



REBALANCING POWER IN MENTORSHIP PROGRAMMES



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3RD TIMES A CHARM FOR CIVICUS' 'MENTORSHIP' PROGRAMME

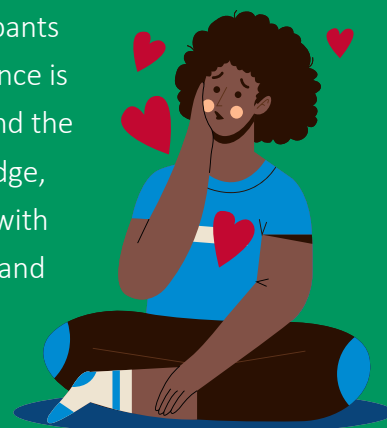
In the prototyping phase of the [Youth Action Lab](#) (YAL), the team absorbed all the learnings and recommendations from the project's Advisory Group and framed the mentorship programme as a Learning Partnership Programme. It was such a great success in the first year that, in 2021, it was replicated almost identically and got a feedback score of 100/ 100 on the question "how likely would you recommend a colleague or a friend to participate in a learning partnership of this kind?". The only modification made in 2021 was to start the programme earlier, so instead of having 5 to 6 months of a committed mutual learning relationship, partners had 7 to 8 months together. Reflections from the first iteration in 2020 are [here](#), and the outcomes and reflections from 2021 are below:

I. OUTCOMES & SURPRISES

- The biggest surprise and takeaway for most of the learning partners was how powerful young activists' are through their commitment and energy toward their communities. The eight months together was an opportunity for learning partners to reconnect with grassroots activism, to remember and re-spark the reasons for beginning their social change-making journey's, to re-energize themselves, familiarise themselves with new social media platforms, and digital security tactics or protocols to stay safe while fighting for social justice.
- The second one was the realisation, empathy and increased concern about the enormous risks grassroots, particularly young, activists, are facing and their bravery and resilience in facing them.

Learning partners left the programme even more committed to the causes of their YAL partner than when they started. Some are still voluntarily supporting the YAL activists because of all the work that is still left to do to change public policies and mindsets that their partner made them aware of.

- The third learning participants learned from this experience is greater self-confidence and the ability to transfer knowledge, share information, listen with an open mind and heart, and understand different contexts even if they are in the same country.



Some of the learning partnerships shared achievements such as the production of **blog posts**, **opened-eds**, and articles important for the YAL activist to raise awareness using effective communication and creative skills. Others were the creation of a mobilisation network in support of the local LGBTQI+ community and a **national campaign** involving decision-



makers to start discussing the rights of a Personal Assistance for people with disabilities. YAL participants inspired and opened the eyes of their partners to multiple worlds, issues and struggles that they would not have been able to explore if it wasn't for this relationship.

Beyond being a learning opportunity, the Learning Partnership Programme is an avenue to recruit and strengthen allyship across generations, borders, cultures and disciplines for youth-led citizen action.

II. ELEMENTS OF SUCCESS

FRAMING: PARTNERSHIP VS. MENTORSHIP

- Traditionally, 'mentorship' has a connotation of inequality and power imbalance between the 'knowledge holder' and the 'learner' or 'apprentice'. However, over and over throughout time and no matter which discipline, every mentor ends the programme affirming they also learned a great deal from their mentees. "Mentor-mentee relationships play significant roles in the growth and development of both mentors and mentees, and the impacts of effective mentorship have been well documented, including psychosocial, academic, and career, across diverse fields". Therefore, to avoid putting any hierarchy on the participants of this learning exchange while also recognising their valuable experience, skills and knowledge that they are willing to share, Youth Action Lab advisors called this a **Learning Partnership Programme**.

With this framing, participants were placed in the same position: learning partners. Both partners sign up recognising that they are there to learn from one another and create a safe space for both to exchange with no judgement. Even though the type and maybe depth of the technical knowledge and skills exchanged are different, both parties were open to giving and receiving equally during the course of their experience.

FUN FACT!

While the young activists knew more or less what they wanted to take away from this experience after their time reflecting on what their needs were, the experienced civil society practitioners did not know exactly what they were going to learn from their partner, it was all a surprise.

The programme is powerful. It has the potential to change lives. At this point in my career things can get redundant. This programme brings renewed energy by engaging with someone who is learning from you. It challenges you.



