

YOUTH ACTION LAB

ONBOARDING JOURNEY 2020 COHORT

REBOOTING YOUTH
PARTICIPATION IN
CIVIL SOCIETY

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INTRODUCTION

In August 2019, CIVICUS Youth tested the **Power of Radical Collaboration** and convened a diverse team of young innovative social changemakers to co-design a pilot programme towards supporting youth grassroots activists and social movement builders from the global south who are often excluded from funding opportunities. As a result, the team launched a first prototype in January 2020, of what would later become the **Youth Action Lab**. This report dissects the experiences and lessons of the Youth Action Lab's first three months which encompassed the virtual onboarding journey towards fostering a friendly, equipped, accountable and sustainable alliance of youth grassroots activists.

To initiate this, 10 young grassroots activists



from the Fiji, Philippines, Pakistan, Palestine, Uganda, Tunisia, Liberia, Ghana, El Salvador and Peru who do not affiliate with traditional civil society structures were selected from a pool of 1000 applicants, to be the first cohort of the Youth Action Lab. Their areas of work cover youth civic participation, feminism, activism, queer movement, trans rights, sexual reproductive rights, climate change, gender based violence, child marriage and indigenous rights. **Meet The Participants.**



The Lab is a one-year co-creation space that seeks to enable youth movements, collectives and non-traditional forms or groups of activists, to become more resilient and sustainable. Equally, the Lab also seeks to reimagine youth participation in civic spaces, testing different approaches to relating with power dynamics within the non-profits and adopting models to support and safeguard individual activists, human rights defenders, changemakers holistically – emotional, physical, financial and political.

Recruitment and selection process

Between January and February 2020, one a thousand young activists submitted the application form drafted by the co-design team and some were nominated by trusted partners. In collaboration with CIVICUS staff members and Youth Action Team members, 130 applicants where shortlisted and in a one-week in person meeting, the co-design team selected the top 15 applicants. After a week of reference checks and interviews, the co-design team invited the 10 strongest applications to join the Youth Action Lab 2020 cohort.

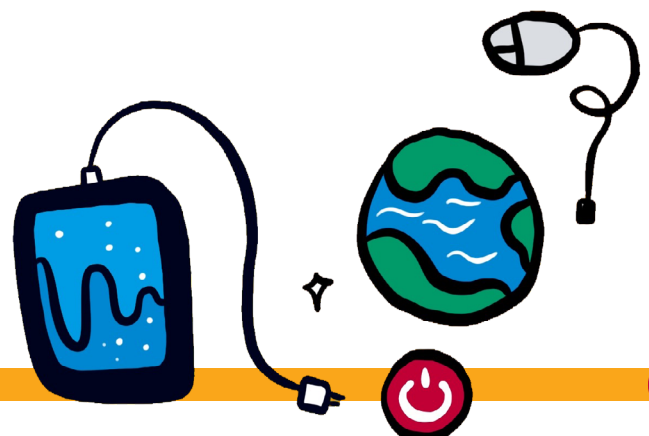
The cohort was selected based on the principles of diversity (age, geographic and gender representation); the links each activist has with their community to ensure their work is truly serving their needs and not the interests of the individual activists or their groups; their capacity to think in a systemic and critical way and see the connections of the work they are doing with wider global issues, and finally, the lack of access to funding opportunities and other kind of resources (training, networks, mentors, tools, etc). The Lab is a space for activists who are not constantly surrounded of funding opportunities.



Onboarding

As a co-created programme, CIVICUS Youth created a one-week residency plan with the co-design team to orientate the 10 Youth Action Lab participants on their journey as Lab participants. The intention was to gather in person for five days to facilitate the creation of a strong new community and exchange all the necessary information.

However, COVID-19 had other plans for us, and the residency week moved to a three to four months virtual onboarding journey.



1 Build a team spirit in which everyone, participants and CIVICUS Secretariat, understands each other's purposes, expectations, timelines and set a foundation to be connected post-orientation week.

- This was achieved virtually through regular communications via e-mail, WhatsApp, virtual calls and a tailor made and user-friendly care pack.
- Elements like online interpretation through Zoom allowed all participants to interact in the language they felt more comfortable with.
- Digital platforms allowed participants to engage at any time that worked best with their respective time zones.
- The most **valuable component** to participants to achieve this objective was a four-week virtual workshop with collaborationsuperpowers.com on 'Work Together Anywhere'. The Lab participants built a team agreement and learned tools to work remotely with each other and their comrades at home.

2 Be introduced to new and critical skills for the Lab through peer-learning and beyond.

The intention is to equip participants with a revision or introduction of key foundational elements to help their work to be more strategic, sustainable, remain accountable to their stakeholders and resilient to the different contexts and circumstances. Critical skills will be further developed through the Learning Partnership Programme, which is a 6-month journey where the Lab participants will work closely with thematic and practical learning partners/mentors from their countries to sharpen their skills and capacities in their chosen areas of interest.

