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The Needs of the Youth-led Sector During the **Economic Downturn**



A youth-led social
policy think tank

IARS Publications

Unit 14, Dock Offices Surrey Quays Road, London SE16 2XU, UK
+44(0) 20 7064 4380, contact@iars.org.uk www.iars.org.uk

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IARS' vision is a society where everyone is given a choice to actively participate in social problem solving. The organisation is known for its robust, independent evidence-based approach to solving current social problems, and is considered to be a pioneer in user-involvement and the application of user-led research methods

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1. FORWARD

The effects of the recession on young people are becoming widely documented with extreme rises in youth unemployment, greater needs for advice around legal and benefit issues, as well as rising demands on housing and mental health services for young people. In addition to this there is a greater demand from young people for volunteering opportunities and ‘things to do’ as they find themselves struggling to find work. Within the Third sector there are many youth-led organisations that are playing a key role in supporting young people around these issues.

The youth-led sector is an emerging sector of organisations that have young people in strategic decision making roles and who work to deliver services. The youth-led approach is unique as it empowers young people to deliver training, services and support to other young people. This sector may be particularly vulnerable to the negative effects of the recession because they tend to be grassroots based operating on small budgets and may not have the necessary infrastructure support needed to guide them effectively.

As a youth-led social policy think-tank that provides frontline services to young people as well as providing second-tier support to other youth-led groups IARS is concerned about the effects of the recession on the youth-led sector. We have already felt negative repercussions of the recession through reduced funding and we feel it is important to highlight the issues and experiences of other youth-led organisations.

The main purpose of this report is to raise the visibility of the youth-led sector and increase awareness of its needs during the economic downturn. This is the first e-book looking at the needs of the youth-led sector during a difficult economic climate, while setting key definitions such as what is “youth led” and a “youth led sector”.

As a result of this project IARS are setting up a forum that will take forward some of the recommendations. In this way the work of the Forum will help the youth-led sector influence policy and practice to increase the support available.

Dr. Theo Gavrielides
IARS Founder & Director

2. THE IMPACTS OF THE RECESSION ON THE THIRD-SECTOR

IARS conducted a literature review to gain a greater understanding of the impacts of the recession. At the time there were no studies on the recession or youth-led sector, and very little documented use of the term and concept 'youth-led sector'. The focus of this background review was therefore focused on the effects of the recession across the Third Sector generally. Although none of the sources cited in this brief review are comprehensive enough to document the impacts of the recession across the whole of the Third sector, they have indicated patterns that have a likelihood of being seen when investigating the youth-led sector in particular.

An overview of recent reports¹ indicates an increase in demand on Third sector services² from the most vulnerable groups affected by recessions; BAME communities, young people, refugees. For example, there has been an increase in youth unemployment across the country (up by 80% compared with early 2008³) and subsequently there is an increase in the need for advice on employment benefits, training and finding new jobs. Such vast increases in demand for services has already begun placing organisations under extreme pressure to continue to bring in funding that will enable them to try and meet the demand.

However, The Big Squeeze report (London Voluntary Service Council, 2009) notes there are large concerns around balancing fundraising and service provision for many organisations. Many Third sector organisations are facing reductions in the amount of funding they are able to secure due to the tendency for funders to tighten their belts. Currently there is a pattern for organisations to transfer staff efforts away from service delivery and towards fundraising which has a decidedly negative impact on their service provision (London Voluntary Service Council, 2009).

Such impacts combined with increased demand for services have begun to create a highly competitive environment for the same funding streams. There is a compilation of anecdotal evidence (National Council of Voluntary Child Care Organisations, 2008) that smaller organisations are struggling to compete with larger organisations for vital funds. This issue may be particularly relevant to youth-led organisations as they compete with other organisations that are generally larger and more established. NCVCCO's (2008) research sees smaller and/or less established organisations as more likely to suffer from the negative impacts of the recession. It is especially concerning as most youth-led organisations tend to be

¹ LVSC 2009; NAVCA 2009; NCVYS 2009; NCVCCO 2008; MiNet 2009.

² For example, advice services on how to cope with legal problems (Youth Access), or volunteering services.

