

Isaac Bell 0:08

Hello and welcome to the third episode of Establish a podcast presented by Shake up the Establishment. Shake Up the Establishment is a nonpartisan, youth-led registered organization that operates within the confines of what is currently known as Canada. Through this podcast, we hope to make climate and social justice conversations accessible to everyone. My name is Isaac and I'm speaking to you from the traditional territory of the Cowichan people, part of Hul'qumi'num Treaty Group. Today we'll be talking about green jobs for youth specifically in the context of a just recovery from COVID-19. There's a lot to cover. So without further ado, let's jump into it. Thanks so much for joining us. Today we're speaking with Sabrina Guzman Skotnitsky. Thanks a lot for being here.

Sabrina Guzman Skotnitsky 0:50

Yeah, thank you. I'm very excited to be able to talk with you folks today.

Isaac Bell 0:55

Perfect. So maybe just to get started - could you tell us a little bit about yourself, some of your background and your interests, and what brought you to this podcast?

Sabrina Guzman Skotnitsky 1:02

Yeah, for sure. So yeah, my name is Sabrina. I am a 23 year old climate justice and youth empowerment advocate. I live in Vancouver on the unceded Coast Salish Territory of the Musqueam, Squamish and Tsleil-Waututh peoples. And I have just been wrapping up my research fellowship with the Canadian Council for Youth Prosperity. I'm here to chat about my green job research that I've been doing for them.

Isaac Bell 1:25

Fantastic. Could you touch on what exactly the Canadian Council for Youth Prosperity is?

Sabrina Guzman Skotnitsky 1:30

Yeah, for sure. So CCYP for short, is a national nonprofit focused on youth workforce development, which is kind of like a fancy way of talking about all the kind of like the support and the trainings that can help youth to like develop employable skills, find work and kind of decide on what they want to do for their careers. So they do a lot of different programming, but all across Canada, and this is the first year of their fellowship program. They really wanted to have youth do research on youth issues. And I was selected because I have like experience in the environmental movement. And I just feel very passionate about helping people get into green jobs. Yeah, I was hired on in November, and I've been researching ever since.

Isaac Bell 2:12

Oh, that's great. So what was your specific niche that you decided to research?

Sabrina Guzman Skotnitsky 2:17

Yeah, so as I mentioned, I've been kind of involved in climate justice organizing for a long time, probably since I was in 10th grade in high school. And I never actually pursued any kind of science or like explicitly environmental studies in university. And I so I have like a Bachelor of Arts in international development. And it's been very interesting for me, because I've worked for like four different environmental nonprofits, and I've been in a variety of roles. But I also noticed that a lot of people were kind of surprised that I could find work without having a STEM degree. And so that kind of inspired this report, and really looking at the federally funded green job programs for youth. So these are programs that provide like wage subsidies, so employers can

hire youth, and place them in environmental positions. So sometimes that's like a position in an environmental organization. But sometimes it's a position in a different kind of organization, but you're doing environmental work. And basically I'm assessing kind of like the limitations of these programs and how they may be could be improved. And I talked to interview, I interviewed experts in the field as well as I did like a youth survey from across Canada to kind of inform this research.

Isaac Bell 3:32

Oh, that's super interesting topic. And definitely relevant as I think a lot of youth are going to be looking for more jobs coming out of this COVID crisis. Could you speak to how the COVID-19 crisis has impacted this project specifically?

Sabrina Guzman Skotnitsky 3:45

Yeah, so I mean, really, that's kind of like the place that we start, I think, for all of us fellows, in our reports, we all start with kind of establishing just how hard hit youth have been during COVID-19 in Canada. So youth had like disproportionately faced unemployment because youth are overrepresented in the most hard-hit industries. So that's like, you know, food, accommodation, tourism, arts and culture, all of those industries which kind of rely on in-person activities, obviously, were then, you know, impacted the most by having all these COVID-19 lock downs and restrictions. So youth are both, you know, faced a lot of unemployment, but the youth that are still employed, there are at most risk of COVID-19 exposure. And so it's kind of important to understand that youth are doing a lot of the essential work, you know, like food delivery, like Uber drivers, like all of these positions, but they're basically putting their bodies on the line. And I think a lot of people think, you know, nurses and doctors are the only essential workers during COVID. And it's like, no, there's so many other people, especially youth that are doing essential work right now. And another really kind of shocking figure I can share is basically at the beginning of the first wave of COVID, we had the highest NEET rate in 20 years. So the highest amount of youth that are not doing education, they're not employed and they're not getting training.

Isaac Bell 5:06

Wow.

Sabrina Guzman Skotnitsky 5:06

Yeah.

