

SHAKING UP TO MOVE FORWARD

*Visions for stronger partnerships
between youth movements and social organizations*



Acknowledgments

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Ndane'é ta'án

Vatsí inká yoo tsi nikanchíí
tsaa ñàà ndaká'án ini kue ñuu
ndakíta'ángo tsí inká nivi
kuáña xoo nuú yoso
ñu'un va'a nuú tsitoo yivi
nuu chíiná raa kuú ndane'é ta'an
raa saán koó tono xíná



Encounters

Other times are coming
New thoughts emerge
Criss-crossed identities
Sketches of moorlands
A fertile site of life
Sown fields of encounters
And in this way, it will be the beginning again.

Celerina Patricia Sánchez Santiago
ñuu savi narrator, poet, and translator

Executive summary

The Youth Engagement Plan (YEP) emerged from a commitment by Oxfam International to partner with young people in the development and implementation of **Oxfam's Global Strategic Framework (2020-2030)**. Co-designed, guided and led by youth leaders, the YEP established a participatory research process to explore how organizations like Oxfam can better support youth agendas and collaborate with youth movements to **activate transformative social change**.

This report draws on face-to-face workshops and digital conversations with **more than 350 young people in over 30 countries in six continents**. It compiles reflections from progressive youth activists and feminist leaders on the challenges of the decade ahead, and opportunities for stronger relationships between youth movements and international non-government organizations (INGOs).

Our research notes that **youth-led progressive and feminist movements are some of the most powerful drivers of change** in many countries, pushing path-breaking progress on political accountability, climate justice, gender equality and economic transformation. With youth movements set to be protagonists of systemic change in the next decade, understanding how to equitably partner with and enhance the power of youth leadership is a priority for major international organizations interested in relevance and success.

The report recommends that Oxfam and other international organizations **engage meaningfully with youth movements**. 'Meaningful youth engagement' means first

understanding the nature of the challenge and the magnitude of structural obstacles that have stifled youth inclusion in the past, including tokenism, bureaucratic barriers to the involvement of informal youth groups, and their lack of access to resources.

Bold youth engagement is not just about interaction with a certain demographic – it requires a **radical rethink of how international organizations operate**. It means fundamentally challenging and changing our conception of organizational culture, timelines, budgeting and ways of working in general, in the interest of inclusion. It means avoiding making assumptions, and actively listening to youth activists to support them based on their real needs. It means questioning decision-making structures, the processes we adopt to navigate complexity, and who sits at the 'big table' for conversations about social change. It also sets a challenge for INGOs to revise their agendas and demands, and how they communicate them.

This broader view of the implications of youth engagement sees it as part of efforts to **decolonize, democratize and decentralize** the development and humanitarian sector; youth agendas are tightly bound with feminist, anti-racist and environmental agendas. This broader view must also include a deeper understanding of the particular context of each country and region. The report also signals how measures to address youth inclusion can help organizations to flatten hierarchies, save costs, and become more relevant and resilient.

The report then outlines core steps that international organizations can take to

better partner with youth movements. These start with a committed process of **organizational change**, geared towards concrete measures to **invest in collective creation**, directly **shift resources** to youth groups and enable them to **prioritize creativity and social connection** in their programmes. INGOs should also **actively listen** to diverse youth perspectives, **openly discuss** power dynamics, and **strengthen the integration** and debate of feminist principles.

The report then presents five areas youth activists have identified where Oxfam and other international organizations can add value: as facilitators of connection to other struggles, international bridges, skill-sharers, safeguarding allies and amplifiers.

Finally, the report explores the **priorities of youth movements for the next decade**, which are anchored in an understanding that we are living through a multilayered and systemic crisis. Single solutions or single-issue approaches are not sufficient. We need **bold proposals and intersectional campaigns** that join the dots between inequality, education, climate justice, poverty, gender equality and economic transformation, and that ultimately help societies to achieve greater wellbeing and justice.

Overall, the findings help demonstrate that meaningful youth engagement is not a 'nice-to-have' bonus for organizations or an easy box-ticking exercise. Meaningful youth engagement is deeply challenging, but in its challenge it offers INGOs a path to achieve greater relevance, success and integrity in the turbulent decade before us.



Why: A testing time

As we write this report, a global health and economic crisis is unravelling, adding even greater challenges to the mix of systemic crises we were already experiencing: an erosion of democracy, a spiralling climate crisis, deepening economic inequality, structural racism, corporate capture of politics, a backlash against gains in gender equality, and an absence of solidarity between global leaders and nations.

The stakes have rarely been higher for progressive movements and organizations, who face a recurring question: **how can we build power to address the systemic crises of our times and create a fairer, more sustainable future?**

There are many ways in which to approach this question. Ours focuses on one piece of the puzzle: the role of young activists and feminist leaders. It is increasingly clear that youth progressive movements will be critical to ensure progressive social change in the years ahead. In the face of structural crises, young people are organizing at every level, across all contexts, to influence change and build a better world. Their dynamism, imagination and ideas are opening new avenues on virtually all the big issues. From climate justice movements jolting governments into action, to movements for racial justice working to dismantle centuries of racist policies, to feminist movements overturning ingrained patriarchal structures, youth-driven movements are changing the game.

This leadership is emerging despite major obstacles. Even though they represent 42% of the global population and the majority

of the population in many countries,¹ young people are minorities in the halls of power and influence. **To be young is often associated with an absence of power – with growing up in a world that has already been shaped by others.** Excluded from political institutions, positioned culturally as naive and immature, and cut off from economic resources, young people are largely absent or sidelined from the formal decisions that affect them and all of society.

These dynamics of exclusion are also prevalent in civil society spaces, where tokenism and patronizing treatment are common experiences for young people. Youth activists are routinely seen as administrative assistants or human resources to be exploited, rather than autonomous agents of change. **When youth are involved in projects, their role is largely limited to consultation, if not decoration; rarely is active involvement or bold empowerment a reality.** Young people often have very little control over the terms of their alliances with international organizations, and are seldom considered ‘full partners’ unless they are part of a formal institution. Youth-led movements also face significant obstacles in accessing sustainable resourcing.

The experience of exclusion is not the same for all young activists, but is intersectional. Disabled youth, Indigenous youth, young women and LGBTQ+ activists are even more likely to have their knowledge devalued, to have less access to opportunities and to be sidelined from power. Furthermore, existing youth engagement work by many INGOs typically only engages with a small

1. Tarik Khokhar, ‘[Chart: How Is the World’s Youth Population Changing?](#)’, World Bank, April 2017.

cross-section of young people who tend to be educated, middle-class or affluent, exposed to the language of rights and activism, and fluent or with working knowledge in European languages. Such selective engagement means that INGOs miss out on interaction and mutual learning with the vast majority of young people around the world, while also further marginalizing them.

