#iwill Fund Learning Hub
Systems Workstream

Report on the sixth #iwill Fund Learning Hub Labstorm
The Centre for Youth Impact
August 2021

Introduction

LabStorms were adopted within the #iwill Fund Learning Hub to foster ongoing, deeper collaboration between Match Funders, to enable a system of effective youth social action funding to be continued beyond 2023. Success for this workstream includes stronger, more enduring collaboration across funders, and a shared sense of common challenges and potential solutions.

The Centre for Youth Impact has facilitated a series of LabStorms as part of the #iwill Fund Learning Hub. By sharing insights across the sector, the LabStorms contributed to sharing learning, data, and insights. Each LabStorm created a dedicated space for the #iwill Fund Match Funders to collaboratively frame and respond to a problem or challenge that they have identified as pressing in their work.

This report draws out the key themes from the sixth LabStorm for the #iwill Fund Learning Hub, which took place on 19 May 2021, which featured as its subject the impact of youth voice in youth social action. To accommodate COVID-19 restrictions, the LabStorm was held online for two hours and intentionally involved a smaller group of Match Funders. Mary McKaskill from the Centre for Youth Impact presented the topic for discussion. We would like to thank all the Match Funders who participated.

As LabStorms take place under Chatham House rules, the themes and reflections in this report cannot be attributed to any one person or organisation; nor should they be seen as representative of an 'average' or consensus view in the room. Instead, they should be understood as providing kernels of insight and conversation within the Match Funder community. In the sections below, we first summarise the discussions held in May before highlighting the key insights generated from the discussion and identifying potential opportunities for funders moving forwards.

The first five rounds of LabStorms took place in June 2019, February 2020, October 2020, December 2020, and February 2021 and similar reports[1] [2] [3] [4]were produced to draw out the key themes. Previous Labstorms featured the following discussion topics:

1. Understanding and communicating community benefit, led by Pears Foundation, and developing a habit of social action led by the Act for Change Fund (a joint initiative between the Paul Hamlyn Foundation and the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation)

---

[1] https://www.youthimpact.uk/iwill-learninghubpublications/report-first-iwill-fund-learning-labstorms

[2] https://www.youthimpact.uk/uploads/1/1/4/1/114154335/iwill_labstorms_report_round_2.pdf

[3] https://www.youthimpact.uk/iwill-fund-learning-hub/iwill-fund-learning-hub-blogs-and-reports

[4] https://www.youthimpact.uk/iwill-fund-learning-hub/iwill-fund-learning-hub-blogs-and-reports

2. Embedding high-quality opportunities for youth voice into youth social action, led by Premier League Charitable Fund, and the concept of 'place' in youth social action, led by Young Manchester.

3. Working with schools during the COVID-19 Pandemic, led by Ernest Cook Trust.

4 and 5. Campaigning in youth social action, led by Dartington Service Design Lab and Team London respectively.

The sixth LabStorm was, again, a slight departure from the standard format, in that the stimulus discussion was not presented by a Match Funder but by a member of the Learning Hub team.

Discussion: Youth Voice in Youth Social Action

The Centre for Youth Impact brings together practitioners, funders and policy makers to improve services and support for young people across the UK. The Centre was founded in 2014, through a partnership between NCVYS, Project Oracle and the Dartington Service Design Lab, to support everyone working with and for young people. In 2017, the Centre became an independent charity and in 2018, it acquired Project Oracle Children and Youth Evidence Hub.

From the outset the Centre's vision has been for all young people in the UK to have access to high quality services that support their social and emotional learning. To achieve this vision, it works collaboratively with partners across the UK youth sector to develop shared approaches to learning, evaluation and continuous improvement.

For this LabStorm, Mary McKaskill from the Centre for Youth Impact led a conversation on the impact of youth voice in youth social action. The following questions were used to frame the discussion:

> **Are there any boundaries around youth voice, and if so what are they? What would youth social action look like without the voice of young people? As adults, *can* we understand youth voice, and *should* we seek to understand its impact, or does doing so immediately corrupt or dilute it?**

1. Defining 'Youth Voice'

Youth voice has a close connection to youth social action. Sometimes youth voice is seen as youth social action in its own right, that is, that the act of participating in consultative or decision-making activity around change in (for example) a local community is social action in and of itself. At other times it is a component of a youth social action activity – that enabling young people to decide the nature, subject matter or mechanism for social action is a key component of young people feeling engaged and empowered.

