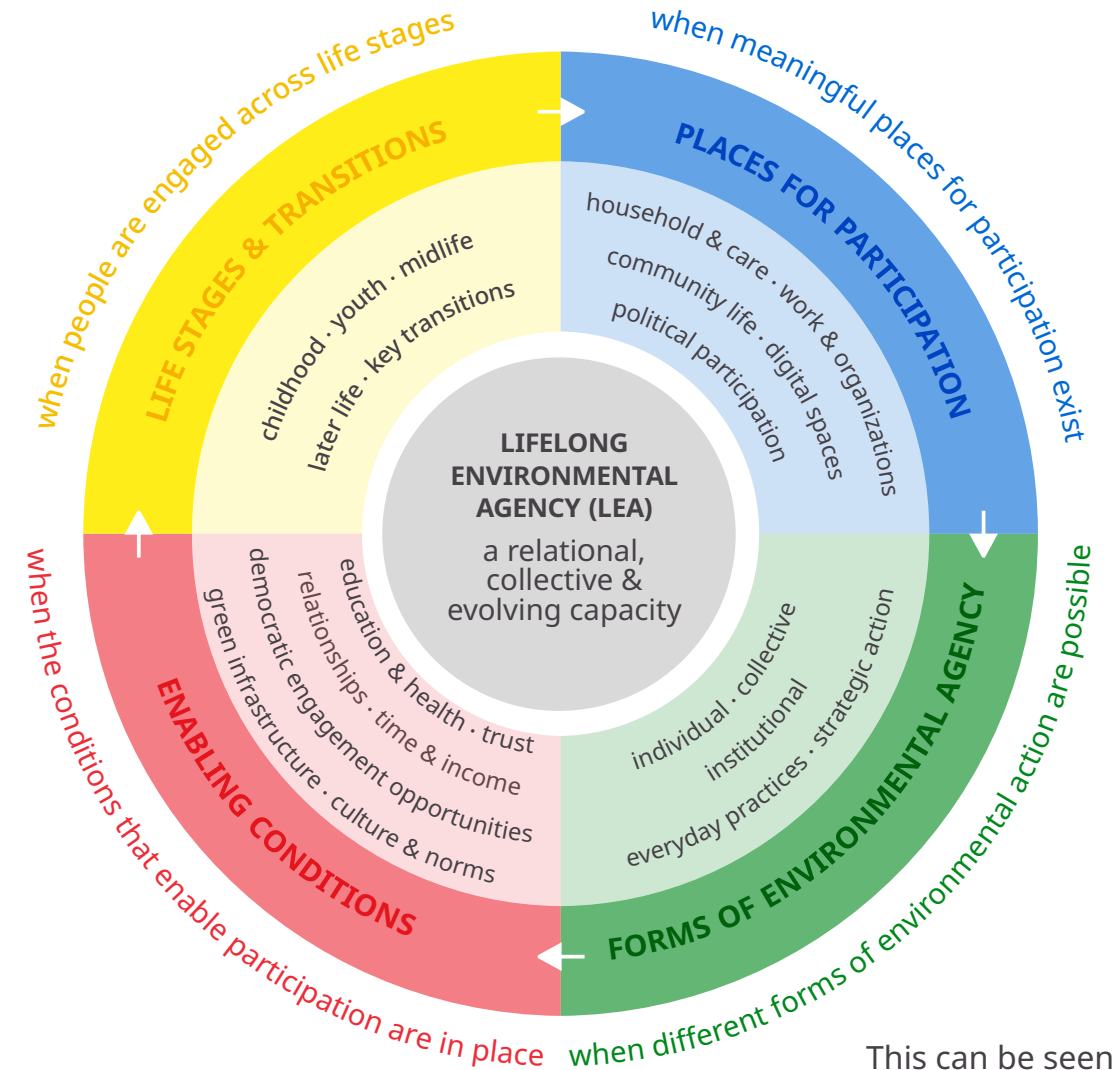
in the intersection of different life stages, places of participation, forms of action, and enabling conditions.

By connecting people, institutions, and political will, it's possible to support agency across diverse contexts and life stages.