The formal and bureaucratic procedures that are often required for collaboration between international organizations and youth movements also leave young people at a disadvantage, given their financial illiteracy, lack of training in management processes, and marginalization from national policies, which tend to overlook youth. Such barriers mean young people are largely confined to advisory roles as opposed to decision-making ones, and their ideas and knowledge are 'extracted' and used without recognition.

Tackling this endemic exclusion of young people by INGOs will be crucial to achieving progress on global challenges. The coronavirus pandemic has crudely illustrated this. Although the disease appears to disproportionately affect older

populations, youth-led movements have shown intergenerational solidarity and are leading the fight against its spread in many contexts. As the global lockdown created intense logistical challenges for international humanitarian organizations, the grassroots nature and flexibility of youth groups allowed them to be among the first to react to the rapidly unfolding pandemic.

From Kenya to India to Argentina, during the crisis young people have been at the forefront of humanitarian efforts to support vulnerable populations, from migrant labourers to elderly people. Youth groups have also articulated bold visions for what a just recovery from the pandemic could look like. **The role of youth-led movements in these responses underlines the importance to the aid sector of active youth engagement and the transfer of resources and capacities to young people.**

The experience of exclusion is not the same for all young activists, but is intersectional.



This report emerges from a process within the Oxfam confederation – the Youth Engagement Plan – to understand how Oxfam and other INGOs can better collaborate with and work alongside youth movements. The research explored a series of questions:

What are the priorities of young activists and feminist leaders for the crucial decade ahead? How do they understand the key themes of Oxfam’s new Global Strategic Framework 2020-2030?

What ways of working and decision-making practices are youth activists embracing?

How can Oxfam and other INGOs better work with and support youth activists and young feminist leaders?

These questions were asked and responses compiled through multiple participatory workshops and digital conversations with young activists across the world.

Overall, **more than 350 young people from over 30 countries in six continents** directly contributed ideas.² These ideas and qualitative data points were then analysed and assembled by **a youth research team through a participatory process of sense-making and collective learning.**

The findings are outlined in three parts: **Who, How and What.** ‘Who’ explores our definition of progressive and feminist youth movements. ‘How’ looks at the ways youth collaborate and want to work with civil society and INGOs, as well as how youth participate in politics and the economy, and as part of struggles for gender justice, equality, sustainability and cultural change. ‘What’ outlines the agendas of youth movements for the next decade, as well as activists’ reflections on Oxfam’s Global Strategic Framework (2020-2030). Overall, the findings aim to capture a broad snapshot of the priorities, possibilities and desires of progressive youth movements around the world. We hope the report does justice to the richness of their ideas.

Amid all the diverse insights, a set of core ideas come through. Firstly, **meaningful youth engagement is about connecting with and including the most powerful driver of change in many countries.**

Success over the next decade for major INGOs such as Oxfam therefore depends, in many ways, on the quality of their partnerships with youth movements.

Secondly, it would be a serious mistake to understand youth engagement as mere interaction with a certain demographic. Rather, **youth engagement means fundamentally changing our conception of structures, timelines, decision making and ways of working in general.** It means

2. See Annex for details on the methodology and the composition of the workshops.

embracing risk-taking attitudes, valuing different vocabularies and styles in public communication, and having a deeply iterative and decentralized approach to campaigns. Real youth engagement involves committing to being a dynamic and learning organization over adopting a static and closed model.

Thirdly, **youth movements often operate in the margins and cracks**, work in response to need, and are not tied to international funding lines or popular humanitarian buzzwords that attract funding. They are usually more agile and adaptable than their elders, and faster in incorporating new technologies and responding to emergent dynamics. This is both their prime strength and weakness: the autonomy of youth movements allows them significant creativity and malleability, but their informality means their sustainability is always under threat. INGOs should approach this paradox with care, curiosity, and a willingness to experiment and find new paths.³ Fourthly, we should acknowledge that partnering with youth activists is a **strategy that implies a cultural shift**. It is vital for organizations to acknowledge the 'cultural dimension' of youth-facing work, and concentrate on investing in solid foundations instead of isolated actions. Focusing on precise mechanisms to



simply generate an outcome will not be enough. The best path for INGOs lies in facilitating challenging conversations, reflecting carefully on how to shift their organizational culture to be more open to the boldness and playfulness of youth movements, and identifying steps to initiate long-term relationship building.

The current intersection of multiple crises puts the world in an era of traumatic experiences and open-ended questions. While the future is uncertain, the possibilities for deep and transformative change are abundant. The dominant old ways of thinking and working are being upended. **It is crucial that young people are at the forefront of shaping what happens next.** We hope these reflections can help to guide us in the tumultuous times ahead.

3. For a creative exploration of this paradox, see Gioel Giacchino, 'Civil society is blurring? Let's remember our whys and get creative!', CIVICUS, December 2018.

Who: Youth-led, feminist, progressive movements

This research process focused on young progressive activists, feminist leaders, and the youth-led movements they are part of. We acknowledge that 'youth' is a flexible category, with some definitions expanding the age range up to 35 and some down to 15. Our research and co-creation process was largely conducted with activists and feminist leaders between the ages of 18 and 25.

These young activists – from members of Malawi's Young Feminist Network, to activists from Bolivia's Indigenous Guarani community, to participants in Peru's Young Activists Labs – were selected and approached by Oxfam teams with the aim of including voices that represent the diversity of youth activism in their country or regional context.

Beyond age and agendas, one important question that repeatedly came up in our workshops and conversations was: **what do we mean by progressive youth leadership and activism(s)?** What ideas, behaviours and principles unite and define youth movements? What values are at the centre of how youth movements understand healthy collaborations and relationships?

Broadly, young activists stressed that **youth movements share an ethos of innovation.** They aim to be as **sophisticated** as the systems they are striving to change, as **bold** as the massive inequalities they are confronting, and as **caring** in their work as the world they want to see.



Here are some of the principles underlying this innovative spirit, which youth activists collectively stressed as core components of their work and leadership:



✧ **Boldness and courage:** We need social and political responses that match the scale of the crises we face, and solutions that match the scale of our dreams. We need to be brave in questioning and challenging the injustices of our system(s), from structural racism to patriarchy to 'ableism'.⁴



✧ **Imagination and innovation:** We should embrace our power to rethink how our societies are, and how they could be. To really challenge the status quo, we need to take risks and constantly seek new ways of approaching and doing things.



✧ **Care and support:** How we treat each other in the work we do defines our culture. We need to take care of one another, and put in place processes to hold each other up.