Isaac Bell 5:07

So the idea of sort of is to use COVID not as an opportunity, but looking at this need for more work, and also the need for more green jobs and sort of meshing those together. Is that along the lines of what you're thinking?

Sabrina Guzman Skotnitsky 5:21

Yeah, exactly. This is like an opportunity to do like, what many people are calling like, "build back better", or like a green and just recovery from COVID-19. So looking at both recovering employment, but also working towards our climate goals, because as we know, like the climate crisis is also something that's going to disproportionately affect youth in the future. So really, it's like, we have a lot to lose if we don't take action right now, on both of these issues.

Isaac Bell 5:50

Absolutely. So you kind of just touched on it there, but on the CCYP website, it says that you use a climate justice approach for your work. Could you just talk a little bit more about what this means and why it was so important to your work?

Sabrina Guzman Skotnitsky 6:02

Yeah, for sure. So to me, a climate justice approach or lens means looking at the intersections of environmental and social justice issues, and realizing that we cannot address one without addressing the other. So kinda for these we look internationally, you know, you can see how climate change impacts poor countries more directly, even though they haven't contributed as much to like GHG emissions or, or they haven't really contributed as much to the climate crisis directly. And then within Canada, you know, we know that communities with high populations of Black, Indigenous and People of Color are more likely to have environmental harms, such as like dump sites, you know, various environmental harms, located near where they live. And that's what a lot of people call, you know, environmental racism. And there's a lot of research around that. And so there's disparities both within Canada and internationally, and how different people are impacted by climate and environmental issues. And so for me, like any climate justice solution needs to have equity at the center, because otherwise you just perpetuate systems of oppression. And you're also very less likely to have solutions that are actually going to be impactful if you don't include the people that are most impacted.

Isaac Bell 7:15

Yeah, that was really well explained. And it's definitely a super important part of the work that everybody at She Up the Establishment tries to do. And then honing that in specifically on the topic of youth in environmental jobs - Can you speak to some of these equity issues that you have identified pertaining to youth and the environmental work that they are trying to enter?

Sabrina Guzman Skotnitsky 7:34

Yeah, for sure. So I mean, I think generally, it is quite a white sector, the environmental field. And there's quite a few like reasons for that. One of the things I talk about with Hadrian Mertins-Kirkwood, who is from the Canadian Center for Policy Alternatives, he was one of my interview participants, is about kind of this elitism that happens within the environmental field, because of the high degree of education that's required, especially if you are trying to do a job that requires STEM. So you know, there's a lot of things that impact access to education. But we know that like, you know, BIPOC youth, and especially like newcomer youth, have harder times accessing education or have higher costs associated with that. And there's also a very much a gender aspect to this, you know, like when I picture the typical environmental worker, I kind of picture like a white man in his 40s, or, you know, 50s, I don't know about you, but that's kind of what I see. And a lot of that has to do, again, is with, you know, women have been excluded from STEM fields for a long time. And women are just less likely to be encouraged to enter the green field. And with these programs, specifically that I'm assessing, for most federally funded job programs across the board, they don't allow like international students or, you know, newcomers that are just on work visas to be eligible. So that excludes a lot of folks that, you know, they call Canada home, and a lot of them are working on becoming permanent residents. But because they don't have that, or they don't have citizenship, they're not able to have these work learning experiences that could help them start their green career.

Isaac Bell 9:13

So you've sort of touched on the barriers to accessing green jobs through these federally funded programs. But what constitutes a green job? So have you looked at sort of how these programs

would define what a green job is? And would you tend to agree with these definitions? Or do you think that they might be perhaps too narrow and focus too much on STEM-related fields?

Sabrina Guzman Skotnitsky 9:33

Yeah, so that's kind of like the deeper kind of theoretical argument of my report. What's interesting is that there isn't a standard definition and I think that is kind of a core issue, but it's also an opportunity. Because the federal government doesn't have one definition, and each program and government department which funds these programs, they provide like slightly different iterations. It kind of gives room to again, like have more flexibility in what jobs can get funded under these programs. I would say that there was a very strong STEM emphasis, they're starting to move away from that, which is great to see. And kind of my emphasis is that I want programs, you know, jobs, such as the ones that I've done in the past that help, you know, environmental organizations accomplish their missions. So you know, jobs that I've done, like fundraising, membership engagement, communications, these all help them do the great work that they're doing. I might not be directly, you know, testing water quality, or, you know, mapping out lands for conservation, but I'm helping them, you know, get either the funds for that, have buy-in from the community for an environmental project, maybe get some petition signatures, these are all important jobs that also help us achieve our environmental goals. And so I think these jobs should have more of an emphasis, because also, a lot of those jobs don't require as much education and especially don't require a STEM degree, which is a huge barrier, as I've mentioned. And again, this may be too broad, but I think any job that is helping us get towards a climate just future or is helping us transition to a low carbon economy. I think that is a job that should be considered a green job.

