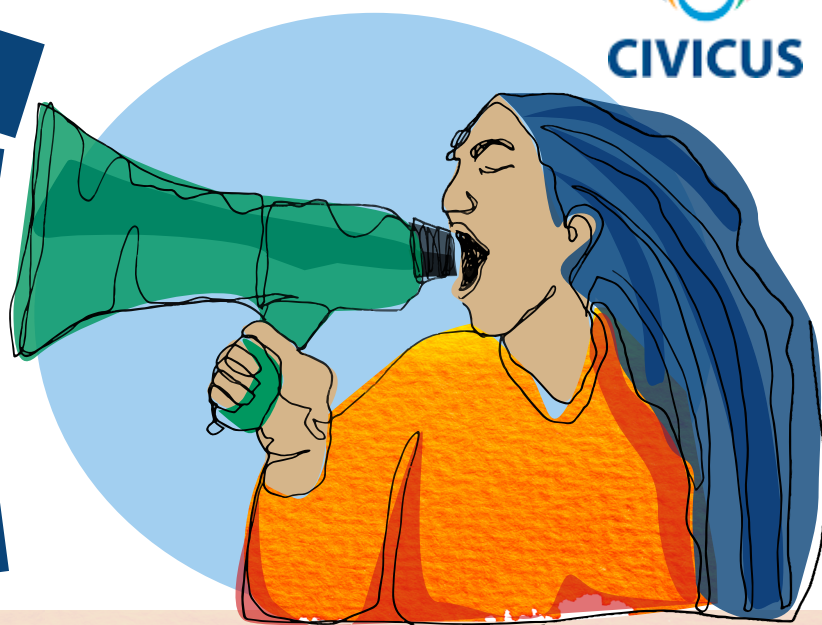# WHAT DOES ACCOUNTABILITY MEAN FOR YOUTH-LED INITIATIVES?

CIVICUS

For the past three months, CIVICUS' Resilient Roots project and Youth Action team have engaged youth-led initiatives to explore how they understand and practice accountability to their constituencies, i.e. the communities they serve and support.

Youth leaders from 16 countries[1], focusing on various issues ranging from critical service provision and women empowerment to citizen engagement and human rights activism, attended these conversations. Despite different contexts, their definitions and experiences were similar. We documented some of these experiences and facilitated practical learning sessions to help them further strengthen their accountability approaches. This is an account of some of the core themes we learned from how they practise constituent accountability.

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LILIAN EFOBI
Nigerian Global Affairs Council - Nigeria
...is the deliberate effort by an organisation

HOW YOUTH LED INITIATIVES GRAPPLE WITH DIFFERENT CONSTITUENT ACCOUNTABILITY ELEMENTS

Youth led initiatives describe transparency as the responsibility they have to share information about their work including decisions, processes and progress towards goals to their primary stakeholders. When constituents of youth led initiatives understand who they are and what they do, this builds trust between them. Mechanisms that are usually used to share information include annual reports, social media updates, e-newsletters and in person community meetings.

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1 India; DRC; Kenya; Nigeria; Benin; Mexico; UK; Zambia; Ethiopia; Ghana; Uganda; Zimbabwe; Cameroon; Morocco; Bangladesh; Liberia; Tanzania; Malaysia; Tunisia

While it is critical to share information with constituents, youth led initiatives realise the importance of responsible information sharing. It is often assumed that because of their youth, they are prone to mistakes. Thus, when they share honestly about their work, especially challenges, this is seen as admitting failure.

"*Being transparent is hard, especially when the expectation is for us to perform better. You are allowed to fail only when you are a startup, but once you get a little bit of experience, standards are raised*", **says Kejal from India. This can negatively affect prospects for future funding, and relationships with constituencies when one's capacity to deliver is in question.**
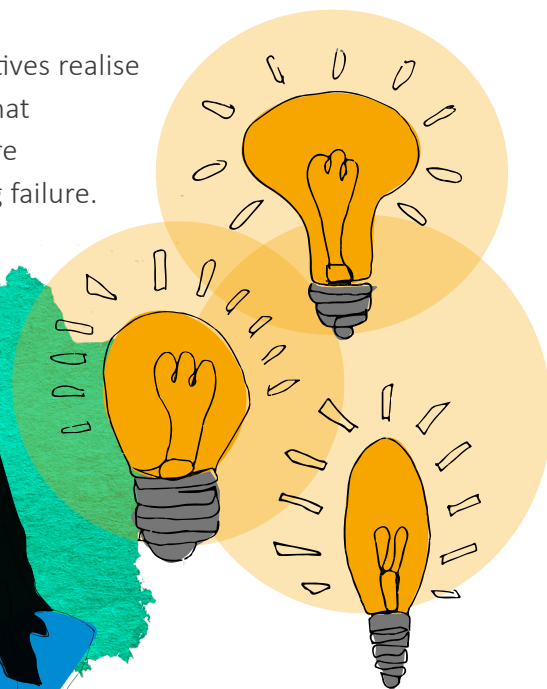
To address this, some youth initiatives develop a strong transparency policy that ensures accurate representation of their work and is driven by the needs of their constituents. Core group in Kenya use their communication strategy to create awareness about their work in weekly newsletters, monthly webinars and outreach programs. In this digital age, youth initiatives are increasingly making use of various social media platforms such as twitter and websites to talk about their work, and the partners that support them.