✧ **Feminisms:** Feminist approaches need to be integral to our organizations and their ways of working. These should reflect the diversity of feminist visions around the world and engage with evolving debates within the movement itself.



✧ **Plurality and inclusion:** We should acknowledge the value of multiple answers and viewpoints rather than searching for one sole truth. To change everything, we need everyone. Our movements and organizations should reflect the diversity of our society, not only the most privileged groups. Difference and diversity are sources of richness and strength.



✧ **Connection and collective creation:** We can only attain a better world through solidarity – uniting our struggles and actively listening to each other. To be a youth activist means learning from different generations and bridging gaps. Workers, carers, farmers, researchers and teachers can all be found within our movements. We all have a lot to learn from each other. Through listening and collaborating, we do better work that reflects our collective needs.

4. Ableism: the oppression of people with disabilities.



✧ **Equitable and active participation:** We try as much as we can to avoid tokenism in any partnership, or approaches that just ‘extract’ our knowledge. Simplistic approaches of ‘box-ticking’ are inadequate, incomplete and unjust. All organisations need to meet challenges such as youth inclusion, anti-racism or feminist transformation with humility and a willingness to embrace complexity.



✧ **Shared power and reciprocity:** Our movements and the organizations we partner with should work to flatten power hierarchies and foster more equitable internal dynamics.



✧ **The personal is political:** We are not separate from the systems we work to change. To be a youth activist is to be personally open to change, passionate about challenging our own assumptions and behaviours, and identifying how they are rooted in the very structures we are battling against.



How: Collaborating with and learning from youth movements

Understanding the principles that bind progressive and feminist youth movements together can help INGOs to understand the conditions that underlie equitable partnerships. What practical lessons can we learn from these shared principles? Youth activists identified a series of concrete steps that can help narrow the gap between international organizations and youth movements.

TRANSFORM ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE AND STRUCTURE

From their hiring practices to their communications style guides to their decision-making structures, international organizations should take bold steps to embed youth inclusion across their organizational culture.

Crucially, they should **rethink hiring practices**, prioritizing youth recruitment and hiring for potential, not just experience. If organizations want to be ahead of the curve, they should hire ahead of the curve. Youth should be a strong constituency, not a minority within Oxfam's staff, especially in countries with young populations. The nature of the roles is as important as who fills them. Organizations should open managerial-coordination roles to young people – empowering youth to spearhead campaigns and programmes, not just advise or assist them. Recruiting young researchers, facilitators and artists can lay the foundations for stronger bonds

with youth groups and movements. Given the opportunity, young staff can shift strategic thinking, reroute organizational priorities and help organizations increase their reach and impact by strengthening their digital and visual communications.

Hiring practices need to be accompanied by structural changes that distribute power more evenly across the organization. In short, **getting youth on board means getting youth on boards**. From Oxfam International's Global Board to national executive boards, there should be at the very minimum one young person (aged 18-25) on each. Young people also called for a detailed review of Oxfam's governance mechanisms from a youth-inclusion perspective.

'That could be a critical role of Oxfam – nurturing, supporting and bringing together.'

EMMA, KENYAN ACTIVIST IN A FACE-TO-FACE WORKSHOP IN THE NETHERLANDS

Such measures can perhaps help cultivate the most crucial cultural change: for organizations to foster an environment that allows **creative thinking, attentive listening and equitable relationship-building with youth movements**. Organizations should be actively curious about youth perspectives and forge relationships with youth activists that are grounded in

mutual respect, care and learning. This implies a commitment to actively listening to all voices, recognizing different ways of seeing the world, acknowledging inequalities of power, and not being afraid to have difficult conversations.

Such a cultural transition also encourages organizations to **be in the business of boldness**, opening up to risk-taking, experimentation and iteration. Organizations need to be forward-thinking, working with youth to approach and understand emerging socioeconomic dynamics and inequalities, not applying outdated analyses or methods.

Opening this **space for listening and challenging** can enable organizations to **really understand the evolving needs of youth movements rather than making assumptions about them**. This shift in emphasis can help INGOs move away from organization-centered youth programming, towards deep alliances and partnerships with youth movements that support their agendas and solutions.

‘INGOs can help our approach by supporting our work in the way that we define it.’

MUSTAFA, TUNISIAN ACTIVIST IN A FACE-TO-FACE WORKSHOP IN THE NETHERLANDS

This approach can put international organizations in closer contact with the real limitations and obstacles faced by youth movements. Due to the often precarious lives of young activists (relating to resources, livelihoods and living conditions) there is a need for **fluid ways of working**

and arrangements for collaboration.

Organizations should enhance some of the main strengths of youth movements – agility and adaptability – by **making space for flexibility** in joint projects, and being open to rethinking, unlearning and reworking in response to the emerging and evolving needs of youth partners.

Similarly, given the economic precarity experienced by many youth activists, international organizations should **be transparent about the value of labour in partnerships**. Youth activists stressed that fairer ideas around remuneration and value should enter into discussions between INGOs and youth movements. Many youth activists believe their time supporting INGOs should be better recognized and remunerated. As participants in the regional Southern African workshop in Malawi reflected, *‘We have to set a standard as young people not to be used by these organizations; not to let them exploit us.’* This is a complex issue and also context-specific, but one that we should discuss openly, not evade.

Putting this into practice

- ✧ Take the leap and hand over power. How about bringing young Southern feminist activists into managerial and executive roles, to chart a more transformative path for the organization over the next decade?
- ✧ Review hiring and funding guidelines to reduce the obstacles youth activists face to gaining positions or securing resources.
- ✧ Invest in and hire young staff members who will lead and develop transformative partnerships with youth movements.

INVEST IN COLLECTIVE CREATION, CONNECTION AND CREATIVITY

Young activists are pioneering innovative ways of working, inclusive practices and transformative ideas. Partner organizations should trust in young people's abilities, visions and opinions by either directly funding them or inviting them to shape joint programmes. In the first case, direct funding means **moving the money**. International organizations should directly fund youth and feminist movements, and simplify their funding mechanisms to adapt to the more informal structures of youth activist groups.

'[INGOs need to be] strengthening activisms that mobilize people demanding structural changes, generating intercultural, intergenerational, intersectional and intersectoral spaces.'

YOUTH ACTIVIST, FACE-TO-FACE WORKSHOP, PERU

At the same time, INGOs should **create spaces** within their organizations for young people to work together with autonomy, or for co-created projects to take place. Co-creation means collaborative innovation, enabling young people to have a say in decisions from the very start: youth groups and their INGO partners collaborate openly and are transparent about power,



resources and challenges. Together they set objectives, develop the project and activities, decide how they want to evaluate the goals, and distribute tasks. Power, influence and accountability are shared.

