

YOUTH-LED COMMUNITY ORGANIZING

VALUES-DRIVEN WORK

UNDERLYING VALUES AND PRACTICES IN YOUTH-LED COMMUNITY ORGANIZING

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A LAIDLAW LEARNING REPORT



BACKGROUND

The Laidlaw Foundation is a private foundation based in Toronto, Canada that supports passionate young people in taking action on issues that affect them and their communities. The Foundation supports the process of youth organizing, where young people work collectively with their allies to identify, advocate for and instigate change on critical issues that are having an impact on their communities and broader society. Each year the Foundation invests close to \$1.5 million in youth-led groups and intermediary organizations that are based primarily in Toronto.

Prior to 2007, the Foundation had several distinct funding programs that focused on the arts, the environment, youth engagement and social inclusion. This changed when the Foundation Board underwent a planning process to identify how its granting strategies could work more synergistically and have a greater impact. The board identified that young people were involved or had the potential to be involved in all facets of the Foundation's activities. The Foundation's experience found that young people use arts-based strategies to address the issues they are facing; that young people mobilize to address environmental and community health concerns; and that engaged young people are a cornerstone of an inclusive society. In 2008, the Laidlaw Foundation launched a five-year strategic plan that focused its granting, convening and knowledge-sharing activities on supporting the process of youth organizing.

The Foundation is committed to ongoing evaluation. As part of its evaluation activities, interviews were conducted with 48 people involved in 10 of its funded groups. The stakeholders that were interviewed included the founders of youth-led groups, coordinators, partners, participants and volunteers. Drawing on an evaluation framework called "Most Significant Change," informants were asked to share what they considered to be the most significant effect of this work on themselves, on their group, and on the community. In analyzing the data, there emerged significant insights into the underlying values of youth-led community organizing, youth organizing strategies and tools, and implications for funding practices. These have been developed into a series of reports to share the Foundation's learning with the broader community.

YOUTH-LED COMMUNITY ORGANIZING: What We Are Learning

The Laidlaw Foundation's work is based on a positive youth development framework that asserts that every young person needs access to multiple opportunities to identify their talents; unconditional support from adults and allies; and multiple opportunities to act on the issues that concern them and that they are passionate about. Looking back on the Foundation's history of investing in youth-led social change strategies,¹ it is clear that young people and their allies (people who support youth-led and youth-driven community change strategies) are actively reshaping their communities, redefining organizational structures and changing the script of how community and social problems are defined, and by whom. The terms 'youth' and 'youth-led' often result in assumptions that the scope and impact of this work extends only to young people, as though they live separate from their broader community and social contexts. The Foundation's learning has been that young people are not organizing in order to fix or change other youth; they are organizing to create supportive and empowering environments so that their peers, families and communities can thrive.

So what do these efforts get called? Engagement... organizing... trouble-making...

The Foundation uses the term 'youth organizing' in its guidelines and materials. 'Youth-led community organizing' is another way to capture the breadth of this work. Expressions like 'youth engagement' often beg the questions: engaged in what, and on whose terms? Often the answers are: in an external group or organization, and on terms not conceived by young people themselves. 'Youth organizing' often begs the question: organizing to do what? The assumption here is that young people only wish to work on 'youth' issues, whatever those might be.

YOUTH-LED COMMUNITY ORGANIZING: A Working Definition

Youth-led community organizing is a process wherein young people and their allies draw their mandate from other youth, communities and their own lived experiences. From this knowledge and experience, groups develop and implement interventions, strategies and initiatives that work to improve and transform communities, institutions and social systems.

IT'S NOT ABOUT 'YOUTH'

As counterintuitive as it may seem, the work of the Foundation is not about 'youth.' The Foundation's vision is grounded in the concept of social inclusion and the role of young people in creating inclusive societies. The Foundation recognizes that young people are leading deep civic engagement efforts aimed at transforming the ways in which social problems are defined and solved. Youth-led community organizing is like most traditions of community organizing in that it acknowledges that people with lived experiences are experts in the issues that shape their lives. As one community organizer and adult ally reflected: "People's experiences and their adversities create in them a resilience and a third eye, a perspective that really is so different than any other kind of perspective." These strategies place the knowledge of young people and their communities at the core of broader social and community change efforts.

