



Plan International

Strengthening the
resilience of youth-led
organisations in Latin
America through direct
funding and mentorship



Plan International is an independent development and humanitarian organisation that advances children's rights and equality for girls. They work with children, young people and partners in over 75 countries across the world.

Overview

In response to shrinking civic space in Latin America – alongside the ambition to shift power dynamics and improve partnerships with youth-led organisations – Plan International initiated a pilot project to **direct-fund and mentor youth-led organisations** in the region with core and flexible funding to enable them to **adapt to risks** as they arose.

This saw Plan fundamentally change its approach to supporting youth-led organisations so that they could act more independently, while Plan worked **in solidarity** alongside them. A risk-analysis tool on the enabling environment was created to accompany this process so that both Plan and youth-led organisations could manage closing space conditions more effectively.





Organisation takes action

Trigger

In 2016 the **enabling environment for sexual and reproductive rights was shrinking** across Latin America, especially for young women activists. Plan International took this issue seriously, as the risks faced by youth-led organisations and networks were growing.

Simultaneously, there was **demand from some of the youth-led organisations** that Plan had been working with, to **change the dynamics of their relationship**. Youth-led organisations felt that they weren't being considered in project design and were being treated as mere recipients, not as true partners in their own right.

Reflection

Closing space and the need for greater **internal organisational reform** are closely linked. The feedback from youth-led organisations in Latin America connected to deeper internal reflections within Plan on how adult-led civil society organisations (CSOs) work in partnership with children and young people's organisations. The strategies and approaches in use were still largely aligned with an old-fashioned style of top-down leadership. Plan needed to address the fact that their ways of working did not adequately consider **youth as a part of civil society**. Young actors and networks were not receiving sufficient funds to support their activities, and were rarely invited into formalised spaces. There was therefore a burning need to open up space for dialogue and for new young leadership to be able to contribute their knowledge and experience. As part of this, it was vital **to support and strengthen youth-led civil society and to help strengthen civic space** for young people's collective action, particularly amongst young women.

Response

Plan International Sweden, in collaboration with other Plan offices, had already begun a review of how to engage in more equal and reciprocal partnerships, in line with a broader ambition to strengthen civil society.

Youth-led organisations reported that they faced issues because they were not formalised, had no space to gather or organise and found it difficult to access funds. Donors were unwilling to fund their organisations as these often lacked solid organisational structures, and because donors were becoming increasingly **risk averse** in this region as **space was closing**. Plan therefore decided that a new approach was required.

Thanks to a flexible budget available for innovative initiatives, as part of funding of the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida), Plan International Sweden launched a pilot project to fund Latin American youth-led organisations directly, instead of through intermediaries. The aim was to **build the resilience** of youth-led organisations especially in the face of growing risks and shrinking civic space in the region.

A fund was created to allow organisations to receive **direct funding and mentorship** from Plan. The amounts involved were relatively low, between \$5,000 and \$10,000 USD. Nonetheless, this represented a significant shift in terms of being core and flexible grants made direct to these organisations, **allowing for the flexibility needed to adapt relevant responses** to growing risk and therefore **develop longer-term resilience**.

The Youth Initiatives pilot project included organisations (meaning both formally registered organisations and informal, loosely organised networks) in six countries in the region – Bolivia, Colombia, Guatemala, Nicaragua, Honduras and El Salvador – all countries where civic space was narrowing. Plan built a reference group for the project. This reference group was made up of programme staff and finance staff, with a 1:1 ratio from each country. All decisions relating to the project were taken collectively by this group, and contracts were drawn up between Plan International Sweden and the relevant Plan country offices to establish accountability for the funds. Country offices then decided on which youth-led organisations should be involved in the pilot, based on agreed criteria.

Response in practice

The pilot project ran for two and a half years from 2016 to 2018, involving direct funding to six youth-led organisations and networks.

Key points and actions emerged around Plan's relationship with the youth-led organisations, including its **important role in solidarity on civic space matters**, and how it could strengthen local civil society resilience. Amongst other things, key considerations included:

- Critical feedback related to the **procedure-heavy approach** – linked to Plan's bureaucratic structure and ways of working – which was not suitable for youth-led organisations. Plan therefore made **changes to its procedures and policies** by developing guidelines for youth-led organisations to suit their needs and those of the donor Sida, who required audits for the funds, thereby allowing greater flexibility (this has not been an organisation-wide change thus far).
- In order to meet the donor's audit expectations, Plan carried out **capacity development** with the youth-led organisations to build financial management and reporting skills whilst making templates more flexible. Adaptations were based on the feedback of the youth-led organisations.
- An **informal network** was created with the six participating organisations to support and build resilience within the pilot project. For example, Plan guided the network through conversations on how to build resilience in the face of heightened risk.
- This led to **transparent discussions about the role that Plan should play** in light of closing civic space. Choices ranged from demonstrating public solidarity with youth-led organisations – e.g. walking alongside them at protests, to playing a quieter role, with continued access on the ground and the ability

to continue supporting groups long-term even in the face of restrictions.