Across the board, partnerships with youth should **prioritize play, creativity and connection**. Youth-led movements and the actions they take are creative, attractive and galvanizing. They remind us that activism cannot only be associated with the realm of formal meetings, projects and funding proposals. Youth activists are challenging the dogmatic adherence to 'seriousness' and calling for liberating social spaces for people to play, relax, meet each other and be creative.

Similarly, INGOs should foster a spirit of creativity, leisure and care in their workshops and programmes. Youth activists

expressed frustrations with projects where they are lectured, or bound by intensive and restrictive agendas; they prefer more open programmes where they can build connections and affinities.

On this same note, international organizations should adopt a more **people-and community-centred approach** to project finance, offering funding for a broader range of activities that make the most of limited resources.

Putting this into practice

- ✧ Consider creating a youth-led affiliate, regional youth-led observatories of youth activism, 'activist laboratories' to incubate youth-led cooperatives, and an independent hub that convenes young people to learn, co-create and campaign together.
- ✧ Invest in and consistently cultivate social spaces: fund and facilitate more youth-to-youth meetings and young activist encounters at national and regional levels.
- ✧ Issue budgets that support community meals and social events, as these are often where the important conversations take place, connections are made and actions originate. Organizing is not just about producing flyers and toolkits.

JOIN THE DOTS BETWEEN ISSUES AND MOVEMENTS

Youth movements are challenging single-issue approaches to social change, looking instead for the links between issues of

inequality and marginalization, and working to braid efforts together. By adopting **'systemic thinking' and viewing issues through an 'intersectional lens'**, we can recognize the nuanced experiences of marginalized people, understand issues from a broad range of perspectives, and tackle multiple social problems at their core.

For youth activists, joining the dots means recognizing that a youth-inclusive agenda is a feminist, anti-ableist and anti-racist agenda, and vice versa.

Youth-friendly spaces are accessible and inclusive. Organizations like Oxfam should apply feminist principles, following the lead of young feminist movements.

'[International organizations] need to contribute to a post-colonial narrative where everyone's strengths, experience and expertise are valued.'

YOUTH ACTIVIST, THE NETHERLANDS, VIA DIGITAL ENGAGEMENT

'[Real youth inclusion] means involving the youth in all the areas of decision making from major to minor decisions.'

YOUTH ACTIVIST, MALAWI, VIA DIGITAL ENGAGEMENT

‘[Meaningful youth engagement] means active listening, giving hands-on opportunities, allowing for mistakes to be “safe”, taking interest in how being “young” has differential impacts – rather than box ticking for “youth opinion” at the end.’

YOUTH ACTIVIST, UK, VIA DIGITAL ENGAGEMENT

Feminist approaches encompass a range of practices (including self-awareness, transparency, accountability, safe spaces, shared power, dismantling bias, recognizing gender-based violence and being survivor-centered).

One of the things that most clearly emerged from our conversations with youth activists was the importance of emphasizing care (self-care, collective care and healing justice) in social change work. **Valuing and prioritizing care** means paying attention to **process and relationships**, ensuring that the ways in which we relate to each other are defined by compassion, accountability, safety, kindness and wellbeing.

All of this involves sharing power to ensure that more women and marginalized youth (rural, disabled, Indigenous, displaced, LGBTQ+, among others) are present in spaces of power and able to contribute visibly and meaningfully. Organizations should **prioritize outreach, mutual learning**

and collaborative work with marginalized youth and support the safety of youth activists, especially those who are at greater risk due to their identities.

Putting this into practice

- ✧ Make visible the diverse contributions that young people bring to social change work, be attentive and open to different personal styles and approaches, and always make sure there is space for emotional processing and sensitivity.
- ✧ Prioritize ways of distributing resources to women, trans and gender non-conforming activists to ensure and better facilitate their participation.
- ✧ Run internal training and workshops on inclusive and active listening to address power imbalances in whose voice counts and to facilitate learning with marginalized youth.



These are clear ways in which organizations can open space for equitable collaboration. **But how can INGOs understand their own role and added value when approaching youth movements?** When should organizations take space, or make space? Based on their experiences of collaboration with Oxfam and other organizations, young activists recommended the key supportive roles that they think partner organizations can play to best add value to youth-led work, as follows.

FACILITATORS AND INTERMEDIARIES: INGO partners can act as intermediaries between diverse actors, social movements, struggles and national contexts. They can play a key role in building stronger alliances, using their reputation to bring new or unexpected allies into struggles: for example, men and boys in the fight for gender justice, the private sector in the fight for climate justice, feminists in labour rights demands, etc. International partners can also play a role in dissolving national siloes, for example by bridging the divide between rural and urban youth.

INTERNATIONAL BRIDGES: The structure and scope of INGOs allows them to bring a necessary and often-missing internationalism to national contexts (this is especially important for work on the climate emergency, corruption, corporate impunity and gender-based violence).

KNOWLEDGE-BROKERS AND SKILL TRAINERS: Many youth activists see in INGOs the potential for building young people's capacity as activists, social entrepreneurs and instigators of grassroots economic initiatives. Young people are particularly interested in honing both hard skills (e.g. 'design

thinking', 3D printing, agroecology, legal knowledge, understanding of legislative processes, digital communication and activism, accounting) and soft skills (public speaking, facilitation, negotiation, building organizational cultures).

SAFEGUARDING ALLIES: Young people are at the frontline when it comes to confronting restrictive social norms and challenging inequalities, and as such are often the first to face intimidation, threats and violence from reactionary actors. International partner organizations can offer back-up through active and vocal support and protection mechanisms – especially for young feminists, land defenders and LGBTQ+ activists. Partners can also offer care resources for activists who are struggling with burnout and discouragement.

AMPLIFIERS: International partners can lend their credibility and wide reach to boost youth campaigns or policy proposals, especially in contexts where ingrained political elitism delegitimizes youth voices.