“The purpose of the in-person orientation week is to bring selected participants on board in the Youth Action Lab, to connect and build solidarity with each other and to develop their capacity in several relevant topics for their activism work throughout the programme and beyond. The orientation week would be a safe and connected space, where we will focus on baseline topics that will take the form of conferences/workshops. These baseline topics are: Mental Health, Financial Management + Resourcing, Legal Support, Digital Security, Global Citizenship / Youth Advocacy Purpose statement of the co-design team in February 2020.



• Needs assessment

Under the principle of empathy and consideration of everyone's time, participants were requested to complete a short needs assessment individually and then discussed the results in small groups during a period of a week. In this exercise, participants confirmed or differed from the results the co-design team found on their research on what are the main needs young grassroots activists have: *Support in Mental Health, Financial Management + Resourcing, Legal Support, Digital Security, Global*

Citizenship and Youth Advocacy. Additionally, they indicated the two technical and content related skills they wish to work with their mentors and the one skill they wish to share with their fellow Lab participants during the Peer-Learning Festival.

"I really enjoyed the storytelling sessions. I like how we shared our individual stories, asked questions, did recommendations and learned how to tell our story. I also like the digital security session, the illustrations that were used about the slippers and the girl helped me understand faster."

- Youth Action Lab participant

• Core-skills Sessions

The results of the needs assessment indicated that participants were indeed curious to learn more about Financial Management + Resourcing, Digital Security and Self and Collective care. Equally, they were interested in progress and impact tracking tools and frameworks, storytelling and critical thinking. Therefore, the CIVICUS Secretariat and partners provided 60-90 minutes sessions in May and June 2020 via zoom and was interpreted from English to Spanish and French. It became evident that although the Lab participants expressed that they were learning a great deal during the sessions, high intensity engagement was lacking during the sessions. We found that if the Lab participants received their pre-readings early enough and we asked them to prepare questions, there were more open during the session. We also found that

the facilitator of the session plays a key role in encouraging engagement by using different tactics such as asking leading questions, using images, and encouraging the participants to think critically about what they see, know, experience, etc. **Using similar communication**

tactics as one would in a face-to-face workshop lends itself to a more

productive and engaging session where different voices and perspectives can find expression.



• Peer-learning Virtual Exchange Festival

Thanks to the suggestions of the Advisory Group, the peer-exchange was framed as a festival and ran over the course of four weeks. During the month of July 2020, participants had the opportunity to run a 60-90-minute virtual session with a focus on their chosen topics: Project management, digital campaigns, coalition building, diversity and inclusion, mental health, and management of youth organisations. A key lesson to be drawn from the peer-learning exchange festival was the **importance of sharing the space**. Having a sense of ownership with regards to how the sessions ran translated in high levels of attendance, interaction and peer support. The peer-exchange festival helped to alleviate the 'Zoom' fatigue as the Lab participants were

keen to hear from their fellow participants (rather than having an external facilitator or the CIVICUS Secretariat lead the session).

Although the Lab is horizontally led, it's good to hear different voices and have grantees take the lead during different periods throughout the co-collaboration journey. This lesson could be applied to future co-collaborations beyond virtual sessions.

"Besides getting to learn a lot that can help with our own work, we also got to know more about our fellow participants and their stories, experiences and organizations. It helped build solidarity as we increase our knowledge." - Youth Action Lab participant

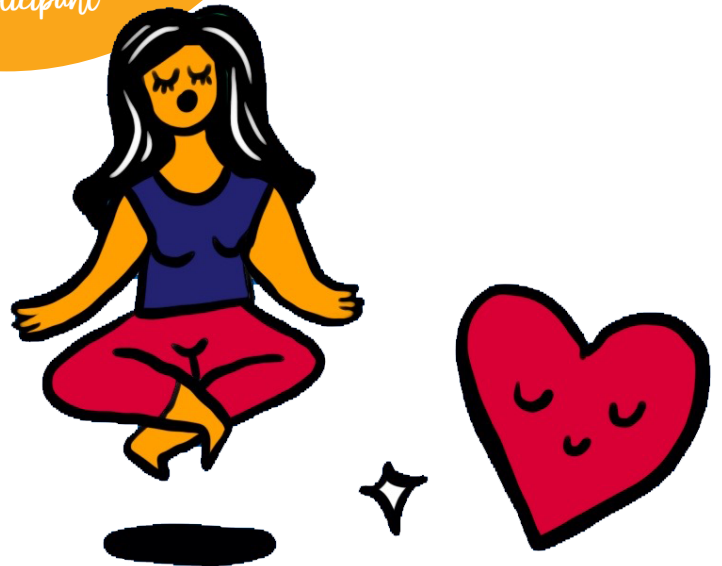
so the participants spent less time figuring out what needed done and could prioritize among their competing obligations more efficiently.

