



DONOR

Transformation

CHALLENGE

*Strengthen your
support for grassroots
changemakers*

The 12-month challenge every donor must try!



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INTRODUCTION

A year to embrace transformative change

Are you up for the challenge?

Why we need to push ourselves out of our comfort zone

At CIVICUS, we know that the only way positive change really happens is when powerful changemakers are recognised, resourced and supported. Citizen action is evolving and we now see less formal civil society organisations (CSOs) and more people-led collective efforts moving quickly and fluidly to meet rising interconnected crises. They are not only acting as first responders during local emergencies, but are also the ones closest to the needs, demands and visions of their communities. Their undeniably critical work is driving positive change in very concrete ways: modifying unfair laws, encouraging policy change, holding duty bearers accountable, crafting solutions to some of our most vexing social problems and promoting peace, human rights and equality.

This means that we must keep learning how to build honourable and lasting relationships with these local changemakers, grassroots groups and movements, and how to be in “good” solidarity with them.

We suspect you know this too.





We also suspect that you know that major barriers exist between local leaders, donors and other potential allies (like international NGOs). A large part of the international support system for civil society – besides being designed to cater mostly for established CSOs – remains stuck in the past, plagued with top-down, colonial, North-predominant, racist and transactional practices rooted in the “white saviour industrial complex.” These slow, risk-averse institutional and personal barriers within donors and enablers hinder the flow of essential resources to the frontlines of change.

Many donors and allies, including the most progressive ones, struggle to understand, trust and connect with groups operating at the grassroots level because they are too focused on large-scale and broad solutions and frameworks. Despite the desire of donors and allies to respond to social, political and economic injustices, they are often navigating institutional policies and procedures that enshrine extractive and transactional grantmaking processes and that make trusting relationships hard to realise.

The challenge

How do we nurture stronger and more meaningful connections and solidarity with these brave changemakers – not just in theory or abstraction – but most importantly, in our day-to-day practices?

This 12-month Donor Transformation Challenge was designed to accompany leaders within funding and enabling institutions working with civil society as they solve this challenge and dismantle dated practices, mindsets and systems of oppression within their organisations and their teams and, perhaps most importantly, within themselves.

The Challenge covers one topic per month that we identified as key to advancing this transformation. It also provides weekly reflection questions, facts, suggestions and resources that will support you to cultivate trust in your partnerships, develop new ways of thinking, have deeper conversations, help transform organisational culture and create more intentional and meaningful collaboration between local leaders, activists, donors and allies.

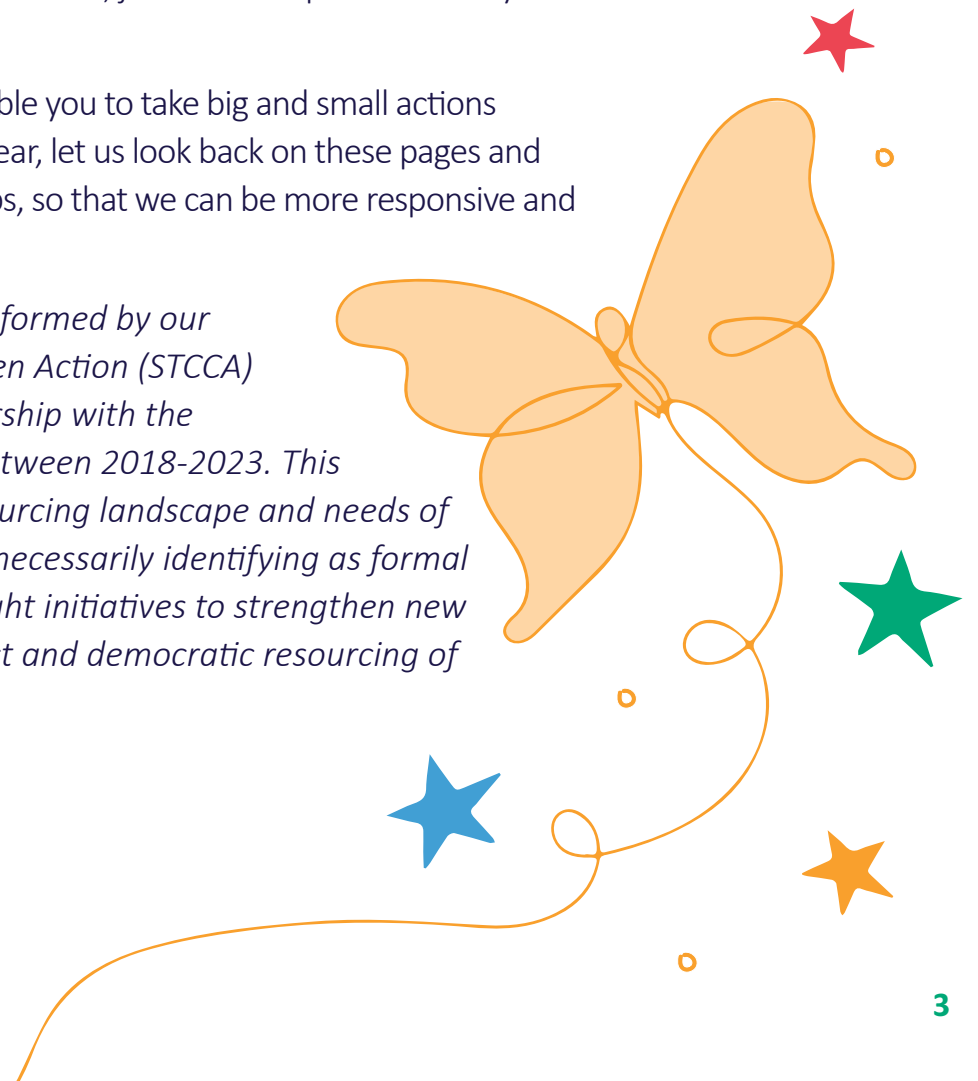
Change begins with ourselves, but we cannot do it alone

If we change one thought, one habit, one rule and one process at a time – consistently and with purpose – we can transform ourselves and transform systems. It's like building a muscle; you start small and work up. This is all the more powerful if we work together. Improving the support ecosystem for the people, activists and groups leading social transformations requires collective action and commitment.