³ Prince's Trust, May 2009.

small with limited resources and it indicates that there is a specific need for small and young organisations to be directly supported by key infrastructure organisations as the recession effects continue to take hold.

In addition, the effects of the recession on young people as a population must be taken into account so that the value of the youth-led sector may be recognised. For example, there is expected to be a rise in unemployment amongst young people that reaches 1.25 million by the end of 2009. This rise in unemployment is an expected outcome of a recession and it is clear is that the youth generation will be severely affected.

With these facts come the impacts on the young people themselves such as low confidence, a lack of skills development, poverty & debt. Furthermore, there are higher chances of young people turning to crime during times of high unemployment. For example, young offenders released from prison may find it extremely difficult to get jobs and may end up re-offending as they try to survive.

In order to support young people effectively there needs to be appropriate support for the youth-led because of such an increased demand on their services as a direct result of the recession.

This brief overview has shown the links between the effects of recessions on young people and how that affects organisations within the Third Sector who offer support and services to such groups. It is likely that smaller and less established organisations are at a disadvantage to the rest in terms of securing funding and therefore surviving to serve their communities. It is therefore prudent that the effects of the recession on the youth-led sector are investigated. The following questions were developed in order to guide the discussions at meetings with both infrastructure organisations and youth-led organisations.

- 1) What is the youth-led sector and how does it work?
- 2) How has the recession affected the youth-led sector (past and present)
- 3) Is the youth-led sector seeing increases in service demand?
- 4) Is the youth-led sector suffering reductions in funding?
- 5) What priority needs are there?
- 6) How could infrastructure organisations be proactive to support the youth-led sector through the recession?

3. UNDERSTANDING THE YOUTH-LED SECTOR AND ITS NEEDS

3.1 Introduction

To understand the youth-led sector and its needs during the economic downturn IARS held meetings with key stakeholders. The evidence from these meetings was used to inform the recommendations of this report.

A qualitative methodology was adopted and it was decided that IARS would hold two meetings that would be conducted in a focus group style using the questions identified below.

3.2 Developing a set of questions

A literature review raised a preliminary set of questions, which are highlighted in section 2. These questions were further refined to enable them to be used to prompt a discussion at the focus groups. Three main questions were decided upon:

- i) **What is the youth-led sector?** There is very little literature that describes what a youth-led organisation is and their activities. It was hoped that the focus group participants might be constructing a definition. Answering this question would also help the participants place the impacts of the recession in context.
- ii) **How has the recession affected the youth-led sector?** - This question was designed to illicit an understanding of the different ways in which the economic downturn has impacted on youth-led organisations.
- iii) **What are the priority needs and how can they be met?** - This question was designed to help the participants generate some recommendations based on the needs of the youth-led sector that they had identified.

3.3 Gathering evidence to understand the youth-led sector and its needs

To find a sample of organisations that should be present at these meetings, IARS consulted with key infrastructure and youth organisations. The organisations that we contacted can be found in table x below. These organisations made recommendations of organisations that should be present at the focus groups to give evidence on the topic.

Organisation
1.MiNet
2.British Youth Council
3.Envision
4.Third Sector Alliance
5.London Empowerment Partnership (LEP)
6.Youth Action Network
7. National Council for Voluntary Youth Services (NCYVS)
8.V
9.Partnership for young London
10. HEAR
11.London Civic Forum
12.London Councils
14.Participation Works
15.Capacity Builders
16.Race on the Agenda (ROTA)
17.Children's Rights Alliance for England
18.VCS Engage
19.London Voluntary Service Council
20.Youth Access
21.Children & Young People Engage Network

Table 1. Organisations involved in identifying sample

21 organisations were selected to attend the focus groups. These organisations were an even mix of front line youth, youth-led and infrastructure organisations including funders. However, there was a high degree of absenteeism on the day with only 13 attendees. The organisations that took part are listed in table X below

Organisation
1.London Voluntary Service Council
2.National Council for Voluntary Youth Services
3.HEAR (Equalities Network)
4.Y- Gen
5.Young Researchers Network/ National Youth Agency
6.Race on the Agenda (ROTA)
7.NAVCA
8.Leaders in Community
9.Youth Access
10.SE1 United
11.V
12.VSC Engage

Table 2. Organisations present at the focus groups

3.4 Main findings

Below is a thematic summary of the main findings from the two focus groups.