This indicated that youth activists are calling for support and understanding and creating necessary boundaries with funders, thus fostering healthier organisational culture and changing the way we see, engage with, and what we expect from youth grassroots activists.

3 To have time and space to reflect and rebreathe.

However, the global pandemic didn't allow this to successfully happen and instead, saw increased barriers and heightened threats to the Lab participants personal stability and to their activism, it called for safeguarding strategies to be applied with immediate effect.

Overwhelmingly, the Lab participants expressed their burn out and their need for introspection in their work. The need for quick and efficient adaptation during a global pandemic was mentally draining. An example of this could be seen when a participant, who had previously engaged frequently and fruitfully with the Lab began to become less responsive over time due to the participants personal circumstances as a young activist in an unstable country. As a result, the CIVICUS Secretariat adapted the Labs demands to better suite her needs by creating a site which made the Lab activities better organized at a glance,



The COVID-19 pandemic further emphasised the CIVICUS Youth teams view that at its core, grant-making demands that we put a face to youth activism. It demands that we acknowledge that people-power is driven by people from diverse contexts. The COVID-19 pandemic gave us 'another reason for social solidarity.'

Prioritising self and collective care is a task to continue beyond the onboarding phase.

Individual Bi-Weekly Check-Ins



The bi-weekly check-ins are an ongoing element of the Lab. The check-ins are conducted on a one-to-one basis with each Lab participant meeting individually with one member of the CIVICUS Youth coordination team. The check-ins are intended to find and trace patterns throughout the collective journey, share learnings for the larger civil society, connect participants to possible opportunities, and manage risk mitigation. The check-ins are a documented journey and will form part of a group stories document. As a learning from the **Goalkeepers Youth Action Accelerator**, the CIVICUS Youth coordination team reduced the size of the cohort in this pilot project with the purpose of having the capacity to provide a more tailored support.



To date, the Youth Action Lab has completed multiple cycles of the bi-weekly check-ins. The check-ins have been successfully fleshed out what the Lab participants have planned with regards to their individual projects, especially considering the COVID-19 pandemic which has resulted in the participants having to re-strategize and adapt their plans. This not only allows for the check-ins to act as a hub for testing new ways of working within civil society and mobilizing learnings from across sectors in support of youth-led movements, but it also allows for effective tracking of their journey and individual actors on change.



The check-ins have been successfully fleshed out what the lab participants have planned with regards to their individual projects.

Key Takeaways

Access

Access, and in this case, access to stable and secure internet connection, determined the level of engagement from the Lab participants. The participants with less stable internet connection were less likely to be engaged in the Labs processes. For many young people, these conditions create a cycle of negative consequences – cycles, which often perpetuate social and participatory inequalities. This begged the question: how can youth activism needs be met meaningfully during a global pandemic, specifically with regards to digital participation?



In the Lab, the lack of strong and reliable internet connection, differing time-zones, and digital fatigue hindered the onboarding journey and impacted the ways in which the participants were able to engage with the Lab and their fellow participants. However, what could have been a hurdle provided us with an opportunity to test our design model which, by its very nature, demanded that we remain flexible and find new, adaptive, and contextual eco-systems for youth activism. During the months of onboarding, Lab participants received extra funds to purchase the necessary equipment to accommodate our new virtual reality and try to address the digital barriers working with grassroots activists. This support varied based on their needs: laptops, cameras, microphones, zoom licenses, etc. Simultaneous translators were also brought on board to interpret Zoom meetings in Spanish and French. This helped them reduce their anxieties and eliminate language barriers which could have affected their engagement with the Lab.

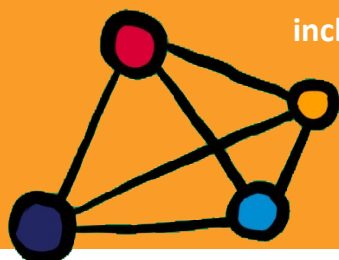
Unfortunately, the support to alleviate the digital barriers encountered a delay due to internal procurement policies and hesitations. Therefore, participants received the extra funds for equipment only after the end of the onboarding phase.