- This helped both Plan and partners to develop a better understanding of the **careful consideration required by this kind of solidarity**, regarding expectations, responsibility and risk.

- In year two of the project, the organisations prioritised discussions on the **emotional and psychological aspects of resilience** and Plan brought in experts to guide these discussions.



Enabling environment tool

During the pilot phase of this project, an enabling environment tool was developed and tested with partners in the region.

Plan International Sweden had already been in discussions with Plan's country offices to gauge knowledge and **understanding of the 'enabling environment'**. **Courses and workshops** were organised to explore what it was and how to measure it, to **try and increase an institutional understanding of risk**. Generally, Plan International does not historically have a high-risk appetite, therefore Plan International Sweden has been gathering information and sharing learning on how risks can be managed to increase resilience.

As partnership approaches with youth-led organisations were strengthened in Plan's Latin America offices, **youth-led organisations were asking**: "How much can we count on you? Will you be there when it's risky?"

As a result, a tool was designed with the youth-led organisations, to aid self-assessment, and **to build understanding of risk and an awareness of the capacities and abilities needed to navigate that risk**, e.g. political advocacy and influencing tactics. The tool is designed to strengthen organisations and to help build collective and **proactive action**, adapted to local contexts and informed by organisations' roles and areas of focus.

At every step, there are inputs that can feed into a plan **to strengthen organisational resilience in relation to shrinking space**, to help individuals make stronger, more informed decisions. The intention is for this to be a digital tool available across all regions.

Organisational learnings

Outcomes

- ✓ The pilot phase of this project has now been completed and evaluated. The model is currently being **scaled up across the region** into a new phase that will run until the year 2024 involving 15 youth-led organisations and networks.
- ✓ The cross-regional connections that were made, along with Plan's international presence, contributed to **the sense of solidarity** between the youth-led organisations on these challenging topics.
- ✓ Quote from the evaluation: *"It is evident that **Youth Organizations were strengthened from the Pilot Project**. Their strengths can be seen in... the optimal use of resources and general organizational capacities. It is also evident... the maturity that Youth Organizations achieved throughout the project, their regional and national projection, and therefore **their ability to have more political influence, as well as the ability to create new alliances and obtain new resources**. Clearly, the Pilot was highly beneficial for all Youth Organizations and for **strengthening new capacities** in the people who comprise them."*



CHALLENGES

Convincing donors

It is challenging to maintain the principles of transparency and full participation. These principles are often difficult to maintain because of conflicting donor requirements. In this instance, making the case for the key difference between direct funding and supporting groups via intermediaries, and advocating for more flexibility when reporting on and auditing the funds, was a challenge. The hope is that through this project, Plan can demonstrate to donors the balance needed between accountability on the one hand, and supporting youth-led organisations and new leadership on the other. This is especially relevant in contexts of high risk where capacities need to be strengthened in order to build resilience in the face of closing space. In this case, Sida's flexibility and ambition to strengthen civil society made the project possible.

Generational differences

There is a generational issue to overcome. Many of those working in international civil society organisations (ICSOs) have a vision for the world and for society informed by parameters and ideologies set several decades ago. This means they risk missing out on what young people see as change, in terms of political participation, trust in democracy, how to build solidarity or connect. For effective partnership and solidarity, there needs to be transparent conversations – and active listening – on what all stakeholders expect of change.

Balancing risks and rationale

It was important for Plan to be able to articulate why it wanted to work with youth-led organisations. This connects to risk analysis, and how far an ICSO will go when acting in solidarity with youth. Without answering this question, an ICSO risks constantly coming up against the barrier of not being willing to take that risk.

LESSONS LEARNED

Solidarity requires courage

The support of empowered staff at the technical level within Plan country offices was key to the success of the pilot project. Importantly, there were courageous staff willing to take on the additional challenges and risks of working more directly with and mentoring youth.

Involving the right decision-makers

Involvement of finance staff was key. Plan's financial procedures are generally strict, with limited flexibility, and so it was necessary to have the buy-in of finance staff for a project that aimed to change the way local, youth-led organisations were supported.

Agency

Ensuring that the youth-led organisations themselves drove the project's agenda was vital to developing Plan's understanding of how to contribute to the strengthening of the resilience of these organisations. For example, work on sexual and reproductive rights (SRR) in Nicaragua revealed how sexual identity had become deeply politicised and how SRR were therefore a political issue. The awareness of this was important to ensure Plan could fully assess risks and responsibilities when working with youth-led organisations on those rights in that context.

Energy needs support

The pilot project revealed that although the youth-led organisations involved need opportunities to learn, alongside certain tools, most of the time they are ready to organise themselves without further intervention. ICSOs and donors have a tendency to suppress energy and leadership that is already there, as they impose northern-led systems. This energy is vital in advocating for an enabling environment for civil society more broadly – it must be strengthened through flexible support and solidarity.

Solidarity Playbook

Plan International

Sarah Pugh and Deborah Doane

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