RECRUITMENT: RELATIONSHIPS VS. NEWCOMERS

- Most successful YAL Learning Partnerships were the ones where the parties knew each other before the programme. **Most of the time young activists know 'experts' or 'leaders' in their communities that they admire but do not have the resources to compensate them for their support in coaching them.** Hence, having the opportunity for a third party (in this case CIVICUS) to offer a financial contribution to this 'local expert' or partner, helped both partners to continue nurturing existing relationships and advance easily over common agendas. **Having an existing relationship with the learning partner helped to dedicate more time in mutual growth instead of time in 'getting to know each other'.**



Similar to the YAL cohort of 2020, some participants did not know a 'local expert' and asked the CIVICUS team to help them identify one. However, this year the team tapped into the existing relationships nurtured in 2020 and invited two learning partners from the 2020 YAL iteration, to work with two 2021 YAL cohort members- instead of finding outside partners from the YAL community. It went very well.

FUN FACT!

One of the young activists from the 2020 YAL cohort became a 2021 learning partner and put in practice all the knowledge on project management, stakeholder mapping and strategic planning received from her learning partners in the previous year and transferred it to a 2021 YAL activist who was actually 4 years older than her.



SEMI-STRUCTURED FORMAT

Some of the learning partners have participated in coaching or similar learning experiences before, but for most of them this was a new experience. Therefore, in 2020 the CIVICUS team provided some light touch resources to support the partners to shape their journey in the way that made most sense to them. Thanks to the positive feedback from the first iteration on having a semi-structured format for these relationships, in 2021 all learning partners received: .

- 1 One brief paper outlining what the Learning Partnership Programme is, the objectives of the Youth Action Lab, the areas the young activists were keen to learn or develop further, and the timeline and conditions of the programme
- 2 An Action Plan template for each pair to work together in defining their common objectives, milestones, deadlines and preferred ways and dates of communication.
- 3 A template to capture reflections, learnings and outputs called a Grow Log
- 4 A mid-term survey to reflect on the experience four months into the partnership and the opportunity to decide if they wish to continue or change something from their Action Plan.
- 5 A beginning and end of the programme group virtual call



PATIENCE

- Unfortunately, the multiple crises we face daily do not allow us to stop. There is always someone needing immediate help and calling us in different directions. Young activists are requested to respond to family, school, work demands on top of their commitments to their communities. As a learning partner and organisations committed to supporting youth-led activism to be effective, sustainable and resilient, **being patient and empathetic is fundamental**. Young activists, and grassroots changemakers in general, can not dedicate the same amount of time on a regular basis, or during traditional working hours, to these kinds of opportunities. As allies, it is up to us to adapt to their availability, wait, and when requested potentially support with time management and

work organisation. Requiring young activists to fit the nine to five and Monday to Friday schedule is part of the problematic power dynamics used to discredit the “trustworthiness” and “reliability” of grassroots activists and youth in particular.



A lot of emotional support is needed to make this relationship and learning journey work.

ADAPTABILITY

Knowing what you need is not easy. Sometimes even realising that we need help is not easy. The ability of learning partners to listen, ask tough questions and be patient was crucial to understanding exactly where the YAL activist was standing and adapt accordingly to their circumstances and needs. In some cases, the Learning Partnership transformed from a relationship aiming to learn about fundraising, for example, to a relationship to analyse, channel and organise the young activists' ambition to create a strategic plan and

define working methodologies for the Lab participant. This speaks to allowing each pair to define what success looks and feels like for their context. It's about the experience of the two individuals involved and how they report their learnings to their organisations that counts. Thus, once the proper time is being put in to find out what the precise needs or priorities for both partners are, it is essential to keep an open mind and be flexible about the outcome of the envisioned plan and allow both parties to grow.

My Learning Partner allowed me to re-strengthen my knowledge. It was an opportunity to learn what I know all over again and to re-connect me to the reality on the ground'



III. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR NEXT ITERATIONS

- It was recommended by learning partners and YAL activists that in future, the YAL activists be connected to more than one learning partner and have the opportunity to hear what the others are doing and how. Therefore, the

commitment for 2022 is to curate a group in the CIVICUS Member 2 Member online platform to stay in touch and keep sharing resources that will allow all the activists to keep getting stronger and resilient.