Initial responses to the opening presentation were focused around whether there is an accepted definition of 'youth voice' that is shared across all actors, including funders, practitioners and young people themselves. There was a sense that it is easier to define what youth voice is *not,* rather than what it *is.* However, without a clear definition, the concept of 'youth voice' risks becoming a catch-all that serves no purpose.

The group also felt that the term 'youth voice' captures elements of process (listening and understanding, for example) and outcomes (shifting power, for example). There was a general acknowledgement that 'youth voice' goes beyond simply surveying young people for their views (that is, it is more than seeking young people's input into evaluation, for example), but beyond that there is little in the way of consensus around definition.

The group wondered whether there was something about youth voice specifically that is important and worthy of consideration, over and above the voices of other beneficiaries (particularly those that might be considered 'unheard') in other social action programmes involving defined groups. The group considered the concept of a 'spectrum' of youth voice activities, from giving young people influence over specific decisions, to handing over complete control of the design and delivery of a social action activity or campaign. This was explored through the concept of 'whose question is being asked': is the question for me (the practitioner or youth organisation) where I am seeking to know the answer, or is the question for the young person, where we are seeking to unleash their voice. This is closely connected to how much 'we' (adults, practitioners and funding community) really want to hear young people's voice.

The group also wondered whether there was an acceptance of what constituted high and low quality practice in respect of youth voice, and whether this had anything to do with the level of representation inherent in any given youth voice activity (how certain it is that the activity can represent the voice of all young people concerned), and how youth voice activities can capture the voices of those who are not 'in the room'. The group also acknowledged both the risk of tokenism in youth voice activities, and the potential 'corruption' or 'sanitisation' associated with co-option, that is, that the voices of young people are exploited or modified to further the concerns and priorities of adults. Finally, the group considered how far youth voice means 'a seat at the table' or whether it extends further than that.

2. Role of youth voice in social action

The group discussed the importance of when and how the voices of young people are introduced into a programme of activity. There can be youth voice activities and structures in the design, specification, decision-making, and evaluation elements of social action programmes. The importance of including youth voice in youth social action activities is paramount, since without youth voice 'youth social action is simply free labour', as one participant noted. That said, the group also acknowledged the importance of a right of refusal, that some young people simply do not want to participate in youth voice activities, and that this right must be recognised and protected. In this sense, participants likened youth voice activities to democracy – the opportunity to exercise one's right to have a voice, but equally the recognition that this only represents an invitation.

The importance of bringing insight from young people to help inform decisions and to help shape programme design was recognised, alongside the fact that this happens in different ways and to different extents across the funding community. The freshness of perspective and creativity that young people can bring to these discussions can sometimes be challenging to funder due diligence, and the group acknowledged varying levels of appetite for this amongst funders.

Finally, the group discussed the increasing role of youth voice within programme evaluation and suggested that this was a natural consequence of the inclusion of youth voice activities in many

funders' programme design and decision-making. Funders are keen for evaluators to tell them what they have been doing in this space and how effective it has been.

3. Youth Voice and existing power structures

All activities and programmes relating to youth voice within youth social action take place within existing power structures, and within an environment that has been largely created by adults. The group wondered how far this needs to be made explicit in the framing of any youth voice activities, and what the implications of this might be, especially for the young people participating. This led the group to consider how far, similar to the discussion on campaigning, youth voice activities and structures create an environment for young people to play with the concept of having power and influence, and furthermore, how much power and influence the adults structuring and delivering youth voice activities have to 'give away'. The group contended that this does not have to be a wholly negative interpretation, since many of the activities involved in becoming an adult involve a gradual transition from 'playing' at something to 'doing it for real'. This is, perhaps, one of the elements that makes youth voice activities specifically different from other kinds of beneficiary involvement. Alongside, the group returned to the question of process vs outcomes – are we more interested in the process of amplifying and listening to youth voice, or the outcome of shared/shifting power? Finally, the group discussed how important it is that youth voice activities do not provide an opportunity for adults to step back from the responsibilities they bear. This highlighted the original question about the role of adults in enabling, soliciting or structuring youth voice activities – is this 'an adult thing' or 'a youth thing'? Power and accountability were felt to be useful lenses through which to assess this.

4. Impact of youth voice

The group wondered how far the ways in which we currently talk about youth voice activities shape the outcomes that we expect to see and measure. Youth voice activities can be powerful in their own right, in reinforcing to young people that they have agency and are able to use it, albeit often in limited ways. But what other impacts of youth voice might we expect to see? The group concluded its discussion with the thought that whilst it is clear that young people frequently have influence over spaces, both physical and cultural, that are designed with and for them, what it would look like for spaces that are not designed with young people in mind to be informed by the views of young people. Is this what would make youth voice truly impactful?