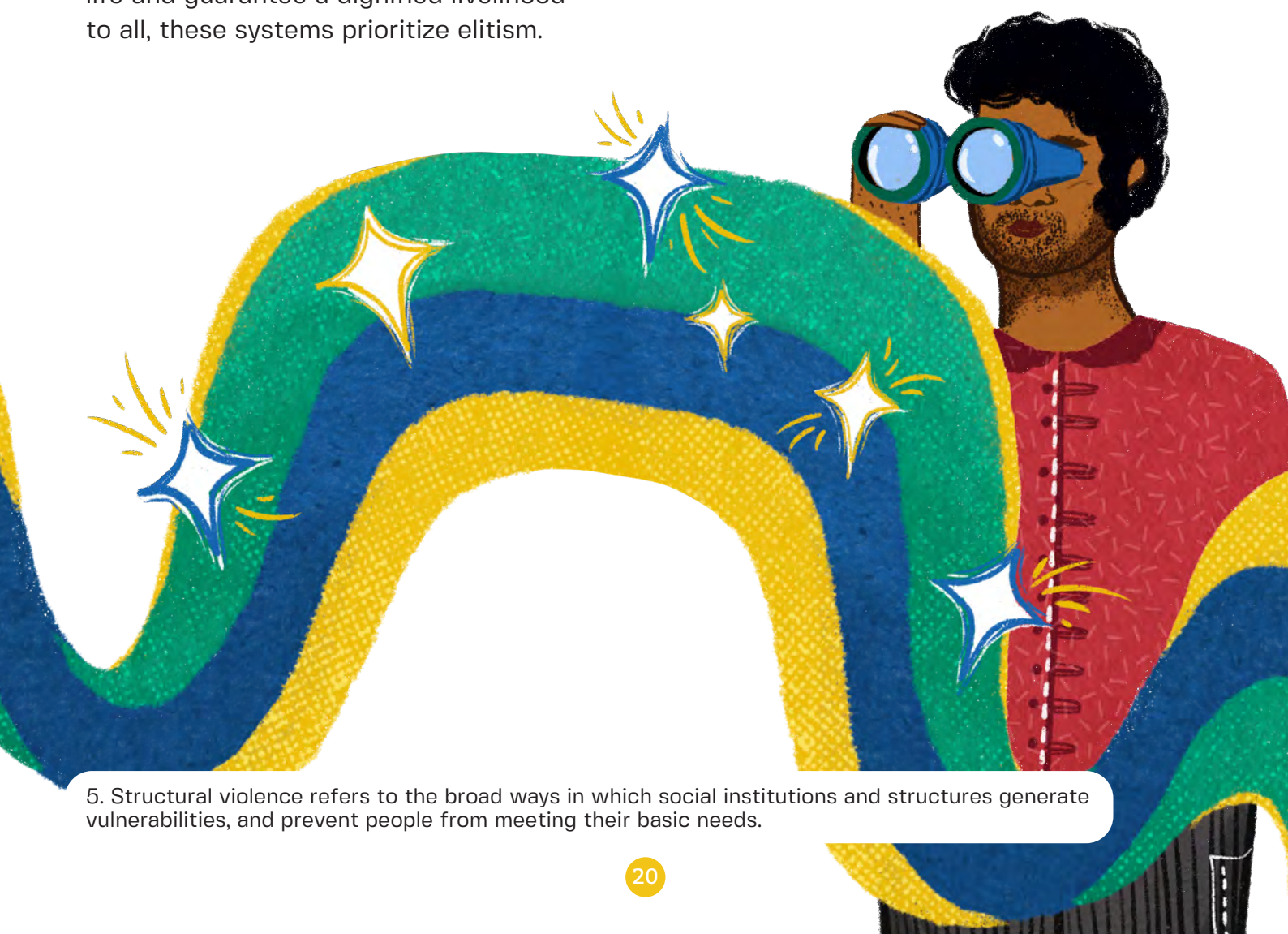
What: Youth priorities and visions of change for the decade ahead

By making such changes and building stronger alliances between international organizations and youth movements, what can we hope to achieve? What systems do we need to challenge, and what policies do we need to advance?

In general, our research shows that progressive youth activists see the world around them as facing urgent, systemic and multiple crises. The dominant political and economic systems are not working for the majority of people. Instead they are worsening gaping inequalities, trashing our planet, and depriving most people of at least one or many more of their basic needs. Rather than seeking to protect life and guarantee a dignified livelihood to all, these systems prioritize elitism.

Progressive youth activists have identified a range of narratives that hold the current system together, including militarism, neoliberalism, patriarchy, colonization, old-fashioned party democracy, structural racism, and an economic model that values growth at all costs. These have a far-reaching outcome: **structural violence⁵ and indifference towards marginalized people, the ecosystems that sustain us and the care that nourishes us.**

Youth activists are demanding new economic, political and social systems to change the status quo. In our conversations with them, the following broad priorities and proposals for the next decade emerged.



5. Structural violence refers to the broad ways in which social institutions and structures generate vulnerabilities, and prevent people from meeting their basic needs.

PRIORITIES

Basic needs: All basic rights should be upheld and fulfilled. These include access to clean water, sanitation, nutritious food, healthcare, a healthy environment, education, safety and shelter.

Employment and dignified work: Young people need decent livelihoods that allow them, their communities and the areas they live in, to thrive. Decent work is a basis for health, greater wellbeing, reduced poverty, diminished violence and a more engaged civil society.

Gender justice: Youth want to live in a world that ends impunity for gender-based violence, that educates for a culture of equity from a young age, that dismantles social norms, practices and policies that generate inequality, that actively opens space for people to explore their own identities in liberating ways, and that guarantees sexual and reproductive rights for all.

Climate justice: A different economic system is needed – one which protects ecosystems and the rights of the communities that rely on them, and creates a widespread environmental awareness across society, such that people value the living planet around us and the ecosystems that nourish and give us life.

Corporate accountability and political justice: There needs to be an end to the culture of impunity that absolves political and corporate actors who pollute the environment, plunder communities, steal from public budgets and violate human rights.

Peacebuilding: ‘No justice, no peace.’ Young people want to live in a world free from violence. Increasingly, youth are calling for holistic approaches to violence-reduction and peacebuilding, which make the connections between toxic masculinities, militarism, historical racism, ecological plunder, gender-based violence, sectarian intolerance, economic precariousness and various expressions of violence in our societies.

Digital equality and security: Young people across the world demand equal access to data and information.⁶ Human rights, particularly those related to privacy, freedom of expression and the right to live free from violence, must be protected in the digital sphere.



6. Digital access issues are especially important at the time of writing, with online education being rolled out in the context of the coronavirus pandemic.

Deep challenges to systems of oppression:

Patriarchy, colonialism, structural racism, exploitation and ableism are just some of the interlocking systems of oppression that young people are increasingly identifying as fundamental in shaping their personal and wider sociopolitical realities. Young people are demanding bold challenges to these historical systems.

Wellbeing and freedom: Young people envision a society that values wellbeing, mental health, and freedom for people to shape their own identities and have a meaningful life. In place of the firm ideologies of a generation ago and reliance on economic metrics (GDP, economic growth) as barometers of societal health, they want to see a range of people-centric visions being explored and proposed (rural dignity, eco-feminism, solidarity economy, queer politics, decolonization, degrowth, climate justice, etc.). As these vary from context to context, there is agreement around the need to develop these new visions and ideals around the attainment of basic rights.

