

FROM RELIANCE TO PARTNERSHIP:

Evaluating how young grassroots organisers are redefining the resourcing landscape through the Youth Action Lab

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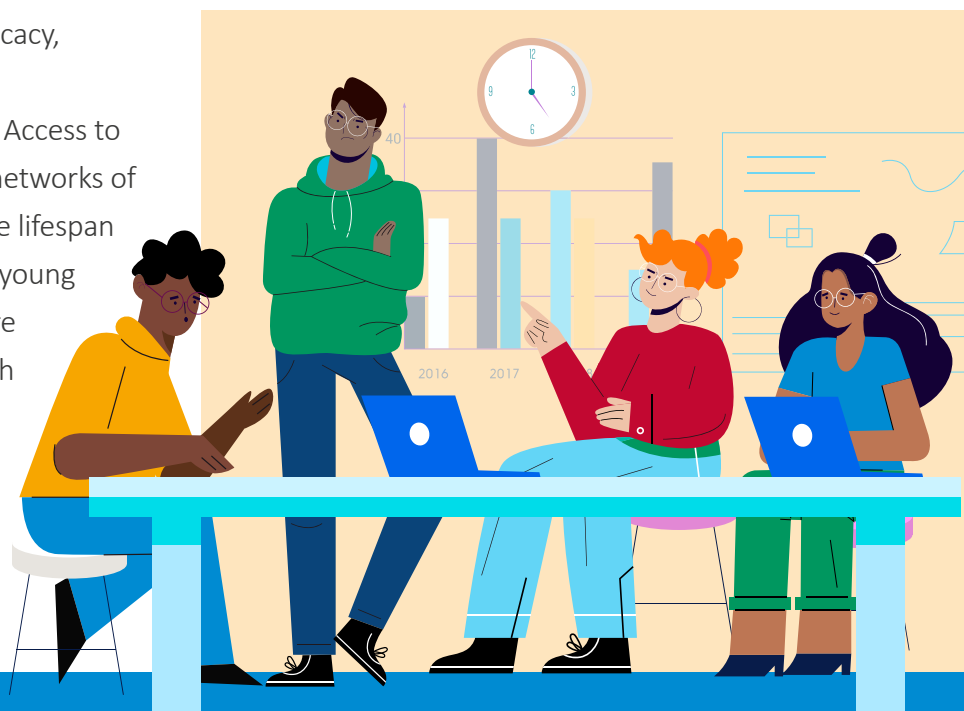
YOUTH ACTION LAB OBJECTIVES:

Increased efficacy, sustainability, and autonomy.

The Youth Action Lab (YAL) evaluation analysed how the project affected the efficacy, sustainability, and autonomy of the 21 young grassroots activists who were directly involved in the initiative. 10 in 2020 and 11 in 2021, meet the cohort here.

To increase young grassroots activists' efficacy, sustainability and autonomy, meaningful partnerships and connections are pivotal. Access to financial resources, in-kind support, and networks of influence often strengthen or threaten the lifespan of their work. This begs the question, are young grassroots activists getting left behind? Are they having meaningful conversations with donors? If so, who does the listening and who does the speaking? Lastly, how can the philanthropic resourcing landscape adapt to meet the needs of young grassroots activists?

The following paper will cover a brief overview of the approach the Youth Action Lab pilot project used to assess its impact and will conclude with some recommendations for peer organisations curious to test this similar methodology.



YOUTH ACTION LAB “CONTROL” GROUP:

The Youth Action Lab, which is in its second funding cycle, hosted a **‘catch-up party’ (virtual meeting)** at the end of 2021 with some of the Youth Action Lab applicants who made it into the final stages of the selection process. Although some of the shortlisted applicants did not make it into the final YAL cohort, they have continued to create an impact in their individual communities and have shown a commitment to social justice and we wanted to hear how their experience was outside the YAL. Together, we used the time to reflect, think out loud about the realities of young activists, evaluate the YAL, and better understand the nature of their relationships with civil society organisations. The catch-up party allowed us to ask the “control group” questions about their experiences regarding the questions of interest of the YAL and compare them to YAL participants’ experiences and feedback. By looking at the difference

between the two groups, it helps distinguish experiences due to the environment and those due to participation with the YAL. For example, COVID-19 impacted how work was done in 2021, and we assume it affected most young grassroots activists. However, we are interested in whether those young grassroots activists’ experience was different, not just due to this and other external factors but due to participation in the lab. A control group is an essential part of measuring the true success of any project. This allows organisations the opportunity to evaluate the cause and effect of their existing projects. Although The YAL “control

group” was important as a means of evidencing the impact, efficacy, and sustainability produced by the Youth Action Lab. It enabled us to measure the accuracy of our initial assumptions about the different elements (flexible funding, skills development and alliance building) which strengthen the work of young grassroots activists.



CIVICUS YOUTH EVALUATION MODEL: PARTICIPATORY, SAFE AND COLLABORATIVE

To start, the CIVICUS Youth team sent the “control group” a meeting invite with a survey which would guide the evaluation process. Of the 100 shortlisted applicants, only 31 responded to the survey and 7 joined the ‘Catch Up Party’. The CIVICUS Youth team shared the survey in three different languages (French, Spanish and English) and responses were accepted over a period of three weeks. This survey facilitated the collection of qualitative data.

Consent was requested and the participants were made aware that their input would be shared publicly and used for reporting purposes.

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The survey sought to advance the following three objectives:

- 1 Gain insight into who young grassroots activists and organisers are, their work, strategies and challenges they face when organising;
- 2 Assess which organisers have had meaningful conversations with funders about how funds or resources can be accessed by their community;
- 3 Gain insight into what the outcomes of those conversations were, if any (e.g. greater trust between partners.)