The Foundation believes that the receptivity of institutions and decision-makers to young people's priorities is a proportionate measure to the inclusiveness of society. Listening to the priorities and issues being raised by youth offers critical insights into what needs to change in order for young people to feel genuinely included and valued. While the focus of the Foundation's work is on youth, the same approach could be used to assess how residents or other groups are genuinely engaged in processes that directly shape their lives and well-being. The Foundation builds from the expertise and insights of young people to illuminate experiences of social exclusion and marginalization. In advocating for social inclusion, the Foundation recognizes the pivotal role that young people play in building inclusive and safe spaces for their peers, families and communities.

1. The Foundation's current organizational strategies build on the Foundation's work to date in supporting youth engagement. The Youth Engagement Program was launched in 2000 and transitioned into the Youth Organizing Program in 2008.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We are deeply grateful to everyone who shared their insights with us through the Laidlaw Foundations Most Significant Change evaluation process. We had the opportunity to connect with youth organizers, community organizers, program participants, volunteers and partners. Your perspectives offered candid and rich insights into youth-led community organizing efforts across Toronto. It was a privilege to listen and to learn from you.

“We talk a lot about how we privilege relationships over money. What does that actually look like in practice? When push comes to shove, what kinds of decisions are we making about our slice of community... What does it mean to privilege relationships over money? Just to say that out loud is creating a different kind of conversation because people don't talk about that much, especially in the social service sector.”

— COMMUNITY ORGANIZER AND ADULT ALLY

INTRODUCTION

What is youth-led community organizing? And what makes youth-led community organizing distinct from other ways of working with young people and in communities?

Youth-led community organizing is a collective effort that builds on peoples' lived experiences and priorities in order to solve critical issues that impact community health and well-being. The Laidlaw Foundation interviewed youth organizers, community organizers and their partners to explore the impacts of this work. Throughout the interviews, stakeholders reflected on values and practices embedded in their work. Based on the Laidlaw Foundation's learning, youth-led groups and intermediary organizations that support youth organizing are distinct in the ways that they draw their mandate from their community; deliberately create decision-making structures that embody these values; and advocate by taking action. These organizers privilege the relationships between individuals, groups and within their communities, recognizing that the people involved and their sense of agency is essential to social change processes. These groups intentionally assess how engaged and validated their stakeholders feel in social change processes. In this sense, the organizing process is intimately connected to the outcomes or impacts that these groups are working towards. These practices are the intangible things that create safe space and support individual and community self-determination.

This report outlines youth-led community organizing practices and builds on insights that youth organizers and their partners shared that illuminate values underlying this work. This is a reflective exercise to stimulate broader sector dialogue around the values that we embody as individuals and that are inherent in our work.

MANDATE DRAWN FROM COMMUNITY

Too often, programs and services are developed for communities and young people by external institutions, without meaningfully engaging them in setting the priorities. These approaches create inequitable relationships, disempower communities or lead to interventions that simply fail to be relevant to the community's needs. What can set youth-led community organizing efforts apart from those of other groups working in communities is how youth-led groups build on their own lived experiences and those of their communities in order to inform their actions. For example, one participant in a youth program reflected: "The way [the program] operates is very fluid, there are always changes and there is always lots of positivity. It's never just [the organizers]...doing things and deciding things. They always come back to the people they provide service to." These strategies create alternative, safe spaces for young people to come together and to be seen for their contributions as opposed to being treated as problems needing to be fixed. This further creates ongoing accountability structures to ensure that their work is relevant. A youth organizer reflected: "I see that it's really about being grounded in community, really channeling what people's needs are or voicing concerns into action. That's sort of what [our group] has been, really responding to community, responding to concerns and putting that into action".