2.1

THE FRAMEWORK FOR LIFELONG ENVIRONMENTAL AGENCY

Environmental participation emerges and evolves typically where these dimensions reinforce each other:



This can be seen as a taxonomy to build multi-level systems that support environmental agency.

2.2

THE FOUR DIMENSIONS OF LIFELONG ENVIRONMENTAL AGENCY

A DEEP DIVE

LIFE STAGES & TRANSITIONS

Environmental agency unfolds across time⁸. Childhood, youth, adulthood, and later life each present distinct opportunities and constraints shaped by social roles, institutional expectations, health, and access to supportive environments — as do key life transitions such as entering the workforce, becoming a parent, or retiring.



Across these stages, institutions can either cultivate ecological belonging and participation, or gradually distance people from the living systems that sustain them. When institutions fail to connect agency across life stages, environmental action tends to remain episodic⁹.

When they succeed, environmental agency can accumulate and circulate across generations, strengthening collective capacities for stewardship.

Find below a quick map of possibilities to tap into each life stage potential and avoid its barriers. The mapped transitions are also open pathways to foster environmental agency¹⁰.

CHILDHOOD



Aminul Islam Bulbul

In **CHILDHOOD**, encounters with nature are often mediated by schooling, urban infrastructure, and opportunities for outdoor learning. **Early experiences can cultivate curiosity, care, and relational sensibilities toward the living world.** Yet the same systems can weaken these dispositions by limiting contact with ecological processes.

OPPORTUNITIES

nurturing curiosity, developing empathy for nature, hands-on learning (gardening, clean-ups).

CONSTRAINTS

dependence on adults, limited understanding of systemic issues.

NATURE ACCESS MEDIATION

school, household, extracurricular activities and urban infrastructure.

POWERFUL TRANSITIONS

first moments transitioning from private family life to a social life in schools, parks, etc.

In **YOUTH**, environmental agency often expands as individuals gain greater autonomy, mobility, and exposure to new ideas, networks, and forms of participation. **Frequently, young people have a heightened engagement in civic life, including environmental activism,**

education, and collective initiatives.

At the same time, access to quality education, safe environments, and pathways into meaningful participation varies widely, and transitions into work and adult responsibilities can either sustain or disrupt emerging forms of ecological engagement.

OPPORTUNITIES

activism, career choices in sustainability, innovative solutions, conscious consumerism.

CONSTRAINTS

financial pressures, career establishment, feeling powerless, eco-anxiety, peer pressure, social media influence.

NATURE ACCESS MEDIATION

school/university, household, urban infrastructure or lack thereof.

POWERFUL TRANSITIONS

getting out of learning environments to join the work force; first experiences with decision making and leading projects.

YOUTH



ADULTHOOD



In **ADULTHOOD**, environmental concern frequently coexists with structural constraints. Economic pressure, fragmented routines, and institutional silos reduce opportunities for sustained ecological engagement. **Responsibility for environmental action is often individualized, isolating concern from collective pathways for participation.**

OPPORTUNITIES

community leadership, policy influence, financial resources for investment, mentoring younger generations.

CONSTRAINTS

family responsibilities, established routines, potential resistance to change, cost of living pressures, lack of time and/or financial resources.

NATURE ACCESS MEDIATION

work place, household, urban infrastructure or lack thereof, social structures: hospitals, shops, supermarkets, etc.

POWERFUL TRANSITIONS

taking on decision-making roles in the work place; responsibility in caring roles.

LATER IN LIFE, older adults often hold long-term memory, place-based knowledge, and caregiving capacities that are essential for sustaining relational worlds. However, dominant narratives of ageing frequently frame later life as dependency rather than contribution — limiting opportunities for leadership and intergenerational exchange¹¹.

OPPORTUNITIES

wisdom sharing, experienced advocacy, legacy building, volunteerism, time for engagement.

CONSTRAINTS

physical limitations, adapting to new technologies, potential generational disconnect.

NATURE ACCESS MEDIATION

urban infrastructure or lack thereof, social structures: hospitals, shops.

POWERFUL TRANSITIONS

retirement.



Cheng Shi Song

Effective initiatives therefore consider how participation can be supported across life stages and how intergenerational connections can be strengthened.

Some conditions (such as urban infrastructure and households) are shared across generations and offer natural anchors for cross-generational design.