For some youth-led initiatives, transparency does not end at just sharing what you do, but accounting for the resources you use for this work. The Nigerian Global Affairs Council is currently working on a framework and tool to improve their reporting process that will include details on budget use for the year.

LEVERAGING COMMUNITY VOICES FOR STRONGER INTERVENTIONS

Youth leaders feel it is their responsibility to create opportunities for community voices to be heard, and to ensure that their ideas, opinions and concerns are incorporated into their work. This results in solutions that are relevant, context specific and long lasting, and tailored to communities' expressed needs and expectations.

"*We all need to give our communities the power to speak and when that happens, transformation happens*", **says Sanaya from One future collective.**
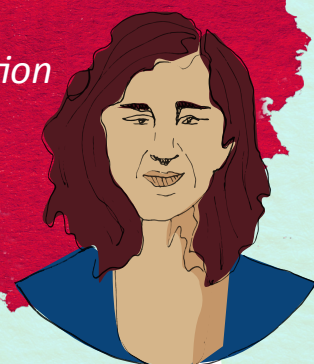
LISTENING AND RESPONDING TO COMMUNITY FEEDBACK

One of the most effective ways of enabling community voices is setting up formal and informal feedback mechanisms. Youth led initiatives usually seek community feedback during specific project intervals, e.g. at the beginning of the project or at project evaluation stage. A common way of collecting feedback is through surveys and focus group discussions. A youth initiative in Bangladesh conducts community needs assessments through surveys and uses this data to design their projects. Through this, they have achieved better results due to projects that are aligned to constituents' priorities.

Feedback received from youth initiative constituents can be either positive or negative. For those providing critical services at community level positive feedback often comes in the form of appreciation for their work. One youth organisation in Uganda that provides health services to poor communities sees this positive feedback as an indication of success as they show how well their interventions are impacting communities.

When it comes to negative feedback, youth-led initiatives have found that communities are less inclined to indicate when things go wrong for fear of jeopardizing their chances for continuing to receive this support. However, one organisation in Liberia has learned that negative feedback is a good indicator of potential risks and gaps to interventions and facilitates organisation-wide discussions on solutions for improvement.

A critical part of closing the feedback loop is being responsive to feedback and adapting to different situations. Women Volunteers for Peace (WOVOP) uses a participatory approach to initiate project ideas with communities, and identify local solutions, and provides feedback to the community on the priority needs that will be addressed by future projects. Reconciliation and Development Association (RADA) in Cameroon is using feedback from target communities to determine the quality of their services and improve their work, working environment, approaches and services. This has been a great source of learning for current and future programming and gives them room to innovate.

Despite some examples of good practice on feedback, youth-led initiatives agreed that they still need to do this more regularly and systematically. Critical areas for further development and improvement include setting up formal feedback mechanisms that are appropriate, accessible and confidentiali; ensuring feedback is representative of especially harder to reach populations with other vulnerability including LGBTI+ communities, children and survivors of gender based violence; and reducing stakeholder bias when providing feedback.

SHARED DECISION MAKING PROCESSES

A key component of being accountable for youth led initiatives is shared decision making. This starts internally within the organisation where teams collectively agree on decisions to be taken and solutions to be adopted when implementing activities. As one youth leader put it "The community starts in our own team". One youth-led organisation from Mexico practices internal accountability as a team, with decisions on project made collectively, and team members responsible for different aspects of the project, to which they are held accountable by the rest of the team. This has improved their reporting and resulted in better outcomes for their projects.

While horizontal decision making seems common internally within youth-led initiatives, externally this has traditionally been a top-down affair, where donors usually decide which interventions to bring to the communities and how change is measured. Communities are only *informed* of these decisions but not involved in making them.

Youth leaders are keen to change this dynamic and have started pushing for more open and inclusive decision making within the organisations and with communities. They have been proponents of strategies such as co-design that are helping to shift power for shaping interventions from just donors and other stakeholders, to community level.