Invite your co-workers, other partners and/or create a group to take this challenge with you. Share your journeys, reflections, motivations, dilemmas and challenges. Even better, join forces to practise what you learn and to push together for change.

We truly hope this Transformation Challenge will inspire and enable you to take big and small actions within your institution in support of partners. At the end of the year, let us look back on these pages and see an improved quality of partnerships and working relationships, so that we can be more responsive and accountable to the needs and ambitions of changemakers.

The reflections, questions and resources featured here are informed by our learning journey within the Strengthening 21st Century Citizen Action (STCCA) Programme, an initiative implemented by CIVICUS in partnership with the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (Norad) between 2018-2023. This programme helped us deepen our understanding of the resourcing landscape and needs of those individuals and groups leading social transformation (necessarily identifying as formal civil society). During this time, we co-designed and tested eight initiatives to strengthen new generation citizen action and explore avenues for more direct and democratic resourcing of smaller and informal groups at the grassroots level.



DONOR Transformation CHALLENGE



January
Dare to imagine



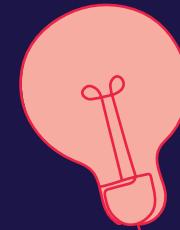
February
Reassess the most important considerations



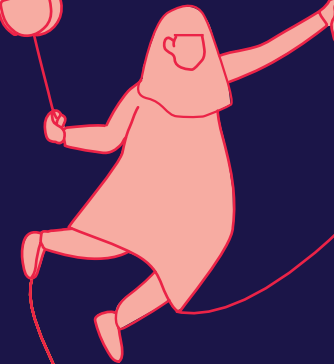
March
Focus on more than money



April
Communicate differently

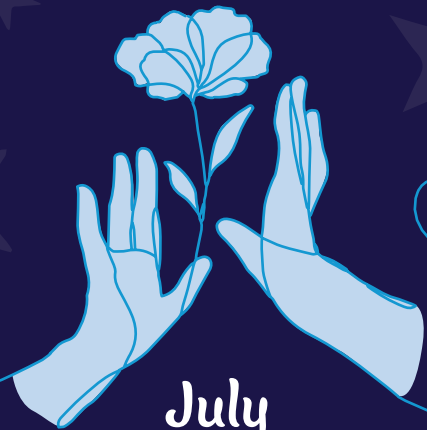


June
Take more risks



May
Doubt out loud



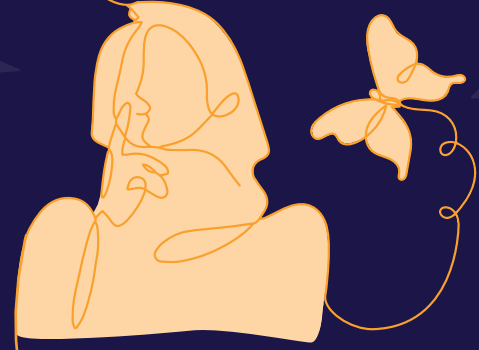


July
Earn trust

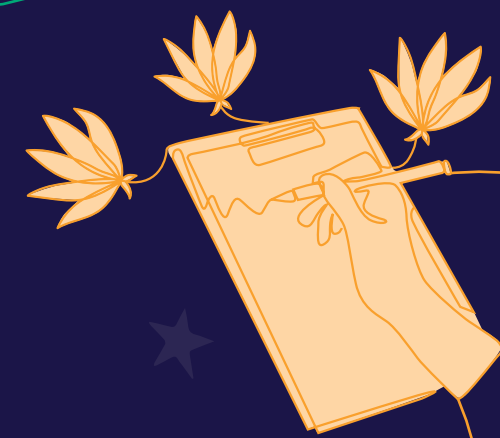
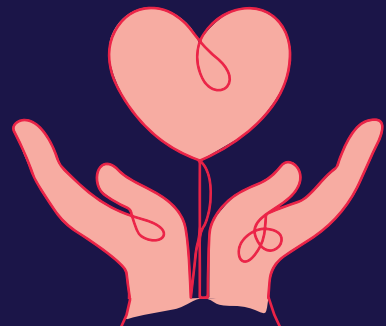
August
Ask the right
questions



December
Reflect on
how we
show up



September
Extend Care



October
Measure what
matters

November
Make room
for "no"





January

Dare to imagine

This month we invite you to dare to imagine. Dare to imagine new ways of supporting grassroots activists, youth leaders and social movements from inside your organisation – new funding modalities, new kinds of partnerships, even asking new simpler final report questions of your grantees and partners.

Dare to imagine how you could show up differently – with more enthusiasm and encouragement for your colleagues and partners! More rooted in your values and deepest motivations.

Dare to imagine a year where your organisation puts your partners, their needs, their initiatives and their visions at the centre of all that you do, informing every decision that you make.

Bringing these possibilities forward is an act of hope and exhibits a belief in the powerful work of our partners.

FACE FACTS

In 2021, the Grassroots Solidarity Revolution [consulted 140 grassroots activists](#) who shared the challenges they face in accessing support from donors and allies. Almost 78% of the survey respondents said that they had requested donor funding in the last two years, but 66% of them did not receive any resources. That's a lot of time and resources invested in unsuccessful quests for funds!

Imagine new ways of supporting grassroots activists.