3.4.1 What is the youth-led sector?

The participants found it difficult to come to a definition of what a youth-led organisation is. Most of the discussion focused on the level of youth involvement in the direction of an organisation and the delivery of its services. At one end of the spectrum one of the participants suggested that *“if it was youth-led it would be completely the young people deciding on everything”*. Whilst some of the participants thought that a youth-led organisation would be one where the young people might have less than complete control. For example, one person said *“there might be decisions that young people might not be able to have an input into”*. However, none of the participants could agree on what level of youth involvement and leadership would be necessary to cross the youth-led threshold.

Some of the participants suggested that one of the reasons for being unable to define the youth-led sector was the generally lack of awareness of the sector. One participant suggested that a lack of funding made youth-led organisations invisible, *“a large proportion of the sector is made up of organisations without funding”*

“there’s a lot of bad youth work and so called youth-led organisations...some organisations have become very lazy. This is a time for these organisations to realise that they have to change”.

“there is a gap in knowledge about the youth-led sector”

“it’s a piece of work that needs to be done about raising the profile about what youth-led means. Work to be done with these groups on sign posting. It would have to be based on their need”.

Particular problems that youth-led sector faces

Largely voluntary

“the sector has always struggled...once the worker has gone the work disintegrates”

Impact of the economic downturn on funding of youth-led sector

Tension between usual suspects and youth-led orgs which tend to be smaller

“youth-led is seen as a soft activity” – meaning that its value isn’t seen? More difficult to get funding”?

“we had two main funders who didn’t have money because of the recession”

“difficult trying to explain to people the extra costs of youth-led work”

“guide for youth-led organisations on how they can influence things at a local level. They need a little guide for where they can go for money”

“recession is providing some organisations with opportunities”

“There may be more funding for NEET groups for example, but all political parties will be looking at funding cuts”

Impact of the economic downturn on demand for services

“greater demand for volunteering services because of unemployment of young people”

“if nothing is done then there will be nothing for young people to do once they’ve left education” – i.e. lots of youth led orgs providing key opportunities.

The need for support services for the youth-led sector

“we can share the lessons we have learnt and create a larger network showing how to become youth-led organisations. We make links to private sector funding”.

“infrastructure organisations could help with staff turn over and dealing with change”

“we’ve had organisations provide us with training but we’ve not received any certificates, some organisations just tick boxes. Sometimes the people don’t receive the accreditation from the training”

“need hands on support”

The need for a voice of the youth-led sector

“value of youth-led forum getting organisations into the sector”

“there needs to be promotion of the sector...[the forum] could be a point to do that”

“it could be used to apply for joint bids”

“so do we want something new or influence what is already there?... we need to compliment the work that is out there”

“need to raise profile with certain groups”.

4. RECOMMENDATIONS

Below are a number of recommendations based on the findings from this piece of research on how the youth-led sector can be supported through the economic downturn and beyond.

Recommendations for third sector infrastructure organisations:

- ✓ There needs to be a body set up to promote awareness and understanding of the youth-led sector and its needs.
- ✓ Infrastructure organisation should actively seek to encourage youth-led organisations to join their memberships.
- ✓ Infrastructure organisations should help raise awareness of the youth-led sector.
- ✓ Infrastructure organisations should ensure they target their support packages to small grassroots youth-led groups.

Recommendations for funders and commissioners:

- ✓ Funders and commissioners of youth work should actively encourage youth-led groups to form partnerships to bid for contracts/grants.
- ✓ Funders and commissioners should differentiate between organisations offering youth services and youth-led organisations.
- ✓ Funders should be aware of the extra value of youth-led work.
- ✓ Funders and commissioners should support the core running costs of small youth-led organisations.

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**14 Dock Offices,
Surrey Quays Road
London, SE16 2XU
Tel: +44 (0) 2070644380
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