Isaac Bell 11:18

Do you have some examples of some of those broader, sort of helper roles?

Sabrina Guzman Skotnitsky 11:22

Yeah, so you know, again, this is a lot less tangibly connected. But if you think of a lot of the jobs that are labor intensive, such as like health care, child care, education, even like janitorial work, they are inherently low carbon, because you don't have to use you know, a machine and you don't have to provide fuel and energy to that machine to do the job. But also, because they're kind of like what I consider kind of like the building bricks of society, right? Like, we can't have a society without, you know, people taking care of children, without people teaching each other. And I think, you know, it just kind of actually relates to the topic of SDGs, but when you think of sustainability, you have to include both human and environmental sustainability. And you need those kind of jobs to sustain humans.

Isaac Bell 12:11

Absolutely. And on the topic of teachers, I think that's especially important because they are shaping a lot of the concerns of future generations, and that knowledge component is going to be so important.

Sabrina Guzman Skotnitsky 12:23

Yeah, for sure. I definitely agree. And what's interesting is a lot of people who are even environmental educators, they are actually quite well rounded as far as their background, and they know a lot about both the social issues and environmental issues.

Isaac Bell 12:57

So on the topic of your final report, could you walk us through some of your main takeaways, or were there any findings that especially surprised you? Or essentially, like, what are your recommendations? What did you find?

Sabrina Guzman Skotnitsky 13:07

Yeah, so there's a few core recommendations. One of the first ones is around scale. So I would really love to see the federal government fund many more positions under these programs than they currently do. So a few months ago, the Minister of Environment and Climate Change Canada, he did announce 500 new STEM internship positions. But really, we're talking about, you know, 1000s and 1000s of youth right now who have lost their jobs due to COVID, or have had their kind of career paths offset or underemployed or not in their chosen fields, or you know, just don't even know about the career options in the green field. And so we need a lot more jobs being created. And these wage subsidy programs really help both the employer and young people, because a lot of these employers wouldn't even be able to hire youth without having part of their wages subsidized. So I think it's actually a great way to both help youth recover from COVID-19 impacts, but also a lot of these organizations, which are, you know, environmental or sustainable-aligned. Another key recommendation is around the diversity of positions. So like I mentioned, I really want to see not just STEM positions, but also positions that support environmental organizations in a variety of ways. And maybe use different skills that are maybe more like soft skills like communication and teamwork and capacity building systems thinking, these kind of jobs that don't necessarily require a STEM degree to do. And then the other kind of key recommendation is kind of around specific programs that I want to see renewed.

Isaac Bell 14:50

I've noticed that a lot of these programs, and I think the nature of your report, was federal. Are there any programs that exist at the provincial level? I'm thinking specifically, you know, for a province like Alberta where there might be a need for green jobs programs for youth who come from communities where oil and gas might be central to the economy or even social identity.

Sabrina Guzman Skotnitsky 15:10

Yeah, so there are definitely provincial programs, I decided to focus on federal programs, just because I thought a look at federal programs would be more useful for readers because I would assume readers would be looking from a lot of different places in Canada. But there are definitely provincial programs. In Alberta specifically, I think one thing that's interesting is that a lot of the green job programs are very much focused on transitioning current fossil fuel workers into low carbon work, which is very important. I'm very much in favor of a just transition. But I think often youth get neglected, just because, you know, current fossil fuel workers make up a large part of the voter base. And so they have a lot more kind of influence, or, you know, political power over where the federal government chooses to spend its money. And I think a lot of youth, especially if they're not even of voting age yet, don't really have as much of a voice. And so I can't speak, you know, I don't know specifically what programs exist in Alberta for young people. But I feel like there's less of an emphasis there, which is concerning, because I think, you know, we do need to transition current fossil fuel workers. But we also can't like neglect the youth who are just trying to enter the workforce for the first time, you know, we don't want to end up with, you know, a lost generation of youth who were hit by this COVID-19 pandemic, and never were able to kind of recover. I want to make sure that youth don't feel disillusioned or, you know, in despair about, like, what do I do with my life now? That's like one of my biggest concerns, because I know a lot of people before COVID, we were very concerned about the climate crisis, you know, like, what is my future going to look like? And now we have COVID-19. And all the economic kind of

recession talk added on to that. And of course, there's also the racial justice crisis, which has been ongoing for a long time. And so it just feels like a lot of things are coming to head at the same time. And what I want my report to do is give youth hope that there is like a possibility for a better future, but also that they could actually be part of helping that future come to happen.

