

# Creating a Culture of Youth-led Organizations in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania

Chelsea Cutright, PhD (Centre College)  
chelsea.cutright@centre.edu

## Introduction

Discussing Tanzanian youth's practices of volunteering, an intern I interviewed from a youth-led organization expressed surprise at how these youth often found ways to make things work, even while remarkably inexperienced in global development practices. This contradiction exposes dueling traits of inexperience and creativity, characteristics I argue to be unique to youth-led indigenous non-governmental organizations (INGOs) in the contemporary, urban environment of Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. The identifier "youth-led" indicates more than an organization led by young people; with youth increasingly engaging in organizational activism, I see a new organizational culture that reflects the distinct challenges and benefits of this identity.

In 2019, during ethnographic fieldwork in Dar es Salaam, I conducted thirty-four semi-structured interviews with staff and volunteers of two youth-led INGOs— one engaged in sport for development work and the other creating animated videos for community education. These voices, combined with eight months of participant observation, reveal youth-specific organizational challenges such as inexperience and age discrimination. Stated benefits of being youth-led organizations include understanding youth, generational differences, and better working environments. I build upon the theory of youth-led spaces as "places of possibility" (Goessling and Wager 2021), arguing that these unique challenges and benefits converge to form a new type of organizational culture.

## Challenges: Lack of Experience

In many interviews, youths said the biggest challenge facing their organizations was lack of experience, including issues with communication, reliability, and accessing funding. However, this lack of experience was not typically treated as significant, even though acknowledged as the main source of most organizational issues. For example, a common complaint was difficulties in intraorganizational communication, between departments, as well as between staff and volunteers. However, interviewees often embraced this characteristic as typical of youth-led organizations.

Age discrimination from non-youths and non-youth-led entities was another challenge. How others view and interact with youth-led organizations impact how these organizations conduct their work. For example, the organization creating animated videos submitted scripts discussing sexual reproductive health (SRH) topics to the appropriate government agencies for approval. Their requests would be questioned or ignored more often than more recognizable or established organizations working on the same issues. Viewing age as a social inequality is important for understanding how youth organize (Goessling 2017). Considering how a youth-led identity

might result in inequitable treatment can help to appreciate how youth-led organizations may conduct themselves differently from non-youth-led organizations.

### **Benefits: Knowing Youth/Unknowing Generations**

One of the greatest benefits expressed about being youth-led was that as youth themselves, they better know the experiences of the youth population with which they are working. One interviewee said, “Youth-led organizations are better for working on youth issues because ‘we are here now,’ meaning youth understand the issues and are living the issues.” Several youth leaders commented that their youth identity creates an environment of openness and comfort where youth beneficiaries can express themselves and seek advice from youth leaders due to less age-restricted hierarchies. For example, the INGO using sport for development practices relied on youth coaches to lead their youth teams and life skills programs, recognizing that having youth in these leadership roles reduces hierarchical relationships between leaders and youth participants. This cultivated an environment where youth playing soccer and netball were more comfortable discussing life skills topics, like puberty, with coaches who were closer to them in age. These micro-level experiences benefit the immediate workability of organizational practices, while at the macro-level, youth are more connected to current struggles impacting young people and are better suited to make suggestions or implement programs that will benefit the entire youth population.

Other benefits espoused of being a youth-led organization related to generational changes and differences. For example, Maria previously worked at a non-youth-led NGO where she was afraid to speak up or ask questions because of age-specific expectations associated with the roles of employees. Now, working at a youth-led organization, she says these age-related hierarchies are not present and she feels comfortable asking questions and making suggestions.

Youth having more ambition for organizing and social change than older people working in similar organizations was another generational difference noted as a benefit. Elim, a youth leader, said, “Youth have power to work anytime, like yesterday we went to the event but still today we came to the office. But the old person says this is our off day.” The implication is that youth have more energy and motivation to pursue organizational work. This belief indicates an interesting ideology of difference between age groups and how they conduct organizational activities.

Generational changes are also seen in youth-led organizations’ more open practices of discussing SRH, a topic common in INGO work in Tanzania. In the past, it was taboo for young men to be involved in SRH education relating directly to girls and women, but now youth-led organizations have an open environment, with both young men and women participating in SRH discussions. Baraka, a volunteer, said, “Now we need to understand even our girls, especially for men, but back then it was women issues are only left to women.”