Political participation: Young people are largely alienated from politics and excluded from decision-making spaces. We need to build a healthier and more vigorous culture of political engagement.

PROPOSALS

What types of actions can help secure these priorities? Youth activists around the world see social progress as being driven primarily 'from below'. Grassroots movements are spearheading transitions, putting forward ideas and opening space for many initiatives to flourish.

‘There’s no victory without struggle. It’s time to move forward from protest to proposal.’

**ROCÍO HUMANQUISPE,
YOUTH ACTIVIST, FACE-TO-
FACE-WORKSHOP, PERU**

For example, in the case of gender justice it is civil society that is carrying feminist principles and practices into mainstream culture and public institutions, not the other way around. In the eyes of young activists, **long-term change will emerge from grassroots movements, but will be sustained and scaled up through collaborations across all sectors (civil society, the informal economy, formal economic initiatives, government institutions) and generations.**

Within this ecosystem of change, it is clear that the role played by youth movements is one of bringing forward new ideas and challenging established norms and structures in society.

The outstanding solution and way forward proposed by young activists relates to learning. Young people understand 'learning' as covering a broad range of activities: formal curriculum-based school education, further education, peer-to-peer learning, knowledge sharing, work experience, skill sharing and capacity building. Tackling the systemic crisis that we face relies upon transforming our societies through educational initiatives and programmes.

Again taking the example of gender justice, young people see that some of the greatest possibilities for advancing equity lie in **popular education**: dispelling misconceptions, empowering women to take up space and value their own voices, making room in the public sphere for questioning social norms and embracing sexual diversity, mainstreaming feminist economics and policies, and encouraging men to challenge toxic behaviours and embrace positive masculinities.

In the case of economic justice, given that the status quo rarely provides openings or opportunities for young people to have dignified livelihoods, youth activists are claiming their right to craft an economy that is beneficial across the board, simultaneously tackling the climate crisis, reducing poverty and hunger, and overcoming gender injustice. **Youth activists are calling for youth-led educational initiatives to build a new economy, share peer-to-peer learning and create job opportunities from below.** They want to share knowledge and technical support around agroecology, climate adaptation, social entrepreneurship, project management and innovation. Young people see potential for economic prosperity and transformation in a range of models and policies, from universal basic income to educational policies that stimulate a youth-led social or solidarity economy.

Through their activism, young people are also demonstrating the potential of **youth-led media and cultural initiatives**, which can help tackle ignorance, expose injustice, disseminate tools for social change and elevate the voices of young people in all their diversity. Through such online and offline initiatives, young activists are working to build a more democratic, empowering and inclusive Internet.

‘Many Somali youth lack safe spaces to unleash their innovations, political views and social entrepreneurship. These spaces could encourage innovation, youth networking and sources of revolutions that lead to enhanced participation of youth, women and marginalized groups in socioeconomic and political spheres.’

SUMMARIZED REFLECTIONS FROM YOUTH ACTIVISTS IN A FACE-TO-FACE WORKSHOP IN SOMALIA

In countries with relatively safe and stable electoral systems, young people are increasingly prioritizing **shaking up the political system through formal electoral politics and participation**. Young people are emerging as some of the strongest voting blocs, and youth movements are calling for more youth representatives to stand in elections. Some progressive sectors recognize that the biggest social victories can be won through intergenerational collaboration, when existing political and youth movements join forces. Some of the most exciting political achievements towards transformative change have happened by enabling young people to lead the way.

Finally, young activists see great potential for transformative change through collaboration and **solidarity across international borders**, between groups within a country, and across campaigns. Connection is the tool needed to scale up transformation. Youth activists are calling for stronger connections between activist movements and international organizations to generate **intercultural, intergenerational, intersectional and intersectoral bonds** and learning.

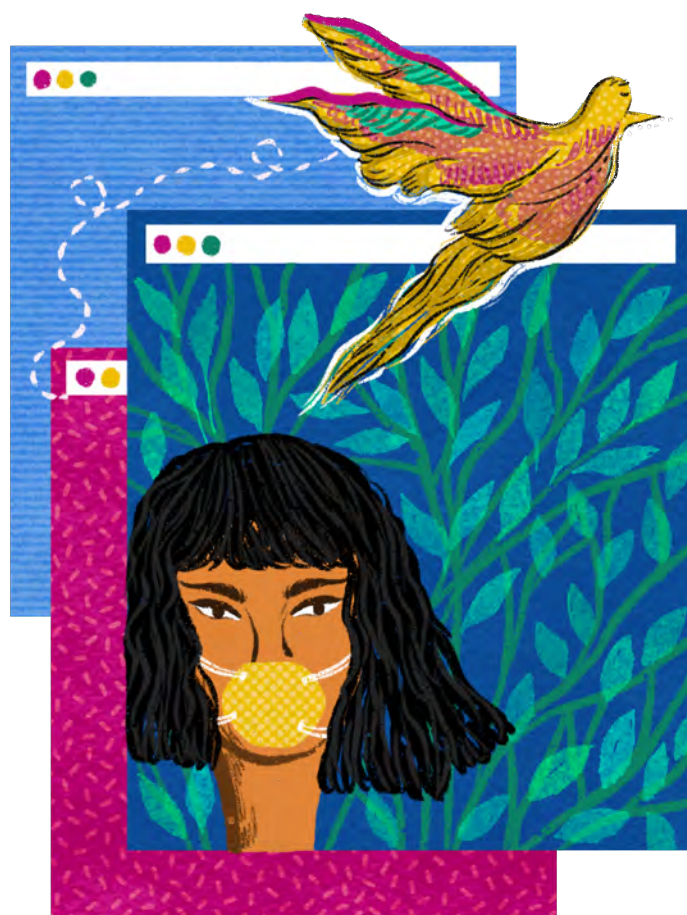
REFLECTIONS ON OXFAM'S STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK

Young people also reflected on **Oxfam's new Global Strategic Framework (2020-2030)**, which identifies four key 'system areas': gender justice, just economies, climate justice, and accountable governance. Young people broadly found relevance in this breakdown, although their responses on implementation seemed to emphasize the intersections and cross-cutting issues binding the four system areas together (conflict, corruption, economic precarity, education, environmental indifference, etc.) Below are summaries of how the youth activists reflected on and understood each system area.

Gender justice

Tackling gender injustice requires efforts across economic, cultural, educational and political spheres. Youth-led feminist movements, particularly in Latin America and Africa, are calling for intersectional feminist approaches that are rooted in the lived experiences and actual needs of communities, rather than approaches where priorities are dictated by governments or formal organizations. For youth activists, advancing feminism is inseparable from advancing social justice. Feminist practice means understanding, valuing and making

women visible as an essential part of all social struggles. **Women all over the world do not just have a 'women's agenda' but a transformative agenda spanning society:** there is no gender justice without economic transformation, financial independence for women, an end to restrictive social norms that limit women's freedoms, and a shake-up of the political system.



