



“I'm excited by the prospect of decentralization within program work”: Hannah Hooper of Force of Nature on helping young people navigate the climate crisis and its impact on their mental health

Eleanore Catolico
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Eleanore Catolico: Please introduce yourself and tell us what's distinctive about your approach in the field of youth mental health.

Hannah Hooper: I'm Hannah Hooper, head of programs at Force of Nature. We're a youth nonprofit working at the intersection of the climate crisis and mental health. We stand out in our area of intervention. Our programs offer support for young people in the beginning of their journey. They may be feeling overwhelmed, anxious, or hopeless, but there's a spark within them of wanting to take action. They want to do something, but they don't know where to begin.

Our programs offer support to help young people navigate and understand those emotions, and to see them as a very rational response to the climate crisis. We offer practical tools on how to take action in a way that feels meaningful and practical in their local communities. We hone in on their values, passions, and strengths, and how they can apply these in a local context to build resiliency and to see that they have the power to create change.

Eleanore Catolico: Where do your programs occur?

Hannah Hooper: We're mostly online. We've run a handful of events in person in the UK, but the majority of our programs, which we run twice a year, are online over Zoom.

Eleanore Catolico: Anything that others might find surprising about your work?

Hannah Hooper: Perhaps it's the breadth and amount of young people we work with from all different parts of the world. Even though we're a remote team predominantly based in the UK, we have quite a big global reach. Sometimes people are surprised by that, and also how we can plug in young people around the world to opportunities.

Eleanore Catolico: The Youth Mental and Wellbeing Co-Lab has three focus areas, building young people's resilience, giving them agency, and helping them build a sense of community and belonging. What does your work focus on, and what contribution do you make in that area?

Hannah Hooper: Our main focus is on agency and building community. We're not clinical psychologists or mental health professionals. Building a sense of robust resiliency has to come from those kinds of mental health professionals. But in terms of feeling a sense of agency and community, we do that very well through our programs and the community we build through our programs.

We also have an online platform to host young people who are part of the broader Force of Nature network. Within the programs, we look at how taking small actions can build a sense of agency, how even little actions done often can have a big impact, and how the feeling of importance from building communities locally can build that sense of agency.

So many young people who come to our programs desire that sense of connection, and perhaps they don't have it in their local area. Coming to the Force of Nature programs allows them to build a network of fellow young people with whom they can connect, share experiences and ideas, and also maybe learn how to establish their own local community actions. We do this through our Climate Cafe initiative, which brings people together to have conversations about the climate crisis.

Eleanore Catolico: What strategies can address climate anxiety in young people?

Hannah Hooper: The first thing to tell a young person who's feeling anxious about the climate is that this is OK and totally normal. There's a lot of shame attached to things like climate anxiety. Allowing young people to share how they're feeling and be vulnerable, and offer them a compassionate space where they can be heard by other young people, is very empowering for them.

It's very difficult for young people to be able to share openly how they actually feel, even within school settings, whether they're doing a climate science degree, or studying different things in high school. Our spaces allow them to share how they're feeling, and realize it's actually a sign that you care deeply, not that you haven't got resiliency.

It's about shifting and allowing young people to understand that it's a sign of care and compassion, and rather than seeing it as a deficiency to experience climate anxiety. We offer training for facilitators to navigate these spaces and hold space for young people. We've done a lot of research with different institutions, such as Imperial College London, to learn alongside other climate psychologists and deepen our understanding on how to support young people in our programs.

Eleanore Catolico: What does your organization do in the other focus areas?

Hannah Hooper: There are so many amazing organizations doing great work and reaching different areas within climate and mental health, and one is resiliency. We

partner with other organizations who offer clinical support, coaching, or research into the impacts of the climate crisis on mental health. That strengthens our ability to support young people around the world, because Force of Nature can't provide everything. There's room for more collaboration and organizations coming together to create a holistic pathway for young people, to support them along their entire journey to build resiliency, agency, and community.

Eleanore Catolico: How do you collaborate with other organizations working in the same focus areas?

Hannah Hooper: This is one of our pain points, something we have yet to establish. We've done a lot of referral partnerships within a network of organizations, and we'll invite them to share our free program with their community of young people, if they're interested in going through it. That's the majority of what we do. We're still in the phase of trying to build out more strategic partnerships with organizations.

We've had conversations that have started out very promising, but fizzled due to capacity, or work on different projects. That's an area where we still have room to grow. We've done some very exciting partnerships with organizations, but that's an area where we're lacking. I'd like to develop it more.

Eleanore Catolico: What, if any, emerging work in this field are you excited about?

Hannah Hooper: I'm excited by the prospect of decentralization within program work, and allowing young people within their regions to take a body of work, adjust it, and integrate it into their own communities in a way that serves them. That's very exciting, because young people in a region know what their community needs, rather than us as an organization assuming what's needed for a community in Uganda, for example. Being able to give power and autonomy to young people to lead on creating and working with their communities is very exciting, by creating more space for compassion in conversations around the climate crisis and mental health.