Youth-led groups develop platforms for community priorities to be seen and heard. They bring attention to what is really happening in their communities. A youth organizer and community stakeholder reflected: "It's basically saying 'okay, let's do some beautiful stuff and lets have a beautiful family that's grounded in real value. Let's also ensure that we don't sugar-coat what the reality of the situation is. Let's make sure that we hold our ground and not make compromises and really be true to ourselves.'" By drawing their mandate from the community and being driven by this process, youth-led initiatives are able to expose issues facing their communities. One community and organizational partner reflected on how this process has helped to shift the culture of their institution: "As we started to meet some other members...we had people in our space that we had never had before, meaning people who lived in the 'inner suburbs' of the city of Toronto, people whose life circumstances were more challenging than I think a lot of the privileged people that we had been accustomed to having here in our space. It's not like it's the dirty little secret but part of what we do in the space that we provide and the kind of space we run is really for a privileged portion of the overall sector."

What can set youth-led community organizing and other community organizing processes apart from traditional programs and services is the degree to which the groups interventions are grounded in the priorities of its community. These groups make community priorities visible and they take action based on what they are seeing and hearing around them.

"START ANYWHERE, FOLLOW IT EVERYWHERE"¹

Often within the public and non-profit sectors, groups are required to map out and predict how change will happen in their communities. While it is important to be intentional, intractable social issues are not easily addressed, let alone through a predetermined work plan or logic model. With youth-led community organizing, the work often begins where a group sees an immediate need or opportunity. A group might start by hosting a conversation, mounting an event or running a project for their peers. Often a vision for what can be done differently emerges from these conversations, laying a path for how to move forward. The challenge here is that the path cannot be laid ahead of time and may take many twists and turns that don't fit neatly into a logic model. What these engagement strategies do is build trust, develop support from the community and create opportunities for different people to become involved. Too often, external stakeholders overlook the critical role that these engagement strategies play in enabling longer-term change efforts. "Like in many new communities, in our community seeing is believing. There's none of the rhetoric. It's 'let's get down to what it is you're trying to do.' I think that was an active strategy that really worked in our favour because it didn't allow us to get beat down at the very beginning. I think a lot of groups get beat down and we didn't really experience that" (YOUTH ORGANIZER).

What starts as a conversation and a social event can quickly build into a sense of collective identity and purpose. This ability to start anywhere is how groups develop strategies based on the needs and mandate of their community. These are essential starting places for longer-term change efforts. Margaret Wheatley and Deborah Frieze of the Berkana Institute² suggest that healthy and resilient communities work with what is around them to create what they need. They state: "At the beginning, we don't have to know where we're going. We don't have to build an organization ahead of time. We don't have to have approval, funding, expertise or answers. We just have to get started."³

While Wheatley and Frieze are reflecting on patterns they see connecting social change efforts around the world, this was echoed

directly by a local youth organizer: “We weren’t in the mode of trying to build an organization. We didn’t even think of an organizational name. We just fell in love with these kids and had zero funding. We funded it all with the overdraft of our debit cards. We thought they were so brilliant that we wanted to showcase their voices and create a platform for their voices to the outside world.” While groups might start where they see opportunity, they follow their commitment to their communities and issues wherever they can have the most impact.

FOCUS ON ORGANIZING

Through experimentation and intentional design, youth-led groups and intermediary organizations that support youth organizing seek to create governance and decision-making processes that enable them to be relevant and accountable to their stakeholders. They often try to avoid creating unnecessary bureaucracy that can drain energy and take time away from the work. In reflecting on a collaborative network, one community organizer shared: “[the group] is in this really interesting time of its development. It has some structure but it’s also unstructured. What’s key is figuring out how to use the structure to protect the unstructured as opposed to trying to push the unstructured into structure. Most places don’t allow for that type of play.” Groups assume different models of working together because it enables them to focus on action and also creates living alternatives to the types of exclusionary decision-making processes and governing structures that they have experienced: “It is about permission – permission to try, permission to fail, permission to be human. Those are all the kinds of things that we are supposed to be doing with young people but often frontline workers and most others in social service organizations aren’t given those same opportunities, just to be” (COMMUNITY ORGANIZER).