Youth Network for Positive Change include their constitutes in project and programs and policies planning, while another organisation in Cameroon involves people living with non-communicable diseases in decision making processes and bodies, including committees, and the Board.
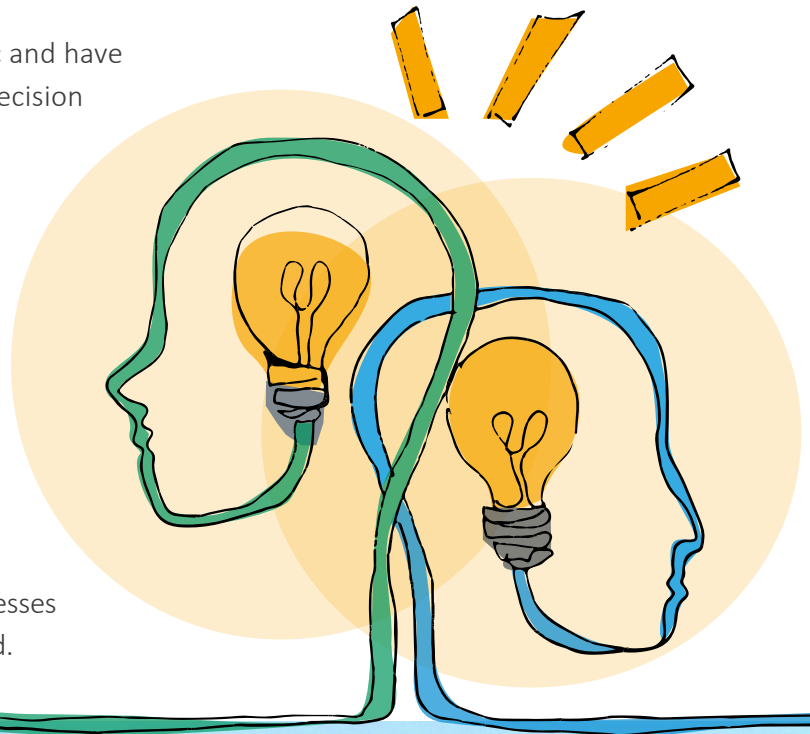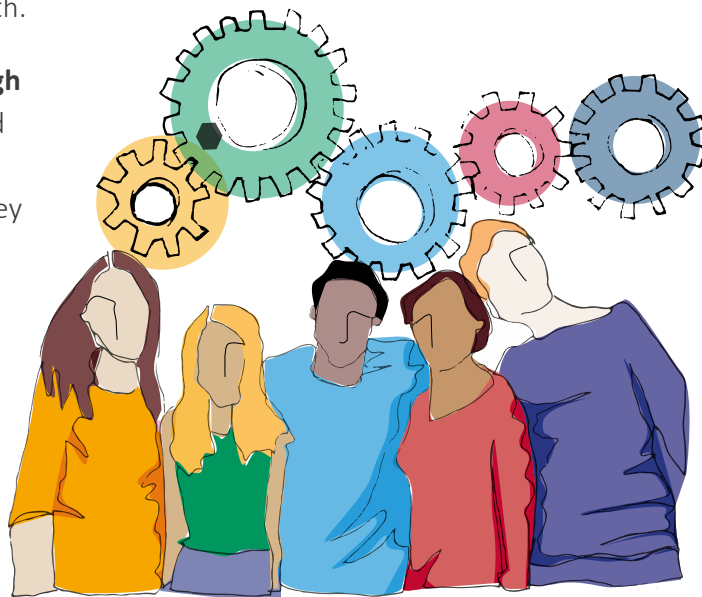
SO, WHAT NOW?

Feedback from the youth initiatives shows their desire to continue learning how to further improve their current accountability practices. Youth leaders' engagement with their peers on this topic, discussing both challenges and successes, has helped them to focus on their own struggles and be motivated to go further on accountability. We learned that while youth leaders are always willing to sign up to such spaces, accessibility issues for them remain a challenge, where they either cannot afford the cost of internet to stay connected or unstable internet connection, which makes it difficult for them to remain engaged.

MAKING YOUTH ENGAGEMENT MORE EFFECTIVE AND ACCOUNTABLE

Youth leaders taking part in a four-week Resilient Roots Youth Accountability Challenge shared some key learnings and important feedback for future youth-focused engagement activities.

- It is crucial to **create spaces for youth leaders to continue this engagement on a regular basis** so that they can continue to learn from and with each other

- To ensure **full and inclusive participation to such online spaces**, we learned that these would need to be accessible, bearing in mind providing translation to other languages, ensuring any interactive activities are suitable on different devices (laptops, Ipads, phones) and considering small stipends for participants that are unable to secure internet bundles for themselves to attend online events

- Considerations would also need to be made to **ensure that any future interactions around constituent accountability are designed to continue building youth leaders capacity to improve their engagement with the communities they serve** and also provide a platform for others to showcase how they are bringing about change to communities.

- It is therefore crucial to **explore other ways for them to still participate in a way that is most useful to them**, and never assume that they have the same access as other organisations do. This is especially true for youth leaders from the global south.

- **Commissioning a small study into why there are high sign-up rates for such events, but low turnout** could be useful in determining how to capture a potential audience's interest in an event and keep it so that they actually participate in it. This could still be due to the reasons listed above and could also have additional concerns that need further exploration

- How to **follow up with participants after such events** also needs careful consideration to avoid interaction on such a crucial topic to die with just that one event, but rather to have it continue as a constant topic of conversation and engagement.