WEEKLY REFLECTION QUESTIONS

WEEK 1	If this new year is “the year” to align your work with grassroots and youth activists and social movements, what is the most important change you can make that you want to prioritise this year?
WEEK 2	Our existing civil society support systems are leaving behind major pockets of activism. Which of those major pockets are you leaving behind? Why and how should you as a donor or ally organisation reach out to them?
WEEK 3	Imagine that every single person working in a funding institution – from the cleaner to the CEO – was given a micro investment fund, over which they have total personal discretion, to find an “under-the-radar” local leader, group or community initiative to support. Who would you invest in and why?
WEEK 4	What were your first experiences of knowing you wanted to pursue a career or calling to “help” other people? Have those circumstances or your motivations changed since then? If so, how and why?

For the Checklist



- Read “[Shifting power and resources to grassroots movements](#)”. This summary of findings from consultations led by CIVICUS with activists and funders identifies possible mechanisms that would increase the scale and quality of resources, both international and domestic, for grassroots groups and movements.
- Find practical inspiration to improve your grantmaking practices. Check out the [Learning Journey of the CIVICUS Solidarity Fund](#).
- Check out CIVICUS’ survey results: “[5 things grassroots activists want donors and allies to know](#)” and learn what activists truly need from donors and enablers to continue their critical work.



February

Reassess the most important considerations



This month we invite you to continue to place your focus on the humans, the people working closest to the ground and who are most impacted by the issues you care about. Building authentic relationships requires humanising each other, the processes and the conversation around resourcing grassroots activism and civil society.

No longer can our bureaucratic procedures be more important than the budgetary flexibility to respond to a rising crisis. No longer will we automatically assume that partners will want to participate in our strategy meetings. Rather than commissioning expensive evaluations that result in a report that few people read, we may assemble partners for intentional, iterative and sustained learning engagements.

When funders act in ways that recognise partners as independent and influential organisations in their own right – beholden to their own purposes and values – we can then more carefully consider how we as people can be most valuable to them.

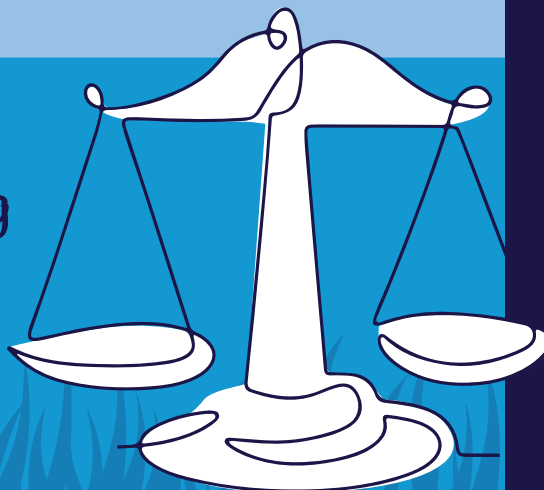
FACE FACTS

Humentum's research team worked with 81 national NGOs in 10 countries in Africa, Asia, Latin America and Europe to publish a report in 2022 that revealed the extent of the "[NGO Starvation Cycle](#)." They found that funders of two thirds of the NGOs surveyed provide inadequate coverage of their grantees' administration or operating costs.

WEEKLY REFLECTION QUESTIONS

WEEK 1	Would you describe your work more as a job or an interest, or is it a matter of life and personal responsibility to your own people? Does this distinction matter? Why or why not?
WEEK 2	Where are you and your organisation in the ecosystem of change? How proximate are you to people making change “on the ground”? Why does this matter?
WEEK 3	Given your organisation’s goals, resources and challenges, what is the optimal number of partners for you or your team to meaningfully engage with?
WEEK 4	Given your organisation’s goals, resources and challenges, what is the optimal grant size for you and your partners to manage? How do you know?

Place your focus on the humans, the people working closest to the ground.



For the Checklist



- Activists are not a means to an end, to meeting a project’s indicators. We must see and support the humans behind this job. Watch the inspiring videos “[Activists are not superheroes](#)”, by Mexican activist Dahlia de la Cerda, and “[One Day in the Life of Filipino Activists](#)”, by Filipino activist Naro Alonzo.
- “Humanising grassroots activists and funders engagement is indispensable,” says Otto Saki, Global Program Officer, Civic Engagement and Government at Ford Foundation, and we cannot agree more. Read his blog: “[Resourcing grassroots activism: Why relationships matter](#)”.
- Share one idea to streamline or simplify your team’s grantmaking process so that it requires *less time* from your partners.



March

Focus on more than money



This month we invite you to look at all aspects of how you and your team relate to your partners. Understanding how we as funders can be of most use to busy and often overstretched grassroots and youth activists and movement leaders means valuing more than just the money or “capacity building” we provide. It means examining what we require for activists to access our resources, and how we relate and connect with them on a human level.

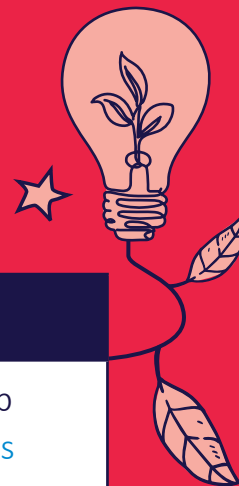
Funders often require unnecessary labour from partners, and this often reflects funders’ desire for information, or longing for certainty, rather than considering how our partners and their work are impacted. In recognition of the many demands on them, let’s consider the “minimum” required for partners to access our resources.

And in our time together with partners, let’s not only focus on “getting the work done”, but also include deliberate steps to build mutual understanding and unity.

How do you and your team relate to your partners?

FACE FACTS

CIVICUS and the Colombian social impact startup Innpactia surveyed 405 civil society organisations in Latin America in 2021 to understand the barriers and costs they encounter when trying to access donor funds. The findings showed that smaller, newer and informal organisations (CSOs) with already low operating budgets face increased challenges in meeting donor requirements in order to access funding opportunities. The CSOs most in need of funding have the lowest success rates when applying to these opportunities.