Often, youth-led groups and intermediary organizations are creating spaces outside existing organizations and institutions because those institutional spaces do not enable community members to access the support they need on their own terms and in dignified ways. Creating organizational structures that are empowering is an important way that groups work to embody their values. An organizational founder and community organizer reflected: “You can’t start a network as one person. To learn from and with other people, to trust other people and to really try to build a community is also a network. It’s sort of an organization that you want the world to be like. We do so much stuff that is aspirational. How can we in the moment animate those things that we want to see differently? Being in so many different toxic organizations, where hierarchy plays out in oppressive ways. In the very contexts that we’re supposed to be helping and healing communities,

we were really struggling with – can we do this differently? Can we interact and create a system of relationships in which we can lean on each other for support and healing and find human relationships and then offer that and broaden that and scale it up? It’s a big experiment but I think that’s one of the biggest parts of it.”

PRIVILEGE RELATIONSHIPS

At the core of collaborative efforts – be they within a group or across communities – are the people involved in and driving them. Being in trusting relationships is essential to taking collective action. One group founder and community organizer reflected: “We talk a lot about how we privilege relationships over money. What does that actually look like in practice? When push comes to shove, what kinds of decisions are we making about our slice of community....What does it mean to privilege relationships over money? Just to say that out loud is creating a different kind of conversation because people don’t talk about that much, especially in the social service sector.” There is a deliberate recognition within some community organizing efforts that there is no true separation between professional and personal, participant and coordinator; and that ultimately change happens based on the people involved and how they relate to one another: “It’s a magical moment where people go from being robots to actually being human again and feeling those human things and being able to express that and given the space to be heard and have their stories heard and valued and be seen” (COMMUNITY ORGANIZER).

Privileging the quality of relationships is a significant way in which youth-led community organizing efforts can challenge traditional approaches within social services that see communities and young people as mainly the recipients of their service. Forming strong relationships that include being social and caring for one another can be a political act: “The question we ask is: what is getting in the way of relationships and what are the mechanisms supporting these barriers? The mechanisms are the same ones that have created circumstances where people do not have places to live, good food to eat, access to jobs that pay enough, access to local free recreation. People have been so hurt that even to bridge people with some of the services and opportunities that are available requires relationships to be built. I think that we’ve been actively de-skilled from and robbed of our birthright, which is to relate and connect and share with other people. Even the dynamic between ‘I’m the helper and you’re the helpee’ immediately divides us. Institutions and organizations as they exist currently in the sector, I think, are being more and more divided from the community” (COMMUNITY ORGANIZER).

The ability to connect on a human level is a key strategy for building meaningful relationships that transcend job titles, organizational affiliations and credentials. These relationships are what enable certain spaces to be seen as safe, and allow for broader community action to emerge. An integral practice in drawing mandate from community and developing community change efforts lies in privileging relationships.

BE LOVING

Throughout Laidlaw's evaluation interviews, love was consistently described by participants, stakeholders and youth organizers as central to their work. Being loving is an integral aspect of youth-led community organizing. It is the intangible thing that separates one space from another and allows people to feel supported. Adam Kahane's work on the practice of social change defines love as "the drive to reconnect and make whole that which has become or appears fragmented."⁴ In this sense, being loving is a direct way that individuals embody community organizing values. To be loving is to see communities for their wholeness and to realize that you are in it with them. Being loving is intentional, as one youth organizer indicated: "A strategy first and foremost is love, lots of love and lots of attention. I find that showing them love and giving them attention is number one." It is what makes certain spaces safe and accessible to young people: "I think that [the group] is the perfect combination of how this type of organizing should be done. It's just the perfect amount of education being given with the combination of support and love that you get because any time you walk into the organization, the first thing you're going to get is love" (YOUTH PROGRAM PARTICIPANT). Another community stakeholder and group volunteer asserted: "I don't think the trust would be there if the foundation wasn't there in the first place. It's how I felt the first time I met them, the first time I went to [a] meeting or going to monthly meetings. It's how you're treated, how you're respected and how much general love there is in the room. You feel supported." This grounding in mutual respect and love enables people to work together towards collective change.

