

YOUTH LEADERSHIP: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SUSTAINABILITY

YOUTH-LED ORGANISATIONS: WHY THEY MATTER

Youth-led non-governmental organisations are those that are fully led, managed and coordinated by young people. In the case of an organisation, it means that staff and members are all below a certain age, and work on a variety of issues from a youth perspective. While youth-led organisations have become increasingly visible in the international, regional and national arenas, many are still struggling to gain recognition as important players in international decision-making processes.

Now more than ever, youth-led organisations are critical to advancing public health because of the sheer numbers of young people in the world today. Currently, almost half the world's population is under 25 – that's three billion young people. These numbers alone may help explain why so many programmes and policies today have begun to focus on young people. Clearly, young people have a critical role to play in leading initiatives and developing policies when they make up such a significant part of the world's population.

Youth-led organisations are also important because through their work, they allow young people to exercise their right to participation (to be involved, to lead and to take action) in improving their health and well being around the world. Participation may mean being actively involved in the planning, implementation and evaluation of development activities, programmes and policies that affect their lives.¹

Lastly, youth-led organisations play a key role in contributing to the success of programmes, projects or initiatives related to young people. Young people have the best understanding of the challenges, strengths and opportunities that affect them. Youth-led organisations are in a unique position to develop and implement initiatives that address issues from a youth perspective and offer solutions that respond to the diverse realities of young people. When young people are meaningfully included in the design, implementation and evaluation of youth-related programmes, policies and services, these initiatives can be more effective and ultimately more sustainable.²

In order to achieve sustainable youth leadership, a strong commitment and investment from young leaders and youth organisations themselves is needed, in addition to the support of funders, non-youth organisations, organisers of meetings and conferences, and decision-making bodies.

This document provides insights into the unique challenges that youth-led organisations face, followed by concrete recommendations on how all actors can best support and facilitate youth leadership.

THE BASICS ON YOUTH-LED ORGANISATIONS: CHALLENGES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following describes some of the key challenges faced by youth-led organisations. Some of these challenges are intrinsic to the nature of youth-led organisations and can be anticipated. Some describe challenges that other non-governmental organisations face as well, however, they may be further intensified by the youth-specific challenges.

1. Aging-out: For youth organisations to remain truly youth-led, there is a process called "aging out," where members and staff transition out of the organisation when they reach a certain age. The age at which staff and members age-out depends on the organisation and its cultural context. In some youth organisations, young people age-out when they turn 25 while in others they may age-out when they turn 30. As a result, youth organisations are in a constant

state of transition. With aging out come new young members and staff, new knowledge, ideas and skills, but it also means a potential loss of organisational history, knowledge, skills, contacts and more.

- 2. High mobility:** In addition to the frequent turn-over rates among staff and members due to aging out, the high mobility of young people is a challenge. Young people often have to move on because of school, work or family. For youth-led organisations, this means additional turnover as members and staff transition out before aging-out.
- 3. Constant orientation, training and re-training:** While new leadership is a positive thing for youth-led organisations to stay true to their structure, it also creates a constant need to orient, train and retrain members and staff.
- 4. Leadership opportunities for a select few:** Often meeting organisers invite the same young individuals because they are only familiar with a few young leaders. Due to this, gaps of knowledge can develop within organisations and amongst young colleagues as a few select individuals gain skills and contacts. In addition, if the same individuals continuously represent young people in different proceedings, the important diversities among young people are over-simplified and misrepresented. Youth-led organisations are parts of all constituencies and this diversity should be recognised.
- 5. Moving past tokenism:** Often when youth are invited to meetings, conferences or to give input on policies and programmes, it is simply

because it "looks good" to have a youth representative or because a guideline exists on including young people. However, often no actual feedback from youth participants is expected, welcomed or integrated into the outcomes of the process. This is especially true when a commitment to meaningful youth leadership is lacking or not well understood by other stakeholders. While many in the international community believe that "elders always know best," this is not always the case, especially when dealing with issues that directly affect young people.

