YOUTH LEADERSHIP FOR COLLECTIVE ACTION

New and emerging leadership approaches

TORCHLIGHT COLLECTIVE

THE TORCHLIGHT COLLECTIVE is a social enterprise that brings together leading consultants and professionals from around the world to strengthen meaningful adolescent and youth engagement in the global health and development agenda. We leverage our individual and collective strengths to deliver high-quality consulting services to governments, multilateral agencies, donors and civil society organizations.

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When we founded The Torchlight Collective, we wanted to bring together some of the best minds working at the intersection of sexual and reproductive health, human rights and youth movements. Over the past two years, we have benefited from the expertise of many brilliant people, including some of our best partners, and also learned together as a collective. Now, we're proud to introduce the first products in our #TorchlightLearning Series. This collection brings together insights from across our network, and we're excited to be leveraging so much expertise in one place.

Our hope is that these publications offer wisdom, fodder for discussion and practical advice to benefit anyone interested in supporting or learning about youth-led advocacy!

Those of you with money to give or grant:
you'll find out how youth leadership models are evolving, and also principles for supporting youth movements.

Those rebel rousers among us:
you'll find tips on improving your advocacy and building leadership skills; and a quick and dirty guide to the pros/cons of joining a youth-led coalition.

This inaugural series includes the following briefs:

STRONGER TOGETHER
Considerations when joining a youth-led coalition

YOUTH LEADERSHIP FOR COLLECTIVE ACTION
New and emerging leadership approaches

FUNDING YOUTH MOVEMENTS
Insights from youth movements and principles for donors

To comment and share your ideas, please visit our blog at www.torchlightcollective.org/learning and follow us on Facebook / Twitter / Instagram.

Please read, disseminate and discuss! As always, please reach out with feedback or ideas for future publications.

Thank you for joining the discussion.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Solutions to the world's most urgent problems – from climate change to economic, racial and gender inequalities – cannot be found by operating within the same paradigm that created them. Today's generation of 1.8 billion young people has inherited these problems and are tasked with the challenge of finding solutions. However, very rarely are young leaders fully supported with all the tools they need to radically re-envision our world and create sustainable change.

Most current approaches to leadership-building seek to provide young people with a set of interpersonal or project management skills, while others focus on self-discovery and mindfulness.

Such approaches to leadership are incomplete and result in flawed solutions that are unable to achieve the sustainable change the world needs. Often, we encounter the following partial responses to global problems:

1. Narrow technical solutions:
Building effective responses can create temporary solutions for certain problems, but as soon as one problem is resolved, others emerge.

Example: Distributing malaria bed-nets, which stop the current outbreak but, by themselves, do not strengthen health systems to prevent future outbreaks.

2. Ineffective policy changes:
Engaging in policy work and advocating with decision-makers is important, but often the policies that are formulated and the institutions that are built do not solve the problems they set out to tackle. Instead they often replicate existing power structures, get stuck in institutional paralysis or are sabotaged by underlying social, cultural or economic dynamics.

Example: Advocating for legal change to increase justice on sexual violence, without addressing barriers that stop people from accessing the legal system, or sexist attitudes amongst police, lawyers and the judiciary.

3. Isolated journeys of self-discovery:
Consciousness-based training programs and books on self-awareness pave the way for some (usually privileged) individuals to feel empowered. However, these initiatives, by themselves, do little to create social change at scale.

Example: A meditation and yoga retreat that creates a space for self-discovery and mindfulness, without direction on how to address systemic issues of inequality and discrimination.

Fortunately, there are now new and more comprehensive approaches to leadership, such as "radical transformative leadership," a concept developed by Monica Sharma, a former United Nations official. This model aims to:

(1) Build shared commitment based on universal values;
(2) Shift policies, norms, systems and structures; and
(3) Solve problems, in order to generate equitable and sustainable results.

Sharma drew on her practical experience in development, as well as on the latest research in areas such as social psychology, communications and systems thinking. This concept now underpins a growing set of leadership programs, including:

- **Leadership for Equity & Opportunity** by Rise Together in Oakland, CA (risetogetherbayarea.org/leadership)
- **Stewardship for Radical Transformation** in Auroville, India (auroville.org.in)
- **Unleashing Full Potential for Social Transformation** in Mumbai, India (tiss.edu)

It is important for donors, implementers and young leaders to demand more comprehensive approaches to leadership. When thinking about funding, designing or selecting a youth leadership program, here are some questions to ask:

1. What are the unstated assumptions of the theory of leadership underlying the program?
Some programs assume that certain traits result in leadership, and others focus on learned behaviours or proficiencies, with the theory that learning a few skills can make someone a leader. Most programs assume that a certain kind of leadership is best, denying young participants opportunities to develop their own leadership style. Many approaches prioritize individual leadership without providing frameworks for building coalitions through collective leadership. In selecting a leadership program, make sure it's cross-cultural, inter-disciplinary and evidence-based – and most importantly – that it states its assumptions upfront.

2. Does the program focus on knowing oneself and others differently?
To be successful, youth leadership programs need to create spaces for young people to challenge their existing personal narratives, build awareness of the systems within which they operate and learn to interact with others through the lens of shared values, rather than narrowly defined social identities. Leadership programs must create spaces for thoughtful reflection and personal growth.

3. Does the program foster a systems approach?

In order to find solutions to complex problems, leadership programs must build competencies that allow participants to analyse inter-connected political, social and economic systems, rather than looking at problems in isolation. Participants must be able to identify root causes, map actors and understand how they interact with each other.

4. Does the program provide easy tools to make ordinary processes and spaces transformative?

It is relatively easy to start new initiatives, but it is extremely difficult to transform existing practices and processes, and to align them towards achieving sustainable impact. Too many youth leadership programs are oriented solely around creating new projects, without providing tools for taking existing programs to a new level. Programs should also provide tools and frameworks to facilitate change from within large organizations, institutions and structures.

There is an urgent need to build the capacities of a new generation of young leaders and organizations. With effective leadership programs, it is possible to build competencies that allow diverse actors to work together to design and generate responses that draw on their most deeply held values, strategically shift systems and tackle the root causes of social injustice. Funders, implementers and partners need to ask more of the leadership programs we provide young people.

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