WEEKLY REFLECTION QUESTIONS

WEEK 1	What do you see as the differences between transactional thinking and relational thinking? How do either of these approaches impact your partnerships?
WEEK 2	Does your organisation require high “transaction costs” (time, labour, technical or language skills) for partners to gain access to your financial resources? How do you know how this affects your partners’ mission-critical work?
WEEK 3	What support does your team or organisation offer to partners beyond financial resources? Why does this matter?
WEEK 4	Grassroots, youth, civil society and movement leaders bring deep contextual knowledge, embeddedness within communities, resourcefulness, language and cultural skills, and the ability to operate in a responsive manner to local needs. How might your partners build your capacity?

For the Checklist



- Read Dumiso Gatsha’s blog: [“Nurturing relationships outside funding partnerships”](#).
- Check out the CIVICUS and Innpactia report: [Access to resources for civil society in Latin America: Barriers and costs; inequities and inefficiencies](#).
- Make an inventory of your and your team’s capacity building needs and what you need to learn to provide more useful resources and relevant support to your partners.





April

Communicate differently



This month we invite you to give some thought to what makes for effective and supportive communication in any relationship. Sharing needs, expectations, limits and boundaries supports every person to know where they stand in a relationship.

So many funding relationships are built on the tension instead- will the partners receive money, how long will it last, will the grant be renewed, is the funding being used “correctly”? This often makes up the bulk of communication between funders and partners, with power imbued in every interaction either explicitly or implicitly.

It is possible and important to communicate differently – to make sure we’re communicating about more than money with our partners, receiving honest (no, actually honest!) feedback, and portraying our partners to the external world as having dignity, sovereignty, voice and agency.

Make sure we’re communicating about more than money.

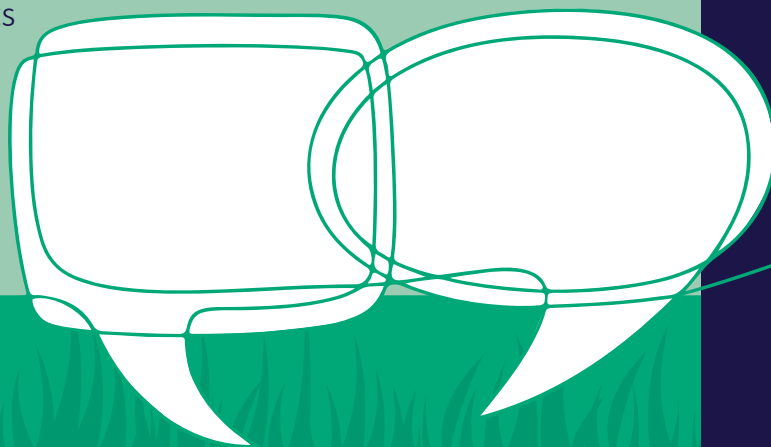


FACE FACTS

In 2019, social volunteer and activist Anna Kolotovkina worked with CIVICUS [reviewing around 200 websites of entities that support civil society](#) to build a directory of funders, INGOs and other entities that provide funding and non-financial resources to activists and small CSOs. She found that information on 50% of the funding/supporting organisations’ websites was often not easy to find, complete or helpful for those looking to connect with relevant donors and find funding opportunities. Finding clear, concise, pertinent and accessible information that is also available in different languages is one of the very first challenges faced by changemakers who need resources and support.

WEEKLY REFLECTION QUESTIONS

WEEK 1	What makes a “good ally” to grassroots changemakers youth activists, and movement leaders? Are you a “good ally”?
WEEK 2	The language we use either closes down or opens up dialogue, as well as our own thinking. What are the most important elements in creating a friendly, open, affirming climate where real listening and dialogue can occur between colleagues and/or partners?
WEEK 3	Which possessive adjectives (MINE – YOURS – ITS – HERS – HIS – OURS – THEIRS – WHOSE) do you use to refer to the projects or programmes you fund? Does it matter?
WEEK 4	Take an inventory of the information that your organisation readily shares with its partners. Where could you be more transparent and proactive in terms of communication?



For the Checklist



- Watch the webinar: [Countering toxic narratives about grassroots activists](#).
- Read Anna Kolotovkina’s blog [“Democratising information is key to democratise funding access for grassroots and activists”](#) and learn what barriers activists face to access information about donors and funding opportunities.
- Schedule a meeting between your programmes and communications staff to discuss what it means to humanise “beneficiaries” in your organisation’s external communications and how you can avoid perpetuating stigmas and toxic labels and narratives about local and grassroots activists and partners.



May

Doubt out loud

This month we invite you to consider the uncertainty that leaders of civil society and social movements face – every day – as they cope with sorrow, despair and multiple injustices, and summon the courage to keep fighting for everyone’s liberation along the way.

Through our education or training or organisational cultures we are conditioned to recognise and value “expertise”, or people who have status as knowledge holders or decision-makers. At this point in history, however, we know the experts don’t have all the answers. We also know that each of us has fundamental know-how and resources that contribute to social transformation.

We work hard to avoid being judged or seen as foolish or indecisive. Why? Because “I don’t know” is a very vulnerable place to be. “I don’t know” is found when we have imprecise information, and when unseen or undetectable outcomes arise. However, continually recreating our work as we learn may be the most strategic way to make change in an uncertain world.

So, let’s not be afraid to doubt out loud.

FACE FACTS



The CIVICUS Solidarity Fund (CSF) was conceptualised to be participatory and inclusive. However, after a couple of years of work, they felt that their grant application process was not as accessible and inclusive as desired. Instead of figuring out all alone how to change this, the coordinators of the [CSF held several conversations with previous grant applicants](#) between November 2020 and January 2021. They shared their experiences and challenges with the CSF and other funds and what they thought could be improved to make the CSF more participatory, inclusive and accessible to groups most in need. This led to an important transformation of the CSF that is documented in the [CSF Learning Journey](#).