PLACES FOR PARTICIPATION

Environmental participation takes place in the environments where people live, work, learn, and make decisions. **These are powerful entry points for nature connection:** households, schools, workplaces, community organizations, care-giving institutions (hospitals, nurseries, elderly homes, etc.), faith institutions, digital environments, and civic or political spaces. These spaces can incorporate green infrastructure design to invite humans to connect with nature.

Initiatives can expand participation by creating or transforming these spaces so that environmental action becomes part of everyday life and institutional practice – either by promoting activities or simply by inviting people to spend time in and with nature.





FORMS OF ENVIRONMENTAL AGENCY

People engage with environmental challenges in different ways.

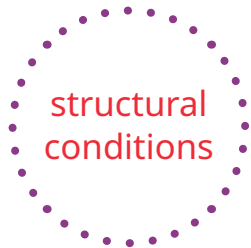
Some initiatives strengthen everyday ecological practices, such as food choices, energy use, or care for local ecosystems. **Others enable collective action within communities**, such as stewardship initiatives or cooperative governance. **Others support institutional or policy influence.**

Clarifying which forms of agency are being strengthened helps guide the design and ambition of initiatives.

Mizuno Kozuki | Centre For Ageing Better | Nasirun Khan

ENABLING CONDITIONS

Environmental participation depends on the conditions that make action possible.



Shape whether participation is even conceivable: secure housing, stable income, access to healthcare, green infrastructure, and reliable public services are not background details; they are the foundation on which agency is built. **Without these, the capacity to engage with the living world remains out of reach for many, regardless of motivation or awareness.** But structures alone are not enough.



Participation is also shaped by the quality of our relationships and inner lives. Trust in institutions, in neighbors, in the possibility of change, is itself an enabling condition. So is a sense of belonging, community connection, and the feeling that one's voice and presence matter. **These are not soft add-ons; they are the social infrastructure through which environmental agencies become real and sustained.**

CONDITIONS FOR DECISION-MAKING

Not everyone experiences the same range of choices. What is possible, culturally appropriate, perceived as important, permitted, affordable, or safe varies profoundly across communities, life stages, and social contexts, shaping not only what people decide, but what they are even able to imagine as a choice.

Ashoka's **COMPLETE framework** provides a useful way to map the architecture of decision-making:

COMPLETE FRAMEWORK

CULTURAL NARRATIVES	influence whether environmental care is valued or marginalized
ORGANIZATIONAL ARRANGEMENTS	determine who participates, how decisions are made, and which forms of contribution are recognized
MEASUREMENTS	determine what's relevant
POLITICAL, LEGAL, AND ECONOMIC SYSTEMS	distribute time, resources, legitimacy, safety, and determine if people experience participation as a choice (or not).
TECHNOLOGIES	shape access, coordination, and visibility
ENVIRONMENTAL CONDITIONS	determine whether participation can be exercised safely in everyday life both internally (e.g.: mental health) and externally (e.g.: nature, demographics, social relations)

Together, these domains define the context in which environmental agency becomes possible, constrained, or unevenly distributed — shifting attention from individual behavior toward institutional design.

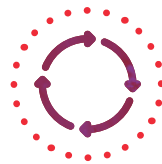
EXPERIENTIAL ACTIVATION

Structural conditions and the architecture of decision-making set the stage, but they do not, by themselves, bring environmental agency to life. **Experiential conditions are how people actually activate and sustain agency: through access, through insight, through practices of care that feel meaningful in their own lives and communities.**

The **Healthy Ageing & Planetary Wellbeing framework**, developed by Ashoka Fellow Mark Swift, identifies three mutually reinforcing processes through which this activation occurs:



access to supportive environments



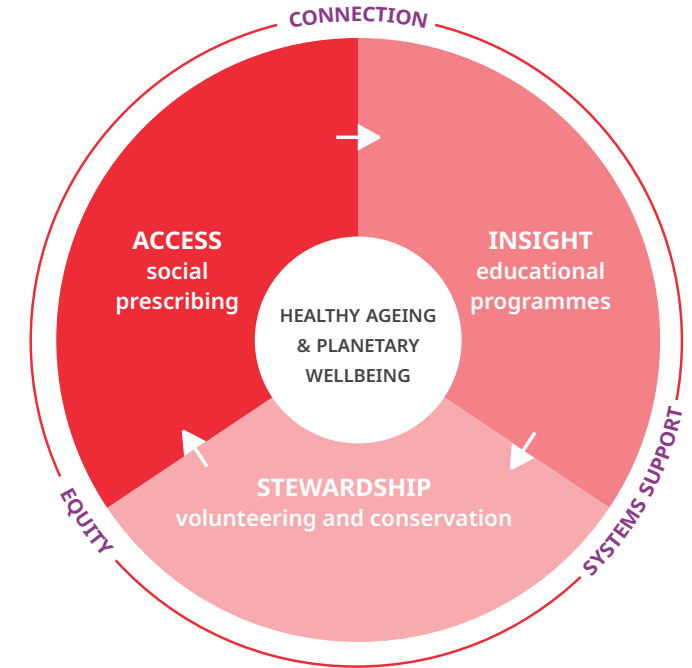
development of ecological insight and relational awareness



participation in practices of care and stewardship

HEALTHY AGEING & PLANETARY WELLBEING FRAMEWORK

Access opens the door to reflection. Reflection deepens participation. Participation, in turn, strengthens identity and the sense of contribution that sustains agency over time.



Durable lifelong environmental agency emerges when structural conditions and lived experience reinforce one another, and when participation can be experienced as a choice.

Institutional reform without lived activation remains abstract.

Individual engagement without structural support remains fragile and uneven.

Systems that make participation possible must be met by meaningful opportunities to act, connect, and belong. This is why structural and experiential conditions should be designed together, not in isolation.

3 USING THE FRAMEWORK TO DESIGN INITIATIVES

The framework can be used as a practical tool for designing new initiatives or reviewing existing ones. Practitioners can work with the framework in two complementary ways:

by reflecting on the **four dimensions that shape environmental participation**

by identifying the **pathways through which an initiative seeks to expand environmental agency**

Together, these perspectives help teams move from isolated activities toward more intentional system design.

3.1

GUIDING QUESTIONS

LIFE STAGES

- Who is involved across the life course?
.....
- Which generations are currently engaged, and which are missing?
.....
- Are we tapping and strengthening their potential or creating and strengthening their barriers?

PLACES FOR PARTICIPATION

- In this project/initiative/policy, where does environmental participation take place?
.....
- Are schools, households, workplaces, or community spaces creating opportunities to access and engage with nature?
.....
- Is this changing structural or experiential conditions?

FORMS OF AGENCY

- What kinds of environmental action are being supported?
.....
- Does the initiative strengthen everyday practices, collective action, or institutional change?
.....
- Is there any incentive for individual action?

ENABLING CONDITIONS

- What are the conditions in place to make participation possible?
.....
- Are there barriers related to time, resources, knowledge, access to green spaces, or institutional support that we need to overcome here?
.....
- What structural and experiential changes would unlock broader participation?

4

PATHWAYS FOR STRENGTHENING ENVIRONMENTAL AGENCY

Initiatives often follow different strategic pathways for strengthening environmental agency. These pathways are not fixed stages or a required sequence. An initiative may focus on one, combine several, or evolve between them over time.

PATHWAY 1: NATURE ENTRY POINTS

ACTIVATING CARE, BELONGING, AND ECOLOGICAL CONFIDENCE

Some initiatives focus on creating **meaningful encounters between people and the living world by prioritizing access, curiosity, and ecological belonging**. They may take the form of environmental education, outdoor learning, community restoration activities, or cultural practices connected to land and ecosystems.

Such initiatives are particularly important in contexts where opportunities to experience nature have become limited or unevenly distributed.

learning from ashoka fellow

JESSICA SHEFFIELD ZAMORA (COSTA RICA) founded **GUARDIANES DE LA NATURALEZA** to bring education close to nature. Through an online platform offering cross-curricular, ready-to-use educational resources and Mi Reto Guardián programme, the organization invites children to identify local environmental problems and design their own responses. By positioning children as guardians rather than passive learners, Guardianes cultivates the ecological confidence and sense of responsibility that make environmental participation a lifelong habit.