- 6. Not just volunteers:** Young people are often seen as volunteers—individuals who will work for free just for the chance to participate. While volunteering is a great thing and an integral part of many organisations, we must beware of acting as if all young people ought to be volunteers. The work of young people needs to be valued and recognised, and part of this means monetary remuneration. Without remuneration, young people often seek employment in other fields, which diminishes their capacity to become meaningfully involved.
- 7. Lack of or limited core funding:** Youth-led organisations face extreme difficulty securing funds for core operating costs, including the funds necessary to run an office, compensate staff and cover other overhead expenses. This is especially true for youth organisations that may have limited experience and lack a financial history. While all organisations face these challenges, the constant turnover of staff and leadership that youth-led organisations experience makes this a particularly difficult hurdle.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR YOUTH-LED ORGANISATIONS

1. Develop a clear mission and develop a strategic plan for the organisation that identifies a niche and guides priorities for the short and long term. Like any organisation, it is important for youth-led organisations to support their own core development through strategic planning. Such planning is important to keeping the organisation's work focused, effective and realistic.
2. Establish a process, plan and budget for ongoing recruitment of younger staff and members in anticipation of aging out. Given the need for youth-led organisations to frequently replace members who leave due to life changes or those who age out, anticipating and planning for re-recruitment of younger members and staff is fundamental. Building recruitment efforts into the work of those currently working for the organisation can help ensure a more sustained influx of new young people. Posting regular announcements for membership with rolling admission can also be helpful in attracting new young people over time.
3. Plan and implement ongoing orientation and training for new staff and members. As older members age out and new staff and members are recruited, the outgoing staff and members should orient the new staff and members to pass on information related to organisational history, existing commitments to funders and partner organisations, as well as contacts. Training should also be provided in areas deemed important by the organisation, such as strengthening of knowledge on key issues and skills important to the work of the organisation. The expenses related to this need to be budgeted for in advance.
4. Create a nomination process that maximises access to opportunities for as many members as possible, as opposed to only a select few. While opportunities for youth engagement can come at the last minute with tight deadlines, making it difficult to gather information on a wider selection of young people to nominate, steps can be taken to facilitate channelling opportunities to a larger number of young people. For example, sending alerts about opportunities to a listserve of members or through other networks can broaden reach of urgent opportunities for youth engagement and leadership. Also, creating an internal database of bios and/or photos of members of the organisation can be helpful in passing on recommendations for calls for youth participation, speakers, media work or other engagements.
5. Prepare members or staff with the necessary information and training to support their meaningful participation if selected for particular opportunities or events. For example, provide training in public speaking if selected for a presentation, in the role of a board member, if recruited to serve on a board of directors, or on how to talk to a reporter if invited for an interview.
6. Create policies, plans and a budget for remuneration or other forms of compensation for young people's efforts and time. Establish organisational policies that relate to remuneration and budget for, as well as implement, these policies consistently. For example, will members be paid for their time and/or will they receive a stipend to cover transportation to meetings and food?
7. Seek out opportunities for partnerships with other youth-led and youth-serving organisations and work in coalition to leverage efforts. When resources are limited, partnerships are critical to advancing efforts and building on existing and complementary initiatives.
8. Seek funding from diverse sources if at all possible, including local government, private foundations, international agencies, or individual funders. Obtaining funds, however small, from diverse entities provides more organisational flexibility as well as financial security.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUNDERS

1. Help youth-led organisations fund their core costs. Funders must acknowledge that core funding for staff turnover, annual meetings, marketing and communications, recruitment, internal training, strategic planning, staff salaries and other organisational costs are essential. Sustainable youth leadership requires having young people in paid coordinator, director and/or leadership roles of organisations, projects and initiatives.
2. Provide long-term funding for a minimum of one to three year terms. Funders with an interest in young people can make an effort to get to know youth-led organisations and develop relationships with them. Designing, implementing and evaluating youth programs takes time and longer-term funding would facilitate more strategic, sustainable programming as opposed to short-term, one time events. While support for short-term projects is appreciated, such grants in absence of broader funding often take staff time away from fulfilling other organisational objectives and leave organisations struggling to cover administrative costs.
3. Support institutional capacity building of youth-led organisations, including fundraising skills. Youth-led initiatives often lack the fundraising expertise, staff experience and long-term relationship that facilitate fundraising. Fundraising support and capacity building support are necessary for youth-led organisations to function effectively.
4. Fund organisational development projects, including incorporation processes. Many youth-led organisations start off as projects of larger more established organisations and over time gain more autonomy as separate entities. An important step for the growth of a youth-led organisation is to apply for incorporated status as an independent organisation from the appropriate governing authorities. This will enable the organisation to be a fully youth-led independent organisation. However, independence processes can be costly, since they usually involve legal council. It is therefore important that youth-led organisations have financial support to assist them in the transition towards independence. This support should include the costs of legal fees, as well as administrative and organisational support required for the staff leading this process.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR NON-YOUTH LED ORGANISATIONS