Isaac Bell 17:20

So when could we find your report? This sounds amazing.

Sabrina Guzman Skotnitsky 17:23

Yeah, so all of the fellow's reports will be published on the Canadian Council for Youth Prosperity website, which I will definitely provide you the link. They are free to download, free to share. We really want as many people as possible to be able to access and read these reports. And I'll be hopefully doing some more engagements similar to this one, talking on, you know, different zoom calls, or podcasts or seminars, really just trying to make sure the word gets out there. And yeah, so all of the reports will be on our website between May 31 and June 4, for anyone to read.

Isaac Bell 17:59

Yeah, we'll definitely direct our listeners with some links. And in addition to the recommendations that you provide, what do you think are some very tangible next steps, either for people who want to do more research or for people who are looking to potentially help with this cause and pressure the government, so to speak, into following some of the recommendations to increase both the quantity and the quality of green jobs?

Sabrina Guzman Skotnitsky 18:23

For sure. So there are quite a few organizations, which I will plug that you could definitely support. A lot of campaigns happening around just recovery and also just transition work. So 350.org has been doing a lot of great work. There is a coalition of organizations that are fighting for a just recovery for all. There are a lot of organizations doing this work, and especially responding to the federal budget, because the federal budget also did not bring as many investments in green jobs as people expected. And our climate commitments also kind of left to let a little bit to be desired. So there's a lot of public pressure to kind of increase those. So I would definitely say one concrete way that youth or just any listener can participate is actually sending my report to their Member of Parliament and discussing why you think they should read it and why it's important to you and is important to your constituency, because Members of Parliament have the power to be able to like then bring up these issues, and especially when there is a lot of public pressure on them. This can really help kind of move things forward and just bring things to fruition. Another thing is really kind of putting pressure to enact a Just Transition Act. This was something we were promised in the throne speech back in September, and the federal government, we have yet to see anything brought to the table in the House of Commons or Parliament. So we really want to make sure that we do have a Just Transition Act because as I said, it's really important to focus both on new workers but also existing fossil fuel workers. And another thing is really just chatting with young people in your lives, especially if you're a parent or an educator, about what options are there to enter the green field, and actually kind of showing that there is more diversity in environmental jobs than what we kind of see. And especially if a young person cares about the environment, but maybe they're a really great artist, or they're an amazing public speaker, like using those skills to find a job that makes an environmental impact. And there's definitely a place like I always tell people, even if you're talking beyond jobs, and just in the environmental movement, there is a place for everyone to participate and contribute to climate action. Because we need so many different roles. And there's so many different ways to make change.

Isaac Bell 20:46

I love that. Not everybody can be installing solar panels, nor do we need everybody to install solar panels, like you said, there's so much space for art and science and everything in between. Just before we wrap up here, I might shift gears a little bit. So you've talked about ways that we can impose pressure in order to pass things like a Just Transition Act, and a lot of our discussion today has been focused very much at sort of a higher level to do with policies and government officials and programs. But I know that you've also done a bit of activist work previously, you mentioned that at the start. You're also a part of a divestment group over at Dalhousie University. So I was also part of a divestment group. And one thing that I love about that is how grassroots it is in nature, and the fact that a lot of the change is coming from the bottom up. So I'd be curious to hear your thoughts on this sort of activism versus advocacy situation. And just your thoughts on what sort of is needed for change? Is there a need for both? Is one potentially more beneficial than others in certain situations?

