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**The Missing Infrastructure
of Youth-Led Change***by Katherine Hermans*

Young people are routinely described as indispensable to sustainable development. They appear in policy agendas, summit speeches and institutional strategies. Yet while youth participation is widely endorsed in principle, the practical support required to sustain youth-led work remains weak. Young people are often given voice and visibility, but not the financial, organisational and institutional infrastructure that allows their initiatives to endure.

I have been thinking about this gap for a long time as the co-founder of Global Changemakers, an international organisation that supports young people addressing social and environmental challenges. Global Changemakers is useful as a lens because its own history illustrates the broader point. What began as a project to showcase young people driving change in their communities has grown into a global organisation co-created with the youth in its network, providing skills development, mentoring, capacity building and grants. It has supported more than 550 youth-led projects and benefited over 16 million people worldwide. But that growth did not come easily. It required deliberate investment in the often unglamorous infrastructure that enables initiatives sustainably.

This raises a broader question: What kinds of support structures are needed if youth-led initiatives are to become a durable part of civil

society, rather than remain dependent on exceptional commitment?

This question became the focus of a study I conducted at the University of Cambridge's Institute for Sustainability Leadership (CISL). At the time, much of the literature on youth and sustainable development focused on participation in programmes designed by others. My interest was somewhat different. I wanted to understand the barriers young people encounter once they have already decided to step up and lead initiatives in their communities.

The study drew on surveys and in-depth interviews with young people in the Global Changemakers network who had initiated and implemented projects. The network offered a particularly rich dataset with projects ranging from growing indigenous crops with native communities in Mexico to running an anti-violence sports programme in Papua New Guinea, and from selling affordable solar panels in rural Sri Lanka to providing education for girls in refugee camps in Uganda. What they shared was not a common context, but a common experience: they had identified a problem, decided to act, and encountered a set of obstacles.

The structure of constraint

The study identified four broad categories of barriers – human resources, material resources, cultural context and external factors – further broken down into ten subcategories, including time, team dynamics, collaboration and materials. The most important insight was that these barriers were rarely isolated.



They were cumulative and mutually reinforcing.

Human-resource challenges were the most prominent; particularly time constraints, team management and sustaining collaboration. Most participants were still enrolled in some form of education and were running their projects on a largely voluntary basis. As a result, initiatives had to compete with study, work and personal commitments. Sustaining engagement over time, maintaining alignment within teams and ensuring continuity were persistent difficulties. Many initiatives depended heavily on a small number of individuals, making them particularly vulnerable to disruption.

Collaboration with external partners introduced further complexity. While it could provide access to resources and legitimacy, it also required navigating institutions that operated on very different timescales and according to different priorities. Communication challenges were often intertwined with these dynamics, ranging from language and literacy barriers to cultural misunderstandings and the practical difficulties of coordinating across distance. For young people operating without administrative support, these were not exceptional conditions but part of the everyday reality of running a project.

Material-resource barriers were also significant. Access to basic inputs – whether tools, equipment or infrastructure – could not be taken for granted. In some cases, such resources were unavailable; in others, they were inaccessible due to cost, regulatory constraints or logistical limitations. Cultural and regulatory contexts added further layers of difficulty. Legal requirements, administrative procedures and institutional norms were generally designed for established organisations and did not easily accommodate early-stage initiatives led by young people.

The funding issue

In the surveys, participants most often described the immediate pressures they faced day to day: lack of time, team instability and difficulties sustaining collaboration. In interviews, however, funding emerged as the underlying condition shaping how severe those pressures became. In practice, it functioned as a cross-cutting constraint, influencing the intensity of other barriers.

Financial support can reduce time pressure, stabilise participation, improve continuity and enable collaboration. It does not simply cover discrete project costs, but shapes the conditions under which initiatives can operate at all. Yet despite its importance, funding is often difficult for early-stage initiatives to access. This points to a broader mismatch between the design of funding systems and the realities of youth-led civic work.