PATHWAY 2: SPACES THAT SUSTAIN PARTICIPATION

EMBEDDING ENVIRONMENTAL PARTICIPATION IN TRUSTED INSTITUTIONS

Other initiatives focus on creating **the social and institutional conditions where environmental participation can continue and deepen over time.** They embed ecological practices within schools, cooperatives, community organizations, faith institutions, care systems, or workplaces – **institutions that people already trust and interact with in daily life.**

These practices make environmental action part of shared routines, relationships, and institutional practices rather than isolated experiences.

learning from ashoka fellow

REV. DR. HEBER BROWN III (USA) founded the **BLACK CHURCH FOOD SECURITY NETWORK (BCFSN)** in Baltimore in 2015, mobilising Black churches as hubs for food sovereignty, land stewardship, and environmental education. Member congregations commit land, kitchens, and organised communities to building Black-led food ecosystems. Core programmes connect churches to Black farmers (Soil to Sanctuary), run youth composting and gardening initiatives (Operation Higher Ground), and coordinate agricultural resources across the network. BCFSN shows that anchoring environmental action in trusted social institutions — rather than creating new ones — is one of the most durable strategies for sustaining collective participation over time.

Zen Chung



learning from ashoka fellow

MARK SWIFT (UK) founded **WELLBEING ENTERPRISES CIC (WE)** on a simple yet radical insight: health, environment, and social connection are not separate domains, but deeply interconnected.

At the heart of WE's approach is the embedding of Wellbeing Link Workers within NHS healthcare settings. Rather than brief, transactional consultations, patients are offered the time and space to explore their needs, strengths, and priorities. Together, they co-produce personalized wellbeing plans that might include nature walks, community gardening, or access to local green spaces—an approach widely recognized as social prescribing¹².

The results are compelling. Participants experience meaningful reductions in depression symptoms, alongside significant improvements in overall wellbeing, generating social value of up to £23.58 for every £1 invested¹³.

What Wellbeing Enterprises demonstrates is both practical and profound: environmental participation is not simply a matter of access or awareness—it flourishes when rooted in relationships of care, trust, and human connection.



Samlin



Paulo Gustavo Modesto

learning from ashoka fellow

RAQUEL BARROS (BRAZIL), through **LUA NOVA**, works with women in vulnerable and socially marginalised conditions, rebuilding trust, voice, and dignity as foundations for broader civic participation. The initiative recognises that environmental vulnerability and social exclusion are structurally linked: the same conditions which expose communities to climate risk also shut them out of decision-making. By strengthening relational capacity and creating pathways to participation, Lua Nova builds the social infrastructure through which environmental agency can take root.

PATHWAY 3: FROM PRACTICE TO POLICY

CONNECTING LOCAL ACTION TO SYSTEMIC CHANGE

A third pathway connects lived environmental practice with institutional change, **translating community experience and local environmental action into governance reforms, policy innovation, market systems, and broader systems change.** This may involve advocacy, coalition building, policy experimentation, or scaling successful models.

Through these pathways, environmental participation can influence how decisions are made within institutions and societies.

learning from ashoka fellow

YURI SALMONA (BRAZIL) founded the **CERRADOS INSTITUTE** to reverse a trajectory of destruction in the world's most biodiverse savannah: a biome that feeds eight of Brazil's twelve river basins and has lost over 50% of its native vegetation. The strategy is explicitly systemic: it has created over 30 Private Natural Heritage Reserves, developed Suindara (a patented early-warning system to monitor and respond to fire in Cerrado), and co-mapped over 200 traditional communities, identifying conflict zones including illegal land-grabbing. A Technical Cooperation Agreement with Brazil's Ministry of the Environment shows how territorial stewardship backed by scientific rigour can translate into policy.



learning from ashoka fellow

HARON WACHIRA (KENYA), founded **AKILI HOLDINGS**, to connect smallholder farmers to value chains through co-ownership of processing companies. Over time, the model has expanded into a full climate platform: delivering energy-efficient cookstoves to rural women; building community beekeeping enterprises; and agroforestry and afforestation programmes connected to carbon credit value chains. Wachira's work demonstrates that environmental agency and economic self-determination are not separate agendas, and that designing market systems which reward ecological stewardship is one of the most powerful ways to connect local land practice to international climate finance.