1. Trust in the work of youth-led organisations and believe that young people are their own experts. Encourage inputs, engage and work jointly with youth-led organisations. Work to build meaningful youth-adult partnerships, which can be beneficial to both youth-led and non-youth-led organisations. It is important for youth-serving organisations to recognise young people as full partners, inviting them to the table not because it is the “politically correct” thing to do or to fill a quota, but because their contribution is needed, respected and will be taken seriously.
2. Support young people through initiatives that encourage youth leadership at the local, national and international level. It is essential that youth allies and partners encourage not only one young person who they deem expert, but rather a group of young people with collective knowledge on the issue. In this way not only the knowledge, skills and network of one individual benefit, but rather the organisation as a whole benefits.
3. Integrate young people into the organisation’s work through staffing, board membership and other institutional leadership opportunities. Sustainable youth leadership means institutionally supporting young people as leaders and as equal partners in order to build on previous accomplishments and to continue our joint efforts – and not only having young people as interns or administrative assistants.
4. Develop effective policies and programs that are grounded in best practices that seek to ensure sustainable youth leadership.
5. Establish two-way learning opportunities, where youth are not only seen as mentees but as mentors also.³ For example, engage in a two-way mentorship relationship with a youth-led organisation. There are several areas in which many youth-led initiatives need advice and guidance – from legal and financial issues to technical expertise. In return, youth-led organisations can offer youth-serving organisations access to youth networks, program expertise, and general guidance.
6. Share fundraising skills and provide support to youth-led organisations by providing letters of support or introducing a youth organisation to relevant funders.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE ORGANISERS OF CONFERENCES AND MEETINGS

1. Allow youth constituencies to choose members to represent young people at global, regional and national meetings and events. This can ensure that the young person is supported by his/her peers and is knowledgeable about the specific issues being addressed.
2. Follow the *Take Two* principle. When you invite someone from a youth organisation to a meeting, invite two: one more experienced member, and one newer one. This will contribute to the sharing of knowledge, experience, and capacity building and facilitate the transition process immensely by building new leadership capacity. This approach allows for greater youth participation and inclusion while also facilitating member and staff transitions and organisational development.

¹ Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development, Action 6.15, <http://www.unfpa.org/icpd/>

² Family Health International Youth Participation Guide: Assessment, Planning, and Implementation, 2005.

³ Examples of best practices in this sense include: Youth Partnerships Initiative, World AIDS Campaign, Mexico YouthForce, <http://www.worldaidscampaign.org/en/Constituencies/Youth/WAC-and-Youth/Youth-Partnership-Initiative>; Multi-generational dialogue on activism and women’s rights organised by CWGL, CREA and the Youth Coalition in Sept-Oct 2007, http://www.youthcoalition.org/site08/html/index.php?id_art=82&id_cat=5

Additional Resources

Building Leadership for an Effective Organization: Selected Annotated Bibliography
<http://www.advocatesforyouth.org/publications/frtp/leadership.pdf>

Approaching Foundations (From Research to Practice)
<http://www.advocatesforyouth.org/publications/frtp/foundations.pdf>

Cultivating Individual Donors (From Research to Practice)
<http://www.advocatesforyouth.org/publications/frtp/indivdonors.pdf>

Ensuring Financial Sustainability: Selected Annotated Bibliography (From Research to Practice)
<http://www.advocatesforyouth.org/publications/frtp/financial.pdf>

Fund-Raising Tips for Local Organizations (From Research to Practice)
<http://www.advocatesforyouth.org/publications/frtp/fundraisingtips.pdf>

Youth Coalition: history of a youth-led organization
http://www.youthcoalition.org/site08/html/index.php?id_art=145&id_cat=2

The flower of participation
<http://www.choiceforyouth.org/index.cfm?vID=11399323-1143-5B72-683F3F91497C2263>