Sabrina Guzman Skotnitsky 21:52

I really appreciate you asking this question because it's actually something I've been grappling with a lot, especially since COVID-19 began. Up until COVID began, I was, you know, in school, very involved with organizing, I was also writing an honors thesis, which was actually about the climate justice movement in Halifax. So I was like, very much entrenched in that, but like, I think if COVID-19 hadn't happened, I definitely would have burnt out, it kind of, you know, made the whole world come to a screeching halt. And, you know, I had to finish the last month of my degree, you know, in my one bedroom apartment in Halifax, so it definitely kind of changed a lot. And it gave me a lot of time to reflect because we weren't able to have, you know, those large scale demonstrations in person anymore. And there was definitely a shift to online organizing. And I kind of realized that, I guess it's also important to mention that my honors thesis was looking at like toxicity and kind of call-out culture and a lot of those dynamics that happen in movement circles. And it was because I'd been personally affected by a lot of those dynamics. And, you know, I didn't feel necessarily like my contributions were valued in some of the organizing circles I was in, and also felt, you know, that people were overly policing each other as far as you know, the language, you use a lot of, you know, cancel culture, you know, those kinds of issues. And I, you know, I'm someone who can often see the value in different opinions, and I often felt kind of wrong about very much antagonizing people that, you know, let's say the left doesn't agree with, for example, like when you meet with politicians, a lot of times it's like very intense, and very much like they're the villain, and they need to do what we say or else. And I think that there's a role for that, because you do need to light a fire under politicians many times to get them to take action. But I also think there's a role for people who want to be lobbying, or more kind of like in an advocacy role. And I see that as someone who kind of works with both sides of the political spectrum in order to make change happen. And for me, at least during COVID, especially because you can't go out into the street and do a protest as much anymore. I feel like that's a better role for me, especially using research to using the power of like, this is all the data that I've gotten, but I also have lived experience, and I am talking to youth that have lived experiences of these issues. So it gives a lot more power to the words that I'm saying, to know that it's backed up by all these things. And I think also, there is really a role for researchers in activism, because a lot of activists, you know, they're distrusting of universities, which I totally understand. Academia in general, can, you know, perpetuate a lot of negative cycles. But I think also when a researcher uses their kind of access to information or their, you know, knowledge or education to help social movements, it can be really impactful. So there's, yeah there's definitely a whole range. But again, like I said, with the environmental movement, there's such a range of roles. And I think sometimes I want to be an activist. And sometimes I want to be an advocate.

And I think that's okay. I think one of the issues I found too, was like the gatekeeping of the word "activist". I understand as well, because a lot of people call themselves an activist for signing an online petition once, there's also a lot of people who generally do want to like help and are, you know, told, oh, you can't be an activist because you haven't done this, this and this. So I think, you know, we're at a point where we need as many people as possible, working towards a climate just future, and so we can't really afford to alienate people.

Isaac Bell 26:02

So just quickly, going back to the Sustainable Development Goals, or the SDGs. I know you talked about them a little bit, but could you highlight some of them that you feel your project and your advocacy work specifically addresses?

Sabrina Guzman Skotnitsky 26:15

Yeah, for sure. So for my project, I think the two that are the most aligned are goal eight, which is Decent Work and Economic Growth for all, and SDG 13, which is Climate Action. And I really think this hits both of them, as I've mentioned, because we're looking at green jobs for youth. But also because I'm trying to address a lot of the equity issues, which get perpetuated. And I think one thing that's interesting about the term Decent Work is, you know, kind of a buzzword lately is this idea that, you know, a lot of youth are kind of forced into work that is low paying, it has a high COVID-19 exposure risk, as I've mentioned, but is also not necessarily like meaningful to them, you know, or where they want to see their work go in the future. You know, like, I know, a lot of climate justice organizers who are doing all of this amazing work, but they're doing that for free. And they're a server or they're a nanny, or there's something that they're maybe not as passionate about, but they don't know how to turn their passion into a job. And one of the kind of, I guess, ulterior motives of this research is that I really want like all of the youth that I've known, and I've yet to meet, that are doing this important environmental like frontline work, I want them to actually get paid for their work. And I know a lot of people feel almost uncomfortable around that. And that, again, kind of goes back to the whole gatekeeping around activism. But I think youth deserved to get paid for our labor, like it comes down to that. We deserve to get paid for our labor, we might be younger, we might not have as much education or experience as other folks. But we have a lot of passion, we bring a lot of insight, and again, yeah, it just comes back to an equity issue. We deserve to get paid for what we do, especially when what we're doing is often trying to help a lot of other members of society. And yeah, so I think definitely, it fits in to SDG 8 and SDG 13.

Isaac Bell 28:16

I completely agree on the point of youth getting paid. A lot of the time the work, as you say is undervalued and at the end of the day going to be essential to tackling the climate crisis.

Sabrina Guzman Skotnitsky 28:27

Yes, exactly.

Isaac Bell 28:28

Thanks so much for those recommendations, and we're glad to have you on the podcast. Thanks again for joining us.

Sabrina Guzman Skotnitsky 28:33

All right, thank you so much.

Isaac Bell 28:41

You've been listening to Establish, a podcast presented by Shake Up the Establishment, with funding provided by the Jane Goodall Institute of Canada. Today's guest was Sabrina Guzman Skotnitsky, and you can find her latest report now available on the website for Canadian Council for Youth Prosperity. I'd also like to thank Acacia Markov for transcribing this episode, and Greg Markov for providing the theme music. You can find more of his music on his Instagram @gregmarkov. Thanks again for listening, and stay tuned for the next episode of Establish.