CO-DESIGN

1. Background
2. Approach
3. Conditions for Success
4. Checklist

This section is part of the Youth Action Lab Playbook - a collection of resources, learnings and recommendations for donors and youth partners based on the Youth Action Lab pilot project. Click here to read more about the YAL Playbook, its background and purpose.

BACKGROUND

Since the important success of Design Thinking in the private, public and non-profit sector, co-design or co-creation is now a preferred methodology and approach to ensure active participation from diverse stakeholders interested in solving a common challenge.

APPROACH

Start by identifying the problem, understanding its complexities and frame your challenge question.

In the case of the Youth Action Lab, the challenge was: how can established civil society organisations and international cooperation institutions better resource and support the new generation of changemakers and individual activists who may not work within or associate themselves with organised civil society, to become more resilient, diverse and vibrant to realise a more just, inclusive and sustainable world?
Through an open call, CIVICUS recruited a regionally diverse team of 9 young change makers to **co-design a solution to the above challenge in the most innovative and relevant way, with a flexible budget of up to $500,000 USD and almost full time support from two CIVICUS Staff members for nine months.**

The selected co-design team was a multicultural and international team of young, positive change makers from the Global South, passionate about challenging traditional structures of civil society organisations. They worked with the CIVICUS Secretariat through open platforms and virtual conference calls to envision new ways of working to design a pilot project for civil society in a collaborative and experimental manner. The co-design team was committed to testing new ways of relating and questioning power dynamics within and outside INGOs to enable young people to flourish within their communities.

Two key factors differentiate a co-design team from other advisory mechanisms or bodies: (1) utilising creative methodologies to reveal perspectives and lived experiences and (2) engaging stakeholders in making decisions on the proposed solutions. By having end users engaged in the process from the beginning, the solutions are more likely to be contextually relevant and provide participants the appropriate agency.\(^1\)

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Once the research, framing and recruitment concluded, the team designed a pilot or prototype during a week-long co-creation meeting in Johannesburg, South Africa in September 2019. The co-design process concluded in March 2020, after eight months of joint work to produce the result: the Youth Action Lab. Throughout the journey, the CIVICUS team 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 in more detail and identifies the strengths, weaknesses, and potential of utilising co-design methodologies for more inclusive and effective solutions.
CONDITIONS FOR SUCCESS

Trust and flexibility

Thanks to the trust and flexibility provided by the donor, CIVICUS as an intermediary, was able to create the details of this project from the very beginning with members close to the stated problem. Once the co-design team was recruited it was very important that they be active listeners, to adapt to the needs and feedback from those closest to the issue and accept unexpected outcomes from the process. It was important for CIVICUS to build a team that represented values around trust, respect, authenticity, reliability and openness to constant learning. These values set the tone in the relationship between the CIVICUS team and the co-design team to work together on the Youth Action Lab prototype.

Compensation

The need to compensate young activists for their labour became apparent as the design process progressed in order to protect them from exploitation. CIVICUS therefore introduced a compensation scheme for activists who contribute their time and skills in shaping a new programme, campaign or research. Achieving this entailed long conversations with peer organisations that are captured in Maximising Benefits: A Recommended Framework for Volunteerism and Compensation of Young People.

Patience and mentorship

Even though this project recruited young activists with experience in social change, some of the envisioned tasks were entirely new to them and resulted in the timeline for envisioned for the design of the initiative being delayed. This hiccup meant additional time to onboard, coach and mentor the team during the design phase. A process of 3-4 months took 9 months. It was important to learn to be flexible and patient with members while they were learning and mastering the new skills and then delivering on the determined missions.
Team Chemistry

Team chemistry proved to be an added challenge due to the diverse lived experiences, expectations, work culture and competencies of the co-design team. Although the design team selected were a passionate and enthusiastic group, not all of them fit the persona initially envisioned. 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 that 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. The co-design team had put in place mechanisms through their governance model to address this, but rarely used these tools to enforce engagement. 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.
Communications

Co-design requires constant and multichannel communication. Lack of communication can often lead to disengagement, confusion, and conflict. This held true within the co-design process. Participants needed to be provided with all the information available to make informed decisions.

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 was often a lack of clarity around logistics and new changes happening at the organisational level. In the interim, the coordination team aimed to address this by providing bi-weekly updates and more frequent communication with the team. Despite this, participants reflected in the post-evaluation that communication was still an area that required improvement.
Governance models

A co-design process 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 assignment of tasks, procedures and design formats. One of the impressive outcomes of that process was rotational leadership. A co-design process 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 assignment of tasks, procedures and design formats. One of the impressive outcomes of that process was rotational leadership.

Rotational Leadership.

Under this leadership system, leadership is distributed among team members rather than being invested in a single leader. This means that every member of a new product development team has the same rights and is on the same hierarchical level. It is facilitated by an overall team environment that consists of shared purpose, social support, and voice. ²

Define the problem, understand its complexities and frame your question.

Identify the characteristics/criteria that best describes the target audience – the most affected groups or individuals.

Depending on the size of your networks and the time available, determine if you can run an open call or follow a nominations process to start the recruitment process.

In the call for application or nomination, the selection criteria, roles and responsibilities, time commitment and expectations must be presented very clearly. In the call it is imperative to mention how the co-design team members will be compensated (financially or in kind).

Recruit a design team with lived experiences and identities similar to groups you identified (target audience or end users).

Recruit individuals (not already established groups) for the co-design team to ensure that more non-traditional actors are able to participate in co-design and recruit people with the right skills and experiences.

Recruit a smaller team for a shorter period of time to ensure concerted and intensive engagement with the co-design process. 5 or 6 members is a good size.

Note: This implies reducing representation by some sub-regions, languages, identities, etc. It is a ‘sacrifice’ to make and requires thinking about a diversity and inclusion approach to bring different voices into the design process in various capacities and times.

Offer capacity strengthening opportunities by providing training and connecting co-design participants to technical experts to cover gaps and provide a mix of financial and in-kind compensation to the co-design team for their work.

Invest in innovative communications technology and facilitate digital engagement to ensure active participation across time zones and regions.

Create channels for ongoing communications about programme activities, updates, and decisions, and make sure all participants in the co-design team are informed.

Ensure that as many team members as possible can attend in-person design workshops or convenings, by selecting, for example, visa-friendly locations and providing enough time and support for visa applications.

Consider having risk mitigation plans and strategies in place to ensure the smooth operation of the project.

Sustain the engagement of the co-design team after the recruitment of the first cohort. An effective co-design team could serve as ‘buddies’ for the grantee-partners and as an decision or advisory group for the project management team through the journey.
The Playbook is to be read and applied according to your context and can be adapted to suit your needs. Each practice is independent of the other so the order you want to choose to explore is always the right one. **Click** on one of the circles below to learn more about each practice.