Across these examples, a shared pattern emerges:

Environmental agency grows when people encounter meaningful opportunities to participate and reconnect with the living world, and when institutions sustain collective action so that local practices can shape broader systems.

DETAILED CASE STUDY: APPLYING THE FRAMEWORK IN A COMMUNITY SCHOOL

FROM CLASSROOM TO COMMUNITY: GUARDIANES DE LA NATURALEZA IN COSTA RICA

Jessica Sheffield Zamora – Ashoka Fellow, Costa Rica (elected 2022) – founded Guardianes de la Naturaleza to transform schools into living laboratories of environmental stewardship. Her initiative offers a concrete illustration of how the Lifelong Environmental Agency framework can unfold in a community school setting.

LIFE STAGES



Rather than targeting children alone, Guardianes de la Naturaleza positions the school as a hub for intergenerational environmental participation. Students from preschool through secondary school are engaged as active "guardians" of their ecosystems through the Mi Reto Guardián programme. Teachers are trained and recognised as key agents of change. Families are drawn in through community clean-ups and home-based ecological practices. And older community members contribute place-based knowledge. The initiative deliberately connects multiple generations within and beyond the school gates.

PLACES FOR PARTICIPATION



Environmental activities extend far beyond the classroom. Guardianes de la Naturaleza has transformed school gardens, community plazas, and river corridors into spaces of ecological learning. In Nosara, for example, students from seven schools joined clean-ups along the Nosara River, removing 17 bags of waste from plaza and riverbank areas. Field trips (ecogiras) bring more than 150 fifth-graders annually to local recycling centres and community meetings. The school itself — its grounds, its garden, its canteen — becomes a place to practice composting, biodiversity observation, and energy conservation every day.

FORMS OF AGENCY



The initiative begins with everyday ecological practices: gardening, composting, recycling, and biodiversity monitoring through tools like the School Biodiversity Index (documented on the iNaturalist platform). Over time, it expands toward collective stewardship — student-led clean-ups, teacher award competitions, and community mobilisation. The Mi Reto Guardián programme frames students as problem-solvers who identify environmental challenges in their school or neighbourhood and design concrete responses, from river restoration to reforestation. More than 200 children have completed guardian challenges to date.

ENABLING CONDITIONS



The initiative works to actively create the structural conditions that make participation possible, rather than assuming they exist. A free, Ministry of Education-approved digital platform provides 120+ bilingual resources that teachers can embed across core subjects — maths, science, languages, music — without needing additional curriculum time. Teacher training programmes and a dedicated educator support line (piloted in Guanacaste in partnership with Programa Bandera Azul Ecológica) address the persistent gap between environmental concern and pedagogical confidence. Partnerships with local municipalities, hotels, and NGOs provide funding, infrastructure, and role models for marginalised schools.

Across time, the initiative activates all three strategic pathways. The Mi Reto Guardián challenges and hands-on ecogiras create nature entry points — meaningful first encounters with the living world, especially for children in rural or under-resourced schools. Embedding ecological practices within school routines, teacher training programmes, and community clean-ups sustains participation across the year and across generations. And as the model deepens, it travels from local practice toward systemic influence: a formal cooperation agreement with Costa Rica's Ministry of Education enabled a joint

pilot in multiple regional directorates, and the model is now expanding to schools in Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador through the Mancomunidad Trinacional Fronteriza Río Lempa.

Through this progression, Guardianes de la Naturaleza moves from isolated environmental activities to a coordinated approach that connects life stages, participation settings, forms of agency, and enabling conditions — turning schools into regenerative spaces where environmental agency can be built, practised, and passed on.

5 BUILDING THE FIELD: WHAT COMES NEXT

Environmental crises will unfold across decades and generations. What this paper shows is that responding to them is **not primarily a question of awareness, it is a question of design.**

Three insights should guide what comes next:

START WITH JUSTICE, NOT INDIVIDUAL BEHAVIOUR.

Environmental agency is unevenly distributed, shaped by race, territory, gender, age, and economic conditions that determine who can participate, in what form, and whose contributions are recognised. **Different bodies encounter both ecological risk and environmental action in fundamentally different ways. Any agenda for lifelong environmental agency must begin by confronting these inequalities, not assuming them away.** Initiatives that ignore structural barriers will reach only those already able to participate.