Consider the uncertainty that leaders of civil society and social movements face.

WEEKLY REFLECTION QUESTIONS

WEEK 1	How do you define “leadership”? What kind of leader do you want to be inside your current organisation, with your partners and in general?
WEEK 2	When does “fear of failure” or “fear of the unknown” show up in your work? How does it impact your partners and colleagues? How do you try to minimise risk or gain control in the face of your fears?
WEEK 3	What is the most difficult part of “speaking up” for you? When is it necessary to speak up for your partners?
WEEK 4	Why does it matter to take the time to reflect when it comes to navigating ambiguity in our sector? How does it impact partnerships?

For the Checklist



- Read the chapter “[Learning from within](#)” from the CIVICUS Solidarity Fund Learning Journey and the blog “[Are you a good grassroots ally? Think twice about it.](#)” Reflect on what you and your organisation need to learn more about how to improve the support you provide for grassroots partners.
- Check out CIVICUS’ “[Resourcing youth-led groups and movements: A reflective playbook for donors and youth organisers](#)”. This playbook is the perfect practical tool if you doubt how to engage with youth activists in vulnerable and truly meaningful ways.
- Reach out to a colleague you trust and talk about your current fears and create a contingency plan for a situation that makes you anxious.





June

Take more risks

This month we invite you to consider what's so "risky" about investing resources in effective, visionary grassroots and youth leaders, civil society organisations and movements? In many ways, funders may not be taking enough risks on the dynamism, self-determination, ingenuity and voluntary resources that community leaders are able to generate!

These people and groups have the most important knowledge, ideas, energy and human resources to address the immense and complex challenges in their contexts. And they are facing serious risks associated with the injustices they fight and the consequences of their activism.

How is it possible that donors and enabling organisations are not willing to take some risks while people and groups on the frontlines risk everything? To deem an initiative or a group of people as "risky" continues to reveal the global power structures at play. Being able to take financial risks is a necessary part of adapting to future uncertainties.

Investing in the wisdom, experience and leadership of people who are already doing something to address the challenges in their own communities may actually be one of the least risky things we as funders can do, and also one of the smartest.



FACE FACTS

Only 14% of the Official Development Assistance (ODA) provided by states around the world is directed to or channelled through CSOs, and less than 1% is earmarked directly for CSOs in the Global South.

Why are we not willing to take some risks while people on the frontlines risk everything?

WEEKLY REFLECTION QUESTIONS

WEEK 1	Local and grassroots activists, organisations and groups have room to learn and grow when funders can tolerate more risk. What are the barriers to more risk-taking in your organisation?
WEEK 2	How can you and/or your team expand your tolerance for ambiguity, conflict and discomfort? How might this support partners' sovereignty and self-determination?
WEEK 3	When and why is it important to "stand back" with partners, and how do you know if it's time to "step in"?
WEEK 4	Do you think you overestimate the probability of things going wrong? How can you work with your partners to prepare for a crisis?



For the Checklist



- Read CIVICUS' paper [Addressing the Resourcing Problem: Strategic Recommendations on Mechanisms to Increase Resources Going to Civil Society Groups in the Global South](#).
- Watch the video "[We need to get more funding](#)", where an activist frog shares their story dealing with a donor that censors their documentary because they don't want to be associated with "radical" or risky statements or allegations.
- Know your "why." Write down three reasons "speaking up" for your partners is worth it to you.



July

Earn trust

This month we invite you to think about trust. Trust is regularly cited as a critical factor in effective partnerships. But trust cannot simply be designed, imposed and managed. Nor does it magically appear. Trusting relationships are nurtured and earned.

Trust is a result of interactions over time. It is both personally and socially constructed – consciously and subconsciously – in moments that people come together.

We might believe that someone is being genuine and truthful when they say that they intend to do something, and yet still not trust them to do it because we don't think that they have the necessary competence, character, community, credibility, communication, capability, context and commitments.

Often funders rely on formal accountability measures to “trust” their partners, rather than building reciprocal relationships with leaders and activists based on mutual responsibility. This often reveals a lack of trust in the analysis and strategies of grassroots partners and the courage and humility to accept that the best solutions often come from the ground up.

So, funder, what makes you trustworthy to your partners?

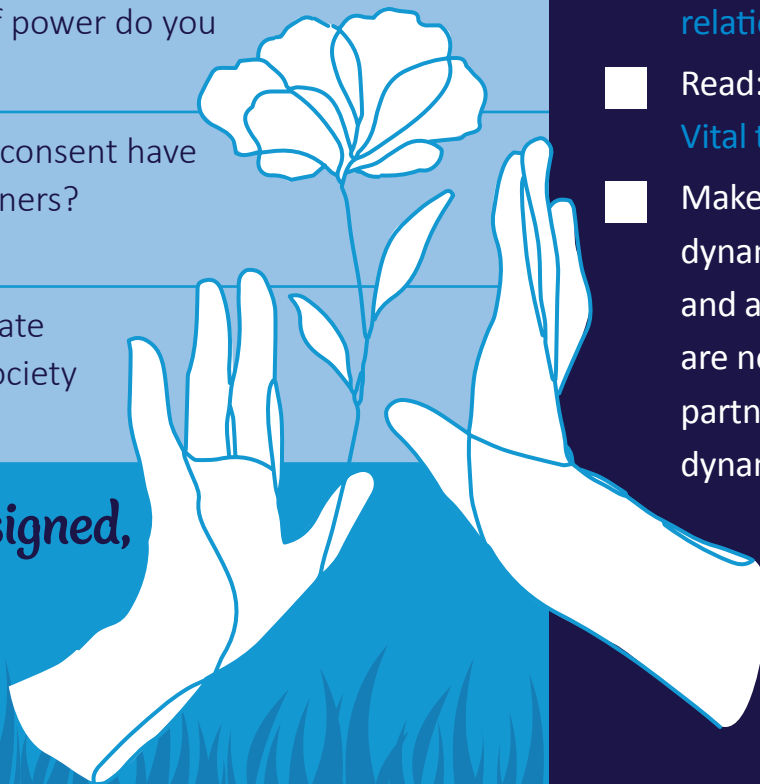
FACE FACTS

Good people are connected to good people. 92% of the chosen candidates to CIVICUS' [Youth Action Team](#) (YAT) in 2021 applied because the experience was recommended by a colleague who participated in a CIVICUS programme.