### **Conclusion**

These unique challenges and benefits contribute to the organizational culture and practices of youth-led INGOs which encourage and prioritize the innovation of Tanzanian youth. Research

on youth-led organizations across Africa recognizes that even with youth facing extreme challenges, participation in youth-led spaces nurtures their ability to be leaders and creators of social change (Diepeveen and Phiona 2021; Grauenkaer and Tufte 2018; Mabala 2011). While inexperienced, these youth are immersed in globalized worlds of social expression through creative outlets (Perullo 2005; Suriano 2007; Thieme 2018). Combining creativity with desire for creating social change, youth innovate new practices and repackage traditional practices, paving an avenue for becoming instruments of social change (Honwana 2012; Sommers 2010; Swartz et al. 2021; Hansen 2008; Weiss 2009). The youth-led INGOs in this research are examples of these “places of possibility,” defined as places which,

...provide youth opportunities to develop skills, experiences, and expertise that translate to job and education markets. These 'places of possibility' are significant in that they center youth experiences, foster learning and identity construction, and contribute to the imagining and building of a broader social movement (Goessling 2017, 424).

In contemporary urban Dar es Salaam, these places are nurtured within the growing youth-led organizational movement, becoming distinctive to the youth populations with which they are working and utilizing creative benefits to overcome perceived challenges.

## References

- Diepeveen, Stephanie, and Sanyu Phiona. 2021. “Youth-led (Digital) Innovation and Resilience during Covid-19: Experiences from the African Continent.” ODI Case study. London: ODI. Accessed April 8, 2022. <https://odi.org/en/publications/youth-led-digital-innovation-and-resilience-during-covid-19-experiences-from-the-african-continent>.
- Goessling, Kristen. 2017. “Youth Learning to Be Activists: Constructing ‘Places of Possibility’ Together.” *Critical Questions in Education* 8 (4): 418-437.
- Goessling, Kristen, and Amanda Wager. 2021. “Places of Possibility: Youth Research as Creative Liberatory Praxis.” *Journal of Youth Studies* 24 (6): 746-764.
- Grauenkaer, Lisa, and Thomas Tufte. 2018. “Youth-led Communication for Social Change: Empowerment, Citizen Media, and Cultures of Governance in Northern Ghana.” *Development in Practice* 28 (3): 400-413.
- Hansen, Karen Tranberg. 2008. *Youth and the City in the Global South*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- [Honwana, Alcinda. 2012. \*The Time of Youth: Work, Social Change, and Politics in Africa\*. Boulder, CO: Kumarian Press.](#)
- [Mabala, Richard. 2011. “Youth and ‘The Hood’ – Livelihoods and Neighbourhoods.” \*Environment and Urbanization\* 23 \(1\): 157-181.](#)

Perullo, Alex. 2005. "Hooligans and Heroes: Youth Identity and Hip-Hop in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania." *Africa Today* 51 (4): 75-101. doi:10.1353/at.2005.0045.

Sommers, Marc. 2010. "Urban Youth in Africa." *Environment and Urbanization* 22 (2): 317-332. doi:10.1177/0956247810377964.

Suriano, Maria. 2007. "'Mimi ni msanii, kioo cha jamii': Urban Youth Culture in Tanzania as Seen Through *Bongo Fleva* and Hip-Hop." *Swahili Forum* 14: 207-223.

Swartz, Sharlene, Adam Cooper, Clarence Batan, and Laura Kropff Causa, eds. 2021. *The Oxford Handbook of Global South Youth Studies*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Thieme, Tatiana Adeline. 2018. "The Hustle Economy: Informality, Uncertainty, and the Geographies of Getting By." *Progress in Human Geography* 42 (4): 529-548. doi:10.1177/0309132517690039.

Weiss, Brad. 2009. *Street Dreams and Hip Hop Barbershops: Global Fantasy in Urban Tanzania*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

---

**Author contact:** Chelsea Cutright, PhD (Centre College), [chelsea.cutright@centre.edu](mailto:chelsea.cutright@centre.edu)

**To cite this article:** Cutright, Chelsea. 2022. "Creating a Culture of Youth-led Organizations in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania." *NEOS* 14 (1).

**To link to this article:** <https://acyig.americananthro.org/neosvol14iss1sp22/cutright/>