Just economies

The overriding demand from young activists is for a different kind of economy – one that does not trash the environment, that enables (young) people to access sustainable livelihoods, and that helps diminish inequalities in society. **They see the economy not as a separate sphere, but a sub-system of our living planet and a cross-cutting issue which affects all spheres, from the household to the political.** Overall, in an economy that suppresses agency, young people are hungry for a system that gives them room to dream and imagine

new possibilities. Many young people find inspiration and hope in concrete projects (cooperatives, social businesses, start-ups, etc.) that aim to encourage a sustainable or regenerative economy, and strive to ensure dignified work to uplift people's lives and a basic income to end poverty.

Climate justice

Youth understand that addressing our environmental crisis will be crucial in the next decade, and that the scale of the crisis requires efforts from all spheres of society. Young people see climate justice as fundamentally linked to economic justice, the preservation of cultural-territorial heritage and the protection of human rights. Participants at the workshop with Indigenous Guarani youth in Bolivia's Chaco region made clear links between environmental violence, food insecurity, the loss of livelihoods and migration of youth from rural to urban areas.

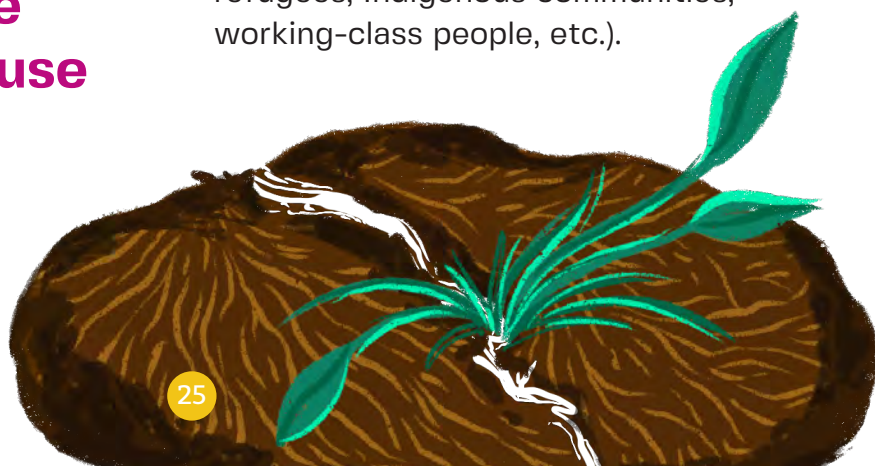
'Sometimes we don't have enough to eat. Everything is dry with the drought. There's no water to drink, you can't sell anything, there's no economy for the family. That's why some young people went to the city to work, because there's no money.'

YOUTH ACTIVIST, FACE-TO-FACE WORKSHOP IN CHACO, BOLIVIA

The solutions proposed by young people **recognize the multicausal and systemic nature of the climate crisis**. Young activists are proposing bold action at a number of levels: educational initiatives to create a shift in awareness; political action to strengthen environmental legislation, confront pollution, phase out fossil fuels and expand protected areas; a radical challenge to the neoliberal economic model, which places little value on ecosystems; major investments in reforestation, zero-carbon public transport, renewable energy and regenerative economic ventures; and greater investment in rural areas through policies to encourage agroecology and sustainable farming practices. Overall, **young people are at the forefront of sustainable practices, and demand to be actively involved in developing and shaping a more ecological society**.

Accountable governance

While the four system areas are deeply interconnected, inclusive and accountable governance was acknowledged by youth activists as **the bedrock which allows the other three systems to be plausible**. Without transparency or an end to impunity, the possibilities for genuine climate action, gender justice and a fairer economic system are slim. For young people, inclusive and accountable governance means many things – but above all it means **a healthy and active democratic society**, and the active inclusion and participation in decision-making processes of groups that are typically marginalized (young people, women, refugees, Indigenous communities, working-class people, etc.).



Conclusions

The findings presented in this document offer some initial ideas and considerations for Oxfam and other international organizations. These are not just recommendations, but rather young people's terms for partnership. **Young people do not want to be 'included'; they want to lead and collaborate.** They are not waiting to be invited to the table; they are already organizing, and it is up to international organizations to decide if they want to ally with them to achieve transformative change. The next step is to advance conversations and take concrete actions.

Questions remain: what or who defines 'youth'? How useful is youth as an organizing category compared to others? To what extent do these broad findings play out differently in fragile states or settings with acute conflicts? As these are beyond the scope of this report, we extend them as open questions to be considered. We also encourage further research into a number of gaps in this process, particularly looking at youth perspectives on digital technology and the possibilities and threats of digital tools for activism.

Overall, this report illustrates that young progressive movements around the world are generating ideas, practices and momentum towards a more just and sustainable world. Established international organizations should engage meaningfully with youth for various reasons: reflecting the voices of all groups in society is an ethical duty; youth already represent the majority in many countries; and young people will sustain the movements of the future – economically, politically and culturally.



But perhaps the most salient argument is that by not meaningfully learning from young people and collaborating with them on equitable terms, international organizations are missing out on the cutting edge of social transformation. Young people the world over are putting forward path-breaking, innovative and justice-rooted visions, alternatives, and ways of connecting and working. Actively listening to and humbly learning from youth movements can help bring far-reaching benefits for both international organizations and young people themselves.

We know that piecemeal actions will never suffice to address global challenges. We need to stretch our political, economic and social imaginations. This report offers some coordinates as we imagine and work out the best route forward. Young people from across the world share the direction and commitment expressed in Oxfam's new Global Strategic Framework. If Oxfam is ready to change then they are ready to help change Oxfam, for it to become the ally they need to change the world together. They are ready to tackle inequality and violence, and to end poverty and injustices – in alliance with Oxfam. These potential partnerships present an opportunity that cannot be missed. We hope that Oxfam will seize it.

As a youth participant in an online focus group in Italy said, **'Young people need Oxfam in the way that Oxfam needs us; we need their instruments in the way that they need our power.'**

Annex – Process of the Youth Engagement Plan

Methodology

The Youth Engagement Plan (YEP) emerged as part of Oxfam's 2020-2030 Global Strategy Process. As thousands of Oxfam staff across regions imagined and brainstormed what scenarios the future could hold, and what transformative roles Oxfam could play in those futures, the YEP was proposed to ensure meaningful engagement with some of the protagonists of the next decade: youth activists and young feminist leaders.