In conclusion, then, match funders should bear the following considerations in mind when thinking about the role of youth voice in the programmes and activities they fund:
- The relative importance to the funder of youth voice as a process (listening, understanding) or an outcome (transfer of power);
- The importance of the place of youth voice in any proposed programme of activity (design, specification, decision-making, evaluation)
- The level of representation inherent in any youth voice activity and the extent to which it is likely to reach 'unheard' voices, or voices not 'in the room'.

- The extent to which listening to the voice of young people is likely to lead to change in the whole community.

Feedback and Reflections

To understand how the Match Funders experienced the second set of the #iwill Fund Learning Hub LabStorms, we collected informal feedback after the session on what they were taking away from the session discussion and how effective Zoom was as a platform for hosting them.

Feedback was wholly positive, and the Match Funders who participated appreciated the time spent working through challenges that resonated with everyone in the group. Participants felt a sense of camaraderie and comfort in learning together.

What are LabStorms?

LabStorms are collaborative problem-solving sessions designed to help generate and explore actionable responses to challenges with which organisations are wrestling. They are an approach developed by Feedback Labs; a US-based consortium focused on identifying the best ways of using feedback to make programmes and institutions responsive to the needs of their constituents.

How do LabStorms work?

Conducted under Chatham House rules, LabStorms are designed to create space for deep discussions between stakeholders who value collective approaches to problem-solving. Each LabStorm begins with an individual giving a 15-minute presentation covering both their work in general and details of a specific challenge that they're facing, with which they would like support and guidance. The presenter sets out what they have tried so far, and two or three specific questions they would like help with from the attendees. Then, attendees work together to support the presenter in finding responses to their challenge via a group discussion. This can range from offering specific advice or suggestions to asking open questions to help the presenter reframe their questions and find new insight. While the discussion remains confidential, the learning from each session is written up and distributed to benefit the wider community.

Appendix A: About the #iwill Fund Learning Hub

This is a report by the #iwill Fund Learning Hub. The #iwill Fund Learning Hub was commissioned to support and build on the #iwill Fund activities. It has two strategic objectives:

1. To inform the strategic and investment direction of the #iwill Fund. This will ensure that the Leadership Board and #iwill Fund delivery partners can target funds into the right areas, ages and approaches, where it is needed.

2. To strengthen and connect the youth social action sector by enabling and facilitating the sharing of learning, data and insights across delivery partners, including what does and doesn't work, and sharing key insights and learning more broadly within the wider youth social action sector.

The Learning Hub has developed three workstreams that will support its objectives. This will allow us to support funders in making decisions about how to support youth social action now and capitalise on the evidence generated through the #iwill Fund to create a legacy of evidence to support funding and delivery in the future.

1. Systems

This work will develop our understanding of barriers and enablers in building and strengthening sustained youth social action. It will support the identification of emerging practice and the testing of potential new solutions and help guide investment decisions.

(a) Systems Mapping
Co-production workshops, supported by research briefings, will build the understanding of barriers to, and opportunities for, embedding and sustaining youth social action in three priority themes: education, place, and the relationship between youth social action and 'all ages' social action. Workshops are attended by Match Funders, invited grantees, and other invited stakeholders (Sept 2018 – Mar 2019).

(b) Funder Collaboration
A series of 'LabStorms' will be offered to Match Funders to enable a collaborative approach to identify common challenges and finding and sharing actionable responses to them. The LabStorms will support Match Funders to fund as effectively as possible (April 2019 – April 2021).

2. Sector Evidence Plan

This work will build on our understanding of what youth social action achieves, reach under-served groups, and sustain youth social action (Aug 2018 – ongoing). It will draw on these four information sources to develop and evolve answers to key questions:

- Intra-fund evaluation aggregation
- Extra-fund research aggregation
- Match Funder returns to the #iwill Fund and data from Information Management System
- Results from other workstreams.

3) Quality Practice

This work will deepen our understanding of what it takes to deliver quality youth social action. It will illustrate how delivery organisations define 'double benefit' and how they attempt to achieve and measure it. This work will support delivery organisations to improve their offer (September 2018 – ongoing). 'The Impact Accelerator', delivered by the Centre for Youth Impact, is an intensive process of impact support, challenge and development – up to 30 organisations will take part in this. Learning from these organisations will be shared more widely to spread knowledge about improvement across the youth social action landscape.