The integrity and commitment that is shown by youth organizers encourages their allies and partners to bring love into their work: "Watching how much care they gave me made me want to care back. I couldn't stop wanting to care back. I wanted to give more and more and more. So it's the foundation. I think that's what's made a difference. When you put that forward you attract the right people. People that get interested, that have the same mindset, that want to give back to a point where you can trust them" (COMMUNITY GROUP VOLUNTEER).

Love plays an integral role in promoting social change. As Kahane⁵ reflects, love is what makes power generative. Too often in our society, individuals and institutions exert power over communities by defining them as problems to be fixed and using forms of charity to try to help them. This can disempower communities because it reinforces unequal power structures and creates dependant relationships. Youth-led community organizing efforts work collectively with other young people and communities to define what wholeness and health mean in real terms. They work from a place of love (a desire to make whole)⁶ in order to define the issues and collectively develop strategies for change.

BE IN IT TOGETHER

Youth-led community organizing efforts are inherently collaborative and driven by relationships of mutual respect and reciprocity. Throughout Laidlaw evaluation interviews, many stakeholders expressed that their partnerships were made meaningful by working with people who believe in the work of young people. A community and institutional partner reflected: "I think it has just really helped ground me in what this part of the sector is trying to achieve and do, how vital that is to our city – and reminding me that the work that I do and the support that we provide isn't just about allowing people to pursue their passions and their interests but it's also about making people feel safe and have the same opportunities that I really always took for granted and that I think most people in my ecosystem, so to speak, felt were just natural opportunities. I think it was really grounding. It's a principal value and just reaffirmed, or sort of took to a new level, the importance of the work that happens around here."

Within certain organizational or institutional spaces, champions and allies of young people and youth organizers have played significant roles in supporting youth-led community organizing efforts. Often what emerges in this process are changing relationships between community-based organizing efforts and institutions that may historically have disempowered, tokenized or simply been disengaged from their community. Moving beyond partnerships, "allyships" are developing. An ally is "someone who advocates for and supports members of a community other than their own. Reaching across differences to achieve mutual goals."⁷ A community and institutional partner stated: "We've become much more integrated with each other. When you actually listen to their stories and listen to how they're thinking, listen to how they're working through things and the challenges they have, you get that kind of understanding. And they get a different understanding about us too." Being allied is connecting on a deeper level, gaining a deeper understanding of one another's

differences and commonalities, and identifying shared values and priorities. It enables people to support one another and work together towards collective change.

ADVOCATE THROUGH DOING

Based on the Foundation's learning with its partners, the dominant model of social service delivery that treats young people and residents as passive recipients of services, is not leading to widespread community transformation. Youth-led groups and their allies echo this learning: "They have instilled an understanding that our histories and our pasts and our heritage and all of that is really important. We need to be more politically educated. We can't just do programming. We can't just buy time. We need to actually be invested in personal growth, political understanding of how things really work" (COMMUNITY PARTNER).

Youth-led groups and intermediary organizations that support youth organizing are not waiting for systems to change. Youth-led groups and their allies are questioning existing institutional models and developing their own strategies that build on the transformative power of diversity: "We live in this great country where lots of people come from everywhere and we're now recognizing that we have to be so intentional about becoming diverse in every way of being; not just in representation but in our problem-solving, in our program designs, in our organizational structures, in our restorative justice practices. It has dynamic potential to affect how we problem-solve, police and govern. It's pretty phenomenal but we are so far away from actually accessing the real capacities that are there" (COMMUNITY PARTNER AND ADULT ALLY).

In doing this work, community organizing efforts are not trying to solve problems through services, but are illustrating how social institutions could better support and strengthen young people and contribute to building socially inclusive communities. These strategies work to balance the urgency of what young people and communities experience daily with the need to change systems and structures. A youth organizer reflected: "All of the beautiful people that are around you, no matter where they come from or who they are – understanding that a movement requires all people to be a part of it...To be – what are we trying to do here, everybody hustling, trying to get stuff in order and trying to make sure that projects survive, but because we're so strained and our resources are such that people default back into the same systems of oppression that they've been oppressed by. It's very easy for folks just to do that."

