



# **STRONGER TOGETHER**

Considerations when joining  
a youth-led coalition



## **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

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

*Thank you for joining the discussion.*

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Around the world, young people are leading sexual and reproductive health (SRH) movements that have the potential to create healthier futures for generations. In East Africa, for example, a wave of SRH advocacy is growing, with youth-led organizations in Kenya and Tanzania joining forces to implement SRH sensitization activities, hold their national and local governments to account and increase access to free and accessible family planning services. These youth-led coalitions are positioning themselves to change the family planning landscape in the region while setting an example for youth-led advocacy globally.

The Torchlight Collective has worked closely with the Kenya Adolescent and Youth Sexual and Reproductive Health Network (KAYSRRH) to collect insights on their experiences with starting and growing a youth-led advocacy coalition. This brief offers guidance and support to other young advocates or organizations considering starting or joining a youth-led coalition, specifically focusing on:

- The benefits of starting or joining a youth-led coalition
- The difficulties in starting or joining a youth-led coalition
- The elements that contribute to an enabling environment for a youth-led coalition to thrive

## WHY GET INVOLVED?

For young advocates in KAYSRRH, there was a clear value to joining forces with like-minded groups, particularly for youth-led organizations who already have a hard time accessing resources and policy spaces. When unpacking the reasons for starting or joining a youth-led coalition, young advocates shared three main benefits.

### 1. Joint fundraising opportunities:

*"We felt we were better placed to fundraise as a coalition rather than as an individual organization by leveraging the strengths of different organizations."*

With a strong coalition of organizations comes a built-in network of partnerships and allies that are automatically pooled from individual entities. This can be a fantastic opportunity for fundraising, particularly after the coalition has established a mission, vision and values. With a strong brand and strategic advocacy goals, fundraising for a coalition may yield more success than fundraising as a single entity.

### 2. Collective leverage:

*"The vast wealth of experience and knowledge brought to the table by all the young advocates [is impressive]."*

Young people are diverse – from their education to their professional experience to their community context – and they offer different insights and opinions. Young advocates in particular are not a homogeneous group and have an array of knowledge and perspectives that can enrich advocacy processes. A coalition gains strength when its intellectual resources are pooled as well as its financial ones.

### 3. Power in numbers:

*"If we can develop a collective voice that is strong, with many diverse perspectives represented, we cannot be ignored by government."*

When powerful voices unite with a common message and priorities, there is a stronger chance that young people can have an impact on policy. When a strong coalition of diverse and knowledgeable youth-led organizations come together to formulate a thoughtful advocacy strategy, it is in their government's best interest to listen, take note and make literal room at the table.

## WHAT TO KNOW FIRST

For young advocates in KAYSRRH, there were also clear difficulties to starting a youth-led coalition. Although a diversity of voices can enrich an advocacy process, a coalition can also create competition, ideological divisions and even add layers of bureaucracy to the advocacy process. When unpacking the difficulties in starting or joining a youth-led coalition, young advocates shared three main issues.

### 1. Inadequate funding for advocacy activities:

*"We hardly had enough money to organize meetings, especially for members coming from different parts of the country."*

Youth-led advocacy coalitions often have significantly less funding than other more seasoned coalitions, leaving young advocates with few resources to operate, convene and coordinate. Key components of advocacy – like hosting strategic meetings, transportation to convenings with decision makers, internet and phone resources – are basic work needs that youth coalitions may be unable to cover from their own budgets or pockets. When a coalition lacks basic operating funds, their advocacy activities become untenable to implement, crippling their coalition and sometimes even halting activities altogether. It is also important to note that inadequate funding for advocacy and programmatic activities makes it impossible to compensate the leaders and coordinators of the coalition, and when young people are not compensated for their time it's difficult to retain

them, particularly when they have prior commitments like school, internships or paid positions.

## **2. Lack of buy-in or ownership from members:**

*"Ownership from all members, even from coalition leadership, can be difficult because no one wants to be a volunteer."*

When there is little funding to compensate coalition members, particularly those serving in leadership roles, it is difficult to ensure that members take ownership for the coalition's success and fully step into a leadership role. When there is little formal investment from coalition members, or when members assume someone else is doing the work, progress stagnates. What makes the cultivation of ownership of the coalition's success even more difficult is when member's skills and interests are not identified and utilized in a way that is mutually beneficial. This makes it difficult to keep members engaged and excited about the work, making full participation in coalition activities more and more difficult.

## **3. Potential for competition among organizations:**

*"Fear of competition from other players in the coalition who feel like the network is going to compete with them for resources [is a major issue]."*

Although communal fundraising is a benefit of participating in a youth-led advocacy coalition, coalitions in resource-starved environments may find themselves competing for resources and attention. At the core of a coalition is the idea that the success of the network is just as important as each of the members; but when the network gets more visibility than individual organizations, resentment may cripple the movement's momentum. Coalition members may also become competitive when various opportunities to lead, travel, or access decision making spaces are offered, making it difficult to put the needs of the coalition first. Often when a funding call is shared, it could be appropriate for both the coalition and individual organizations to apply. When there is a consistent trend of funding going to the coalition, leaders of organizations may resent the fact that their organizations are no longer receiving funding, but smaller portions of a shared fund.

## **HOW TO MAKE IT WORK**

For young advocates in KAYSRRH, there are also clear investments that can curb some of the aforementioned difficulties, thus aiding in creating an enabling environment for youth-led coalitions to thrive. These include:

## **1. Adult partnerships:**

*"Our mentors helped us to get organized and to establish leadership structures, mission, vision and objectives of the coalition."*

Having adult allies who not only believe in the coalition, but also in the value of youth-led advocacy in its own right, is essential as they can aid coalitions in accessing resources, policy spaces and other opportunities. In many ways, adults holding positions in NGOs (both national and international), foundations or the government can serve as gatekeepers to funding and opportunities for policy impact, therefore making their mentorship to the coalition extremely crucial. It is important to cultivate and leverage adults who believe in youth-led advocacy and are willing to share space.

## **2. Funding for advocacy activities:**

*"Funding has helped us do simple things like meet face to face to develop our strategy."*

Funding is essential to securing not only the material resources for advocacy activities, but also providing an opportunity to compensate young people for their leadership. When there is funding that covers the time needed to build a movement in a region like Sub-Saharan Africa, it empowers young advocates to focus on the success of the coalition without compromising their other pressing priorities. When there is funding for young advocates to host strategic meetings, disseminate their messages and travel to participate in local and global conversations, it levels the playing field and opens up otherwise closed doors.

[For more information, see the "[Funding Youth Movements](#)" brief in this learning series.]

## **3. Capacity-strengthening opportunities:**

*"These opportunities create a platform for the coalition members to improve things like communication skills and knowledge on running a coalition, ensuring our advocacy work is more effective."*

As is the case with youth-led organizing in general, young advocates greatly benefit from expanding their skills and knowledge. Capacity building opportunities – from technical seminars on SRH topics to trainings on policy reform – provide skills and also inspire young leaders to continue mobilizing for change.



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