WEEKLY REFLECTION QUESTIONS

WEEK 1	Why does the pace at which you work matter when it comes to building stronger, more trusting relationships with your partners and colleagues?
WEEK 2	People most often consider power to be a product of organisational authority, hierarchy, status or position – often unseen by those with the power and usually obvious to those without it. What other kinds of power do you have? Your partners?
WEEK 3	In your experience, what does consent have to do with your work with partners?
WEEK 4	Where/how can you demonstrate more transparency with civil society partners?

Trust cannot simply be designed, imposed and managed.



For the Checklist



- Improving the resourcing conditions for grassroots and new generation activists starts by establishing honest, equal, trust-based and meaningful relationships. Watch CIVICUS' webinar: "[Resourcing grassroots activism: Why relationships matter](#)".
- Read: "[3 Reasons Why Relationships are Vital to Expanding Youth Networks](#)".
- Make an inventory of the various power dynamics at play in your partnerships and analyse: which are healthy, which are negative, how they affect your partnerships and how to change the dynamics that need change.



August

Ask the right questions



This month we invite you to ask the “right” questions. In our fast-moving organisational lives, it can often seem that “getting it done” - whatever it is- is always top priority. The problem with a constant focus on productivity is that in that impulse, in that unconsciousness of taking action, we uphold the status quo.

We ensure there’s no time to ask challenging or big picture questions like: “Couldn’t this grant application process be streamlined?” or “Can we add a small grants function alongside this larger project proposal?”

The bias for action no doubt ensures that we complete tasks. But we end up valuing that effort more than we value asking the right questions, let alone building and maintaining relationships.

Let’s make room and preserve energy for deliberation or discernment between options, for consent, for disagreement, for repair, for trust-building and togetherness.

FACE FACTS

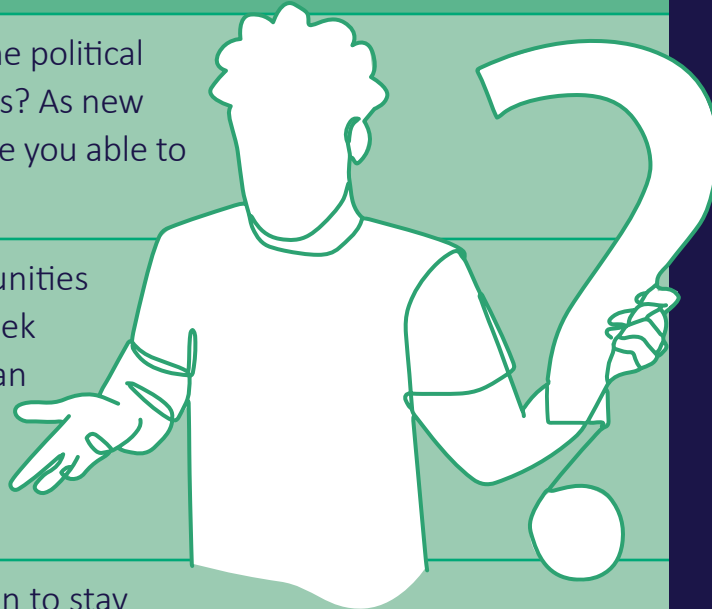
In 2021, the Grassroots Solidarity Revolution [consulted 140 grassroots activists](#) who shared the challenges they face in accessing support from donors and allies. When asked what their main difficulties are in meeting donor requirements, 36% of respondents indicated the political context of their countries/cities as the number one challenge.

Make room and preserve energy for deliberation or discernment.



WEEKLY REFLECTION QUESTIONS

WEEK 1	How do you factor in the political context of your partners? As new situations arise, how are you able to respond?
WEEK 2	Where are the opportunities for you to listen and seek explanations rather than making assumptions and judging your partners?
WEEK 3	How do you know when to stay even though a partner is struggling, and when to leave if the partner is failing?
WEEK 4	Where can you care less about what others think? When do others' assessments of you or your work matter most?



For the Checklist



- Read CIVICUS Youth Action Lab's paper: "[Rebalancing Power in Mentoring Relationships](#)".
- Watch the video "[What is it like being an activist in Nigeria](#)". Understanding the raw realities of activists and communities on the front lines is necessary for donors and allies to define relevant goals, actions, impact and how to give activists the support they need.
- Make a list of "big picture" questions that you think your team needs to address. Schedule a periodic but recurring team meeting solely for the purpose of group reflection on "big picture" or emerging issues that often get ignored.



September

Extend Care

This month we invite you to extend care to your partners and colleagues, and perhaps most importantly, to yourself. Extending care means offering each other the opportunity to listen to our bodies, minds and entire beings. This is a political act and it helps form mutual trust in shared collective experiences.

We all need each other. Extending care acknowledges our shared vulnerability, despite how hard, complicated and unintuitive caring has become under the weight of hierarchical institutions and oppressive systems.

Extending care gives us an opportunity to deepen the most important conversations of the day and concretise – in practice – interdependence and trust, in order to fundamentally shift our organisational cultures towards new ways of living, loving and working.

We can't do this work alone, so we must dwell much more often on where we are connected to each other. Let's dare to tap our sources of love, generosity and compassion, and re-humanise our work. Integrity, courage and solidarity are choices made by your heart.