Eleanore Catolico: Can you explain that a little more?

Hannah Hooper: For me, it's about how we show up and understand mental health with a more compassionate lens. So many young people feel this sense of shame or imposter syndrome when it comes to feeling things like climate anxiety. Something I'm passionate about that we facilitate at Force of Nature is a very accepting, compassionate, open space where young people can share how they're feeling without judgment. I'd like to see more of that in the climate and mental health field when we're having conversations or focus groups.

Eleanore Catolico: Any examples that illustrate the impact of your work?

Hannah Hooper: Part of our program is called "Becoming a Force of Nature." It's our three-part flagship program, which we run twice a year. Young people who go through this program have the option to be trained as facilitators to deliver that same program, so we create a nice circular cycle and provide young people with paid opportunities to

learn how to facilitate and give back to the Force of Nature community. That's been wonderful to see. We've trained eight facilitators who've been delivering our programs over the last two years, which has been very rewarding. We want to support more young people to facilitate conversations in these programs.

Eleanore Catolico: Everyone learns as much from things that don't work as things that do. Can you describe something that didn't work, but you learned from it?

Hannah Hooper: Something we've learned from is how we're engaging with partners. We're still a very young organization. Even with my own experience, it's still very new. The way I'm approaching partnerships is shifting now. Before, I felt the need to just reach out to as many people as possible to share this program, and have as much impact as possible, whereas now I'm wanting to go a mile deep, rather than a mile wide.

There's far more impact in reaching a smaller cohort of young people through very strategic partnerships, rather than a huge breadth who maybe aren't fully engaged, and reaching out to lots of different partners in a very surface-level way. It's not always about the big numbers, but also about focusing on impact in perhaps a smaller cohort of young people, and building out a strategic, robust partnership with an organization.

Eleanore Catolico: What are you looking for in a partner?

Hannah Hooper: Another thing we've come up against is funding, and perhaps our goals being too broad and not focused enough. The young people who go through our programs from all over the world are varied, and many funders tell us, "It's not specific enough. You're not reaching one community, or having an impact on this one area where young people live."

I'd like to establish a partnership, perhaps with an organization that works with a community of young people locally, where this program would be especially beneficial, perhaps even co-designing and building on a program we've already made to make sure it's relevant to those young people. Maybe funders would be more inclined to fund that kind of work, rather than the broader approach we're taking at the moment.

Eleanore Catolico: How do you adapt your work based on regional differences in places that bear the actual impact of the climate crisis more than others?

Hannah Hooper: At the start of last year, we sat down as a team to discuss the broad global reach of our programs. We were using the word "eco-anxiety" that isn't always relevant for folks on the front lines of the climate crisis. We decided to run focus groups with young people, both from frontline communities and also with those in the global north who are not.

We had conversations about our content, what felt relevant, and what they'd like to see changed and done differently. It was a very big piece of work that took about six months of work with these young people to adjust and edit our content so it felt more relevant on a global scale. We also worked closely with the facilitators to give them the freedom to adjust the content based on their region, locality, and personal experiences.

It's something we continually do. We like to run focus groups every year with young people in our community, just to gauge whether the content still feels relevant to them, and whether there's anything they'd like to change. If it feels aligned and good, that's amazing. We want to keep having these conversations with young people to understand if our content is relevant, if it's landing for them, or if it feels outdated.

Eleanore Catolico: How does the climate crisis become outdated? Is it because the science changes?

Hannah Hooper: It's more about outdated terminology, specifically the "eco-anxiety" term we were very much known for in the early days of Force of Nature. Over time, we realized that to be more inclusive and welcoming for folks from the global south, we needed to slightly shift away from that terminology, so young people on the front lines experiencing the climate crisis could feel that their experiences were understood.

Eleanore Catolico: Why do some people not like the term "eco-anxiety"?

Hannah Hooper: In some focus groups, young people would say the term eco-anxiety didn't resonate for them. For example, if their home is being destroyed by a hurricane, they are in the throes of fight or flight. "Eco-anxiety" suggests you are waiting for something to happen, or anxious about that. Whereas, for them, it was like, "It's already happened. We're in it." It was very, very interesting to learn from them about that.

Eleanore Catolico: Any insights or teachable lessons from your work?

Hannah Hooper: Be open to learning again and again. We've already learned so much from running a cohort of "Becoming a Force of Nature" in the spring, and we just started our autumn cohort. Being willing to pivot, change, and be flexible is very important. Learning from the community you're serving, running focus groups, having conversations with them, and seeing what they need, has been super important at Force of Nature, and it's aided in our evolution as an organization as well.

Eleanore Catolico: How to define current attitudes towards youth mental health? Have attitudes shifted in your sector, and if so, what contributed to that change?

Hannah Hooper: Yes. When I joined Force of Nature four years ago, youth and climate mental health wasn't very much in the mainstream of climate conversations, definitely more on the periphery. But now, it's loudly spoken about, particularly in the UK and in our networks where it's very front of mind. I wonder whether it's still pushed to the periphery in the global context, but within our UK network, it is definitely front of mind and something that people want to discuss and research, which is amazing.

