

# THE POWER OF RADICAL COLLABORATION



CO-DESIGNING SOLUTIONS IN PARTNERSHIP  
WITH YOUTH **BY ATHAVARN SRIKANTHARAJAH**





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## INTRODUCTION

Young people are facing increasing barriers and threats to their activism. Youth-led movements are unable to access sustainable resourcing, lack the technical capacity and networks to engage with political systems, and continue to work in silos, separated from other movements and activists across geographies, movements, and causes.

Often, these barriers and existing hierarchies in civil society often position youth as foot soldiers and not as change agents. Through extensive research and consultation with stakeholders, CIVICUS has come to understand that designing an alternative resourcing mechanism that centers meaningful youth participation is imperative to achieve a sustainable, resilient, and inclusive civil society.

Thus, CIVICUS, in partnership with the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation, launched an initiative called “Strengthening 21st Century Citizen Action,” examining how we can better resource

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and support young activists and new generation changemakers. A component of the project was to co-design and test a resourcing mechanism for young activists from the global south who do not align themselves with traditional civil society.

To do so, CIVICUS Youth recruited a regionally diverse team of youth advocates and activists to co-design and implement a one-year pilot program focused on supporting 10 youth activists from around the world. During a week-long co-creation meeting in Johannesburg, South Africa in September 2019, the team designed a test-pilot, called the Youth Action Lab.

The co-design team is a group of young, positive and innovative change makers from the Global South challenging the traditional structures, working to envision new ways of doing, working, and designing programs for civil society in a more collaborative and experimental manner. The co-design team is committed to testing new ways of relating and questioning power dynamics within INGOs to enable young people to flourish with their communities.

This co-design team is a multicultural and international team working remotely with the CIVICUS Secretariat through open platforms and virtual conference calls to deliver a protocol for a pilot programme to support the work of ten young fellows/activists coming from different communities and networks across the globe.

The co-design process concluded as of March 2020, after eight months of joint work to produce the result: Youth Action Lab.<sup>1</sup> Throughout the journey, CIVICUS Youth has collected a variety of data about the co-design journey through surveys, reflection discussions, and other means. This summary examines the experiences of participants and staff throughout the co-design journey and aims to identify the strengths, weaknesses, and potential of utilizing co-design methodologies for more inclusive and effective solutions.

<sup>1</sup>CIVICUS Youth, January 2020, [Youth Action Lab](#).



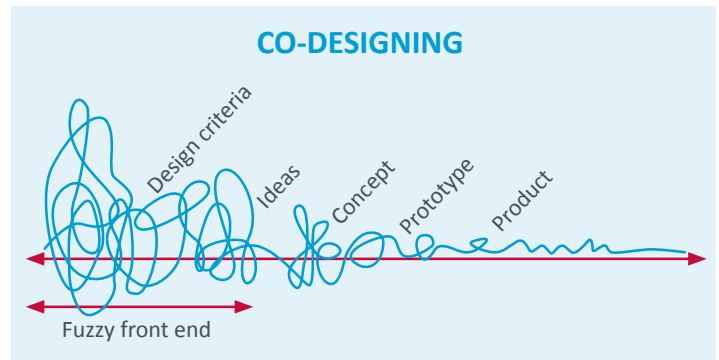
## WHAT IS CO-DESIGN?

Many international non-governmental organisations and civil society actors have begun to question the stark power-imbalances between northern, larger INGOs and the southern, resource-restricted grassroots groups. As a result, many have begun to explore potential avenues to [shift power from larger institutions to local communities](#). One mechanism through which this can be done, is **co-design**.<sup>2</sup> In the context of restricted civic spaces, increased populism, and shrinking resources – institutions and civil society actors must leverage their capacities to collaborate and invent new ways of tackling social justice challenges.<sup>3</sup>

Co-design is a highly collaborative practice where people bring together their skills, expertise, cultural context, and lived experiences to produce solutions to pressing challenges. This methodology centres the lived experiences of those who experience the realities of the challenges in question.<sup>4</sup> Co-design allows participants to not only identify the challenges but design solutions which benefit them. Sanders & Stapper (2008) argue that “in a co-design process, the roles change: the person who will eventually be served through the design process is given the position of ‘experts of their experience’, and plays a large role in knowledge development, idea generation and concept development.”<sup>5</sup>



Figure 1 Depicts the front-end design experience as a non-linear practice.<sup>6</sup>



What differentiates co-design from other advisory mechanisms are two key factors: (1) the emphasis on utilizing creative methodologies to reveal perspectives and lived experiences and (2) engaging stakeholders in making decisions on the proposed solutions. By having end users engaged within the process from the beginning, the solutions designed are more likely to be contextually relevant and provide participants the appropriate agency.<sup>7</sup> Co-design is becoming an increasingly popular methodology, as the increasing complexity of social, political, environmental, educational, and technological issues require the united capacities of diverse stakeholders working together equitably to solve them.