Access to funding is typically structured around assumptions of institutional maturity: the ability to produce formal applications, demonstrate track records and provide audited financial histories. These expectations are difficult to meet for initiatives that are still in formation. As a result, many young leaders face a structural catch-22: without funding, they cannot develop proof of concept; without proof of concept, they struggle to access funding.

The limits of recognition

This diagnosis remains relevant today because the underlying issue extends well beyond one organisation or one study. It concerns the place of young people within civil society more generally. The question is no longer whether young people have ideas, initiative or the capacity to lead; the evidence on that point is substantial. The more difficult question is whether civil society institutions are prepared to support forms of action that emerge outside established organisational pathways and do not yet resemble conventional organisations in form.

Young people are increasingly recognised as contributors to sustainable development. Yet meaningful support remains unevenly distributed. In many contexts, what is offered is recognition rather than infrastructure. Young people are invited to speak, consulted in strategy processes, featured in public campaigns and celebrated through prizes or ambassador programmes.

Such formats are not without value. They create visibility, confer legitimacy and sometimes open doors. But they have limits. They are not designed to meet the needs of grassroots civic initiatives, which are usually continuous, relational and organisational rather than selective, time-limited and visibility-oriented. What such initiatives require is different: flexible funding, mentoring, administra-

tive guidance, trusted networks and the capacity to sustain work over time. Recognition and support are not interchangeable. Recognition may matter, but it is insufficient when presented as evidence of serious institutional commitment.

That distinction matters because symbolic inclusion can obscure structural exclusion. Institutions may foreground youth visibility without changing access to resources, governance or long-term support. In doing so, they can appear inclusive while leaving the underlying barriers untouched.

This is not primarily a question of intent, but of institutional design. The tools commonly used to assess impact tend to privilege what is easily measurable – outputs, activity levels and indicators of scale – over less visible but equally important forms of value, such as trust, continuity and capacity. Funding mechanisms that favour institutional maturity therefore tend to further advantage established organisations. Reforming these systems would involve redistributing access to resources, which helps explain why change has been slow.

The three dimensions of missing infrastructure

This missing infrastructure has at least three dimensions: financial, organisational, and symbolic and institutional.

The first is financial. Early-stage initiatives are often too new, too small or too unconventional to access conventional grantmaking channels, even when their work aligns closely with public-interest goals.

The second is organisational. Mentoring, peer support, skills development and administrative guidance are not secondary additions, but part of the enabling environment that allows initiatives to survive beyond the enthusiasm of their founding moment.

The third is symbolic and institutional. Young people are still often positioned primarily as beneficiaries, volunteers or participants, rather than recognised as actors capable of building and sustaining institutions of their own.

Implications

Once framed in these terms, the policy implications become clearer. If philanthropy, public institutions and intermediary organisations are serious about participation, they need to move beyond symbolic endorsement and invest more consistently in the structures that sustain youth-led work. This includes funding mechanisms better suited to first-time founders, lighter application processes, more trust-based forms of support and greater recognition of the realities of unpaid or underpaid civic labour. It also requires taking autonomous youth-led structures seriously on their own terms, rather than valuing them only once they are absorbed into larger and more established organisations.

The central point is this: youth-led initiatives should not be understood merely as transitional spaces in which young people acquire experience before entering ‘real’ institutions. They are already part of civil society. They already generate public value. And they already reveal where existing support systems remain underdeveloped.

The success of youth-led projects is no longer what most needs to be demonstrated. What deserves closer attention are the institutional arrangements that continue to privilege visibility over durability and recognition over sustained support. If civil society is serious about participation, it will need to invest more deliberately in the infrastructure that allows youth-led work to endure – not just celebrating young people who succeed against the odds, but changing those odds.

Katherine Hermans co-founded Global Changemakers as an international civil society organisation in 2014. This essay draws on her Master's thesis accepted by the University of Cambridge in 2016. She is currently preparing a PhD thesis on democratic representation at the University of Fribourg, Switzerland.

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