Youth-led groups and their allies present alternative approaches to working with communities and young people. As a youth organizer echoed: "People feel like this is what we needed. It exists. It's not something that we have to create from zero. It's already there. We can take advantage of this opportunity and maybe change something now." Funders and governments frequently seek out new frameworks and strategies for addressing social issues, yet examples of alternatives exist right in front of us, within and across youth-led community organizing efforts.

REFLECTIONS

Youth-led community organizing is driven by a desire to live in a better world and the necessity of engaging in intentional action to make this happen. Community is inherently involved in this process, and groups create ongoing accountability structures to ensure that the work adapts to and reflect the priorities of its stakeholders. Youth-led community organizing is driven by relationships and intimately ties the processes of working and being together to the broader goals and outcomes of its efforts.

Youth-led community organizing offers insights into best practices and principles for working together to create socially inclusive communities. These practices include:

- Intentionally drawing mandate from one's community. Youth-led groups and intermediary organizations that support youth organizing recognize the fundamental need to value the expertise and experiences that their communities bring to bear on strategies seeking long-term social and community transformation.
- Start where there is energy and build from there. This enables efforts to be collectively owned and relevant to community contexts.
- Develop organizational structures and platforms that support action and enable ongoing community accountability.
- Honour relationships as the foundation of community change. The way that people relate to one another is key to working together and is an essential indicator of how meaningfully a strategy is meeting its goals.
- Be loving and work from a place of seeing wholeness. Groups challenge models that differentiate people based on a client/service provider binary and model different ways of working together based on mutual respect and allyship.
- Be in it together. Advocate and support others by being allied.

- Advocate by doing the work. What are often called ‘pilot’ projects are examples of how things can be done differently. These projects can illustrate values-driven work in practice.

Youth-led community organizing is a process that nurtures personal growth and fosters community transformation. This work cultivates a strong sense of self and brings power back to the individual – back to community – so that they can claim spaces that have been inaccessible to them and work to transform those spaces in the process. As one youth organizer reflected, youth-led community organizing is:

“really getting young people to connect as best as possible to what exactly it is they want to do and why, because that’s where we see sustainability. If we can connect young people in a meaningful way to a purpose and vision that they have, that’s sustainability. Sustainability is not throwing money at a problem or propping someone up. It’s really trying to help people connect and find what it is they want to do and why. That’s really at the crux of everything.”

RECOMMENDATIONS

Youth-led community organizing is a rich, transformative process that calls into question dominant ways that social issues get defined and who is involved in implementing solutions. Recognizing the value and impact of these models has important implications for funders and other decision-makers that shape the landscape in which community organizing happens. When taking stock of the values and practices underlying this work, as a partner it is important to:

- Invest in the people behind the work, because relationships create safe space and support collective action. Trust gets built between individuals, and the strength of relationships between one person and their community can enable a group or organization to become more accessible to its community.
- Invest in groups that demonstrate community accountability. Being accountable to community requires a group to be in the community, creating ongoing opportunities to listen and refine strategies as well as multiple opportunities for people to plug into and take ownership of the work.
- Invest in grassroots, community-based groups that demonstrate their ongoing commitment to their communities. In practice, it is very difficult for community-based groups to receive support for their work and often other organizations end up delivering strategies that are not relevant or meaningful, and that at worst can be damaging to communities.

As the insights and reflections shared through Laidlaw Foundation interviews demonstrate, youth-led community organizing is deeply values-driven. Youth organizers, community organizers and their allies align how they work with their aspirations for the world they are committed to creating. The Laidlaw Foundation is a strong advocate for investing directly in young people and communities, supporting them to draw on their expertise and lived experiences to address issues they are passionate about.

ENDNOTES

1. Wheatley, Margaret and Deborah Frieze (2011). *Walk Out Walk On*. San Francisco, CA: Barrett-Koehler Publishers Inc., 221.
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A NOTE ABOUT THE DESIGN

What is youth-led community organizing, and what does it look like? As this series of Laidlaw Learning reports asserts, it begins with youth but its impact extends beyond them, more broadly and deeply into their communities. The design envisions youth-led community organizing as a complex and kinetic force — a power that communities can tap into, support, and cultivate for lasting and meaningful change.

— UNA LEE, DESIGNER