It is important to note the complexity of engaging in co-design; it is a process which requires intentionality and patience by the convenor of the design process. The success of a co-design process is predicated on one's ability to negotiate, challenge normative constructs, and ultimately share power equitably between stakeholders. Participants may take different roles within different stages of the design process, acting as facilitators at one stage and as data gatherers in another. It requires the continuous flexibility of both the participants, and the structures put in place to facilitate their progress.<sup>8</sup>

There have been many use cases of co-design within civil society, from which CIVICUS has drawn from in order to produce its own approaches to co-designing solutions. This mainly includes Oxfam Quebec's work with the Actua.pe partnership.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>2</sup>Deborah Doane, June 2019, [Are INGOs ready to give up power?](#)

<sup>3</sup>The Spindle, October 2018, [Joining forces, sharing power: civil society collaborations for the future](#).

<sup>4</sup>Anna Salmi & Tuuli Mattelmäki, February 2019, [From within and in-between – co-designing organizational change](#).

<sup>5</sup>Elizabeth B.-N. Sanders & Pieter Jan Stappers, March 2008, [Co-creation and the new landscapes of design](#).

<sup>6</sup>Ibid

<sup>7</sup>Anna Salmi & Tuuli Mattelmäki, February 2019, [From within and in-between – co-designing organizational change](#).

<sup>8</sup>Theodore Zamenopoulos & Katerina Alexiou, September 2018, [Co-Design as Collaborative Research](#).

<sup>9</sup>Oxfam, April 2019, [Strengthening Youth Activism to Tackle Inequality](#).



## OUR JOURNEY

This process began with an initial design workshop to begin exploring what an initiative which would support young activists would look like. CIVICUS convened several youth activists within its network in a participatory design workshop which took place in Uruguay in 2018, and began to develop an initiative to challenge traditional ways of working within civil society and address power-imbalances between young activists and more formal civil society actors. Through various iterations, the design process continued, including an additional design workshop in Serbia during International Civil Society Week in 2019.

The need to compensate young activists for their labour became apparent as the design process progressed in order to protect from exploitation. As such, in July 2019 CIVICUS launched a call for a team of regionally disbursed young activists under the age of 35 who would engage in a co-design process for eight months, with the plan to launch a pilot program in March 2020. A total of 262 applications were received, amongst whom 33 moved forward to the short-list. Five group interviews were conducted, ultimately leading to the selection of the final team who called themselves the “Ubuntu Team.” More information about their profiles can be found [here](#).

Following their selection, the co-design team convened in South Africa at the CIVICUS headquarters for a design-thinking workshop. The process centred the research, prototypes, and methodologies already utilized in previous iterations of the design process. This foundation was then built upon by the co-design team to develop a more comprehensive program plan. Throughout the week, they also engaged in various

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capacity-strengthening and team building activities with the help of staff facilitators.

In addition, the team designed its own governance model, communications plan, and work plan. Ultimately, the week completed with the Youth Action Lab, a year-long pilot program to support young activists to be more sustainable and resilient through flexible resourcing, strategy development, and alliance-building.

In the fall of 2019, the co-design team began working virtually to construct the components of the Lab and begin testing its validity with relevant stakeholders. The team of nine split into various sub-groups and would convene bi-weekly to share progress updates. The group practiced rotational leadership, wherein each month a new member of the team would be responsible for anchoring the work of the team including sending the agenda, facilitating team meetings, and following-up on action points.

They worked on a consensus decision-making system, wherein participants would be given time to provide constructive feedback to others on their work, and then would vote to approve the item as an official component of the Lab. They utilized a “Yes,” “Consent” and “No” wherein participants may be able to consent to a decision despite their discontent with it or block it if they feel there is a fundamental flaw.



Should the participant choose to block, they must provide an adequate solution to the challenge.

After months of co-designing and individual work, in December 2019 many of the components for the Youth Action Lab were completed. This included a communications plan for the program launch, an application form and selection criteria, and research analysis of the relevance of the pilot program with our target audience. The research analysis was particularly fruitful, as all members of the design team conducted semi-structured interviews with other young activists, they have access to through their own local networks.<sup>10</sup>

Throughout this process, there were a variety of opportunity for networking and stakeholder engagement to promote the Youth Action Lab. In September 2019, two participants had the opportunity to attend a dialogue between funding agencies, philanthropic foundations and grassroots groups, which was facilitated by CIVICUS in the United Kingdom. In addition, we held focus groups during the Inter-Regional Retreat of Innovation for Change in Bangkok in November. The findings from the focus groups contributed to the research analysis.

