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

Reporting requirements can be overwhelming for young activists who lack experience in engaging with grantmaking organisations.

The Youth Action Lab (YAL) recognised this challenge and aimed to ease the burden and increase the value of reporting processes for its participants by walking the reporting journey with them to increase skills and confidence, and including their communities in the process. For the narrative report, each participant wrote their own story of change they perceived from the activities implemented during the YAL period in their preferred language and preferred format: video, infographic, blog post, slide show, or essay. For the financial report, each participant accounted for their expenses in a template provided by the CIVICUS finance team. The success of the reporting phase depended on the clarity of the communications and accompaniment provided to participants.

However, understanding this entailed a process of trial and error...
In 2020, at the beginning of COVID-19 global restrictions, the communication between CIVICUS's team and participants was to an extent confusing, contradictory and distant. In February 2020, YAL participants were told that their award was going to be US$2,499 and did not require a financial report, only a narrative report. However, global lockdowns happened in March 2020 and required a switch from in-person to online interaction, so participants received an additional US$2,500 to purchase the necessary equipment to work remotely. With this increased financial award, CIVICUS’s reporting requirements also changed, requiring additional documentation to ensure CIVICUS’s own donor compliance. This change caused confusion for many participants, and one participant did not understand or ‘forgot’ to save supporting documents to account for his expenditure with the additional funds. Without the supporting documentation, CIVICUS could not provide the documentation they needed to send the donor to charge the expenses to the intended grant and instead CIVICUS used its core funding. This caused tension and frustration.

Thanks to that lesson, in 2021 we tested a new approach of sharing information three different times in three different ways to increase efficiency and effectiveness in the reporting process and timeline.

This led us to receive 8/11 reports within four weeks, very different from the 12-weeks it took to complete the reporting phase with the 2020 cohort. The remaining three reports of 2021 arrived eight weeks after the deadline because of competing commitments in the participants' lives.

This is a common situation when working with youth who do activism as a volunteer and are fully embedded in their community while pursuing their studies, starting a family and/or being caretakers for their parents in some cases.
**APPROACH #1**

The YAL co-design team shared that first-time grantees, especially young people, feel a great deal of anxiety when signing funding agreements due to the responsibility that this entails. This resulted in signed funding agreements in the first iteration of the YAL being received six months after the programme started.

Therefore, the CIVICUS youth project team attempted to ease the stress and burden by breaking down this process into **five steps**:

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<th>3 DIFFERENT TIMES</th>
<th>3 DIFFERENT WAYS</th>
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<td>3 months before the deadline</td>
<td>Creating a simplified version of traditional contracts CIVICUS provides when granting funds. The <em>Youth Action Lab Funding Agreement</em> template had 6 pages instead of the 20 pages of a traditional agreement.</td>
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<td>2 months before the deadline</td>
<td>Translating the Funding Agreement into the languages YAL participants were comfortable with.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1 month before the deadline</td>
<td>Offering a 90-minute group call to walk participants through each clause of the agreement.</td>
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Participants mentioned that the process was not as straightforward as they would have liked. However, they all said at the end they felt very proud for doing it and some are using the financial and narrative reporting template for their organisations. Having access to the financial and narrative reports from the previous cohort helped them to better understand what was expected of them, and saved time.
Outcome of the 3 times-3 ways communications rule:

- **Increased efficacy & confidence:** The session with the YAL participants, the YAL coordination team and the finance team provided an initial boost of confidence to the participants thanks to the clear explanations and patience of the team answering all the questions. Moreover, it also **gave the finance team the opportunity to hear directly from the partners, so that they could better accommodate their needs.** For example, although the finance team mostly manages financial reports in English, this year the participants were able to submit their reports in their own languages.

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“My experience with reviewing financial reports for YAL participants are as follows:

1. **At first, some participants did well as per CIVICUS financial reporting requirements while other participants struggled due to a lack of financial background or those participants who were struggling, CIVICUS coordinators assisted and guided them on how they should prepare the financial reports for CIVICUS.**

2. **The participants then started to understand how to prepare the financial reports, as per CIVICUS requirements, and in the end all of them complied with the reporting standard.”

ADAM SONDLO
CIVICUS Finance Officer
APPROACH #2

The YAL shifted the traditional self-assessment narrative report that is usually submitted by the grantee to the grant making organisation, to a community feedback report. This meant that each grantee partner drafted a ‘story of change’ or a summary of the activities and outcomes achieved by their group or movement during the duration of their participation in the Lab, and then presented that story to three people from their community (partners, beneficiaries, family members, etc.) Community members assessed a) the clarity of the report - what is the main idea presented; b) the validity of those activities based on their experience or perception; c) general surprises and comments.