The YEP was the result of a clear commitment to partner with young people in the development and implementation of Oxfam's Global Strategic Framework (2020-2030), the organization's steer for the next decade. In 2019, Oxfam's Strategy Development Team, with the support of the Youth as Active Citizens (YAC) Community of Practice, developed the plan to ensure co-creation with young people and young feminist leaders in order to inform Oxfam's thematic areas, approaches and ways of working. This plan was then co-implemented by the YAC community, which includes youth researchers, activists and Oxfam's country teams.

The YEP, co-designed, guided and led by youth leaders, articulated several principles to underlie the process. Firstly,

feminist principles were the starting point of the process, the guidance throughout its workshops, and the benchmark for its evaluation. **Collectively, the YEP coordination team aimed for the process to be safe, sensitive, collaborative, equitable and caring, with a clear focus on gender justice.** The team strove to avoid tokenistic or box-ticking approaches to engagement, or to simply 'extract' knowledge from young people. We used an 'intersectional lens' in our approach, acknowledging and working to overcome power imbalances, prioritizing accessibility, and ensuring the equitable participation of marginalized youth.

Seven face-to-face co-creation workshops were held in six countries (Bangladesh, Bolivia, Malawi, Peru, Somalia, Solomon Islands), involving **over 130 young people**, nearly two-thirds of whom were women or people identifying as non-binary. Youth participants were selected by national Oxfam staff members with experience of collaboration with youth networks, to represent the diversity of experience of young people in that country.

Insights from these workshops were enriched by ideas generated by **additional face-to-face youth workshops in four countries** (Benin, Canada, The Netherlands and Jordan), reaching **over 125 participants**,

of whom over 60% were women, trans, or gender non-conforming. Further insights were obtained through social media polls, digital surveys and online focus groups, reaching youth from 23 countries, primarily in the Middle East and North Africa region.

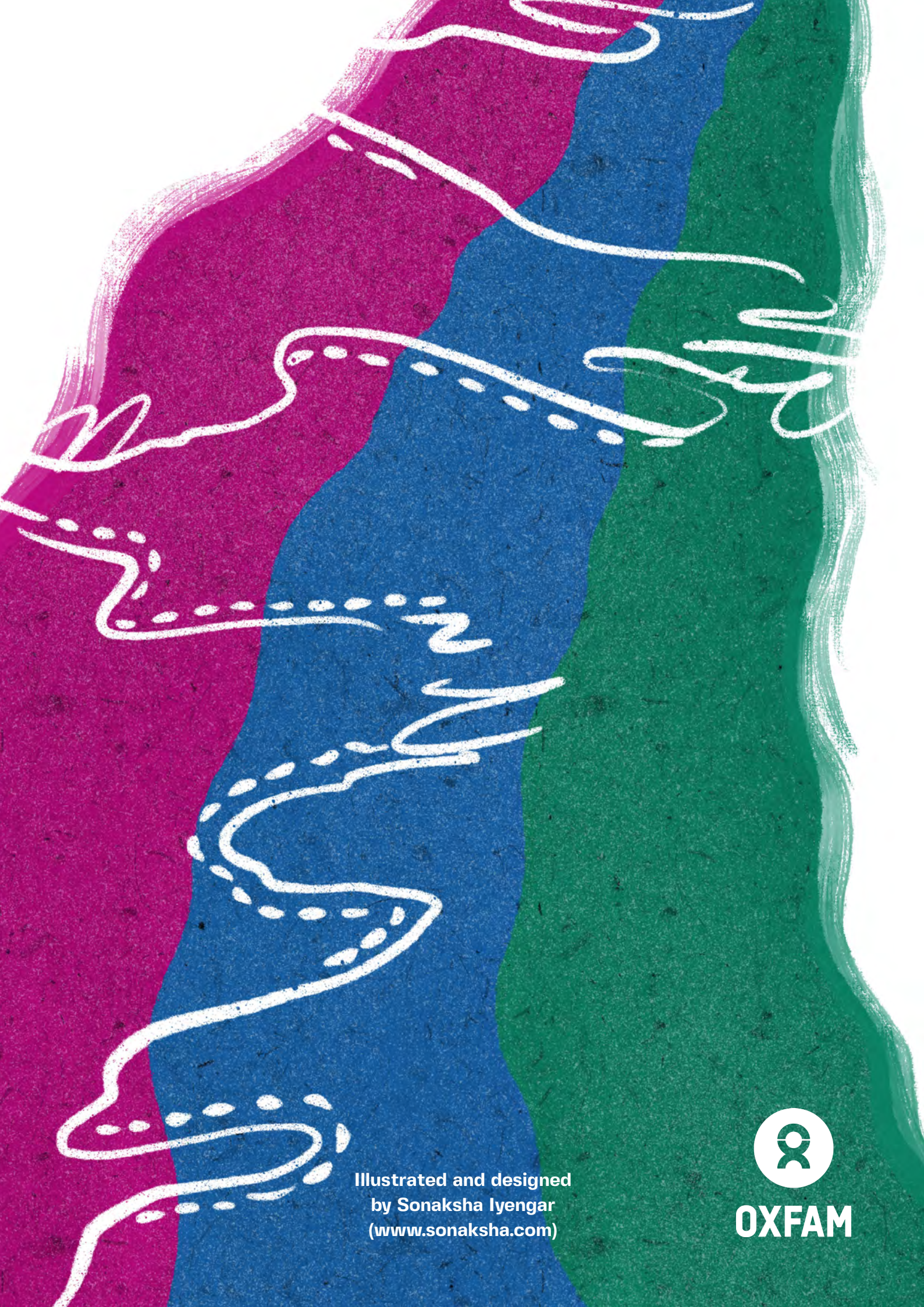
These insights were then analysed through a participatory sense-making process. Three researchers and an illustrator collaborated over a period of a month to assemble the findings. Using a research matrix, they tracked patterns, common ideas and key differences emerging from the reflections put forward by young people in the workshops and online conversations. Through a collaborative drafting process, these ideas were then synthesized before being assessed and tested with various regional focus groups.

Feminist principles were the starting point of the process, the guidance throughout its workshops, and the benchmark for its evaluation.

Youth activists, including those who had already been involved in the research process and others who hadn't, offered feedback on the report's core findings, and the report was finalized on the basis of this feedback, as well as input from Oxfam colleagues.

There were various limitations to the research process: it was only able to engage with a fraction of the diversity of youth movements and young feminist leaderships across the globe. The workshops were limited in size and geographic spread. Furthermore, the research process did not aim to focus on young people in their totality, but rather to connect at the local level with youth activists – diverse young people engaged in their communities and movements for social change – i.e. a subset of the youth population. While these methodological choices narrow the scope of the research, we hope its findings offer qualitative richness and depth in their reflections.





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