The Youth Action Lab officially launched in January 2020, with the application period open until the beginning of February. We received a total of 14,000 different engagements with our platform, from whom we received 1050 applications. All participants of our selection committee we CIVICUS staff or members under the age of 30. With their support we narrowed the applications to a final long list of 90. The co-design team convened again in Jordan in February of 2020 to narrow down the 90 to final 10 participants.

After a challenging, but similarly rewarding eight months of collaboration and creativity, the co-design process officially concluded at the end of March 2020.



Participants of the co-design team participating in a panel with Jordanian youth activists.

<sup>10</sup>Co-Design Team, December 2019, [Research Report](#).

## WHAT WE LEARNED

The eight-months spent by CIVICUS to co-design and test a new resourcing mechanism was often ridden with various challenges, yet the results were fruitful and spoke to the capability of civil society to work through more collaborative and equitable mechanisms. Ultimately, the challenges provided key learnings to the CIVICUS Secretariat as to how to utilize this mechanism for more effective program design.

The coordination team within CIVICUS made significant effort to document these challenges and track progress through three evaluation surveys and a group reflection discussion. The following section will explore some of the results of these evaluations, as well as anecdotal evidence which was documented throughout the process.

### 1 LOGISTICS

As previously mentioned, intentionality and attention to detail are required when convening a co-design process. Planning the logistic considerations of convening a global team to engage in participatory design work was one of the most significant challenges faced by the coordination team. This mainly included remote work and travel.

Many participants indicated remote work as a point of anxiety for them during their pre-assessment evaluations. Time zones and varying time commitments were selected as the two potential challenges. This did remain true as a challenge throughout the process, however time zones did not greatly impact the work.

Contrary to the predictions, travel posed the most significant barrier to co-design process. Many of the participants originate from locations which often encounter various problems in acquiring visas. In addition, our meetings were held in destinations which were often accompanied by restrictive visa processes. In our first meeting in South Africa, seven participants successfully obtained visas and were able to attend, while for our second meeting in Jordan, only five participants successfully obtained visas and were able to attend.

Participants referred to this as a consistent source of stress they experienced during the co-design process. In addition, to run an effective co-design process, participants must equitably be able to engage in discussion and negotiation. The participants who were unable to attend in person reported difficulties remaining engaged with the process in both the interim evaluation and post-evaluation.

## 2 CAPACITY STRENGTHENING

An integral part of co-designing is ensuring that participants have the adequate resources and tools they require to develop components of key solutions. Arguably, co-design can continue even beyond the life of the specific project as they often have developed their capacity and are able to continue contributing their expertise and experience towards the issues in question (Ehn 2008; 92-101). This remains true as the current team is now leading work with other organizations to research civic space challenges faced by young people.

Through the pre-assessment survey, we identified that research methodologies and monitoring and evaluation as two key areas for capacity-strengthening. From the coordination team's perspective, this was a key gap as we did not identify opportunities for knowledge-sharing and peer-learning.

Throughout the design process, some information emerged about the participants' individual capacities. Many participants commented that they gained better understanding of the global resourcing landscape for civil society organizations and the key civic space challenges faced by civil society organizations.

By the end of the co-design process, many participants did not indicate that they gained new skills through the co-design process. However, many reported that they did strengthen existing capacities and skills through utilizing them for design work and through peer-learning. Many participants commented that the process strengthened their capacity to work in collaborative and horizontal structures. One participant commented that "the most important thing I learned was how to share power and leadership with others."

This indicates that co-design is an opportunity to collective existing skills and competencies and bolster the capacity of stakeholders to engage in this work. It indicates potential gaps on behalf of the coordination team in terms of providing participants with effective capacity-strengthening opportunities.

BY THE END OF THE CO-DESIGN PROCESS, MANY PARTICIPANTS DID NOT INDICATE THAT THEY GAINED NEW SKILLS THROUGH THE CO-DESIGN PROCESS.

## 3 TEAM CHEMISTRY

Creating strong teams is a challenge for any organization, but in this instance proved an increased challenge due to the diverse lived experiences, expectations, and competencies of the co-design team.

The central aim of the co-design process was to create a mechanism that was inclusive of young people who operate outside of the traditional structures of civil society. With that aim in mind we launched the co-design process in order to select individuals who met that criteria. However, through various internal discussions and logistics concerns, CIVICUS opted to launch recruitment for teams of young people, rather than individual young people.