This shift resulted in a final narrative report becoming a new opportunity for young civil society activists or changemakers to determine how to prioritise their communities' needs and to map the gaps in their work. The YAL participants have referenced the findings from their reports over and over again to mobilise resources and be inspired to design new projects. For example, Anna was able to secure approximately US$90,000, and Sabir embedded this participatory and inclusive approach in the ways of working of his association.
CHECKLIST

Checklists for the reporting process for young activists engaging with grantmaking organisations and increasing community accountability practices:

- Share information 3 times in 3 different ways to increase efficiency in the reporting process and timeline.

- Provide step-by-step instructions, templates and actual examples (without sensitive information) of financial and narrative reporting requirements in one email.

- Hold virtual sessions with all relevant parties (grantees, finance and project team) to explain the requirements and answer any questions.

- Keep in constant communication through check-ins, WhatsApp and email.

- Provide support and guidance for participants struggling with reporting requirements.

- Language and terminology can be exclusionary. If your project team is not multilingual, request translators for support to ensure all information is accessible.

- Provide avenues for translations in reading the requirements and submitting the relevant documents.

- Encourage participants to work independently with the resources provided to execute the reporting at their own pace to increase their confidence and critical thinking skills.

- Offer simple templates and steps to guide grantee-partners in the collection of feedback from their community with recommendations to gather data in a responsible and safe manner with the community’s member identity and integrity.
Remind grantee partners of the value of the reporting process and the final product as a reference for future resource mobilisation efforts and input for future initiatives.

Using this checklist was successful in creating a journey for participants to gain skills and confidence in the reporting process and to increase efficiency and accountability for the Youth Action Lab, resulting in more timely and accurate reports from participants.

THE REPORTS REVEALED THE FINANCIAL PRIORITIES OF YOUNG ACTIVISTS

Established civil society organisations tend to allocate more resources to office costs or high salaries. Younger organisations have limited funds and are more spontaneous and flexible to work virtually or in person, as long as the communication tools are working. For example, most Lab participants spent more on virtual platforms for home office and per diems for their volunteers, and almost zero on rent.

The following examples from two young LGBTQI+ advocates from obstructed and repressed civic spaces (Brazil and Uganda) highlight the attention some Lab participants gave to investing in communications tools and the different results from this decision.
Julio used the micro-grant to equip their collective with communication devices such as phones, laptops and printers. The second financial priority for them was to provide stipends to the volunteers to cover the time invested. For Julio, this support allowed them to gain increased visibility and better exchange of knowledge within the movement. These results shifted the perception and culture of their movement which now identifies itself as an ‘intersectional movement’. Additionally, Julio was invited to represent their movement on a national level thanks to their increased legitimacy, which contributes to the cultural shift in Brazil.

Anna spent most of her funds on materials, filming, printing and publications. The flexible funding helped the participant reach excluded communities in Uganda. As grassroots trans activists, this is important to them as their main demographic is often neglected and harder to reach. However, the funding alone was not sufficient. For Anna, her organisation suffered as they are an LGBTQI movement based in Uganda, which is an anti-LGBTQI rights country. The funding and tools shared through the Lab acted as a buffer and enabler, but it did not protect her from the harsh conditions of being a trans activist in a restrictive country.

Ultimately, by studying the trends of their spending, the overall financial priorities of young activists are:

1st priority: Equipment such as laptops, phones, printers, cameras and megaphones.

2nd priority: Coordination, administration and consultation fees, and funds to cover their living expenses. All eleven YAL activists work as volunteers for their movements/collectives, hence receiving this award was crucial for them to cover their living expenses and be able to continue their activism.

3rd priority: Per diems for the participants or ‘beneficiaries’ of their programmes who attended conferences or workshops organised by them.
This case study allows us to conclude that even if similar grantees invest their resources in the same manner, the outcomes will not be the same. It is actually the threats - physical, virtual and emotional - each activist faces day-to-day that determine the effectiveness or not of the funding provided and not the direction or strategy for using the funds. Therefore, when planning budget allocations and restrictions, do not predict the direction of where and how funds should be used; and when assessing the effectiveness of funding grassroots individual activists, the expected outcomes must consider the individual risks each individual or group faces before reviewing the quantitative outputs.

**Youth-led initiatives and financial reporting: Insights from the Youth Action Lab programme**

Unlike the 2020 cohort, only 1/11 participants from the 2021 cohort suggested the need to increase the amount of the YAL micro-grant. In 2020, 7/10 made that suggestion. This could be the case because 4 of the 11 participants of the YAL in 2021 were able to access scholarships and fellowships and one secured one grant.

- The higher chances in securing a fellowship vs a grant speaks to a trend in philanthropy that development opportunities for young people are more available than funding. Sometimes this is due to the misplaced fear of youth being ‘risky’ as grantees, which we have faced even here at CIVICUS in 2% of the cases. However, our work with youth in the last 5 years has shown youth can and should be trusted with funds.

- Regardless of the limited financial resources available, small flexible grants to young individual activists together with skills development and networking opportunities are an effective combination to sustain the vision and identity of young people as positive agents of change, build their confidence in themselves and nurture their agency as a strong and radical changemaker.
DO YOU WANT TO KNOW ABOUT OTHER PRACTICES?

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.