It's also becoming more prominent in schools, whereas four years ago, there were a lot of teachers who were feeling very lost with how to navigate conversations about the climate crisis for young people. There still is a sense of that. People didn't realize it's important to talk about mental health with the climate crisis, but now it's understood how important it is to also weave in the impacts on people's mental health.

Eleanore Catolico: What barriers to changing minds still exist? What's needed to change the way people think about youth mental health?

Hannah Hooper: The main thing I've noticed is that people still see young people as lacking in knowledge, and their experiences are still not validated or taken seriously. A lot of young people feel this imposter syndrome, or if they're working in the climate field, they feel their experience and the things they share are not taken seriously because of their age. That's a barrier we need to overcome, by platforming and validating young people's experiences, and seeing this as very important, especially in research projects.

Eleanore Catolico: Is centering youth in the conversation a newer development? Does their feedback influence policy, or is it just a nice thing to placate them?

Hannah Hooper: I'm definitely seeing more organizations involve young people in more strategic decisions. I see a lot more youth advisory boards. However, particularly with corporations, they'll bring in one youth advisor, but that's only one perspective, and it's not taken seriously. But having an advisory board of multiple young people from different experiences, is where I see the most platforming and proper participation of young people and their experiences.

Eleanore Catolico: Why wouldn't organizations take their positions seriously, since they're the people you serve?

Hannah Hooper: It's wild. We see it all the time. We'll speak to a young person, and they'll say, "Oh, yes, I was invited to be on this advisory board, but none of my ideas were taken seriously. None of my ideas were followed through. It was just speaking into the void," which is very upsetting.

Eleanore Catolico: Any resources, guides, or tools that have been especially helpful in advancing your work?

Hannah Hooper: I'm part of a handful of different coalitions and networks that are exploring the intersection of the climate crisis and mental health, specifically with a UK focus, just because that's where we're based. It's been very beneficial and useful to learn from psychologists, other organizations, universities and schools.

Understanding the landscape of youth and mental health from those different perspectives has been amazing. In terms of our own resources, we created a climate cafe resource guide during [the United Nation's] COP [Conference of the Parties] because we realized there were so many young people who couldn't be on the ground to share their experiences.

We wanted to offer them a means to bring people together in their communities and have open, vulnerable and honest conversations about how the climate crisis is making them feel, and it just took off. It's a bit wild. We've now had young people running climate cafes in over 50 countries. It's been wonderful to see young people taking the climate cafe initiative into their own organizations to build on it. It's been very affirming.

Eleanore Catolico: How do you incorporate youth voices in shaping your work or the broader narrative on mental health?

Hannah Hooper: We run focus groups every year to explore our content and programs. For all of our programs, we run a pre and post-program survey to understand how young people feel before they go through our program, and how they feel afterwards. That includes collecting qualitative and quantitative data to understand those mindset shifts, and capturing testimonials and feedback as well. We run feedback calls with all our facilitators to share their experiences of running the program, any themes that came up during the sessions, whether certain activities need to be changed, and how they themselves experienced delivering this content.

Eleanore Catolico: What changes have you seen in the attitudes, mindset, or behavior of young people after going through your program and being in fellowship with others who care about these issues?

Hannah Hooper: One of the biggest things is that sense of connectivity. A lot of young people say that before they go through the program, they're feeling very disconnected, they're lacking community, they're feeling very isolated, and just fear for the planet. Then they'll go through one of our Force of Nature programs, or they'll run a climate cafe, and they'll come out of it feeling very connected to other young people, with a sense of solidarity and community, even if it is through one of our online programs. Just feeling that sense of being heard and understood, and hearing other people's experiences, has been a wonderful sense of connection that's come out of the programs.

Eleanore Catolico: What's the most important question you think the Co-Lab should be asking right now?

Hannah Hooper: How are we building out more strategic partnerships from multiple different levels? How are we weaving in researchers, schools, education systems, policy, youth, and non-profit organizations to work on this journey for a young person to go from feeling anxious, overwhelmed, and hopeless, to feeling empowered to take action in their community? There are so many amazing organizations and folks doing great work. I want us to come together, but I don't know how to make that happen. Funding is always the biggest part of it. There's something there for me about strategic coalitions, collaborations, coming together, and being resourced to do this work.

Eleanore Catolico: Anything else you'd like to share about your work?

Hannah Hooper: I'm happy to share any links to other organizations we value and that we're closely connected with, if that's useful.

Eleanore Catolico: It was lovely to meet you and learn about your work.

Hannah Hooper: Thank you so much.

Eleanore Catolico Catolico is a freelance journalist, writer and editor based in Michigan. Her solutions journalism has focused on initiatives in K-12 schools that address trauma, cultivate affirming and inclusive spaces and foster healthy peer connections.

** This interview has been edited and condensed.*