The insights provided through the survey allowed participants to thoroughly reflect and organise their thoughts about their experiences as young change-makers in the resourcing landscape before the catch-up party. A survey is a critical albeit only an initial step in the evaluation process.

SURVEY QUESTIONS

- In 2021, have you had a meaningful conversation with a funder about how funds or resources can best be accessed by your community?
- If yes, please tell us which donor or donors you had this conversation with?
- If yes, can you tell us more about the outcome of this conversation? (e.g. did it result in greater trust, better relationship or better outcomes/resources for the youth or their community?)

Survey Results: 11 of 31 participants have had meaningful engagements with funders on how funds can be better accessed by their communities and 18 of 31 participants have not

The participants that were able to engage with funders highlighted some factors which contributed towards making their relationships with donors successful, namely;

- a. Trust, mutual respect, and flexibility. As argued in *Philanthropy Daily*, [The Problem With Measurable Impact](#), “metrics are often used to run a shortcut around relationships, but do so poorly.”
- b. Partners that introduced participants to new concepts and approaches such as ‘Design Thinking’, were particularly successful because the relationship was not purely extractive.

Power imbalance between partners should be understood as an initial outcome of hierarchical settings. However, partner organisations can be intentional about flattening the imbalance.

- c. The participants experienced increased trust with donors; they now have an open line of communication and are building partnerships as a result
- d. They are moving away from traditional donor-organisation relationships. This is especially essential because young grassroots activists work in informal and often unregistered organising structures. Moving away from traditional donor-organisation relationships gives non-traditional grassroots activists the opportunity to engage and benefit from relationships they otherwise would be estranged from.

AGENDA SETTING

From the results of the survey, the CIVICUS Youth team drafted an agenda for the catch-up party. The format of the meeting was relaxed and included ice-breakers, music, and an 'open space' at the end of the meeting for each participant to speak and connect with others. We also engaged in networking activities, for instance, we invited Vanessa and Mohaiminul, two Youth Action Lab 2021 participants to speak during the event to share their experiences as young grassroots activists within the Lab. Importantly, we aimed for the meeting to be as inclusive as possible; we had simultaneous interpretation in three different languages and set a time for the meeting that considered different time-zones. Furthermore, to ensure that the party was

not extractive, the "control group" had the opportunity to gain valuable insight into the YAL application process to better understand how they can strengthen their application for upcoming opportunities. In turn, the CIVICUS Youth team was able to ask evaluation questions such as- how can the CIVICUS Youth team improve their application processes and be a better enabler of moving flexible funds to young grassroots activists? This way, the CIVICUS Youth team was also evaluated as part of the evaluation process.



OUTCOME MAPPING AND RECOMMENDATIONS

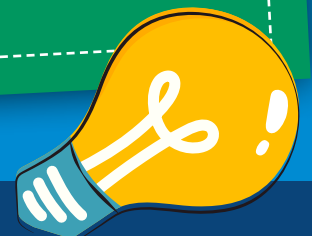
The current *trend* of resourcing young human rights defenders should be applauded. However, there is a need to further interrogate how best to resource, capacitate, and strengthen the work of young movement builders. CIVICUS is not unique in its commitment toward resourcing young activists. Organisations such as Mama Cash, Action Aid, FRIDA, and the Global Resilience Fund have had a coordinated and structured approach toward moving flexible funding to young activists.

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BELOW ARE OUTCOMES AND RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE MEETING:

- 1 No new or 'groundbreaking' information came out of the catch-up party.** Ask guiding questions to get to the root of the information that is being shared. The guiding questions will help the control group reflect on their micro-experiences and not solely on macro-experiences. This will help boost strategic and critical thinking. For example, in the survey we asked "have you had a meaningful conversation with a funder about how funds or resources can best be accessed by your community?"; and in the 'Catch-Up party' we asked them "what allowed you to connect in the first place with that donor?/ "how did that conversation start?"



2 A break in relationship building with partners who do not make it into the final cohort happens frequently.

Consider having an evaluation process at least twice throughout the lifecycle of the project to keep partners engaged. 7 of 100 shortlisted candidates is a very low number to make a conclusive statement of how different or relevant the YAL is versus the experience of others outside the YAL (the “Control Group”).

3 The “control group” provided limited information as not too many people participated.

During the meeting, use different formats e.g. survey, Zoom meetings and one-on-one calls. If possible, use different tools such as Jamboard or Mentimeter so that participants who are not comfortable speaking in groups can write their responses.

4 Youth Action Lab Members Reported Higher Rates of Meaningful Funding Conversations with donors

Power?? conversations do not reach grassroots activists. Moreover, power imbalance between partners should be understood as an initial outcome of hierarchical settings. However, partner organisations can be intentional about flattening the imbalance. 11 of 31 participants had a meaningful conversation with a donor while in the Youth Action Lab; 11 of 31 had a good relationship with an international NGO that provided flexible funds.

We would like to extend our gratitude to all the young grassroots activists who gave their time to participate in the evaluation process.



IF POSSIBLE, USE DIFFERENT TOOLS SUCH AS JAMBOARD OR MENTIMETER SO THAT PARTICIPANTS WHO ARE NOT COMFORTABLE SPEAKING IN GROUPS CAN WRITE THEIR RESPONSES.

5 Most participants experienced donors setting the agenda for their projects.

Strengthening existing youth-led networks makes for meaningful cooperation. The YAL was deliberate in its efforts to not be prescriptive by ensuring youth inclusion during the co-design phase of the YAL programme until the evaluation phase at the end of the programme. Traditional top-down approaches are less suitable for activists. A flexible and context specific approach is needed to enable sustainability, local embeddedness, and legitimacy.