DESIGN FOR THE FULL LIFE COURSE AND THE TRANSITIONS WITHIN IT.

No single stage of life is sufficient. Early encounters with nature cultivate ecological belonging that can last a lifetime but only if adulthood does not sever that connection through structural isolation. Older adults carry place-based knowledge and intergenerational memory that most systems fail to mobilise. **The most durable environmental initiatives, as seen across Ashoka's network, are those that connect generations rather than serving one cohort in isolation.** The transitions between stages (entering the workforce, becoming a caregiver, retiring) are moments of particular leverage.

**ALIGN STRUCTURAL CONDITIONS
WITH LIVED EXPERIENCE.**

Institutions and policies set the conditions for participation but conditions alone do not produce agency. **What the evidence from Ashoka Fellows shows is that participation becomes meaningful and sustained when structural support meets lived experience: access to nature and community, opportunities to reflect and connect, practices of care that feel relevant and real.** Reform without activation remains abstract. Engagement without structural backing remains fragile. The field must build both, together.

*Different people have different roles.
How to translate these insights into action?*

POLICYMAKERS	integrate environmental participation into the systems people already move through education, health, urban planning, and care. Prioritize intergenerational design and remove barriers that exclude specific bodies, territories, and life stages.
FUNDERS	invest in the infrastructures of continuity: community spaces, long-term partnerships, and learning networks that help initiatives adapt across changing conditions.
PRACTITIONERS AND DESIGNERS	make your design choices explicit. Which life stages are you reaching? Which bodies are you designing for? Which conditions are you building and which are you assuming already exist? The framework offered here is a tool for that reflection.

**THE TASK IS TO BUILD A SHARED FIELD OF PRACTICE,
WHERE LIFELONG ENVIRONMENTAL AGENCY EVOLVES
FROM AN ASPIRATION INTO SOMETHING DELIBERATELY
DESIGNED, RESOURCED, AND IMPLEMENTED.**

ENDNOTES

¹ Indigenous knowledge systems have long articulated relational understandings of health, territory, and wellbeing that do not separate humans from land, ancestors, or more-than-human beings. In many Indigenous worldviews, care, reciprocity, and responsibility toward ecosystems are not individual choices but collective obligations embedded in social organization, cosmology, and daily practice. These relational models challenge dominant Western paradigms based on separation, extraction, and control, offering alternative ways of understanding environmental agency

as intergenerational, place-based, and beyond humans. While Indigenous peoples and knowledge systems are diverse and cannot be treated as homogeneous, their absence from this Junction highlights an important epistemic gap and reinforces the need to engage Indigenous perspectives as central to future work on Lifelong Environmental Agency (Krenak, 2019; Muradian et al., 2018; Pascual et al., 2023).

² From 1900 to 2021, life expectancy around the world more than doubled. This increase is a result of a large mortality reduction across all life stages. However, even though

the global average has increased, life expectancy varies across geographies and sex (Dattani et.al. 2023).

³ In 2025, out of the nine planetary boundaries assessed by the Planetary Health Check report developed by the Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research, seven have been crossed. All of the seven depict signs of increased pressure, suggesting that further degradation and destabilization of planetary health can happen in the near future. Crossing these boundaries increases the risk of sudden, irreversible and large-scale environmental changes putting at risk the humans and

non-humans living conditions (PBScience, 2025; Stockholm Resilience Centre, s.d.).

⁴ The WHO's Healthy Ageing framework establishes a direct relationship between people's intrinsic capacities and their environments (the physical, social, economic, and digital contexts in which people live). The framework shows that the interaction between capacities and environments shapes people's functional abilities—including their ability to meet basic needs, learn, grow and make decisions, remain mobile, build and maintain relationships, contribute to society,

and live with purpose. (World Health Organization, 2015).