This posed a significant number of challenges in terms of accessibility for our target audience. Although the design team we selected were a passionate and enthusiastic group, not all of them fit the persona we were initially seeking. This became apparent during the pre-assessment evaluation, where only 29% of the participants felt strongly connected with grassroots movements in the Global South. In addition, it proved difficult to find teams which were well balanced in terms of skill and competency.

Prior to launching the process, 100% of participants reported in the pre-assessment evaluation that they felt confident in their other team members and their ability to achieve product outcomes. However, this changed over the course of the eight months. Through lack of engagement and differing quality of product, conflict began to form within the team. Only 12% of participants reported being very satisfied with their colleagues engagement and contributions during the interim evaluation.

Members of the co-design team reported that they felt their colleagues were not contributing as the same level as others, ultimately creating tensions within the group. One respondent of the interim evaluation commented that "Some team members have shown less than impressive commitment while others have continuously done their best to deliver credible work. That, to my mind is not equitable. Also, a few teammates neglect the micro team tasks to their teammates while making excuses of unavailability."

This created various points of contention throughout the co-design process, which were never



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ultimately resolved respite continuous conversations and feedback. In the post-evaluation survey, another participant commented that one of their most significant challenges was “team members staying engaged throughout the project. I have the impression that in the second half of it some team members were disengaged, not that responsive and/or interested.” The design team had put in place mechanisms through their governance model to address it, but rarely use its tools to enforce engagement. Engagement began to falter towards the end of the process due to this.

The coordination team aimed to address this by hosting individual check-in calls to understand peoples’ various contexts and experiences. This proved fruitful in the interim, as participants began to re-engage and commit to new pieces of work. However, engagement began to falter again after a few months.

Reflecting on their experiences, many co-design team members commented that they would recommend smaller teams of designers to engage in these processes. Most participants suggested that the co-design team should consist of 5-6 designers instead of 9 and that the contract period should be less than eight months in order to facilitate more intensive engagement. This held true from the coordination team’s perspective, as the most work occurred during the September – December period, and only a few members of the team were required to do so.

## 4 COMMUNICATIONS

Co-design requires constant and multi-channel communication feedback between participants of the Youth Action Lab. Lack of communication can often lead to disengagement, confusion, and often conflict. This held true within the co-design process. Participants need to be provided with all the information available so that they can make informed decision.

During the interim assessment, the co-design participants commented on the difficulties of receiving information from the coordination team and ultimately the secretariat, as there were often lack of clarity around logistics and new changes happening at the organizational level. In the interim, the coordination team aimed to address this by providing bi-weekly updates and more frequent communications with the team. Despite this, participants reflected that after communication was still an area that required improvement within the post-evaluation.

## 5 DECISION MAKING

A co-design process is one that involves a lot of decision making: long term, midterm, short term and intermittent. The co-design team realised this from inception and included a decision making guideline in its governance model, which laid down a parallel format for decision making in line with the horizontal relationship of Civicus and the Co-design team.

With such clarity, the initial process was smooth and decisions were jointly made on all issues of importance, including assignments of tasks, procedures and design formats. One of the impressive outcomes of that process was rotational leadership.



# WHAT WE LEARNED



## 1 ENSURE THAT AS MANY PARTICIPANTS AS POSSIBLE CAN **ATTEND IN-PERSON**

CONVENING, BY SELECTING VISA-FRIENDLY LOCATIONS AND PROVIDING ENOUGH TIME AND SUPPORT FOR VISA APPLICATIONS.



## 2 INVEST IN INNOVATIVE **COMMUNICATIONS TECHNOLOGY** AND

FACILITATING DIGITAL ENGAGEMENT TO ENSURE ACTIVE PARTICIPATION ACROSS TIME ZONES AND REGIONS.

## 3

IDENTIFY AND IMPLEMENT OPPORTUNITIES FOR CAPACITY

STRENGTHENING BY PROVIDING **TRAINING AND CONNECTING CO-DESIGN PARTICIPANTS TO TECHNICAL EXPERTS.**



## 4

**CONDUCT RECRUITMENT INDIVIDUALLY** IN ORDER

TO ENSURE THAT MORE NON-TRADITIONAL ACTORS ARE ABLE TO PARTICIPATE WITHIN CO-DESIGN.



## 5 RECRUIT SMALLER NUMBERS OF PEOPLE FOR SHORTER PERIODS OF TIME TO

ENSURE A CONCERTED AND INTENSIVE ENGAGEMENT WITH THE CO-DESIGN PROCESS.



## 6 CREATE CHANNELS FOR ONGOING **COMMUNICATIONS**

ABOUT PROGRAM ACTIVITIES, UPDATES, AND DECISIONS, AND MAKE SURE ALL PARTICIPANTS IN THE CO-DESIGN TEAM ARE INFORMED.



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