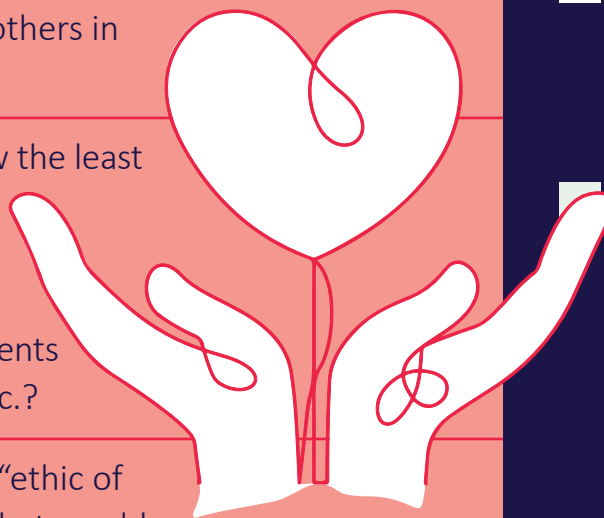
FACE FACTS

The impact of human rights work on the mental health of human rights advocates can be quite burdensome, but it is often neglected by the entire system. “[Mental Health Functioning in the Human Rights Field: Findings from an International Internet-Based Survey](#)”, published in 2015, indicates that among the 346 human rights advocates who completed this international survey, 19.4% met criteria for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), 18.8% met criteria for subthreshold PTSD, and 14.7% met criteria for depression.

Extending care is a political act.

WEEKLY REFLECTION QUESTIONS

WEEK 1	Naming people's contributions is important for sharing and building trust. How do you actively and regularly recognise the work of your partners and colleagues?
WEEK 2	What does it mean to be "fully present" for another human being? Why is it important to step away from "getting things done" and offer this presence to others in your work?
WEEK 3	Think of the partner who you know the least well. How will you start to learn about their lives, their challenges and triumphs, their context, their family and friends, their hidden talents and interests, their preferences, etc.?
WEEK 4	What would it mean to imbue an "ethic of care" inside your organisation? What would change about how you relate to your partners and colleagues?



For the Checklist



- Watch the video "[Resourcing activists' mental health and well-being](#)" for a close look at the mental and emotional burden activists are exposed to.
- Check out and share with your partners the "[Jam Session Toolkit – A guide to hosting nurturing and healing spaces for civil society activists and organisers](#)".
- Explore ways to provide resources for activists, organisations, groups and movements that allow them to invest in their wellbeing. Also, include care practices in your interactions with these partners. For example, schedule check-in calls with your grantee partners to know how they are doing and to connect at a more human level. If you want to get more creative, host a [Jam Session](#) with them!



October

Measure what matters



FACE FACTS

This month we invite you to measure what matters. Funders can stand to be more humble about the limitations of what we can and cannot know, as well as the ambiguity and contradictions inherent in our work. We high-mindedly question everything about “what works.” We obsess about gathering data to answer those questions. At some point all this thinking can insulate us and remove us from the lived realities of people we’re trying to support who are navigating a rarely linear, unpredictable path of social change.

The evidence-push also reinforces a glass ceiling that prevents the participation of those who supposedly matter most in decision-making, exacerbating the inequalities in our partnerships. Measuring what matters means listening to our partners about what progress looks like for them.

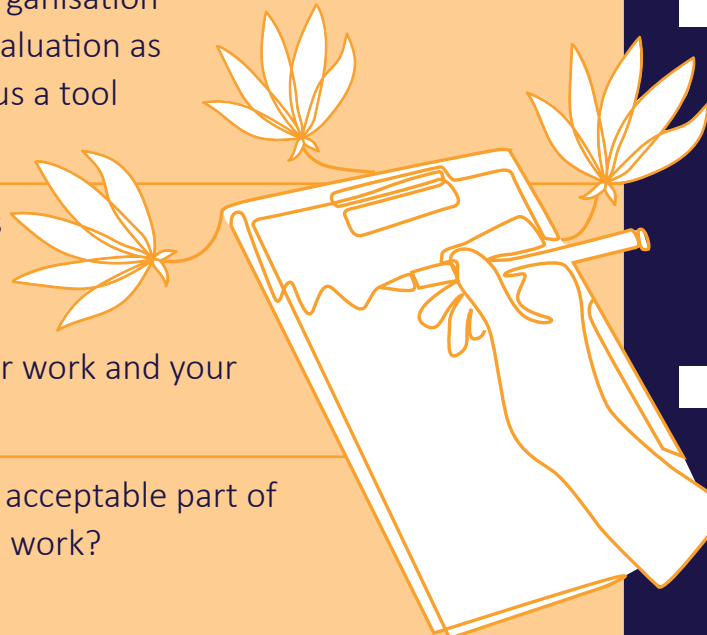
Undoubtedly, soundly-gathered and-interpreted data can provide important new perspectives for us all to consider. Let’s remain unsatisfied with poor results... and still prepare ourselves to embrace the mystery.

The Youth Action Lab (YAL) **challenged predominant ways of monitoring and evaluating “grantees” progress and success** by having the communities take the lead on determining the value and impact of the YAL activists’ work. The YAL considered the recognition from local communities as an indicator of success and impact, and monitored it, focusing on outcomes harvesting, community feedback, storytelling and referring to the lived experiences of participants.

Ask your partners what progress looks like for them.

WEEKLY REFLECTION QUESTIONS

WEEK 1	How does your team or organisation navigate the tension of evaluation as compliance enforcer versus a tool for learning?
WEEK 2	Do you or your colleagues have a high or low tolerance for “not knowing”? How does this impact your work and your partners?
WEEK 3	Is failure an expected and acceptable part of your work? Your partners’ work? Why or why not?
WEEK 4	We have more information at our disposal than at any other time in human history. How has this decreased your tolerance for “not knowing”? Where could you challenge yourself to release having to have access to information about your partners?