⁵ A growing body of research demonstrates that environmental agency is unevenly enabled by social, historical, and institutional conditions. Studies in sustainability science and political ecology show that dominant human–nature relations based on separation, control, and extraction systematically shape who can act, how action is recognized, and with what consequences (Pascual et al., 2023; Muradian et al., 2018; West et al., 2023). From a Global South perspective, these dynamics are inseparable from

colonial histories, uneven development, racialized geographies, and structural inequalities that shape access to land, green infrastructure, political voice, and environmental safety. Research on environmental justice and urban political ecology documents how marginalized communities — particularly in Latin America, Africa, and other postcolonial contexts — are disproportionately exposed to environmental risk while having fewer opportunities to participate in environmental decision-making (e.g. Li et al., 2025; Pesliak et al., 2025; Riechers et al., 2025). Together,

this literature highlights that expecting uniform environmental agency across profoundly unequal contexts obscures power relations and risks reproducing injustice by shifting responsibility onto individuals rather than addressing the conditions that enable or constrain collective action.

⁶ This relational framing is supported by a growing body of research showing that socioenvironmental crises are closely linked to dominant models of human–nature relations. Sustainability science and environmental governance research highlight how extractive

and instrumental relationships with nature undermine both ecological integrity and social wellbeing, while relational approaches foreground care, reciprocity, and interdependence (Muradian et al., 2018; Pascual et al., 2023; West et al., 2023).

⁷ Since the mid-20th century, understandings of health have progressively expanded beyond the biomedical model. The World Health Organization's definition of health as encompassing physical, mental, and social wellbeing marked a critical shift, later reinforced by research on the social determinants

of health, which demonstrates how living conditions, social relations, and place shape health outcomes across the life course (WHO, 1946; Marmot et al., 2008). More recently, scholarship on planetary and relational health has emphasized the inseparability of human wellbeing from ecological systems and living systems relationships, framing health as a relational and ecological phenomenon rather than a purely individual or medical outcome (Whitmee et al., 2015; West et al., 2023; Ressorio, 2024).

⁸ A life-course perspective shows that agency is not static, but develops through distinct stages shaped by biological, social and institutional conditions (Elder et al., 2003). Research

across developmental psychology, environmental education and social gerontology demonstrates that early-life experiences play a foundational role in shaping relational orientations toward the living world (Chawla, 2007; Giusti et al., 2018), that adulthood is often constrained by work structures and institutional demands rather than lack of concern (Stern, 2000; Shove, 2010), and that later life offers critical assets for stewardship, intergenerational learning and collective care when ageist barriers are removed (Rowe & Kahn, 1997; Kaplan et al., 2017).

⁹ The Geographies of ageing approach understands ageing as a spatial, relational, and situated process, produced through the ongoing interaction

between generations, places, environments, social relationships, and scales (from the body to the global). Ageing is not merely biological or chronological, but co-constituted by spaces, practices, mobilities, care, policies, and representations across the life course (Skinner, Cloutier, Andrews, 2015).

¹⁰ By no means does this table exhaust the possibilities and constraints of each life-stage, but it helps visualize and organize the elements for design. Feel free to expand it as you wish or as context demands.

¹¹ Dominant narratives of ageing are shown to be socially produced through cultural images, media representations, and institutional discourses that repeatedly associate

later life with frailty, dependence, and loss of productivity. Such representations do not merely describe ageing but actively shape social expectations, public policy, and older people's self-understandings, often marginalizing their voices and constraining the recognition of agency, creativity, and leadership in later life. Even seemingly positive ideals—such as “successful” or “active” ageing—can function normatively, privileging certain bodies and trajectories while obscuring structural inequalities and diverse ways of ageing. As a result, cultural representations play a powerful role in reinforcing ageism and limiting the social imagination of how multiple generations can live together and

contribute to society. (Featherstone & Wernick, 1995)

¹² Social Prescribing refers to a structured approach within health and care systems in which professionals identify non-medical, health-related social needs and connect individuals to community-based activities, services, and support. Typically mediated by link workers or equivalent roles, it involves co-producing a personalized plan that may include participation in nature-based activities, social groups, volunteering, or other forms of community engagement. Social prescribing is grounded in the recognition that health and wellbeing are shaped by social, economic, and environmental

determinants, and seeks to address these through non-clinical interventions (NHS England, 2019; Moore et al. 2022).

¹³ Social Return on Investment (SROI) analysis of the WE Connect service, commissioned by Wellbeing Enterprises CIC and independently verified by an accredited SROI practitioner (Timpson, 2025). For detailed figures, see the full report at wellbeingenterprises.org.uk.

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