Relationship building

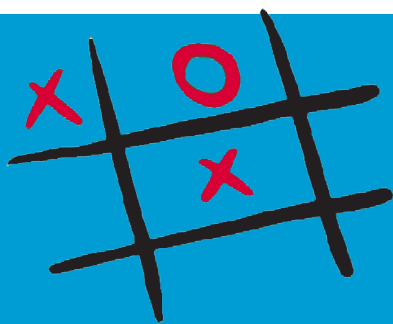
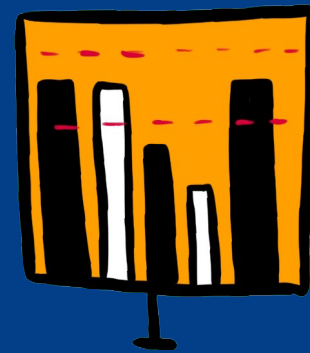
Relationship building was vital during the onboarding journey under the principles of trust, empathy and flexibility, ensured that the Lab served as a safe, inclusive, and adaptive space for rebooting youth participation in civic spaces.

Tone, networking, and resilience were harnessed through strong and intentional relationship building. This was done mainly through the 'bi-weekly check-ins.'



Close feedback loops

Gathering feedback throughout the journey helped direct and re-direct important elements of the onboarding journey. By closing the feedback loop, the CIVICUS Youth coordination team could adequately adjust and administer deliverables in a manner which would ultimately produce the best result and ensure participants had a lead role in shaping their journey in the Lab.



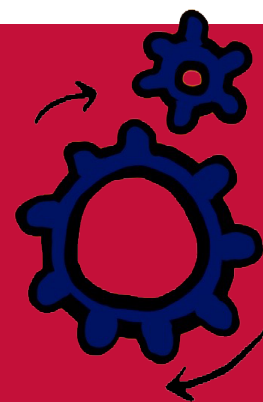
Logistic support

Logistical Support is an ongoing element of the Labs outputs. The quality of logistical support in ensuring a smooth reception of their micro-grants and participation in meetings, has a direct effect on the Lab participants experience in working with civil society organisations.

Typically, it is during the onboarding journey when the work of correcting trial and errors sets a strong foundation for the post-onboarding journey. The combination of relationship building, and logistical support provided a solid springboard for all the Youth Action Labs positive outcomes.

We are partners

The Youth Action Lab prides itself on enabling a space of experimentation for the Lab participants whilst also encouraging them to think independently and critically about their work as grassroots activists. Participants or in traditional resourcing models 'grantees', that have a sense of ownership over the space are able to help structure the onboarding journey in a way which is meaningful, productive, and most importantly- non-extractive.



Constant learning

The approach of the onboarding journey enabled CIVICUS to draw key lessons related to thematic and practical focus areas for the grant-making process in a non-extractive way from the grantees. It built a framework with clear process to harvest learnings in a regular basis and adapt easily based on participants feedback and the context.

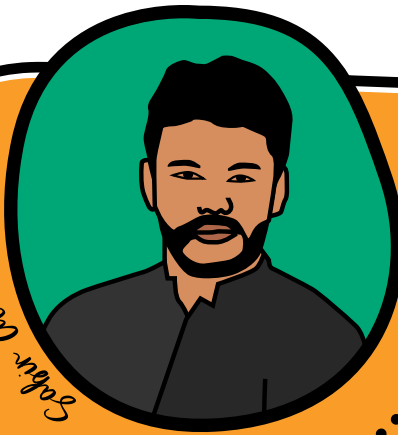


Key Takeaways



Access

Sabir Ali (Pakistan)

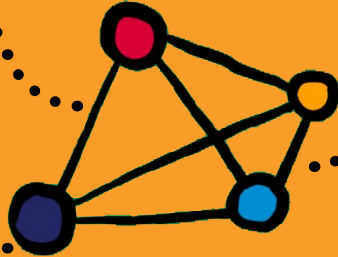


Close feedback loops

Tosq Miravalles (El Salvador)



Banesa Farfan (Peru)

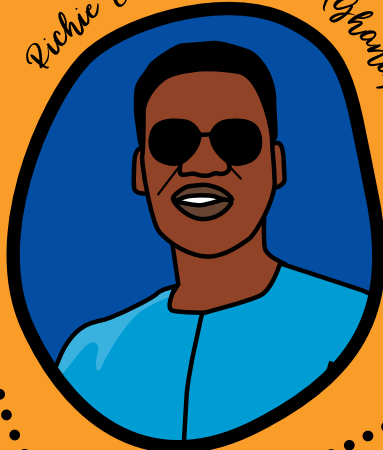


Relationship building

Nana Millers (Uganda)



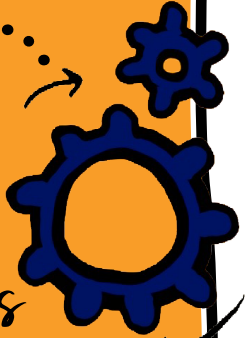
Richie Edem Domeyie (Ghana)



Self-Tizem (Tunisia)



We are partners



Kinga Tauli (Philippines)



logistic support

Constant learning



Orlando Freeman (Liberia)