For the Checklist



- Read the “[Outcomes and learnings of the Youth Action Lab 2020.](#)”
- Read the CIVICUS [Youth Action Lab’s Playbook](#), a collection of resources, learnings and recommendations for donors and organisations looking to build or strengthen their supporting mechanisms for youth-led or focused groups.
- If your organisation uses evaluation frameworks, research the origins of logframes.



November

Make room for “no”

This month we invite you to make room for “no”. Can your partners really say no to the resources you offer? (The answer to this question will reveal something about you.) Funders often assume that because they bring money to the table, our priorities matter first. But we can do more to ensure that potential grantees are making informed decisions as they enter and manage partnerships with us.

Ensuring partners can opt in or opt out doesn’t mean just eliminating coercion, which is easier to spot. It also means actively challenging assumptions and confirmation bias and asking open-ended questions. It means anyone can offer options and alternatives. It means sharing much more reasoning behind decision-making results. Ultimately, consent means partners can change their minds! Attempts to express concern or renegotiate immediately slow down processes so clarity, mutual understanding and new agreements can be sought.

Making room for “no” is a skill set and a mindset. Funders can choose to see “pushback” to their offerings as evidence of more equitable relationships.

FACE FACTS

A [notable takeaway](#) of the co-creation process of the Grassroots Solidarity Revolution campaign is that activists consistently have to understand and adapt to the actions of others, both those who depend on them and/or those who oppress them. In activists-funder relationships, activists have to comply, do the groundwork, manage expectations, navigate risks, be cautious and challenge structural power where possible. In these rooted dynamics, activists have little room for saying “no”.

Can your partners really say no to the resources you offer?

WEEKLY REFLECTION QUESTIONS

WEEK 1	How do you solicit, welcome and listen to opposing viewpoints and voices beyond the usual suspects? How do you seek and receive feedback from your partners?
WEEK 2	When and how do you name the power that you hold? How do you ensure you are clear for yourself and others when you are using your power?
WEEK 3	How can you offer more options within your work, so that partners and colleagues can be clear that they have a choice?
WEEK 4	What do you observe about power dynamics and consent in your organisation's partnerships?



For the Checklist



- Read Dumiso Gatsha's reflection: "[21st century citizen action: co-creating to improve resourcing relationships](#)" and open up to co-creating solutions, shared agendas and collective visions for change with your grassroots partners.
- Read "[The power of radical collaboration: co-designing solutions in partnership with youth](#)". This paper reflects on CIVICUS' experience, challenges and opportunities in co-creating the [Youth Action Lab](#) with a group of young activists.
- Make an inventory of the times grantee partners have said no to you or freely expressed/proposed different ways of doing things. Then, make a list of feasible and safe ways you can request honest and even opposing feedback from your partners and put in practice at least one.



December

Reflect on how we show up



This month we invite you to take an overview of the closing year. How did you show up? Did you centre partners at the core of your strategies? Did you prioritise change? Were you courageous enough to put your partners' needs first – so that they could adapt to arising needs, inherent complexities and local realities? When did you question “the rules”, especially when they constrained partners?

Did you make enough mistakes? Did you let yourself and others learn from them? Did you own up to what you did/do not know? Did you make up your own mind, or care too much about what others think?

How did you challenge your own biases, -isms and preconceived notions? How did you wear your privilege? Did you listen, or speak more? Were you able to observe without evaluating? When did you ask for help? When did you ask for feedback? Did you receive with grace? Did you allow yourself to rest, or did you focus too much on “productivity”? How did you nourish your body, your heart, your creativity, your soul? What did you most frequently celebrate in your and your partners' work?

FACE FACTS

CIVICUS published an open letter to donors in March 2020 calling for more flexibility, certainty and stability towards grantee partners at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. CIVICUS consulted members of the alliance (127 CIVICUS members representing 50 countries) on how the pandemic affected their ability to organise and mobilise resources and support, as well as their relationships with donors/supporters. [Survey findings](#) showed that 60% of respondents found the letters to donors useful for their work. Many said they used them for advocacy with donors and during negotiations on the conditions of their funding.

Did you centre partners at the core of your strategies?

WEEKLY REFLECTION QUESTIONS

WEEK 1	How we “show up” for and with other people – in our partnerships – starts with how we first show up for ourselves. How do you normally cope when overwhelmed with work or life?
WEEK 2	How do you actively refrain from needing to be the expert? Can you take up and hold space in a way that doesn’t assume you know best?
WEEK 3	One of the bravest things that funders can do is to get out of the driver’s seat. How do you ensure that you are centring those closest to the problems?
WEEK 4	When do you embrace change, or resist it? Do you normally welcome challenges and seize opportunities, or shrink from them?

For the Checklist



- Read the CIVICUS Youth coordination team’s blog: “[Four Practices to Strengthen Youth Activism](#)”.
- Watch “[Grassroots Resilience in Action](#)”, an inspiring video series produced by grassroots activists that reflects their realities, the ideals that drive their work, the risks and stigmas they face, and their challenges in accessing funds.
- Make two lists: (1) all of the ways that you supported grassroots partners in 2024, and (2) all of the ways that you were supported in 2024 – and send a note of gratitude to your favourite partner or colleague.





Congratulations!



You completed the challenge.



Thank you for trusting this process and transformation journey. We hope it was an enriching and valuable experience that drew you closer to becoming a better partner for activists and groups leading change at the grassroots level.

We are planning to host events with leaders within funding and enabling institutions who engage in this challenge. The idea is to share experiences, learn from peers and imagine potential ways of collaboration as grassroots allies. Please send us an email at csresourcing@civicus.org if you are taking the challenge and want to be part of these spaces or to simply share any feedback about the challenge. We'd love to hear from you!

